

III Metalogue: Why Do You Tell Stories? (MCB)

DAUGHTER: Daddy, why do you talk about yourself so much?

FATHER: When we are talking, you mean? I'm not sure that I do. Certainly there is a lot about myself that never comes up.

DAUGHTER: That's right, but you tell the same stories again and again.

For instance, you presented your epistemology for the introduction by telling how you arrived at it, and now you've been telling about going to the zoo in Chicago. And I've heard you tell a hundred times about going to the San Francisco Zoo and watching the otters at play, but you never talk about what you played with as a child. Did you ever have a puppy to play with when you were a little boy? What was its name?

FATHER: Whoa, Cap. That's a question that's just going to remain unanswered. But you're quite right that even when I tell stories out of my experience, it's not my own history I'm talking about. The stories are about something else. The otter story is about the notion that in order for two organisms to play, they have to be able to send the signal "this is play." And that leads to the realization that that kind of signal, the metacommunication or the message about the message, is going to be part of their communication all the time.

DAUGHTER: Well, but we're two organisms. And we have that same problem you're always talking about, of figuring out whether we are playing or exploring or what. What does it tell me that you don't talk talk about play. I want to talk about talking about play -- how the otters go about it and how we might try to go about it.

DAUGHTER: Talking about talking about talking. Cosy. So this has turned into an example of logical types, all piled up. The otter story is a story about metamessages, and the stories of you growing up in a positivistic household are about learning -- because it was in thinking about learning and learning to learn that you began to realize the importance of the logical types. Messages about messages, learning about learning. I must say, even though the logic boys say they have new and better models of logical types that you don't take account of, you get a lot of mileage -- a lot of insight -- out of using them, when almost nobody else does.

But, Daddy, can you just go along at the top of the pile? I don't think you can talk about talking about talking without talking, and I mean talking about something specific, something solid and real. If you tell a story about play when I'm not part of it, does that mean we're not playing?

FATHER: Playing we may be, but you're nipping at my heels in this particular game. Look, we're getting into a tangle. You have to distinguish the logical types in the words of our conversation from the overall structure in the communication, of which the verbal conversation is only part. But one thing you can be sure of is that the conversation isn't about "something solid and real." It can only be about ideas. No pigs, no coconut palms, no otters or puppy dogs. Just ideas of pigs and puppy dogs.

DAUGHTER: You know, I was giving a seminar one evening at Lindisfarne, Colorado, and Wendell Berry was arguing that it is possible to know the material world directly. And a bat flew into the room and was swooping around in a panic, making like Kant's *Ding an sich*. So I caught it with somebody's cowboy hat and put it outside. Wendell said, "Look, that bat was really in here, a piece of the real world," and I said, "Yes, but look, the *idea* of the bat is still in here, swooping around representing alternative epistemologies, and the argument between me and Wendell too. "

FATHER: Well, and it is not irrelevant that Wendell is a poet. But it's also true that since we're all mammals, whatever word games we play we are talking about relationship. Professor X gets up at the blackboard and lectures about the higher mathematics to his students, and what he is saying all the time is "dominance, dominance, dominance." And Professor Y stands up and covers the same material, and what he is saying is "nurturance, nurturance, " or maybe even "dependency, dependency," as he coaxes his

students to follow his argument.

DAUGHTER: Like the mewling cat you're always talking about that isn't saying "milk, milk" but "dependency, dependency." Hmm. You wouldn't want to comment on the nationality of your two professors, would you?

FATHER: Brat. What is even more interesting is that someone like Konrad Lorenz can be talking about communication of relationships among geese, and he turns into a goose up there at the blackboard, the way he moves and holds himself, and it's a much more complicated account, a much richer account of the geese than we have had here about otters. . . .

DAUGHTER: And *he's* talking to the audience about dominance and so on at the same time. A man talking about a goose talking about a relationship that's also about the man's relationship to the other men . . . oh dear. And everybody in the room is supposed to pretend that it isn't happening.

FATHER: Well, the other ethologists get pretty resentful of Lorenz. They talk as if he were cheating, somehow.

DAUGHTER: What is cheating anyway?

FATHER: Mmm. In conversation it is "cheating" to shift logical types in ways that are inappropriate. But I would argue that for Lorenz to move like a goose or to use empathy in the study of geese is appropriate -- the way he moves is part of the empathy. But I run into the same problem: people say I'm cheating when I use the logic of metaphor to speak about the biological world. They call it "affirming the consequent" and seem to feel that anyone who does so should have their knuckles rapped. But really it seems to me to be the only way to talk sense about the biological world, because it is the way in which that world, the *Creatura*, is itself organized.

DAUGHTER: Hmm. Empathy. Metaphor. They seem similar to me. It seems to me as if making those things against the rules -- calling them cheating -- is like the kind of constraints you have in a relay race. You know, one hand tied behind your back, or your legs in a sack.

FATHER: Quite.

DAUGHTER: Well, but Daddy, I want to get back to the subject. I want to know why you are always telling stories about yourself. And most of the stories you tell about me, in the metalogues and so on, aren't true, they're just made up. And here I am, making up stories about you.

FATHER: Does a story have to have *really happened* in order to be true? No, I haven't said that right. In order to communicate a truth about relationships, or in order to exemplify an idea. Most of the really important stories aren't about things that really happened -- they are true in the present, not in the past. The myth of Kevembuangga, who killed the crocodile that the Iatmul believe kept the universe in a random state --

DAUGHTER: Look, let's not get into that. What I want to know is, why do you tell so many stories, and why are they mainly about yourself.

FATHER: Well, I can tell you that only a few of the stories in this book are about me, and only apparently so at that. But as for why I tell a lot of stories, there's a joke about that. There was once a man who had a computer, and he asked it, "Do you compute that you will ever be able to think like a human being?" And after assorted grindings and beepings, a slip of paper came out of the computer that said, "That reminds me of a story . . ."

DAUGHTER: So human beings think in stories. But maybe you're cheating on the word "story." First the computer uses a phrase that's used for introducing one kind of story . . . and a joke is a kind of story . . . and you said that the myth of Kevembuangga is not about the past but about something else. So what is a story really? And are there other kinds of stories, like sermons in the running brook? How about trees, do they think in stories? Or do they tell stories?

FATHER: But surely they do. Look, just give me that conch over there for a minute. Now, what we have here is a whole set of different stories, very beautiful stories indeed.

DAUGHTER: Is that why you put it up on the mantelpiece?

FATHER: This that you see is the product of a million steps, nobody knows how many steps of successive modulation in successive generations of genotype, DNA, and all that. So that's one story, because the shell has to be the kind of form that can evolve through such a series of steps. And the shell is made, just as you and I are, of repetitions of parts and repetitions of repetitions of parts. If you look at the human spinal column, which is also a very beautiful thing, you'll see that no vertebra is quite like any other, but each is a sort of modulation of the previous one. This conch is what's called a right-handed spiral, and spirals are sort of pretty things too -- that shape which can be increased in one direction without altering its basic proportions. So the shell has the narrative of its individual growth pickled within its geometric form as well as the story of its evolution.

DAUGHTER: I know -- I looked at a cat's-eye once and saw the spiral, so I guessed it had come from something alive. And that's a story about our talking that did get into a metalogue.

FATHER: And then, you see, even though the conch has protrusions that keep it from rolling around the ocean floor, it's been worn and abraded, so that's still another story.

DAUGHTER: You mentioned the spinal column too, so that the stories of human growth and evolution are in the conversation as well. But even when you don't actually mention the human body, there are common patterns that become a basis for recognition. That's what I meant -- part of what I meant -- when I said years ago that each person is his own central metaphor. I like the conch because it's like me but also because it's so different.

FATHER: Hello, snail. Well, so I tell stories, and sometimes Gregory is a character in the story and sometimes not. And often the story about a snail or a tree is also a story about myself and at the same time a story about you. And the real trick is what happens when the stories are set side by side.

DAUGHTER: Parallel parables?

FATHER: Then there is that class of stories we call models, which are generally rather schematic and which, like the parables presented by teachers of religion, exist precisely to facilitate thought about some other matter.

DAUGHTER: Well, but before you go off on models, I want to point out that the stories about snails and trees are also stories about you and me, in combination. And I'm always responding to the stories you don't tell as well as the ones you do, and doing my best to read between the lines. But now you can tell me about models or even about Kevembuangga if you want to. That's safe enough -- I've heard it before.

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