

[Book Review] “Philosophical Stories for Children and Adults” : Tillmanns, Maria daVenza (2020-2021), *Why We Are in Need of Tales*

Sergey Borisov
(South Ural University, Professor)

Readers are awaiting a new encounter with stories united under the common title *Why We Are in Need of Tales*. Let me remind you that these deep philosophical books were written by Maria daVenza Tillmanns, a professional philosopher dedicated to the study of philosophizing with children, who has gained valuable experience in this field. Maria’s books are “co-authored” with her students at El Toyon Elementary School in National City (California), with whom Maria had classes of philosophy for children for three years before Covid. After I read them a picture book story, the children philosophize about some of the questions that come up for them in the story, writes Maria (Part I, p. 59). The children also provided their drawings, which are used as illustrations for the plots of the books. Philosophizing with children is a special world of intellectual discoveries that children make as if playing and joking, but this does not detract from the significance of these discoveries. The depth of these discoveries is due to the special state of thinking of children who perceive the world for the first time. Unfortunately, these wonderful insights, unexpected turns of thought are later forgotten in the routine of everyday life. The child's thinking gradually acquires a standardized form, which allows him to successfully navigate the cultural environment, but the “redemption” for this “success” is a “veil of oblivion” that erases the memories of these intellectual discoveries and insights. This “veil of oblivion” extends into that important and great full contact with being,

being-presence (the “I-Thou” relationship), which, in fact, forms the adult life of a person. This unique experience is the very first and deepest knowledge about the world and about one’s place in it, which always echoes in the heart with yearning for being, yearning for lost happiness and unity with the world.

The author of these excellent books managed to find appropriate images to describe such a unique state. First of all, these are the images of the main storytellers of these books Huk and Tuk. The fact is that the books are written in dialogue, so the reader immediately plunges into the context of a lively conversation. Dialogue not only sharpens attention, but also invites the reader to participate in the conversation. In this way, the reader becomes a listener at the same time. Huk and Tuk are strange creatures who are bound by a strong friendship, which is always felt and preserved with the help of ... tails (*Why We Are in Need of Tails*) Indeed, it is very convenient, because when you are connected with the Other tail, then in all other respects your body can do whatever it needs. However, you always feel connected with a friend; it always helps you, and sometimes, maybe even save you. Friendships are the strong bonds-tails that bind people together. These bonds, although strong, never shackle, because they are natural and not artificial. What a pity that we do not have that magic “tail” with which we can always reach a friend and through which we can always feel his presence in our life, even if we are busy with our daily affairs.

Since evolution has ordered that we – ordinary people – live without tails, it is difficult for us to convey to the Other the full depth of our feelings and thoughts. We can be close, but at the same time we are always missing something. When we cannot connect with each other, we feel isolated and distanced from the Other. But the author of these magic books seems to know a remedy to fix it. Allegories, metaphors, images come to our aid, i.e. everything that fairy tales are based on. And understanding becomes possible. Allegory, imaginative vision is what connects us with invisible tails to our common invisible roots. Through this subtle subconscious

connection, we feel unity with each other, because with these tails-fairy tales we are all rooted in nature and in culture.

In the first and second parts of *Why We Are in Need of Tales*, Huk and Tuk tell us fairy tales based on the picture book stories of Leo Lionni and Arnold Lobel. The magic of these stories is not only in the fact that their heroes are animals, because for fairy tales this is normal. The real magic is that these stories open the way for us to self-discovery. This is the power of a fairy tale; this is the power of the deep metaphors that it contains. Metaphor is a path to the unknown, the new. The metaphor literally “opens our eyes.” because in its light we clearly see what was hidden from us in the shadow of everyday life. At the same time, it is not the thought itself that we caught in the plot that is new, but I myself as a thinker. I discover in myself some new state, which becomes clear to me in the light of this thought. Perhaps I discover in myself some new quality that has long remained invisible to me. Perhaps the metaphor leads me to a new understanding of my actions, a new understanding of my judgments about the world and to a new understanding of my relationship with other people. Truth is always new; it is always a discovery. The novelty of any philosophical truth is that it reveals myself to me. I freeze before the truth as if in front of a mirror and carefully peer into the features that open up to me, which I had not noticed before (or tried not to notice). As Martin Heidegger says in his reflections on truth, “the essence of truth is the truth of essence,” implying that the truth is not so much revealed to me as it is revealing myself. Where is this discovery leading me? Perhaps it’s leading me to the need to change something in oneself, in life, in one’s attitude to the world and other people. This is the path of self-transformation. To follow this path is the goal of philosophy and philosophizing.

Consider a few of the stories from these books that evoke philosophical reflection. Whom do the heroes of these magical stories remind us of? Why, it’s ourselves! Sometimes we can remind ourselves of those three grumpy frogs (*It’s Mine*, in Part I), the heroes of one of the stories of the first part,

who decided that a single and accessible global world can be divided into parts and consider these parts as their own. These rulers of the little puddle proclaimed themselves: one the ruler of the air, the second the ruler of the water, and the third of the earth. But when the pouring rain dispelled their megalomania and in distress they found refuge on a small island, it turned out that it was not an island at all, but a big toad that helped them to get out of a difficult situation. Indeed, does what we own really belong to us? And does it belong to us alone or to all of us encouraging us to share, to cooperate and help each other? Do we really need to go through some kind of disaster (big or small) in order to understand this, in order to then come to the conclusion that if I share what I have, I will get much more in the end than if only I would own it? If we love something, let's say fresh mornings and we are all members of the *We Love Morning Club* ("The Club" in *Grasshopper on the Road*, Part I), does this mean that access to our club is closed for those who love not only morning, but also day, and also night? There is something to think about ...

Sometimes it happens that we find it difficult to get rid of our usual ideas, for example, opinions about a particular person. People change, but our opinions about them often remain the same. After all, we are used to judging people only on the basis of what is close and understandable to us. These judgments come from the *Idola Tribus* (fallacy of the Idols of the Tribe) and which, according to Francis Bacon, lead us to regard our tribal prejudices as universal principles. How to explain to a fish for whom the only real (of full value) living creatures are only fish, that there are many other living creatures with the same equal rights to a full life (*Fish is Fish*, Part I). Frogs, cows, birds have their own characteristics and live in their own special (phenomenal) world. Is it possible to discover the world of the Other? Or will others, by the very nature of their "otherness", always be hell to us, as Jean-Paul Sartre claims. But maybe the way out of this "hell of others" is to stop comparing, and then the otherness of the Other will not create artificial obstacles to communication and understanding. "This is

exciting, said Huk, imagine all these worlds out there we know nothing about and how much we can learn if we stop comparing things to what we know.” (Part I, p. 14). Are all the rules by which we are guided in life for everyone? (“The Voyage” in *Grasshopper on the Road*, Part I). Maybe these rules do not suit someone. However, we can respect those rules and compromise while remaining true to our own goals. For example, if there is a rule that Mosquito-boatman ferries everyone across the puddle in his fragile boat, then what should a Grasshopper do if it is easier for him to jump over this puddle? “Grasshopper decided to respect Mosquito and Mosquito’s rules, even when they didn’t apply to him. So he picked up the boat instead of hopping cross Puddle Lake and even thanked Mosquito for taking him safely across the lake” (Part I, p. 41). How is this for a solution?

The world treats each of us differently. No one in the house loves poor little mouse Alexander who lives in a hole in the baseboard (*Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse*, Part I). But for some reason everyone adores the wind-up mouse Willy. And although Alexander and Willy were able to make friends despite the fact that they are so different, Alexander was ready to part with his hated life, where no one loves him, in order to become a wind-up toy just to be loved. But one day Willy found himself in a box to be thrown out the next day since the children had lost interest in them. And after that Alexander’s attitude towards life changed. “Huk and Tuk were amazed at all the reasons they could come up with why it was so much better to be a real mouse than a toy mouse” (Part I, p. 22). Free will is what will set us apart from wind-up toys and “social zombies.” This is something that both pleases and frightens. This is what gives us a choice, and if there is a choice, then there is a hope that my desire will coincide with reality. The most important thing is that, as Epictetus argues, my desire is about what is and not about what cannot be. Only then does it gain strength and will my will and my mind help me find happiness in this life.

But what about those desires that arise in me contrary to the existing rules? I may be faced with a choice: should I follow these rules, or break

them? What will help me: an external prohibition or willpower? (“Cookies” in *Frog and Toad Together*, Part I) Frog and Toad feast on delicious cookies from the box until the very last (and therefore the most desirable) is left. Frog and Toad know that they will get sick if they decide to eat all the cookies Toad baked. Frog proposes to put the cookies in a box and cover the box with a string. All the same this will not eliminate the temptation to break the rule and eat the last desired cookies. “But then Frog had a bright idea. He took the box outside and emptied it, calling out, Hey birds, here are cookies!” (Part I, p. 49). Not a bad solution. But is this willpower? Maybe it's just self-deception, like Toad's suggestion to cover the box with a string. “Getting rid of the problem is not solving it, Huk and Tuk agreed” (Part I, p. 51). It is impossible to avoid the problem of choosing: whether to comply or not to comply with the commitments made. Commitment is as harsh and unforgiving as fate itself. The Oedipus myth teaches us that any attempt to escape fate leads to its fulfillment. Therefore, in order to feel like the masters of our destiny, we must understand that we are absolutely free. Yes, we are doomed to be free, just as we are doomed to be responsible for our actions, says Jean-Paul Sartre. Therefore, we always have a choice of how to act on this freedom. But we must remember that our free will is the source not only of our rights, but also of our responsibilities.

In *Why We Are in Need of Tales*, Part II, Huk and Tuk discuss another important aspect of our life, which the subsequent magical stories reveal to us, namely the importance of our dreams. It would seem that there is nothing further from reality than the world of our dreams and fantasies. Our life, however, is not just a daily routine; our life is a creative act. In her introduction of *Why We Are in Need of Tales*, Part II, Maria daVenza Tillmanns writes: “See, dreams can spark our curiosity (by imagining what's on the other side) and ignite our fantasies (by imagining a world that can lift our spirits) and light up our creativity (by imagining the beauty expressed in art and music)” (Part II, p. viii) The most important and

significant thing that we create to the best of our ability is ourselves. The quality of our life depends on the quality of our creativity. By the sheer fact of our existence from birth, we become the main character of our life's drama. Jose Ortega y Gasset writes about this specifically, noting that life is what we do and what happens to us, from our thoughts, dreams or experiences to gambling on the stock exchange or fighting on the battlefield. This drama of relationships occurs either in reality, or in a dream, or in the state somewhere between sleep and reality. What happens when we are transferred into the reality of another person? Do we disappear in the process? In the story "The Dream," in *Frog and Toad Together*, we sometimes only realize the need for the presence of the Other in our life when they are not there. We are so absorbed in ourselves, in our acting on the stage of life, that the Other simply disappears for us, but immediately after his disappearance we feel an acute longing for him, longing for our friendship which makes us who we are.

Jose Ortega y Gasset notes that our life begins with an eternal surprise of existence: without our prior consent, it plunges us into the abyss of the world, about which we know nothing in advance. Life is not given to us, we discover it, and this happens when we discover ourselves. We discover ourselves through the knowledge of the unknown that lurks in the world. The unknown is always desirable, precisely because it is hidden. The mystery of the unknown always beckons and prompts us to act. Tillie the mouse was fascinated by a huge stone wall at the foot of the hill (*Tillie and the Wall*, Part II). What is behind this wall, what is this mysterious world on the other side of the wall, how to overcome this wall in order to be there? Once such thoughts come to mind, there will be no rest from them – the desire to be on the other side of this huge wall. Tillie made many attempts to overcome this wall, until one day she was struck by a brilliant idea – to make a tunnel. "She dug a long, deep tunnel under the wall. It was pitch black and very scary. She had no idea where she was going" (Part II, p. 4). As if echoing the efforts of this brave mouse, the

words of José Ortega y Gasset: “Life produces many things. The most important thing is to choose at this moment what we will do next. Therefore, I argue that life is inherent in the ability to make decisions. Life is a decision.” It is a decision to accept the unknown and, overcoming fear and doubt, believe that something new, important and significant awaits us “on-the-other-side-of-the-wall.” What’s so amazing is whom Tillie meets on the other side of the wall. We will not reveal our cards; we will keep the intrigue, let the reader himself feel a craving for the unknown, the power of a dream. Make this discovery by reading the story yourself.

And here is another strange character – the crocodile Cornelius, who, unlike ordinary crocodiles, learned to walk on his hind legs, and moreover, with the help of his monkey friend, also learned to stand on his head and even hang from his tail. (*Cornelius*, Part II) True, these extraordinary abilities do not meet the expectations of ordinary crocodiles. Does this mean that you need to give up your “unusualness” just in order to be like everyone else? As it turned out, Cornelius’ behavior had unexpected consequences: his younger brothers and sisters began to imitate him. At least they did not consider Cornelius “abnormal.” “Sometimes we don’t want to try new things because we don’t want to feel embarrassed when we can’t do them” (Part II, p. 16). It is worth learning from Cornelius, who did not feel like a fool at all, because he learned to see the world from the perspective that was never open to other crocodiles simply because they were just like everyone else. Just as unusual was Frederick the mouse, who, instead of scurrying around like other mice, gathering reserves for the winter, sat pensively on his stone for a long time and “[he was] gathering sunrays for the dark days of winter” or “was gathering colors for when the day became gray and dreary” or “was gathering words for when nobody has anything left to say during the long cold winter” (*Frederick*, Part II, p. 28-29). As a result, Frederick’s “spiritual food” helped them all survive the long cold winter, awakening their imaginations thanks to the memories that Frederick kept and generously shared with them.

The uniqueness of each of us opens up new opportunities for us which may be dormant in our souls for a long time, but sooner and later will reveal themselves, as soon as we give them a chance. This fully applies to the story of the mouse-artist Matthew (*Matthew's Dream*) and the mouse-musician Geraldine (*Geraldine, the Music Mouse*) as discussed by Huk and Tuk. You just need to have the "courage to be," as Paul Tillich defines it, to be who you are, despite the fear of loneliness and misunderstanding. Courage is the willingness to accept denials that fear warns against, in the name of a more complete affirmation. After all, "the courage to be," according to Paul Tillich, is a function of vitality, and vitality is the power that allows a person to create outside of himself, without losing himself. The more creative power a living creature possesses, the more its vitality. We clearly feel the echoes of this philosopher's words in the final dialogue between Huk and Tuk: "Dreams give us the courage to take risks and to persist and to not be afraid but rather inspired to go beyond what is familiar and venture into worlds created by our imagination. Dreams help us come *alive!* " (Part II, p. 53).

In conclusion, it should be said that it was the study of philosophy with children that inspired Maria daVenza Tillmanns to write these whimsical stories containing deep philosophical ideas that help to establish communication on many life problems, both young and not-very-young readers. Therefore, these books can be recommended not only for individual reading, but also for collective reading in groups, and they can also be a teaching, practical tutorial in order to engage in philosophy with children and others. Hopefully these stories will inspire and challenge our own thinking and help us (re-) connect with each other as we are meant to.

I References

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Sergey Borisov

E-mail : borisovsv69@mail.ru

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