

Metologue: About Games and Being Serious*

Daughter: Daddy, are these conversations serious?

Father: Certainly they are.

D: They're not a sort of game that you play with me?

F: God forbid . . . but they are a sort of game that we play together.

D: Then they're *not* serious!

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F: Suppose you tell me what you would understand by the words "serious" and a "game."

D: Well . . . if you're . . . I don't know.

F: If I am what?

D: I mean . . . the conversations are serious for me, but if you are only playing a game . . .

F: Steady now. Let's look at what is good and what is bad about "playing" and "games." First of all, I don't mind—not much—about winning or losing. When your questions put me in a tight spot, sure, I try a little harder to think straight and to say clearly what I mean. But I don't bluff and I don't set traps. There is no temptation to cheat.

D: That's just it. It's not serious to you. It's a game. People who cheat just don't know how to *play*. They treat a game as though it were serious.

F: But it *is* serious.

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D: No, it isn't—not for you it isn't.

F: Because I don't even want to cheat?

D: Yes—partly that.

F: But do you want to cheat and bluff all the time?

D: No—of course not.

F: Well then?

D: Oh—Daddy—you'll *never* understand.

F: I guess I never will.

F: Look, I scored a sort of debating point just now by forcing you to admit that you don't want to cheat—and then I tied onto that admission the conclusion that therefore the conversations are not "serious" for you either. Was that a sort of cheating?

D: Yes—sort of.

F: I agree—I think it was. I'm sorry.

D: You see, Daddy—if I cheated or wanted to cheat, that would mean that I was not serious about the things we talk about. It would mean that I was only playing a game with you.

F: Yes, that makes sense.

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D: But it doesn't make sense, Daddy. It's an awful muddle.

F: Yes—a muddle—but still a sort of sense.

D: How, Daddy?

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F: Wait a minute. This is difficult to say. First of all—I think that we get somewhere with these conversations. I enjoy them very much and I think you do. But also, apart from that, I think that we get some ideas straight and I think that the muddles help. I mean—that if we both spoke logically all the time, we would never get anywhere. We would only parrot all the old clichés that everybody has repeated for hundreds of years.

D: What is a cliché, Daddy?

F: A cliché? It's a French word, and I think it was originally a printer's word. When they print a sentence they have to take the separate letters and put them one by one into a sort of grooved stick to spell out the sentence. But for words and sentences which people use often, the printer keeps little sticks of letters ready made up. And these ready-made sentences are called clichés.

- D: But I've forgotten now what you were saying about clichés, Daddy.
- F: Yes—it was about the muddles that we get into in these talks and how getting into muddles makes a sort of sense. If we didn't get into muddles, our talks would be like playing rummy without first shuffling the cards.
- D: Yes, Daddy—but what about those things—the ready-made sticks of letters?
- F: The clichés? Yes—it's the same thing. We all have lots of ready-made phrases and ideas, and the printer has ready-made sticks of letters, all sorted out into phrases. But if the printer wants to print something new—say, something in a new language, he will have to break up all that old sorting of the letters. In the same way, in order to think new thoughts or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces.
- D: But, Daddy, the printer would not shuffle all the letters? Would he? He wouldn't shake them all up in a bag. He would put them one by one in their places—all the *a*'s in one box and all the *b*'s in another, and all the commas in another, and so on.
- F: Yes—that's right. Otherwise he would go mad trying to find an *a* when he wanted it.

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- F: What are you thinking?
- D: No—it's only that there are so many questions.
- F: For example?
- D: Well, I see what you mean about our getting into muddles. That that makes us say new sorts of things. But I am thinking about the printer. He has to keep all his little letters sorted out even though he breaks up all the ready-made phrases. And I am wondering about our muddles. Do we have to keep the little pieces of our thought in some sort of order—to keep from going mad?
- F: I think so—yes—but I don't know *what* sort of order. That would be a terribly hard question to answer. I don't think we could get an answer to that question today.

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- F: You said there were "so many questions." Do you have another?
- D: Yes—about games and being serious. That's what we started from, and I don't know how or why that led us to talk about our muddles. The way you confuse everything—it's a sort of cheating.
- F: No, absolutely not.
- * * *
- F: You brought up two questions. And really there are a lot more . . . We started from the question about these conversations—are they serious? Or are they a sort of game? And you felt hurt that I might be playing a game, while you were serious. It looks as though a conversation is a game if a person takes part in it with one set of emotions or ideas—but not a "game" if his ideas or emotions are different.
- D: Yes, it's if your ideas about the conversation are different from mine . . .
- F: If we *both* had the game idea, it would be all right?
- D: Yes—of course.
- F: Then it seems to be up to me to make clear what I mean by the game idea. I know that I am serious—whatever that means—about the things that we talk about. We talk about ideas. And I know that I play with the ideas in order to understand them and fit them together. It's "play" in the same sense that a small child "plays" with blocks . . . And a child with building blocks is mostly very serious about his "play."
- D: But is it a *game*, Daddy? Do you play *against* me?
- F: No. I think of it as you and I playing together against the building blocks—the ideas. Sometimes competing a bit—but competing as to who can get the next idea into place. And sometimes we attack each other's bit of building, or I will try to defend my built-up ideas from your criticism. But always in the end we are working together to build the ideas up so that they will stand.
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- D: Daddy, do our talks have *rules*? The difference between a game and just playing is that a game has rules.
- F: Yes. Let me think about that. I think we do have a sort of rules . . . and I think a child playing with blocks

has rules. The blocks themselves make a sort of rules. They will balance in certain positions and they will not balance in other positions. And it would be a sort of cheating if the child used glue to make the blocks stand up in a position from which they would otherwise fall.

D: But what rules do *we* have?

F: Well, the ideas that we play with bring in a sort of rules. There are rules about how ideas will stand up and support each other. And if they are wrongly put together the whole building falls down.

D: No glue, Daddy?

F: No—no glue. Only logic.

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D: But you said that if we always talked logically and did not get into muddles, we could never say anything new. We could only say ready-made things. What did you call those things?

F: Clichés. Yes. Glue is what clichés are stuck together with.

D: But you said “logic,” Daddy.

F: Yes, I know. We’re in a muddle again. Only I don’t see a way out of this particular muddle.

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D: How did we get into it, Daddy?

F: All right, let’s see if we can retrace our steps. We were talking about the “rules” of these conversations. And I said that the ideas that we play with have rules of logic . . .

D: Daddy! Wouldn’t it be a good thing if we had a few more rules and obeyed them more carefully? Then we might not get into these dreadful muddles.

F: Yes. But wait. You mean that I get us into these muddles because I cheat against rules which we don’t have. Or put it this way. That we might have rules which would stop us from getting into muddles—as long as we obeyed them.

D: Yes, Daddy, that’s what the rules of a game are for.

F: Yes, but do you want to turn these conversations into *that* sort of a game? I’d rather play canasta—which is fun too.

D: Yes, that’s right. We can play canasta whenever we want to. But at the moment I would rather play this game. Only I don’t know what sort of a game this is. Nor what sort of rules it has.

F: And yet we have been playing for some time.

D: Yes. And it’s been fun.

F: Yes.

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F: Let’s go back to the question which you asked and which I said was too difficult to answer today. We were talking about the printer breaking up his clichés, and you said that he would still keep some sort of order among his letters—to keep from going mad. And then you asked “What sort of order should we cling to so that when we get into a muddle we do not go mad?” It seems to me that the “rules” of the game is only another name for that sort of order.

D: Yes—and cheating is what gets us into muddles.

F: In a sense, yes. That’s right. Except that the whole point of the game is that we do get into muddles, and do come out on the other side, and if there were no muddles our “game” would be like canasta or chess—and that is not how we want it to be.

D: Is it *you* that make the rules, Daddy? Is that fair?

F: That, daughter, is a dirty crack. And probably an unfair one. But let me accept it at face value. Yes, it is I who make the rules—after all, I do not want us to go mad.

D: All right. But, Daddy, do you also change the rules? Sometimes?

F: Hmm, another dirty crack. Yes, daughter, I change them constantly. Not all of them, but some of them.

D: I wish you’d tell me when you’re going to change them!

F: Hmm—yes—again. I wish I could. But it isn’t like that. If it were like chess or canasta, I could tell you the rules, and we could, if we wanted to, stop playing and discuss the rules. And then we could start a new game with the new rules. But what rules would hold us between the two games? While we were discussing the rules?

D: I don’t understand.

F: Yes. The point is that the purpose of these conversations is to discover the “rules.” It’s like life—a game

whose purpose is to discover the rules, which rules are always changing and always undiscoverable.

D: But I don't call that a *game*, Daddy.

F: Perhaps not. I would call it a game, or at any rate "play." But it certainly is not like chess or canasta. It's more like what kittens and puppies do. Perhaps. I don't know.

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D: Daddy, why do kittens and puppies play?

F: I don't know—I don't know.

Metologue: How Much Do You Know?*

Daughter: Daddy, how much do you know?

Father: Me? Hmm—I have about a pound of knowledge.

D: Don't be silly. Is it a pound sterling or a pound weight? I mean *really* how much do you know?

F: Well, my brain weighs about two pounds and I suppose I use about a quarter of it—or use it at about a quarter efficiency. So let's say half a pound.

D: But do you know more than Johnny's daddy? Do you know more than I do?

F: Hmm—I once knew a little boy in England who asked his father, "Do fathers always know more than sons?" and the father said, "Yes." The next question was, "Daddy, who invented the steam engine?" and the father said, "James Watt." And then the son came back with "—but why didn't James Watt's father invent it?"

* * *

D: I know. I know more than that boy because I know why James Watt's father didn't. It was because somebody else had to think of something else before *anybody* could make a steam engine. I mean something like—I don't know—but there was somebody else who had to discover oil before anybody could make an engine.

F: Yes—that makes a difference. I mean, it means that knowledge is all sort of knitted together, or woven, like

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