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METALOGUE: IS THERE A CONSPIRACY?

Daughter: Daddy, is there a conspiracy?
Father: To do what, exactly?
D: Well, to destroy the world's ecology? To make Vietnam into a desert? To overpopulate? To keep the poor hungry? To pollute?
F: Well – perhaps. Or perhaps not a conspiracy to *do* any of these things but just a shared understanding to *not* do any of the opposite things. An agreement not to worry about the ecology and Vietnam and so on. But does it make any difference?
D: Oh, yes – if it's a conspiracy we ought to fight it – but if it's just ignorance or not caring, we ought to *show* people what is happening –
F: No – I mean, would things be happening differently if it were a conspiracy – differently from how they would happen without a conspiracy? Does conspiracy or no conspiracy make a difference to what happens?
Millions of people want to eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day. This affects the turkey population and the turkey farmers and so on, but it's not a conspiracy – not even among the farmers, who no doubt have a lobby in Washington –
D: So if the turkey bit were bad, what should we do? Attack the farmers?
F: Should we conspire to attack the farmers? And so drive them to form a conspiracy?

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D: So we let them destroy what they will?
F: Who is "they," and who makes "them" do what they are doing?
D: I don't know…men,…with machines…under orders from somebody…and somebody makes the machines…and somebody pays for it all…and somebody profits.

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And somebody dies – perhaps we all die. How much harm do they have to do before they stop? Or somebody stops them?
F: Oh, no. That's not how it works. Crisis does not slow down the process of destruction – *it speeds it up*.
D: I don't understand. Surely people can choose whether to do harm, can't they? And if they still do it, other people can choose to stop them? Can't they?
F: No. It depends on the timing.

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D: What do you mean?
F: Well, it's like the frog in the saucepan. He was put into cold water in the pan and then heated *very slowly*. If he were heated fast, he would have jumped out. But if he's heated slowly, he "accommodates" to the heat, gets comatose, and gets cooked.
D: You mean that gradual crisis is no good?
F: Yes – gradual crises are no good and small crises are no good.
D: So we need quick fast crises?
F: Yes.
D: And we're all frogs? With no power to choose?
F: No power to prevent ourselves from getting accustomed to even the most monstrous horrors – Dachau and Vietnam and so on. The process of getting accustomed is totally unconscious – almost.
D: But if we're all frogs…
F: But we are not – frogs do pretty well in their own world, but they don't *invent* anything. What we do is invent a "remedy" whenever things get uncomfortable. When we are overpopulated, we invent miracle rice, and when there are too many cars, we build more roads, and so on.

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D: But in World War II, didn't your generation *choose* to stop Hitler?
F: Or was Hitler a crisis, which speeded up the process of wider destruction, leading to all the rest that has happened since? We *thought* we chose to stop Hitler. But I don't think we did much to stop his ideas. Indeed, we adopted many of them. His ideas compelled us to adopt them…
D: But what ideas?

F: Panzer divisions and force, for example. And some not-too-sensible ideas about races and secret police and computerized law enforcement and the welfare state and depersonalization and freeways for automobiles and Volkswagens… And not caring about the destruction… and valuing efficiency above everything else…

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D: Daddy, what is a "crisis"? How does it work?
F: Well, I suppose there are several sorts. There is the sort of "crisis" in pneumonia which is the worst moment in the disease, after which, if it does not kill the patient, he starts to recover. But that's not what I was talking about when I said that crisis speeds up the destruction.
D: But the Hitler crisis could have been like that, couldn't it? Couldn't it?
F: I don't know. Anyhow, it wasn't. It left us all more ready to distrust each other, more ready to damage the world and with better tools to do damage with – from atom bombs to electronic machinery.
D: But – that's progress. We don't *have* to use the A-bombs and the electronics for destructive purposes.
F: Ah – we could "choose" to use the atomic fission as an energy source?
D: Yes.
F: And then put the atomic waste… in the sea? Underground?
D: Somebody will invent some way of dealing with it.
F: Perhaps. And so?

I mean that the accumulation of atomic waste either is itself a way of killing the ecology – Or it precipitates a crisis as it accumulates, and that crisis *speeds up* our technology – and so more or less indirectly increases our destructive capacity.
D: That's crazy – not *all* good is evil.

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F: Good for whom? Evil for whom? And when? I mean, okay, the mosquitoes and the malaria bugs made a crisis: our boys overseas in World War II were dying of typhus and malaria, and other bugs *were* eating crops. Out of this crisis came the DDT and other insecticides. Those insecticides are *today* among the great threats to the world.

D: But that was only a mistake – they'll find better and safer insecticides. They didn't *know* DDT would be so dangerous – that it would spread all over and so on.
F: No – not a "mistake." They knew what they knew and *didn't care* what they didn't know. Such mistakes are systematic, repeated, and regular. Not accidental or random. You asked, "Is there a conspiracy?" but I say it doesn't matter whether there is a conspiracy. The point is that there is *regularity* in the way things work towards the destruction of the world ecology.
D: But there can't be regularity in mistakes.
F: Of course not, that's why I say the word "mistake" is wrong – we are not talking about mistakes but about systematic and directional error in what people do when faced with "crisis."
D: Well – what do they do?
F: They *invent* something. And what they invent has particular purpose related to that particular crisis.
D: And that is wrong? Regularly and systematically wrong?
F: Yes – regularly and systematically wrong.

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D: But Daddy, that's *progress*. All machines and inventions and laws and everything – it's *all* directed at specific purposes.
F: Mostly – yes – almost all inventions are anti-biological for that very reason. Machines are single-minded and that makes them ultimately destructive. But there is also biological evolution, and that is different. And a few inventions are pro-biological, not anti-. For example, cheese. And poetry…
D: Daddy, stop it. Poetry is not an invention. You are being silly –

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F: I wonder – I wonder where you draw the line. A mouse trap is an invention?
D: Yes – of course.
F: And the design of a mouse trap?
D: Yes.
F: And the differential calculus?
D: Yes. That was invented by Sir Isaac Newton.
F: And "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows?"

D: No. Because Shakespeare *made* it. He didn't *invent* it.
F: But the hexameter and rhythm?
D: Yes – I would call that an invention, perhaps.
F: And cheese?
D: Yes.
F: But Yeast?
D: No. – that's a discovery. It's a plant, isn't it?
F: Surely… And they say that somebody invented the idea of inventing things. Perhaps Leonardo. But I wonder. It looks as if men were told by the machines what sort of thing an invention should be…
D: But machines don't talk –
F: No, of course not – but the men who invented invention surely got the *idea* of invention from the tools and machines which they were making and using. It wasn't just their idea. It was their thinking, *guided* by the machines.
And when you say that poetry is not an invention, you mean that it's not the sort of thing that the machines would let you classify as an invention.
D: So the machines "told" people how to think about them?
F: Yes, indeed.
And, more than that, I think the machines told people to hurry up and make more machines and what machines to make.
D: Did the machines tell us to make the napalm and the DDT and the A-bomb? Are *they* the conspiracy?
F: No, not by themselves. They had to con us into thinking their way, so that we and they together became the conspiracy. When you say that poetry is not an invention, it shows that you have been conned into thinking their way. You have been "got at," as the English say.

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D: But *how* do machines think? And how do they make us think that way? And are there other ways of thinking? And are some ways of thinking better than others? And what's so wonderful about cheese and poetry?
F: And just why does the quality of cheese fall steadily as our technology and industrial system becomes more efficient and powerful? Our poetry gets more angry, and our cheese gets more tasteless.
D: Daddy, go back to us and the machines in a conspiracy. They say man is a tool-using animal…

F: All right. And most people still, today, a million years or more after the first tool was used, think that the relationship between man and tool and "nature" is something like this:

with the tool somehow between man and nature. "Nature" is supposed to be more or less unchanging, the tools are to be steadily improved so that man can get more gasoline or fish out of nature, and we do not ask what changes this process imposes upon man.
D: Then don't you want a back arrow from nature to man, to represent the fish and gasoline?
F: All right, yes. But the tool is still *between* man and nature; it still narrows his view of nature. If you go out with a gun, you won't do much bird-watching along the sights of the gun.
D: But Daddy, it might have been a pair of binoculars.
F: Indeed it might – but it wasn't.

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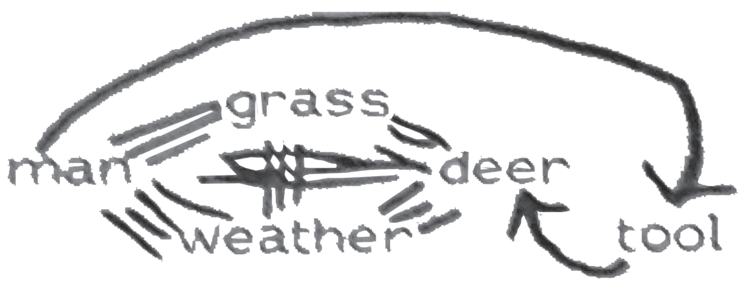
D: Well?
F: Let's forget the tools for a moment … and go back to man as part of nature and not a very special part.

He has at this stage intimate multiple links with all the creatures – and especially those that he can eat and those that eat him. But the links are unmediated and complex. With the development of *tools* all this changes – now his links become mediated, with tool between him and the others. This simplifies what were formerly rich relationships. Wherever the tools are most effective, the relationship is simplified – and made less intimate.
D: But he is still pretty close to nature.
F: Yea – he has no control over the weather – and indeed his complex and intimate dependency on weather remained for a long time – expressed in religion –
D: Is religion all about complex and intimate relations, Daddy?
F: Yes – till it turns into magic or gets secularized by putting tools between man and God.
D: Or nature?
F: Yes – but sometimes religion becomes entertainment – a tool specifically aimed at reducing boredom.

D: But what about crises?
F: Wait a minute. Let me bring our diagram up to date.



Now that he has a tool, man begins to picture himself as partly *outside* nature. He still has some intimate links, but now he has a bow and arrow to get more deer. And I have drawn the connection through the tool with a long arrow to come around and attack nature from behind.
D: Why ever?

F: Ah – because I want to say that now man is *talking to himself* every time he spears a deer.
D: What?
F: I mean that man's tools (and they were *his* tools, operated by *him*) begin to communicate back to man *through* nature. The tools have their effect on nature and that has its effect on man –
D: But what can he do about it? Does it even matter?
F: Oh, yes – because you see the tools can now precipitate a crisis in nature and this will be uncomfortable for man.
D: But what can he do?
F: That's easy – he invents more tools to deal with the crisis.
D: You mean that the tools have *told* him to invent more tools?
F: Exactly. And that's where we are today.

Except that you and I are talking about it.

D: But what about cheese and poetry?
F: All right. I have argued that inventions "talk" to man through their effects. That these effects produce crises or needs which may be more or less urgent and that these crises or needs determine the shape of future inventions.
D: No. I don't see why they determine the *shape*. Faced with air pollution, man might invent something to catch the fumes as they leave the automobile. Or he might invent a drug which would be an antidote; or electric automobiles, or rapid transit systems, or …
F: Yes – but those are all the same shape. They are all of that shape which man's experience with machines tells him is the proper shape for inventions.
D: No, I don't understand.
F: I mean that each one of the inventions is designed to meet a specific need. It has what is called a "purpose."
D: But of course. It should have. It had better have.
F: No – again you only say that because you have been got at by the machines. They have dictated your philosophy. All machines are shaped rather like mongooses – with sharp noses, and they follow their noses to achieve their purposes. It's that simple. And the more modern and sophisticated the machine, the narrower its purpose. That's what is called "efficiency."

D: But that's natural. You cannot help that.
F: No – it's precisely not "natural." And I don't care how many machines tell you that that is the natural and inevitable course of their evolution.
D: Are we on to *that* subject now?
F: Yes – inevitably.
D: But, Daddy, in biological evolution don't animals get over-specialized?
F: Yes.
D: And then they die out?
F: Yes – inevitably. So that getting overspecialized and being "efficient" is *off the path* of biological evolution. What the machines and inventions are telling man is precisely how to get off that path.
D: But isn't all evolution adaptive? Isn't that what Darwin discovered?
F: Hm – I don't know whether Darwin discovered it. Anyhow, it's a very misleading half truth. You have to remember that by the mid-nineteenth century the machines were already riding high and they certainly got at all the evolutionists of the period – told them what questions to ask and how to answer them.
D: But, Daddy, isn't *adaptation* the central idea in the theory of evolution? If I were not adapted, I would die, wouldn't I?
F: Of course – that's the half of the truth that is true. If you had no lungs or two heads, you would be dead – and probably in a bottle.
D: And don't I have lungs specially in order to breathe?
F: No – it's not so simple. Evolutionarily speaking, you were able to breathe before you had lungs. You were a fish with gills.
D: But I got lungs in order to come on land.
F: I doubt it. When you had something like lungs, you *found* you could come on land. But whether you got the lungs for that "purpose," I doubt.
D: Anyhow, I have to have oxygen, and that's what lungs or gills or whatever are for.
F: No – you do not breathe to get oxygen; you breathe to get rid of CO_2. It's the CO_2 in your blood that tells your body to breathe.
D: Anyhow, I do get oxygen by breathing, and that's the point.
F: No. The point is that *in principle* living things are *not* designed like machines. An engineer would have designed your respiratory reflexes to be controlled by oxygen lack. But that is not how you are designed. And, similarly, you do not eat to get energy (whatever that might be). You eat to satisfy *appetite*. And, indeed, when you have been starving for a few days, appetite and

even hunger disappear. "Adaptation," as they call it, is in general not achieved by direct purpose but by a sort of crabwise, sideways progression.
D: Do you mean, Daddy, that if I were a machine I would know exactly what I wanted and just go after it?
F: Yes. Just that.
D: But I always thought that's what I *ought* to be like.
F: Hm – I wonder how you got that idea. I guess your teachers must have been got at by the machines. Or when you were little, you wanted to be "The Little Engine that Could" or the "Red Caboose" or "Blinky, the Lighthouse." Monstrous!
D: All right, Daddy. Stop raging at the children's books.
F: No – seriously – in the good old totemic days, men wanted to be Kangaroos or Crows or Witchetty Grubs. Next thing you know, children will be told they ought to want to be computers or idiot boxes.

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D: Could we talk about cheese now?
F: Oh, all right. Cheese. You see, cheese is a second-line invention. First there was the domestication of cattle, an invention of doubtful value; and then cheese came later.
D: But what's wrong with cattle?
F: Okay – go look at North Africa and the Middle East, where cattle and especially goats have created a desert. What's wrong with cattle is just that they are *over-efficient*, like almost all inventions. Of course, as wild animals they were fine – kept in control by predators and disease. But when man made them into food-producing tools and energy sources for vehicles, he was asking for trouble. He imposed purpose (his purposes) on them. And his efficiency.
D: But, Daddy, millions of people were able to live in North Africa for hundreds of years, thanks to cattle.
F: Yes – and they blossomed into great civilizations and empires. That's what always happens. A great invention enables man to exploit nature (and other men) more efficiently. His civilization then rises. But too great efficiency of exploitation creates a desert and the great civilization declines.

And that would not matter much, except that as the local resources get used up, the men who have been taught large-scale exploitation by their invention begin to invent how to exploit the neighbors.

D: All right. But what about cheese?
F: All right – cheese is an invention which enabled man to use the milk produced by the cattle and goats in a more economical way. And, incidentally, a more aesthetic way. If he had too much milk, he could turn some of it into cheese. So that the invention of cheese probably delayed the creation of the deserts and the exploitation of the neighbors.
D: Then refrigerators are a *good* invention, too?
F: No – they were not necessary. You are too young to remember how good bacon and ham – and kippers – used to be. You see, everybody knew how to preserve meat and vegetables and fruit long before refrigeration was available. And today, by some mysterious law of cultural decline, you cannot get good bacon or ham – and what you get won't keep for more than a few days even in the refrigerator. It's strange.
D: And poetry?

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