

Metalogue: Why Do Things Have Outlines?*

Daughter: Daddy, why do things have outlines?

Father: Do they? I don't know. What sort of things do you mean?

D: I mean when I draw things, why do they have outlines? F: Well, what about other sorts of things—a flock of sheep? or a conversation? Do they have outlines?

D: Don't be silly. I can't draw a conversation. I mean things.

F: Yes—I was trying to find out just what you meant. Do you mean "Why do we give things outlines when we draw them?" or do you mean that the things have out-lines whether we draw them or not?

D: I don't know, Daddy. You tell me. Which do I mean?

F: I don't know, my dear. There was a very angry artist once who scribbled all sorts of things down, and after he was dead they looked in his books and in one place they found he'd written "Wise men see outlines and therefore they draw them" but in another place he'd written "Mad men see outlines and therefore they draw them."

D: But which does he mean? I don't understand.

F: Well, William Blake—that was his name—was a great artist and a very angry man. And sometimes he rolled up his ideas into little spitballs so that he could throw them at people.

D: But what was he mad about, Daddy?

F: But what was he mad about? Oh, I see—you mean "angry." We have to keep those two meanings of "mad" clear if we are going to talk about Blake. Because a lot of people thought he was mad—really mad—crazy. And that was one of the things he was mad-angry about. And then he was mad-angry, too, about some artists who painted pictures as though things didn't have outlines. He called them "the slobbering school."

D: He wasn't very tolerant, was he, Daddy?

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*STEPS TO AN
ECOLOGY OF MIND*

COLLECTED ESSAYS IN ANTHROPOLOGY,
PSYCHIATRY, EVOLUTION, AND
EPISTEMOLOGY

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F: Tolerant? Oh, God. Yes, I know—that's what they drum into you at school. No, Blake was not very tolerant. He didn't even think tolerance was a good thing. It was just more slobbering. He thought it blurred all the outlines and muddled everything—that it made all cats gray. So that nobody would be able to see anything clearly and sharply.

D: Yes, Daddy.

F: No, that's not the answer. I mean "Yes, Daddy" is not the answer. All that says is that you don't know what your opinion is—and you don't give a damn what I say or what Blake says and that the school has so befuddled you with talk about tolerance that you can-not tell the difference between anything and anything else.

D: (Weeps.)

F: Oh, God. I'm sorry, but I was angry. But not really angry with you. Just angry at the general mushiness of how people act and think—and how they preach muddle and call it tolerance.

D: But, Daddy

F: Yes?

D: I don't know. I don't seem able to think very well. It's all in a muddle.

F: I'm sorry. I suppose I muddled you by starting to let off steam.

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D: Daddy? F: Yes?

D: Why is that something to get angry about?

F: Is what something to get angry about?

D: I mean—about whether things have outlines. You said William Blake got angry about it. And then you get angry about it. Why is that, Daddy?

F: Yes, in a way I think it is. I think it matters. Perhaps in a way, is the thing that matters. And other things only matter because they are part of this.

D: What do you mean, Daddy?

F: I mean, well, let's talk about tolerance. When Gentiles want to bully Jews because they killed Christ, I get intolerant. I think

the Gentiles are being muddle-headed and are blurring all the outlines. Because the Jews didn't kill Christ, the Italians did it.

D: Did they, Daddy?

F: Yes, only the ones who did are called Romans today, and we have another word for their descendants. We call them Italians. You see there are two muddles and I was making the second muddle on purpose so we could catch it. First there's the muddle of getting the history wrong and saying the Jews did it, and then there's the muddle of saying that the descendants should be responsible for what their ancestors didn't do. It's all slovenly.

D: Yes, Daddy.

F: All right, I'll try not to get angry again. All I'm trying to say is that muddle is something to get angry about. D: Daddy?

F: Yes?

D: We were talking about muddle the other day. Are we really talking about the same thing now?

F: Yes. Of course we are. That's why it's important—what we said the other day.

D: And you said that getting things clear was what Science was about.

F: Yes, that's the same thing again.

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D: I don't seem to understand it all very well. Everything seems to be everything else, and I get lost in it.

F: Yes, I know it's difficult. The point is that our conversations do have an outline, somehow—if only one could see it clearly.

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F: Let's think about a real concrete out-and-out muddle, for a change, and see if that will help. Do you remember the game of croquet in Alice in Wonderland?

D: Yes—with flamingos?

F: That's right.

D: And porcupines for balls?

F: No, hedgehogs. They were hedgehogs. They don't have porcupines in England.

D: Oh. Was it in England, Daddy? I didn't know.

F: Of course it was in England. You don't have duchesses in America either.

D: But there's the Duchess of Windsor, Daddy.

F: Yes, but she doesn't have quills, not like a real porcupine.

D: Go on about Alice and don't be silly, Daddy.

F: Yes, we were talking about flamingos. The point is that the man who wrote Alice was thinking about the same things that we are. And he amused himself with little Alice by imagining a game of croquet that would be all muddle, just absolute muddle. So he said they should use flamingos as mallets because the flamingos would bend their necks so the player wouldn't know even whether his mallet would hit the ball or how it would hit the ball.

D: Anyhow the ball might walk away of its own accord because it was a hedgehog.

F: That's right. So that it's all so muddled that nobody can tell at all what's going to happen.

D: And the hoops walked around, too, because they were soldiers.

F: That's right—everything could move and nobody could tell how it would move.

D: Did everything have to be alive so as to make a complete muddle?

F: No—he could have made it a muddle by . . . no, I suppose you're right. That's interesting. Yes, it had to be that way. Wait a minute. It's curious but you're right. Because if he'd muddled things any other way, the players could have learned how to deal with the muddling details. I mean, suppose the croquet lawn was bumpy, or the balls were a funny shape, or the heads of the mallets just wobbly instead of being alive, then the people could still learn and the game would only be more difficult—it wouldn't be impossible. But once you bring live things into it, it becomes impossible. I wouldn't have expected that.

D: Wouldn't you, Daddy? I would have. That seems natural to me.

F: Natural? Sure—natural enough. But I would not have expected it to work that way.

D: Why not? That's what I would have expected.

F: Yes. But this is the thing that I would not have expected. That animals, which are themselves able to see things ahead and act on what they think is going to happen—a cat can catch a mouse by jumping to land where the mouse will probably be when she has completed her jump—but it's just the fact that animals are capable of seeing ahead and learning that makes them the only really unpredictable things in the world. To think that we try to make laws as though people were quite regular and predictable.

D: Or do they make the laws just because people are not predictable, and the people who make the laws wish the other people were predictable?

F: Yes, I suppose so.

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D: What were we talking about?

F: I don't quite know—not yet. But you started a new line by asking if the game of croquet could be made into a real muddle only by having all the things in it alive. And I went chasing after that question, and I don't think I've caught up with it yet. There is some-thing funny about that point.

D: What?

F: I don't quite know—not yet. Something about living things and the difference between them and the things that are not alive—machines, stones, so on. Horses don't fit in a world of automobiles. And that's part of the same point. They're unpredictable, like flamingos in the game of croquet.

D: What about people, Daddy?

F: What about them?

D: Well, they're alive. Do they fit? I mean on the streets?

F: No, I suppose they don't really fit—or only by working pretty hard to protect themselves and make themselves fit. Yes, they have to make themselves predictable, be-cause otherwise the machines get angry and kill them.

D: Don't be silly. If the machines can get angry, then *they* would not be predictable. They'd be like you, Daddy. You can't predict when you're angry, can you?

F: No, I suppose not.

D: But, Daddy, I'd rather have you unpredictable—sometimes.

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D: What did *you* mean by a conversation having an out-line? Has this conversation had an outline?

F: Oh, surely, yes. But we cannot see it yet because the conversation isn't finished. You cannot ever see it while you're in the middle of it. Because if you could see it, you would be predictable—like the machine. And I would be predictable—and the two of us together would be predictable

D: But I don't understand. You say it is important to be clear about things. And you get angry about people who blur the outlines. And yet we think it's better to be unpredictable and not to be like a machine. And you say that we cannot see the outlines of our conversation till it's over. Then it doesn't matter whether we're clear or not. Because we cannot *do* anything about it then.

F: Yes, I know—and I don't understand it myself. . . . But anyway, who wants to *do* anything about it?

Metologue: Why a Swan?*

Daughter: Why a swan?

Father: Yes—and why a puppet in Petroushka?

D: No—that's different. After all a puppet is sort of human—and that particular puppet is very human. F: More human than the people?

D: Yes.

F: But still only sort of human? And after all the swan is also sort of human.

D: Yes.

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D: But what about the dancer? Is she human? Of course she *really* is, but, on the stage, she seems inhuman or impersonal—perhaps superhuman. I don't know.

F: You mean—that while the swan is only *a sort of* swan and has no webbing between her toes, the dancer seems only *sort of* human.

D: I don't know—perhaps it's something like that.

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F: No—I get confused when I speak of the "swan" and the dancer as two different things. I would rather say that the thing I see on the stage—the swan figure—is both "sort of" human and "sort of" swan.

D: But then you would be using the word "sort of" in two senses.

F: Yes, that's so. But anyhow, when I say that the swan figure is "sort of" human, I don't mean that it (or she) is a member of that species or sort which we call human. D: No, of course not.

F: Rather that she (or it) is a member of another subdivision of a larger group which would include Petroushka puppets and ballet swans and people.

* This metologue appeared in *Impulse 1954* and is re-printed by permission of Impulse Publications, Inc.

- D: No, it's not like genera and species. Does your larger group include geese?
- F: All right. Then I evidently do not know what the word "sort of" means. But I do know that the whole of fantasy, poetry, ballet, and art in general owes its meaning and importance to the relationship which I refer to when I say that the swan figure is a "sort of" swan—or a "pretend" swan.
- D: Then we shall never know why the dancer is a swan or a puppet or whatever, and shall never be able to say what art or poetry is until someone says what is really meant by "sort of."
- F: Yes.
- F: But we don't have to avoid puns. In French the phrase *espece de* (literally "sort of") carries a special sort of punch. If one man calls another "a camel" the insult may be a friendly one. But if he calls him an *espece de chameau*—a sort of camel—that's bad. It's still worse to call a man an *espece d'espece*—a sort of a sort. D: A sort of a sort of what?
- F: No—just a sort of a sort. On the other hand, if you say of a man that he is a true camel, the insult carries a flavor of grudging admiration.
- D: But when a Frenchman calls a man a sort of camel, is he using the phrase sort of in anything like the same way as I, when I say the swan is sort of human?

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- F: It's like—there's a passage in *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is talking to the murderers whom he is sending out to kill Banquo. They claim to be men, and he tells them they are sort of men.

Ay—in the catalogue ye go for men.
 as hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
 shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves are clept
 all by the name of dogs.
 (*Macbeth*, Act III, Scene 1)

- D: No—that's what you said just now. What was it? "Another subdivision of a larger group?" I don't think that's it at all.

F: No, it's not only that. Macbeth, after all, uses dogs in his simile. And "dogs" means either noble hounds or scavengers. It would not be the same if he had used the domestic varieties of cats—or the subspecies of wild roses.

D: All right, all right. But what is the answer to my question? When a Frenchman calls a man a "sort of" camel, and I say that the swan is "sort of" human, do we both mean the same thing by "sort of"?

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F: All right, let's try to analyze what "sort of" means. Let's take a single sentence and examine it. If I say "the puppet Petroushka is sort of human," I state a relationship.

D: Between what and what?

F: Between ideas, I think.

D: Not between a puppet and people?

F: No. Between some ideas that I have about a puppet and some ideas that I have about people.

D: Oh.

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D: Well then, what sort of a relationship?

F: I don't know. A metaphoric relationship?

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F: And then there is that other relationship which is emphatically not "sort of." Many men have gone to the stake for the proposition that the bread and wine are not "sort of" the body and blood.

D: But is that the same thing? I mean—is the swan ballet a sacrament?

F: Yes—I think so—at least for some people. In Protestant language we might say that the swanlike costume and movements of the dancer are "outward and visible signs of some inward and spiritual grace" of woman. But in Catholic language that would make the ballet into a mere metaphor and not a sacrament.

D: But you said that for some people it is a sacrament. You mean for Protestants?

F: No, no. I mean that if for some people the bread and wine are only a metaphor, while for others—Catholics—the bread and wine are a sacrament; then, if there be some for whom the ballet is a metaphor, there may be others for whom it is emphatically more than a metaphor—but rather a sacrament.

D: In the Catholic sense?

F: Yes.

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F: I mean that if we could say clearly what is meant by the proposition "the bread and wine is not `sort of' the body and blood"; then we should know more about what we mean when we say either that the swan is "sort of" human or that the ballet is a sacrament.

D: Well—how do you tell the difference?

F: Which difference?

D: Between a sacrament and a metaphor.

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F: Wait a minute. We are, after all, talking about the performer or the artist or the poet, or a given member of the audience. You ask me how I tell the difference between a sacrament and a metaphor. But my answer must deal with the person and not the message. You ask me how I would decide whether a certain dance on a certain day is or is not sacramental for the particular dancer.

D: All right—but get on with it.

F: Well—I think it's a sort of a secret.

D: You mean you won't tell me?

F: No—it's not that sort of secret. It's not something that one must not tell. It's something that one cannot tell.

D: What do you mean? Why not?

F: Let us suppose I asked the dancer, "Miss X, tell me, that dance which you perform—is it for you a sacrament or a mere metaphor?" And let us imagine that I can make this question intelligible. She will perhaps put me off by saying, "You saw it

—it is for you to decide, if you want to, whether or not it is sacramental for you." Or she might say, "Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't." Or "How was I, last night?" But in any case she can have no direct control over the matter.

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D: Do you mean that anybody who knew this secret would have it in their power to be a great dancer or a great poet?

F: No, no, no. It isn't like that at all. I mean first that great art and religion and all the rest of it is about this secret; but knowing the secret in an ordinary conscious way would not give the knower control.

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D: Daddy, what has happened? We were trying to find out what "sort of" means when we say that the swan is "sort of" human. I said that there must be two senses of "sort of." One in the phrase "the swan figure is a `sort of' swan, and another in the phrase "the swan figure is `sort of' human." And now you are talking about mysterious secrets and control.

F: All right. I'll start again. The swan figure is not a real swan but a pretend swan. It is also a pretend-not human being. It is also "really" a young lady wearing a white dress. And a real swan would resemble a young lady in certain ways.

D: But which of these is sacramental?

F: Oh Lord, here we go again. I can only say this: that it is not one of these statements but their combination which constitutes a sacrament. The "pretend" and the "pretend-not" and the "really" somehow get fused together into a single meaning.

D: But we ought to keep them separate.

F: Yes. That is what the logicians and the scientists try to do. But they do not create ballets that way—nor sacraments.