

**About a text by Françoise Dolto:**

***What is a true thing?<sup>1</sup>***  
*(Father Christmas)*

**Quote:**

*"I have here a question about Father Christmas, quite simply. That's it! It's a father who asks your opinion on this myth: "Should the child be allowed to believe in Father Christmas and the tooth fairy for the loss of milk teeth, or in Easter eggs? When schoolmates teach him the truth, will the explanation of the father's symbolism be enough to compensate for the child's disappointment, who will suddenly realise that his parents have lied to him?"*

*Dolto: I think this is a false question. Children have a lot of poetry, and so do adults, since they themselves continue to wish each other Christmas, don't they? What is a true thing? Father Christmas makes so much money: it's not true? when you make a lot of money, it seems to be a true thing, doesn't it? [...]*

**Discussion :**

Dolto questions with a listener the appropriateness of telling children stories such as Saint Nicholas or Father Christmas. These stories, which are "arranged realities", fictions, will sooner or later appear to children as lies. The speed with which these stories become inventions of adults to make children "sing" will be even more effective and damaging today in a hyperconnected world where dozens of *Father Christmas* can be seen at the same time in different places. The parents' word is immediately confronted and questioned by the "televised parent". And yet Dolto maintains that it is appropriate to tell children these stories, these Christmas tales and many others, because there is a truth in this children's poetry, in poetry in general. It is on this point that we wish to make Dolto's words explicit.

In her answer, Dolto develops the idea that there are several levels of truth...

What makes a thing true or a behaviour true is that it makes money. Making money makes things important. An economic figure gives weight, seriousness to an activity even if it may be fiction, a lie or charlatanism. It does not matter! This type of activity indicates that credulity is an exploitable dimension of the human being. From this point of view, all the spending on the end-of-year celebrations makes Father Christmas important, almost real...

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<sup>1</sup> Françoise Dolto, *Lorsque l'enfant paraît* " tome 1, Editions du Seuil, 1977, p.93-95.

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What also makes something true is the word of an authority figure or the social relationship that is put forward. If parents engage their influence at an early age and give it credence, the thing presented will be taken as true; the child will take what the parents say at "face value"... Dogmatic faith is a fruit of education" wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Beyond the simple relationship of authority, there is also the social relationship where the number of followers or supporters imposes itself: if there are a billion Christians who believe, Christianity can appear to be a true thing. It is difficult to imagine that so many people are mistaken or deceived. However, "numbers do not make a truth", according to Plato, but in reality, numbers will sometimes create a huge balance of power that it is better to respect. A balance of power imposes itself on you, but the fact remains that numbers can impose a lie. Even if there is a risk of abuse of power, we cannot exclude the possibility that the number is an indication, an argument that there is something true, authentic in the collective approach...

But today, in our contemporary era, in principle, it is the scientific method, through its relationship to experimentation, that will prove what is real and true.

A thing is also true when it is subject to biological time: that a thing is born at a given moment and then dies, that is the proof that it is alive! Father Christmas seems never to die: he is therefore not a real person.

Beyond these three levels of truth (economic, social and biological), there is for Françoise Dolto another level of truth, that of poetry...

**Quote (continued):**

*"I'll tell you right away that the listener in question is violently against Father Christmases, especially those who walk in the street.*

*Dolto: Perhaps it's because he rightly thinks that these good people in disguise are depoetrizing the real Father Christmas, the one he believed in and who was not to be seen in the street all December, who only existed on Christmas night. It annoys him. Or maybe it's the opposite, a man who doesn't have much poetry left in his heart. [...] Father Christmas was not born, he did not have a father or a mother. He is not alive; he is alive only at Christmas time, **in the hearts of all those who want to give a surprise** to celebrate the little children. And all the grown-ups regret that they are no longer little children; so they like to keep telling the children: "It's Father Christmas"; when you are little, you don't know how to distinguish between real living things and real things that are only in the heart. [...]"*

*- So can I be Father Christmas too?*

*- Of course you can be Father Christmas. ...] For your father, **I won't say it's you, it will be a surprise too.***

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*He was delighted and overjoyed, and he said to me on the way back from a walk: "It's now... that I know that he doesn't exist for real, that it's really good, Father Christmas. "*

*Childish imagination and poetry are neither credulity nor childishness, but intelligence in another dimension.*

**Discussion (continued):**

**The truth of poetry for Dolto is in the surprise.**

That I receive a present from Father Christmas is not in the order of things. Indeed, that I can imagine for a moment that someone other than my parents, my relatives, my friends want to do me good, is not in the order of things. Yes! there would be a great Other (Saint Nicholas with his big beard or Father Christmas) who wishes me well. That's the surprise!

**To build a child, the fable may be necessary for a while. Indeed, it is important that as a child he believes that he is falling into a world that wants him well. If, too early on, he is convinced that here below, "hell is other people", as Sartre put it, this child will have difficulty trusting those he meets.** How can a child grow up if from the outset he or she has to distrust everyone and everything? Unfortunately, this is a situation that can occur: at the very heart of a family, all hell can break loose, a parent can turn out to be abusive. This unfortunate eventuality leads us to another stage of reflection.

**What is the truth of becoming an adult? The truth of no longer believing in Father Christmas?**

In order to become an adult, it is important that the child learns little by little to distance himself from the stories of childhood. This critical distancing reveals the complexity of a world where evil and good are mixed and perhaps intertwined to such an extent as to make it undecidable to know whether one prevails over the other.

At a given moment, difficult historical times can lead to the conviction that Evil prevails over Good or, on the contrary, easy times can make one forget the requirements that build a world of freedoms where I can choose ethical variety in my actions. In principle, education and culture teach us to judge this complexity, to orient ourselves, but sometimes, in the worst cases, they are manipulated and they compromise the growth of an individual by masking the efforts necessary to build ourselves.

**Historical complexity can seem undecidable.**

Worse! The actuality of an era can appear chaotic and become like a "story told by a madman" in the words of Hamlet. Faced with events, the individual, in the urgency of the present, has a life to live. Pressed by events, it is urgent that he informs himself as

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best he can and makes up his mind: is his world dominated by Good or by Evil? Undecidable! He is forced to make an act of faith: "Yes! this world is evolving towards more good! No! it is moving towards more evil.

**After observation and information, the individual is called upon to make an act of metaphysical faith.**

By **metaphysics**, we mean that which is beyond physics, beyond the observable and the knowable. The fact that the individual cannot take stock of all that the physical world can teach him and foresee, leads him to bet: "Yes! the world is moving towards the Good and I am taking the risk of being swept away by a nationalist, business or gregarious madness, etc."

His 'gamble' may be conditioned or hindered by a happy or unhappy history in his early life in which tales had a constructive or anaesthetic role and in which the great Culture had or did not have a positive and critical reinforcing effect. And even if he sees the omnipresence of evil, he can still wish and dream for a better world. However, there is no one to tell him that Good will prevail... No more believing in Father Christmas!

**Ambivalence (that there is Good and Evil) and ambiguity (impossible to know if Good can prevail over Evil) must have invaded his adult consciousness** but the fact remains that if he sees children around him, he can hope and bet for a happy ending of History. "The history of the world is the final judgment of the world. "Hegel wrote.

**How can we believe that the Good will win? How to choose the good? How can we avoid making mistakes and bet with reason? By playing Father Christmas?**

No!

But by looking and acting as broadly as possible.

In other words, by avoiding the confinement of family, clan, social class, elite, society, continent, in short by being for the Earth.

To this end, each of us has the responsibility to create a surprise in the eyes of the other. Not just any surprise! **But that surprise which will make him say that someone else who is not his father, his mother, his cousin or a friend, has given him a gift!**

In short, that a stranger wishes him well!

In other words, one day we may find someone who wishes us well, and who does so without worrying about being caught out by family, professional, social, political or international obligations. This person could have attacked us: he did not do so, but he helped us. In the event that he did not help us, this person would not have been

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accountable to anyone but to his conscience, which we will call metaphysical. **Metaphysical consciousness is that consciousness which makes us wish - in principle - that there was something rather than nothing, that there was the World rather than nothing.** The experience of such a situation can make us believe that Father Christmas exists... and can make us want to 'be' him, or at least to play him...

Who knows if we have ever met him! It's up to each of us to answer. If we have, so much the better. If not, for the sake of the whole world, it would be desirable to meet him as soon as possible... Only the future can tell us. Adolphe Hitler must not have met him or he did not recognise him.

Bernard Spee

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