

Episode 5

THE EGOCENTRIC

Cookie and Alan, who is wearing his usual dark glasses, are sitting on a blanket in the shade of a tree. Alan is resting against the tree; cookie is sitting in a lotus position.

"So what's this oriental philosophy you told me about the other day?" asks cookie. "The one that says I have 20 billion years of work ahead of me?"

"More than that, even. Way more."

"Even more?! Actually, more than 20 billion wouldn't change much I guess... We could round up to infinity anyway!"

Alan laughs. "Quite right! Anyway... About fifty years ago, an Indian sage named Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan - who was not as crazy as his name could make you think, since he became president of his country in the sixties - declared, *It is but an illusion to consider our neighbours as not being ourselves.*"

Cookie looks puzzled. "Explain," he says after a moment of silence.

"The problem is that it's not easy. There are at least two ways of interpreting that declaration. The first is to consider the self as not being limited by our skin as we are used to think, but as encompassing everything we see, feel and experiment. In that sense, I am partly you, because you are part of my experience. In the same way, you are, to some extent, me.

"But then I am everything!" exclaims cookie.

"Not everything: only what you experiment. Have you read *Lost Horizon* for instance?" asks Alan.

"No."

"Then you're not this story, and you're not James Hilton, either. Not yet, at least."

"Who is James Hilton?" wonders cookie.

"He's the author of Lost Horizon. In any case, you'd never *entirely* become James Hilton, but you'd become him a very little if you read his story."

"Is it true?"

Alan squints. "Not necessarily."

"So why are you telling me that?" asks cookie with a frown.

Alan takes a deep breath. "Because it's *possible*."

"...Okay," says cookie after a moment of silence.

"Remember yesterday, when I was despairing of the world always lying to us because it never is as it seems?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, because of that, all philosophical theories are built on quicksand. Therefore, I'll never be able to tell you that a philosophical theory is true. On the other hand, I'll always ask you to understand them," explains Alan.

"What's the difference?" asks cookie.

Believing and understanding, that's the exact difference between religion and philosophy. You see, for centuries, we thought philosophy was the search for truth. That was a mistake. In fact, philosophy is the search for logic. Since there can be multiple ways of explaining things logically, philosophy is a probabilistic science, in the sense that its task is to identify all possible ways things can be explained."

"So the theory that everything I see is me is only a possibility."

"Right. And now, I'll get to the second way of interpreting our friend Radhakrishnan's sentence."

"That guy's name sounds as if he were a leader of a religious sect."

Alan shrugs. "It's no worse than having a name that sounds like a pastry. Anyway... Another way of understanding his sentence is to use our capability of empathy. Do you remember your lessons?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

"Very well. Now, imagine that you're someone else, and that this someone else looks at you. Who do you see?"

"Me - no, cookie."

"If that someone else knows you, yes, he'd see cookie. But what does he see if he doesn't know you?"

"A boy?" tries cookie.

"Forget the details."

Cookie smiles. "Someone?"

"That's it - someone else. Consequently, the whole world sees you as « someone else », and you are the only one to see yourself as « me ». Who, do you think, is right: you or the rest of the world?"

"...So I'm not me?" asks cookie a little unhappily.

Alan clenches his fist. "Yes you are! Because for once, the whole world is wrong, and you are right: you really are « me »! Remember that well, because it is very rare to be right against the whole world. Now, since you

know we are wrong when we see a person as « someone else », you'll try not to be wrong any longer. What are you going to do to achieve this?"

"Stop thinking people are someone else?"

"Absolutely. And if they are not someone else, who are they?"

SUBLIMINAL FLASH

Who are we?

"...Me?" guesses cookie.

"Exactly! Everyone is me! And now, there is a very interesting deduction we can draw from that. Because if everyone is me, or everyone is I, then..." Alan takes a deep breath, "I am everyone!"

Cookie looks baffled.

"And this is the second interpretation of this declaration of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *It is but an illusion to consider our neighbours as not being ourselves!*" declares Alan.

"But it's not true! I, for instance, am not you! And you are not me!" protests cookie.

"Of course that I am me! I am me just as well as you are! Do you think you're the only one to be me? You don't have a monopoly on « me-ness »! And I realize quite well that it doesn't look true, but remember what I told you: the world lies to us. If we believed our perceptions, we'd still think the world is flat. So it is very possible that the yous, hes or shes we see are only a distortion of our perceptions, and that the truth is that everyone is always me."

"Still, it's hard to swallow!"

Alan rolls his eyes and sighs. "Also remember that I'm not asking you to believe me, but merely to understand me - to understand my reasoning. I'm not saying Radhathingammy is right; I'm only trying to explain what he said! It's theoretical, do you understand?" He takes a deep breath. "Another way to explain it is to argue that it's just a matter of missing connections: if my five senses and my memories were connected to your brain, then you would actually experiment being me on top of being who you are, with your own senses and

memories. The point is, consequently, not to let a few missing connections conceal a logical possibility from us."

"Alright. Okay. So let's say everyone is I, and I am everyone. What then?"

"Very well. When you notice you are everyone, two things happen: first, you are going to behave as perfectly as possible."

"What does it have to do with how I behave?"

"If you think you are everyone, you'll always think of everyone when you do things, and not only of yourself. If you think you are only yourself, you might do things that are good for you, but that are not necessarily good for others; if you think you are the others too, you'll always want to do things that are good for everyone."

Cookie smiles. "That doesn't sound bad."

"On top of that, you get rid of a lot of negative feelings like envy or jealousy, which you have no more reason to have since it's not « others » who have things you like, but yourself..." Alan takes a breath. "And that's

how, with the most egocentric philosophical theory ever - « You are all me! » - we get to the most selfless behaviour possible - « Thus I'll do everything I can so you are all happy! » Nice paradox, isn't it?"

Cookie smiles again. "That's funny."

"The second thing that's going to happen is that you're going to feel much more responsible: Since you are everyone, *everything* is your responsibility. All the problems to be solved, everything that's got to be done, it's for you! And that's why I told you two days ago that it is possible that you have 20 billion years of work ahead of yourself, and even much more, because there will be trillions and trillions of lives lived before our universe goes into retirement!..."

Cookie sighs. "Before I start, am I allowed to lie down on the grass for a while?"

Alan smiles. "...Okay. I guess you can do that for a little while. Fifteen minutes maybe. But after that, you better get started!"

"Fifteen minutes out of 20 billion years..." cookie shrugs and smiles. "Better than nothing, I guess!"

Cookie raises a hand that Alan *high fives*. Smiling, they both lie down on the grass. The scene widens, showing plenty of people sunbathing in the same way. One after another, everyone turns into cookie - Alan included.