



The First Smile of the Child¹

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Phenomenology discovers that there exists a secret alliance between animated corporeality and spiritual existence. This alliance is uniquely present in every function and observable expression, but nowhere is it so evident as where animated movement becomes the expression of what is most human in human beings: the joy of being in the world.

The first smile of the newborn child deserves our special attention, because this first smile confronts us with a dual mystery which must be probed from both a biological and a psychological viewpoint. While the biological perspective considers human being a part of living nature, the psychological view understands human being as bearer of mind or spirit. And so the phenomenon of smiling compels us to inquire into its origin and genesis as well as its significance and meaning.

If we wish to understand the genesis of language, play, or intelligence, we must come to an understanding of the essential nature of these phenomena. Only then will it be possible to see how a more primitive stage constitutes the developmental antecedent of a later phase. Therefore, if we wish to consider smiling as an early form of laughing then it is not sufficient to simply note how the first phenomenon transforms into the second phenomenon. The point is that we must be able to see how, in this transformation, something becomes different and yet remains essentially the same. Moreover, to explain the origin of smiling it is not enough to study the factors that precede it, whether these are psychological such as joyfulness, or physiological such as stimulation of certain parts of the cortex.

Joy or stimulation may be the immediate antecedents which give rise to smiling but to say that smiling is the consequence of joy or stimulation only makes sense when we have come to an understanding of what this joy or this stimulation consists of. Also, one has to determine what is the nature of the organism that is joyful or stimulated, how functional a human movement is, what kind of movements there are and finally how smiling is an expressive act and what it is that this act expresses. And so it should be clear that even scientific analysis of the simplest of motoric movement is only possible if we start from an understanding of the nature of the individual, the species, and all living things.

Darwin (1872) understood expressive movements as vestigial reminders of purposive behaviors, and by application of the principle

of antithesis, he declared that the phenomenon of laughing is the opposite of crying. He based this view on a certain conception of living nature and the genealogy of human life. But if one holds on to a different conception of human being and of organic being then one must reject Darwin's explication of expressive movements.

If there exists such an inseparable connection between an apparently independent function of an organism and its meaningful significance then it is clear that we can attempt to understand its significance from the way it appears. Thus psychology must fulfill a double task. The call and the sound of alarm of a hen, the babbling of a child, the play of young kittens, the intelligence of a rat or an ape, all these are expressions of living beings each of whom has a certain mode of being in the world and finds in this mode of being its significance. In reflecting phenomenologically on the appearance and essence of a phenomenon, this relation of significance must be continually held in view. In this way one must try to answer the question of what is the essence and meaningful significance of a certain expression such as the smile.

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One might perhaps suppose that the question of the essence and significance of the first smile of the newborn can be answered simply on the basis that we adults smile too. And therefore we should be able to provide an account of the lived meaning of the smile. We should be able to tell under what conditions we smile, and what we express by it. However, comparative psychology admonishes us to be careful. The observable behaviors of animals, children, and adults may appear to be similar, but they are in essence quite different. Behaviors involved in a reflex action or instinctive response, a habit, an expressive gesture, a symbolic act, and an arbitrary motion may for a moment look very much alike. One can see this in the example of a wink of the eye.

In searching for an adequate explication of the first smile of the infant there are two reasons to be extra careful. First, it is quite possible that during the first few months after birth the human impulse in the infant still slumbers in a latent state. At the time when the first smile appears, the child may still function in a state which may not be animalistic but which is, nevertheless, a physiologically closed existence—an existence as yet without an inner life. If this were the case then we could not really compare the crying and smiling of the infant with our adult expressions.

Second, we need to be cautious in our description because adults may smile for entirely different reasons and possibly they may have lost the childlike smile. Everyday life shows us that we can distinguish among various kinds of smiling. No other mimic expression assumes quite such a wide range of feelings, moods, and personal characteristics. And no other mimic expression can appear in so many shades and nuances. For example, we know the real and the inauthentic smile, a smile that is repressed, open, determined,

painful, disdainful, false, mocking, bitter, sarcastic, pitiful, intelligent, stupid, good-natured, friendly, shy, loving, gay, content, and happy, to name just a few. We know the mysterious smile of the Mona Lisa and the still smile of the death-mask of the unidentified girl from the Seine river (*Inconnue de la Seine*).

One might mistakenly assume that these different types of smiles are so easily recognizable that it is quite possible to identify the infant's smile as one of these. But when people are shown photographs of smiling individuals then there is a wide disparity of interpretations that people give of them. Very few expressions are clearly recognizable independent of the situations in which they occur. Most smiles can only be understood from the context in which the smiling takes place.

Before we should accept the first smile of the infant as a psychological expression of something—whatever it may be—we need to consider whether the facial contortions involved in the smile are not simply physiological processes that only accidentally look like smiling. Protests from mothers and fathers who claim to have witnessed “real” smiling should not deter us, just as the protest from doglovers should not deter us from questioning whether dogs can know feelings of fidelity and jealousy.

When a parrot says “good morning” then this is only acoustically similar to the same greeting by a human being. Just so the first smile of the child might be only seemingly similar to the smile of the adult. This possibility needs serious consideration because adults too can show mimic expressions which do not really possess the expressive meaning that they seem to portray. Every excitation or irritation of a non-specific nature is accompanied by stimulations from the central nervous system which then send a flood of impulses to the facial muscles. For example, strong emotions such as anger, fright, shock, overwhelming joy can produce sudden physical expressions which differ from the underlying emotions and which may be contingent on certain situational factors. We also may see such facial contortions (for example, movement of the tongue) when a child is involved in a difficult task such as writing. Is it the visible result of a physiological process of the central nervous system?

Duchenne (1876) had shown already that a stimulation of the facial nervous system with a mild electric current can easily produce contractions of the facial muscles which completely resemble smiling. Not just the mouth shows signs of happiness and contentment, even the eyes partake in the smiling. Dumas (1937) drew the conclusion from Duchenne's experiments that every mild stimulation tends to accommodate in the facial muscles a response that resembles smiling. Even the stimulation of a cool breeze or the application of aftershave lotion on the face can bring about such expression. And so can the stimulation of alcohol or a good meal produce in the facial muscles an expressive response of contentment. Against Dumas one

might object, however, that some facial responses in such situations look more like a grimace than a real smile, as when a person is walking in a snow storm. But even if we wish to disregard the subtle nuances in the mimic response, we need to ask what exactly is to be understood by the term "mild stimulation" and whether there are common characteristics which bring about a smile-like effect.

In order to trace these characteristics it is necessary to explore what is the nature of those situations which produce real smiles. The truth of a mimic image, of course, comes about only in the relation of an *inner* to a *real* or *imagined* constellation, in which the subject experiences him or herself as a lived and situated self. Now, it appears to me that there are two situations which, more than any other, induce real smiling. These are the friendly encounter and the threat of being tickled.

I need to explicate a bit what is meant by "encounter," and the predicate "friendly encounter," too, needs some extrapolation. An encounter is not just the appearance or sensory perception of the presence of someone else. This may be the precondition of an encounter, but the essence of encounter consists in the discovery of a "Thou" who engages with me in a relation, and who, so to speak, enters the threshold of my inner life and whose own inner life reveals itself to me. Anyone who knows what is meant by the concept "person" will understand how an encounter is a personal and thus an existential happening.

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As far as the predicate "friendly" is concerned, I chose this because it is in the meeting of a real friend, and in almost everything toward which we cherish feelings of friendliness (whether this be a child, an animal, or an object), that we almost automatically are brought to smiling. Such encounter is somewhat like the experience of "seeing again"; it has the character of a reunion. In a friendly encounter we beam with pleasure and the face expresses this radiation of pleasure through the mouth and the eyes. And yet, the feeling of shining joy is in itself not the real reason for the smile. Indeed, joy can be expressed in a variety of manners such as through other bodily expressions of rising, lively movements or gestures, jubilations, and through wide-as-light radiating eyes and a somewhat opened mouth, and so forth. In other words, there are many expressions of joy. The smile, however, is not just an expression, it is also a response to the person or object toward whom our heart has affectionately opened.

The related experience of contentment is comparable to a clear, sunny sky. It is a form of happiness that scintillates a well-being that invites heart-warming goodness. In contrast, joy is also scintillating, but it is more exuberant and also more egocentric. A contented human being is therefore more quiet, more tranquil, more restful while remaining open to the world. Contentment is more an attitude of reserve than of a complete surrender. With this word "more" I want to

bring out the ambivalent character of contentment that we notice when we consider carefully the lived experience of contentment as it is directed to our own being and to our being in the world. It is an ambivalence which shows itself also in the polar unity of tension and relaxation. In comparison, joy expresses itself in laughter, in a release of tension through surrender—by surrendering oneself in one's relation to the lived body as a means for acting and expressing. In some respect, laughter is relaxation pleasure, an outburst, and exuberance.

Along this line, Gregory (1924) says: "Laughter is not an *act* as a blow is an angry act or as flight is a fearful act. Neither is it, properly speaking, an act of acceptance" (p. 61). "The laughter simply holds its sides and laughs—laughter is an *action broken*" (p. 158). While joyfulness involves the release of tension; the contented person is subjectively relaxed as every happy person. And yet the contented person also knows a certain tension; it is the kind of tension we experience in expectation. This is particularly the case in the joy of a friendly encounter, for example, when we approach a child playing with toys. Then our approach is filled with a certain anticipation of the pleasant possibilities, the promises which this encounter may hold in store. In such situations, we experience a certain inner pleasure, a secret amusement—secret, because we experience this pleasure as a yet to be kept secret that already within us begins to scintillate, dissipating fog and clouds and making way for a beaming brightness. The smile is the adequate expression of this. The smile externalizes a sunny, silent surrender by a broadening of the face, by the expression of the eyes, and by the closed lips—everything that the encounter contains as possibility.

In its floating balance this situation is related to the play situation. Just as play is always a playing with something that also plays with the player (Buytendijk, 1932), so too we always encounter someone who encounters us. And so there is a reciprocity in the anticipation of joy which is mirrored in the smile. The human being is the inexhaustible source of happiness for the exploring power of sympathetic affection, and therefore, we see the mutual smile as the most convincing expression of pure love. Is this not the significance of the many icons of the smile of pure motherlove of the Holy Mother who answers our child-like smile with the expectation of an encounter?

Now I feel that we can give an answer to the question of the meaning of the earlier mentioned notion of "mild stimulation." It is an excitation which differs from a "strong stimulation," not quantitatively, but qualitatively. This does not mean that I agree with Bergson (1889) who argues that all quantitative differences in awareness are really qualitative differences. Nevertheless, an excitement that touches us personally always possesses a qualitative character. So when we say that the stimulation is "mild" then we mean not only

that it is quantitatively small, but also that it must be held in check in relation to something else. This "something else" is what we experience as anticipation in the encounter. We notice then that in the minor joy, in the contentment of the moment, there lies a major, future joy without knowing, however, how this might be fulfilled. That is why the "mild stimulation," which makes us smile, is really ambivalent—related to the shyness which also makes us easily smile.

Even more clear is the character of a "mild stimulation" in the second typical situation I mentioned: when someone threatens to tickle us. Everybody knows that we cannot help but smile in a situation like that—and that the smile usually turns into some sort of laughter, giggle, or chortle, when the threat of being tickled turns into a reality.

Now, tickling is an ambivalent situation which may contain elements of pleasure and displeasure: a play of appeal and repulsion, desire and disgust (Plessner, 1941). In this anticipation of ambivalence, tickling is already at work, even if it is only in the imagination. Although the sensation of tickling is not yet experienced, the effect is already evident in a way that is similar to feeling sick to the stomach merely from seeing a repulsive potion. The effect is usually weaker than the real sensation, and yet, however weak it is, it already possesses the quality of the possible real excitation.

20 It occurs to me, moreover, that any approach (and in particular the approach of a strange hand as in the perceived threat of being tickled) is subjectively experienced not only as a *diminishing* of the objective distance of the hand but also as an *increasing* of a subjectively sensed happening. The approaching hand is primarily experienced as a personal excitation which increases with the diminishing distance. This excitation is indeed ambivalent in character. One tends to experience the uncertainty of what is coming. One wonders: What will happen? How far will this go? In this experience of ambivalence, the sense of unpleasantness is the strongest, while an approaching hand in itself is not sufficient to entice a smile. However, when the manner of approaching and the aim of the hand are associated with the past experience of tickling then one will more easily be brought to the state of emotional instability. The smile which then appears is a different smile than that of the friendly encounter. Under the threat of tickling, the tendency to repress dominates: in the pursed lips or the repressed giggle expressing a cramped tension which is completely lacking in the joyous laughter. When being tickled, one is forced, as it were, to smile. One cannot help oneself.

The smile of the friendly encounter and the smile of the anticipation of being tickled are therefore different in some respect. But what they share is the character of ambivalence. This character of ambivalence is already present in the slight stimulation of the skin, for example, the cheek or chin, which so easily calls forth a smile in the

young child. We call this "stroking." Stroking is more superficial than tickling, but both possess a definite motoric quality. Stroking is to be distinguished from itching which causes the more localized reaction of scratching. We experience even a slight stroking of someone's hand as an affection that involves us totally, that touches us personally, but that we do not know how to answer and therefore often brings us into a state of shyness or modesty. We therefore may best qualify stroking and tickling as a "sensory shyness."

Shyness is the most pronounced ambivalent condition in which we can find ourselves because this state to which we are subjected affects our very existence. In order to experience shyness, however, several existential conditions must be met. These conditions can only be described negatively: We cannot be withdrawn from the situation or from ourselves; we cannot be intentionally active; we cannot be asleep, absent-minded, or preoccupied. These same preconditions must be met for the shyness-related affects and modes of existence to become possible (such as in play, in being tickled, or in the experience of a friendly encounter).

Now we understand why the infant reaches an age where he or she can be quietly awake without being either hungry, sleepy, or restless. Only then can the first smile appear. Only when the child exists in a state of neutral, floatingly labile non-involvement are the sensory-shyness and its response possible. Then the child may smile and lightly blush (a typical expression of shyness) when he or she is being tickled, or is listening to the alternately approaching and receding sounds of ta-ta-ta, or when the child feels an uncertain grip under the arms, or is approached by the friendly face of mother or father. Why does the human face react with a smile on such mild stimulation?

It has been shown that the smile appears (and not some other physiological reaction) when the face or body is stimulated (by cold, a breeze, tickles, and so forth), and it is apparent that the human face reacts more easily with the image of a smile or grimace than with any other facial-muscular or physiological response (Duchenne, 1876). Especially with the very young child we can observe directly how the smile appears with ease, while crying, in contrast, appears to require an effort. And what we observe in the child we can recognize in our own lived experience as well.

The smile of the friendly encounter wells up, as it were, from an atmosphere of labile, quiet well-being. This inner sense of well-being increases as a warmth which irradiates us as a flood inundating our being. This happens automatically and requires no purposeful, willful, or intentional action on our part. The sense of pleasure or well-being that irradiates or inundates us remains enclosed within us, not unlike the feelings of well-being and satisfaction that follow a good meal and pleasant drink. In this state we do not need to do anything, hold back anything, because we are filled with a scintillating mode

of being which unwittingly, as if by magic (Sartre, 1939), lightens the things about us as it lightens ourselves.

We should look a bit more closely at this labile, quiet state of being which is the precondition for the smile. It is not a restful state as the state of sleeping which is completely passive. In some respect it is an autonomous, active attitude and therefore a determinate relation to the world (Buytendijk, 1938).

This autonomy is true also for the state of quiet sitting, or quiet walking, or other such activity. And it is true for the infant who quietly lies there awake and watching his or her world. In this state of restfulness the muscles have a certain tonal quality distributed through the body; they may contain moderate inner tensions which have effects that are experienced as vague, unqualified, and undefined needs. This restful state of being in the world is always in some sense in confrontation with the larger world which surrounds us and impinges on our self-enclosed sense of being. The paradoxical nature of the smile is that it consists of an activation of certain facial muscles which are nevertheless experienced as the beginning of a relaxed, active, restful state. Thus the smile is the expression of a threshold situation, of a yet-to-be-contained burst of exuberance, of a closedness that is opening itself, of a self-satisfied, immanent sense of well-being as well as an anticipated joy that transcends it all. In the smile there is the experience of instability, scintillation, and brightness which is characteristic of all joy, and there is also the sense of stability, permanence, and closedness which is characteristic of restfulness.

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We understand why, in the friendly encounter, the eyes express the instability, and the mouth expresses the restfulness. Is it not the glance that emanates from us, that embraces the other, and that probingly moves about the other person's face and figure in order to ascertain, as it were, what possibilities are contained in this encounter? All the while, however, the mouth is silent as if by mutual understanding of a shared secret. Of course, it may be different as well. There is also the blissful smile whereby the eyes are being closed in the peaceful manner of sleep while the mouth expresses a playful, mischievous smile to which a subtle trembling of the corners of the mouth and sparkling of the eyes agreeably participate.

It would be worthwhile to study phenomenologically the many forms of smiling. Such knowledge may prove to be helpful to those who are pedagogically involved with children or adults. It would increase our understanding of the other person's subjectivity and what possible educational or diagnostic relation might be appropriate in a particular situation. But here we are restricted to considering the nature of the first smile of the child, and I feel that this is the moment where we can articulate further what are the essence and significance of the first smile.

The smile is the expression of an emerging quality of humanness in the first hesitant, sympathetic encounter, and thus it is an answer in which a sense of self-being is being constituted. But it is also the beginning growth of an awareness of being shy with oneself, now that this small child enters as a vital self the threshold of the tender unity with the other: This happens when the child is being called by the mother who is the matrix of pure love.

The child reveals his or her human nature through smiling—the child who movingly moves while still caught in the involuntary strictures of the organism, but then overcomes it in the smile; the child who is caught in the stream of unselfconsciousness, but then overcomes it by the ontic participation in the awakening awareness of a felt security. Something awakens in the child from a slumber, like a bird wakens in the morning, welling up from his or her deep innerliness and radiating as a recollection of this origin and as a sign of a certain destiny. The language and theory of psychology contain many referents to these understandings but psychology does not know what to do with the hidden meanings caught in the terminology of “feelings,” “expressions,” “innate activities,” “muscle stimulations,” “moderate excitations,” and so forth. All these only become transparent in the light of the existence of human beings.

In this light too the parent sees the first smile of the child. And the parent understands this smile, like Frederik van Eden who poetized this most sensitively:

Then he smiled, the first of his life
And thus he came to us from a far still land
...
He sent us to hold this sign of love
He who smiled himself—no longer alone by himself

Even more depthful ring Virgil's words through the ages because they sing most succinctly of the unity of life and awareness of the awakening spirit.

*Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem.*²

Notes

1. This article was presented by Professor Buytendijk as his inaugural lecture at the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in 1947. It has been translated and edited by Max van Manen.
2. This passage is from Eclogue, IV, line 60. Literally it says “Begin, small boy, to acknowledge your mother with a smile.” A more existential reading would not be inappropriate for *incipe* to mean that the child “begins to come into being” in acknowledging his mother with a first smile. The context makes it clear that what Virgil is talking about is the acknowledgment the child (although *parve puer* is masculine) owes its parents, in particular his mother. (I thank Robert Burch for this clarification—M. van Manen).

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