

## Maturity, Adulthood, Boxing, and Play

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There are plenty of things which delighted us as children that can delight us the rest of our lives, if we let ourselves go.

According to the Norwegian philosopher Harald Ofstad, ethical norms may be condensed into one formula: To take the serious seriously. Personal maturity I take to be intimately related to that. But maturity should be carefully distinguished from adulthood. Since childhood I have associated adulthood with being meticulously occupied with what is on the whole boring. Ethics may require us to do boring things, but it leaves most of us plenty of time for what is not boring, such as an infinite variety to be found in our playfulness.

One of the antecedents to my playing with boxing gloves was throwing heavy bricks at each other. Our gang had three or four members. We were very fond of each other. We never had real quarrels and we never hit each other in anger or even felt an inclination to do so. In throwing bricks, there was an evident, probably never explicitly formulated rule: never to throw at somebody whose attention was engaged in avoiding being hit by a brick coming from a different direction. We had to be very alert and make a series of comical jumps, laughing all the time. It did not make the play less popular with us that the mother of one of us sometimes saw us and implored us to stop. It looked dangerous and aggressive.

Playing with boxing gloves also looks aggressive but *ahimsa*, no-hurting, is an absolute rule when we do it.<sup>1</sup> If one plays without any instructor, sooner or later, a finger or a rib may break. (Both have happened to me). So now I engage in this play, I am sorry to say, only a few times a year, and only with highly competent boxers. They are able to control every millimetre of the movements of their strong arms. One sequence which lately has elicited much laughter, as much as is compatible with keeping our jaw from hanging down too far, runs as

follows: My heavyweight, tall, athletic boxing-friend (Bjørn Barland) sends a series of punches to my stomach which I am able to protect with my bony elbows. The loud noise this makes is remarkable and delightful. It sounds as if there was a real fight going on. My companion then all of a sudden reaches for my jaw. His disgustingly long arm must travel far, whereas I need only to lift one of my gloves less than ten inches in order now to protect my face instead of my stomach. With astonishing speed and marvellous elegance he again and again is able to "hit" my face before my glove manages to move the few inches needed. Mahatma Gandhi would have laughed!

The general rule in such play is to reach for the limit of the other's capacity. It implies that my good-humoured boxing partner mostly slows down his movements enough to ensure that I have *a chance* to defend myself. My expert playmate has a difficult time following my rule that hitting should be more than just touching but should be without real weight. It ought to be clearly heard as a hit. In between "fights" we discuss his work as a graduate student of the sociology of sport.

Maturity implies taking seriously what is serious, but there is intuitively more room for (ecologically innocent) playfulness than ordinarily assumed. Some mammals have the capacity to be childishly playful all their lives. Why should we not be among them?

For me, occasionally playing with boxing gloves is great fun. Mock aggression or dangerous behaviour patterns belong to many sources of play we have at our disposal. Joyful play with boxing gloves is one of a hundred of its kind.

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<sup>1</sup> Fons Elders was the first, I think, who publicly lamented my play with boxing gloves, see his amusing *Reflexive Water*, A Condor Book, Souvenir Press, 1974, p. 274–278. For him, hitting *must* be incompatible with Gandhian non-violence.