

## *A Coky Man*

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Per Jespersen

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**I**t is a summer evening at the beach - mild and without any wind. The surface of the sea is like a mirror, in which you can see the clouds drifting for an invisible wind, and a sun setting behind the horizon.

I walk here with a child I know very well - we love to take a trip to this beach - not only because of the beach, but also because of the talks we have here. This very place has grown into a sacred place for us, because here we can discuss things, we cannot discuss anywhere else - strangely enough - but we do love it. We can walk here for hours and find ourselves disturbed when other people suddenly turn up. They do not disturb us - they disturb the deep dialogue we both love.

Michael told me one day why: How often can people talk deeply with each other - without anybody disturbing?

What do you mean?

That people talk and talk, but they do not really say anything. The more they are and the more they talk, the less they say.

How come?

That any human being has a need to express his inner thoughts.

And if they do not have the possibility to do it? Michael's answer surprises me: Their spirit will die. I know a lot of people with dead spirits.

Upps!!!

Now the sun is close to the horizon, so we see two suns - one in the sky, which is now greenish and blueish - one in the surface of the water.

There you see, Michael says. That is the way it is with human beings - if their spirits are not mirrored in other people, they die. Like the sun - oh look, it is gone now - no, they are both gone. Who switched off the suns?

I do not know. But I know, that he or she or whatever it is will switch it on again tomorrow. So night and day can mirror themselves - oh, now I see: that is eternity!

Once again I am amazed what children can express. I enjoy the trips to this beach as much as Michael does. Why? Because Michael mirrors my vague thoughts - and even thoughts I did not know, that I had.

We sit down for a while on a huge stone at the seaside, enjoying being silent together, and watching the fading light. Michael puts his hand in mine, and for a moment we feel as one human being, even as one mankind - a marvelous feeling. The water has been here for billions of years, the small waves are rolling close to our naked feet.

Then Michael says:

The sea has always been there, but a wave is only there for a second.

Are the water and the wave not the same? Yeah, but only for a second.

So what about eternity? It is there all the time.

What is it?

Michael hesitates for a moment. Then:

Nothingness is always there. Nothingness?

Yeah - there is more nothingness in the world than anything else.

Oh!

Does that count for human beings, too? Of course. I have learnt in school, that the biggest part of our bodies is water - it is the same with our brains and minds - there is more emptiness than thinking and feeling.

Is this emptiness intentional?

I guess so. But I do not know, whose intentions it is. Do you?

God?

So what is God?

Now Michael is the questioning person. Well, - eh ?

Michael laughs. It is not a man. God is not a man somewhere up there - God is - everything.

The sun has gone. Darkness is there, so I say: It is dark now.

Do not worry, Michael says. Look: The moon is there. That is intention.

And the emptiness?

Michael laughs again: Do you not see it: YOU AND I !!!!

We have had hundred of these important discussions - they are glowing pearls in our relationship, which has now lasted for about a year. Michael came to me, because his parents found, that he had too few

adults to talk to. And we became friends - close friends: an elderly man and a young boy of ten. And it quickly showed, that Michael profoundly needed an adult friend to exchange deep thoughts with. The school considered him an outsider and was not able to cope with him. Therefore, he started to behave strangely - that is boys' way of telling their environments, that something is wrong.

So now we are close friends, because we both discovered, that philosophy could help. Michael did not know the word, but he certainly knew the concept. And I am confirmed in my belief, that human beings can comprehend wordlessly, and that words can help the concepts to be conscious, so a child learns about his own inner thoughts and emotions. This is the goal of philosophy for children - not only in school (Michael's school did not even subconsciously know the concept), but in common everyday talks as well.

The talk at the beach is one out of many and I wonder deeply, because Michael is only ten and cannot have read Levinas and his book «I AND THOU», and he cannot possibly have seen the film YOU AND I, as it was produced for schools, colleges, and universities. He expressed his own inner wondering. And thus he taught me! This is the best parts of the dialogues, we have had, that he taught me.

Levinas based his metaphysics on the fact, that you have to learn your own I with all its thoughts and feelings in order to be able to comprehend the outer world, which Levinas called «The Thou». Kierkegaard declared, that the I opposed to the outer world, which he called «the system», but Levinas sees comprehension of the I as a presupposition for comprehending «the You», and therefore declared this connection as the basic ground for metaphysics. Many people read Kierkegaard, not so many read Levinas - and the discussion at the beach between Michael and me was only heard and experienced by two persons: the boy and me. But also perhaps by the intentionality, as Husserls may have expressed it, if he had overheard our talk.

So what about the classroom in school? It is not a beach - there is no sun - no waves - oh, there are waves of thoughts in every single student. The teacher's goal is to pick up these waves of thoughts and let them roll through the class so that everybody wakes up spiritually.

Michael told me that he knew a lot of people with dead spirits. So do I. And I profoundly understand, what he means. I see him in class - not really listening - not really tuned in - not really present. But sometimes he puts up his hand, saying: «I've been thinking, so...». But it is out of schedule. This happens so often, that he finally gives up, and a terrible thought pops up in his mind: Maybe I am not worth while - I am thinking the wrong things - I am the only one with these feelings. Therefore, he puts a shell around his I - don't touch me!! - and starts to behave weirdly. Nobody in his environments seems to understand him.

I remember a small talk we had on a downtown cafe, a cozy little place where lots of people meet to have a small meal and a drink - and a talk. On the walls of the cafe you see old paintings of the old Danish kings and queens, paintings from forests as they were in the past, old banknotes, and portraits of unknown people, who lived centuries ago. We do love to come here and have a coke - and a good talk. We love the atmosphere and the people here - we can be ourselves and exchange thoughts without anybody else listening.

Today Michael is remarkably silent, and I have the suspicion that something is wrong and dare not ask, as he is a very sensitive boy. So we sit for a long time without saying a word, and all of a sudden we realize, that being silent together is a wonderful thing in this computerized world. Michael breaks the ice:

What does the priest say, when he marries a couple?

Oh, I don't remember anymore. It's so long time ago.

Yes you do!

And you do, too.

I'm not married, Michael says, laughing. I don't want to grow up!

Oh, why not?

Because things get so complicated. But I do know that the priest says something like: would you love this person until Death do you part. Something like that.

I nod.

But that's not right. What is not right? That love only lasts until death. It lasts forever. Oh?

Yeah. My Grandma lost her husband, but after he died, she still loved him. So?

I guess you're right. See!!

Yes I see.

Love is there forever. The strongest feeling. It's part of the I and the You at the same time. It can never disappear.

I agree. But don't feelings complicate things? Wasn't it easier, if we only had the rationality? No way. Rationality complicates things, feelings clear them up.

How do you know? (What a silly question!) I don't know anything. Nobody knows anything. What we call knowledge is only assuming. We can read a lot of books about anything, and we believe that we are reading facts - knowledge - but we only read assumptions. I think, that it feels good to experience, that we know nothing. We can't make a formula for love, can we?

Of course not. You are a clever boy.

No, I'm not. I'm just a thinking being, and that's enough for me. My I is my inner soul, and your I is your inner soul, and in this very minute my I is a You for you, and your I is a You for me.

Vow!! What a talk! I was amazed, puzzled, and enthusiastic, so I bought a couple of cokes more, and Michael laughed: I love you - you are a coky man!!!

Philosophy is not only for the classroom, although it must play an important role here. Philosophy is everywhere, hidden in human relations - the heartbeat of everything. We live in a very technological world, in which thousands of children spend a lot of their time alone, in front of the TV-set, playing computer games, running Nintendo-games etc. In my country investigations have shown that young children from the age of ten live a life with stress, anxiety, uncalmness and insecurity. There are very few adults to talk to: in the classroom you do not talk, but work following the curriculum - in their homes the parents are stressed, and the children very often only meet them in the week-ends, where they are busy washing clothes, having guests, or preparing the work for the following week.

There the children are - left alone with their feelings of not being worth while - with their loneliness - with their pain. Ten percent of the children in my country take painkillers several times a week because of headaches from the age of ten. They see their parents take them, when they are busy, so they conclude: this is the way to solve problems.

I have met hundreds of children, who do not have talks with adults at all during a week - not even small talks about the weather, their interests or whatever - and definitely not dialogues about the deep concepts of life. My guess is, that 99% of the children never talk metaphysics with anybody, and as we know that metaphysics is the deepest part of life, the important guideline of everybody's life and the basic ground of philosophy, it is a human disaster, that leaves children lonely and even suicidal. Unfortunately, this is typical for western life, be it Denmark, Germany or the US. Therefore, I see philosophy for children as the most important initiative in teaching and talking with children. When I meet a new child in my work, and we step by step work ourselves into the world of philosophy, the children wake up, discover their own feelings and love to share them with me, and I very often hear this remark after such a dialogue, be it short or long: This feels good!!!

And that is what I want: to make children feel good and comfortable with themselves and their way of life. The only way to reach this point is the philosophical dialogue: the children feel spiritually richer, and so do I.

Michael and I are still sitting in the cozy cafe at a table filled up with empty coke-bottles. I guess we have been talking for hours. The host of the cafe smiles, because he knows us and finds it beautiful that a boy and an elderly man can spend so much time talking in his cafe. One day, when Michael had left, he said: I would really like to join you, but I guess it's too sacred.

That is the word! A dialogue between an adult and a child can be sacred - or we experience it as sacred - because we exchange our inner thoughts in a deep philosophical dialogue, which we both enjoy. I know that Michael is not the only child in town needing this, but we have just been lucky to meet each other. But this does not prevent me in feeling a pain on behalf of all the children in town - and in the world - who do not have that chance.

The door opens and Michael comes in again, saying: There's something more to this!

Oh, sit down. A coke?

He smiles. Why not?

I order, while Michael says: There is more to life than words.

What do you mean?

That we have experiences, which we cannot express in words.

So you mean, that we have a world inside ourselves, that we cannot share with others? Something like it. But still - I do think that you and I share them.

But we cannot tell each other - so you say. They are between the lines. When we talk, there are streams of emotions and images hidden in the words, and I can feel, when you understand them. And do you know what? This is intentional!!

And ...

I know what you are going to say: And where do these intentions come from? Right?

Right.

I don't know. The only thing I know is, that if life is not intentional, you can't call it Life.

So what are the deepest intentions of life? Responsibility.

I see.

Don't you understand! To have or to feel responsibility means to expect a response. My responsibility to others is my response to their need. Don't you see - that's why it's called responsibility. Life is the intention of exchanging responses - it's like the body. If you could ask the blood: What is your intention here, it might not be able to answer - but we know, that the intention of blood is to keep the body alive - a response to the need of the body. See?

Sure! But I never thought about that way. Neither did I. He laughs. It might be because of all that coke!!

I laugh, too. Want another? Oh no, you are too coky now!

And he gets up, gives me a hug and rushes out of the door: Thank you for today! THE day of all days.

And I sit at the table and feel the tears running down my cheeks.

Of course, teachers do not serve cokes in the classroom. But they should necessarily serve philosophy, because children need it desperately, although they may not know. Nobody might have told them anything about philosophy. Human beings can have needs they do not know, that they have, because they have never heard about the object of their needs. This leaves them with a wordless longing - subconsciously they do not feel worth while - almost the way Plato considered the existence of the soul: it dwells in our bodies with a constant longing for returning to heaven, while we live our bodily lives.

In this way we can live our lives without knowing the richness of philosophy and the profound richness of a philosophical dialogue. I have experienced children change their way of life overnight after a philosophical talk. Imagine, just one talk taken on the child's premises can change a whole lifetime. Socrates knew that, Plato knew, but we seem to have forgotten. We do not hesitate, if we do philosophy at all, to tell the students the history of philosophy and tell them how important this and that philosopher is, forgetting that our students are completely new on this Planet Earth - there have never ever been exactly those kind of kids before - and that they expect us to consider them independent human beings.

They are unique! Every single child is unique! And philosophy is unique!

So why should the two of them not meet - in the classroom or on a cafe!

Thus philosophy is intentional in itself. There is a difference in degree between scientific philosophy and metaphysics. They are differently intentional. Metaphysics is philosophy of and for life - scientific philosophy is philosophy for greyhaired adults, who have forgotten the fairytale of childhood, spiritual innocence, and spontaneity.

Thus Michael is cleverer than me because of his spontaneity - he is living in a universe, I have left a long time ago. But he invites me in through his thinking, and I feel happy - and very intentional. A coky man!

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