WHY DO THINGS HAVE OUTLINES?

GREGORY BATESON *

D: Daughter. Daddy, why do things have outlines?
F: 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 outlines 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?
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

* Another metalinguistic dialogue by Mr. Bateson, anthropologist and co-author (with Jürgen Ruesch) of Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry (New York: Norton, 1951).
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 cannot 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 an-
other 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 gettings 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, hedge-hogs. They were hedge-hogs. 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 hedge-hog.
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 something 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, because 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 outline? 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?

But of all political ideals, that of making the people happy is perhaps the most dangerous one. It leads invariably to the attempt to impose our scale of "higher" values upon others, in order to make them realize what seems to us of greatest importance for their happiness; in order, as it were, to save their souls. . . . But, as I have said before, the attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell. It leads to intolerance. It leads to religious wars, and the saving of souls through the inquisition. And it is, I believe, based on a complete misunderstanding of our moral duties. It is our duty to help those who need our help; but it cannot be our duty to make others happy, since this does not depend on us, and since it would only too often mean intruding on the privacy of those towards whom we have such amiable intentions. . . . [T]he fight against suffering must be considered a duty, while the right to care for the happiness of others must be considered a privilege confined to the close circle of their friends.

Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies