

## A Philosophy of Fidgets

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Waiting in Dublin airport once, in the state of tipsily philosophical bliss that is common with me in airports, I saw a baby aged about nine months sitting at its parents' feet. The baby was entirely absorbed in a game that involved stretching and releasing the strap of its mother's handbag, while sliding the buckle up and down its length. At one point, its mother reached down and carelessly handed it a piece of muffin to eat. The baby looked from the muffin to the handbag, seemingly weighing the chances of it being able to play some useful part in its pushme-pullyou investigation. After a couple of puzzled moments, the muffin was thrown aside and the baby resumed its researches. I had never seen such absorption and intentness, and have never forgotten it. The baby was simultaneously concentrated and abandoned, utterly in and at the same time entirely out of this world. I thought I had seen something amazing: a creature coming into being in its capacity utterly to leave of itself in the calm ecstasy of play.

Fidgeting has a different kind of reputation. It suggests a kind of restlessness, a vague, sourceless unease. A fidge or fidget, perhaps from German *ficken*, to move about briskly, which also gives us the Northern dialectal *fike*, to fuss or vex oneself, is a ferment, a twitching, tremulous confusion. It may also be related to *ficus*, which seems to be a kind of itching complaint, probably piles (on account of the visual resemblance to a fig) but also sometimes involving the penis – 'Ficus is a maner wexynge þat arisiþ upon a mannes 3erde tofore', we are advised in the thirteenth-century surgical manual of Lanfranco of Milan (Fleischhacker 1894, 287). It seems centred on the edges and extremities of the body, toes, heels, knees, and, especially, the jitterbug capers of the fingers – fidgeting is digital. It may often be associated with drug deprivation: '“Look, Jim, how my fingers fidges” says the rum-starved captain at the beginning of *Treasure Island* (Stevenson 1985, 13). The fidgeting of children is an involuntary dance, that we everywhere and everyway seek to damp down. To fidget is also to fiddle, which associates it with music, perhaps the involuntary jigging of the tarantella or St Vitus's dance, and also with swindling. Fiddling is a kind of nothingness, or absurdity, as in 'fiddlesticks!' Miss Howe in Richardson's *Clarissa* describes her suitor Hickman as 'a sort of fiddling, busy, yet, to borrow a word from you, *unbusy* man: Has a great deal to do, and seems to me to dispatch nothing. Irresolute and changeable in every-thing.' (Richardson 1930, 2.5). Fiddling and fidgeting are first cousins to words like 'twiddle' ('twiddling one's thumbs' seems to arise around the middle of the nineteenth century), 'tweedle' (to play carelessly upon an instrument – sometimes called 'noodling' nowadays), 'twattle' (to babble emptily) and 'doodle'. Fiddling and fidgeting are oscillating actions, that go

obsessively back and forth on themselves rather than purposively in any direction and thus give rise to reduplicative forms like ‘fiddle-faddle’, ‘fiddle-de-dee’, ‘twiddle-twaddle’, ‘tittle-tattle’ and ‘titter-totter’ (this last a lovely early word for a see-saw). The conjoined senses of twitching and cheating come together in sexual associations – to fiddle and diddle both mean to masturbate. To ‘frig’, which has come to be applied almost exclusively to masturbation, meant to rub, chafe, or move up and down, and its variant form ‘fridge’ meant almost the same as to fidge or fidget – Henry Hallywell in 1681 beautifully evokes, for example, ‘the little Motes or Atoms that fridge and play in the Beams of the Sun shining through a Crany’ (Hallywell 1681, 3). Some of the force of fidgeting may also spread across into ‘fadging’ and ‘fudging’, meaning to fit together in a clumsy or improvised manner.

This extended family of words form a kind of fluttering cloud or constellation around the action of fidgeting, on which definition somehow never quite bites down, but itself enacts and propagates the kind of nervy, wavering, fretful quiver it names. Fidgeting seems often to belong, or at least be ascribed to the animal or inanimate world. Horses are afflicted with fidget, and mice, rats and flies all fidget: ‘The fire’s ashes fidget’, writes Louis Macneice (Macneice 1979, 75). Fidgeting belongs to the inhuman condition of the insomniac: in Thomas Haynes Bayly’s poem ‘Deadly Nightshade’, a sleeper lies uneasily awake in a strange house and ‘heard the hooting of the owl, the ticking of the clock,/And the door did shake, while something seem’d to fidget with the lock’ (Bayly 1844, 2.52). Florence Nightingale urges nurses to keep the sickroom quiet, since ‘[a] nurse who rustles...is the horror of a patient’ and ‘[t]he fidget of silk and crinoline, the rattling of keys, the creaking of stays and of shoes, will do a patient more harm than all the medicines of the world will do him good’ (Nightingale 1876, 27).

I think we should be willing to see more in fidgeting than just this futile, fitful fevering. Henry James speaks of the ‘fidget of composition’ (James 1971, v), and perhaps there is a kind of playful composition in all fidgeting. Indeed, one eighteenth-century dictionary offers as the Latin for ‘fidge’ the word *discurrere*, to run up and down, the word from which ‘discourse’ derives (Coles 1679, n.p.).

We might notice first of all that fidgeting requires an object, something to fidget with, even if only with oneself. Indeed, the urge to fidget might almost be put down to the need for or lack of some object, and the casting about for and taking up of some substitute for that object. Without some kind of object to fidget with (a cigarette, a biro, a slip of paper, a lock of hair), one becomes fidgety. Many of the objects with which I have been so earnestly toying in my book *Paraphernalia* (2010a) are *fidgetables*, things that hold out the possibility of being fiddled with – buttons, elastic bands, pins, sticky tape, glasses.

But, even though we may have favourite fidgetables, fidgeting is never satisfied with any particular object. This is because fidgeting is itself a process of searching for what might be called the ideal object. I mean by this something that is at once part of the world, something that can be owned and kept and fixed in place and

relied upon to stay put, in all the usual ways that objects can – and yet also resembles me, in all my fugitive variability, all my ways of being beside and taking leave of myself. The philosopher and historian of science Gaston Bachelard has evoked, as one avatar of this kind of object, what he calls the dream of an ideal paste. The ideal paste (of which snow, ice-cream, mashed potato, putty, playdough and potter's clay, all of them generalised kinds of *stuff*, are versions) is infinitely malleable, while yet never becoming entirely liquid, for at that point it would begin to escape me. The ideal object resists me, while yet also yielding; yields, while never simply giving way before me (Bachelard 1948, 78). It is capable of being deformed beyond recognition while yet persisting in itself. It is in fact like me, or the way I take myself to be, in being infinitely variable while yet miraculously remaining the same. It is capable of being put maximally to work, which is to say, maximally in play. We play with such objects as we do with all playthings, for an entirely circular reason – namely, to find out how much play (in the sense of give, stretch or variability), they may be found to possess. Sometimes, the action of taking an object to its limits will result in its being tested to destruction. Eventually, the paper-clip snaps. Perhaps all play has at its horizon the death of the plaything. When we put something to work, we use it for a particular purpose. In play, we seek not so much to use them as to *use them up*. The point of putting things into play may be to play them out, to see how far they go, how far we can go with the open totality of their affordances. And, at the same time, we put ourselves into play, we use these objects to play with ourselves, even to play with our own play, seeking its possibilities and limits.

The deeper secret of these objects is perhaps that they are the necessary accessories to thought. Perhaps they are forms of thought themselves. Just think how hard it is to think without touching yourself – putting your finger to your chin, or lip, or your palm to your cheek, flicking your tongue your tongue over your lips, tapping your thumbnail against your front teeth, padding your fingertips against each other, rubbing your brow. It is as though we were compelled to act out literally the meaning of the word 'reflection', from *reflectare* to bend back on oneself. Just as we recruit our own bodies for these doubling enactments of our own reflective work, so we requisition objects to join the flexing play of thought, as Leopold Bloom does in Joyce's *Ulysses*, twisting an elastic band round his fingers as he listens to, and thinks about, music:

Love that is singing: love's old sweet song. Bloom unwound slowly the elastic band of his packet... Bloom wound a skein round four forkfingers, stretched it, relaxed, and wound it round his troubled double, fourfold, in octave, gyved them fast...

Words? Music? No: it's what's behind.

Bloom looped, unlooped, noded, disnoded. (Joyce 1986, 225-6)

The inaugurating movement of fiddle or fidget is the making of a bend, or, if all goes well, a loop, to test how flexible something may be. Most children encounter

the magic of a loop for the first time during that rite of passage when they first learn to tie a shoelace. To form a loop, to make a fold or pleat or bow, is always a kind of magic, since it suspends the order of things (loops or nooses are necessary for suspensions), holds back the steady unfurling of time. Loops are parentheses, procrastinations, pockets of time and space which are held apart from the general conditions of propagation and passing away. Sometimes, in a tied ribbon or shoelace, for example, a loop will be held in place with a knot, but knots and loops are in fact topologically distinct. For a loop, unlike a knot, never crosses over itself. It is the difference between a bowtie and a necktie: pull on a knot, and it will get tighter; pull on a loop, and it will unravel. A knot condenses space, or feeds it into itself. A loop saturates space, filling it up from the inside out.

A loop is opposed to a straight line, because its aim is not to overcome or minimise space. If you aim to get from A to B as quickly as one can, then you will lay down a Watling Street, ignoring every circumstance of hill and waterway, with no concern for variations of soil and gradient, or historical rights of way, no deviation of intent. But a looping progress, whether the product of disorientation, irresponsibility or caprice, has no interest in saving time. Where the straight line aims to traverse as little space as possible, in order to complete its journey in the minimum of time, the looping or detouring itinerary aims rather to traverse the maximum of space. Labyrinths and mazes, which are structures which aim to leave no part of an area unvisited, are made predominantly of loops, looped on themselves, loops raised to a higher power, looping the loop.

The OED suggests that 'loopy' first started to mean 'cracked, mad, or crazy' only during the twentieth century – which seems hard to believe. The loopy resemble the crazy in that they do not go intelligibly from one thing to another. But the aim of the loopy or the crazy is precisely not to reduce possibilities, but to maximise them. Loops are in fact optimal itineraries when what counts is occupying a territory – leaving as little space as possible left over – rather than optimising a trajectory. Straight lines, metrics, are fundamentally agoraphobic, or space-averse, they want as little to do with space, and as little space to do with, as possible. Loops are topophilic, for they tarry, temporise, dilly-dally, and in every way take their time with space.

It is for this reason that natural forms frequently adopt the method of the loop, when it is a matter either of covering as much ground as possible, as in the case of a fly or bird patrolling a territory, in order to intercept as many intruders as possible and increase to the maximum the probability of intersecting with prey. If one can move fast, one has no need to be large, for one can occupy space by movement rather than mass, or by a movement thickened into mass.

If the mad are loopy because they cannot get their words or thoughts straight, then there is kind of grandeur or magnificence in loopiness too, precisely because the loop is an accentuating rather than an accelerating device, an instrument of

pervading rather than progress. Thus the signature of Queen Elizabeth confirms her power in its very enactment of the gratuitous or the unnecessary.



The signature is the point where a letter both comes to an end and turns on itself, says 'yes' to itself, especially in the case of a document that itself has a performative force, that is itself an act. It is the point of the document, the point in the document that validates it all. But Elizabeth's signature curls and coils in almost lascivious abandon, consciously and, of course, grandiosely delaying the signing off of the signature, like a cadenza at the end of a symphony. It is authoritative precisely in its commanding circumstantiality, taking its time by taking up space. This is the fidget apotheosized; it displays, not economy, but versatility.

So the loop is not just the optimal mechanism for the occupation of a territory. For precisely this reason, it is also important in maximising the possibility of reception, sensitivity and awareness. These are the terms in which, prompted by the intricate labyrinth of the inner ear, Michel Serres has praised the maze or labyrinth as a model for communication.

We inherit our idea of the labyrinth from a tragic and pessimistic tradition, in which it signifies death, despair, madness. However, the maze is in fact the best model for allowing moving bodies to pass through while at the same time retracing their steps as much as possible; it gives the best odds to finite journeys with unstructured itineraries. Mazes maximize feedback. ... Let us seek the best way of creating the most feedback loops possible on an unstructured and short itinerary. Mazes provide us with this maximization. Excellent reception, here is the best possible resonator, the beginnings of consciousness. (Serres 2008, 143)

The principle of space-filling, the desire to leave no stone unturned, no track untraversed, no hole unplugged, is widespread, not just among human beings, but also among natural forms, for whom survival may be an all-or-nothing affair, and for whom an immoderate project of world domination may be necessary if one is to end up with even the most modest niche. Little in nature appears self-limiting, as the behaviour of most types of human over the millennia may seem dismayingly to confirm. Nature's idea of staying put is spreading out, getting everywhere while going nowhere.

Fidgeting is related to the practice of doodling, the production of pictures or, more often, aimless patterns, in an absent-minded or inattentive state. Used in this sense, the word, like 'loopy', is surprisingly recent – the OED can find no examples of its use before 1937 – though it is clearly related to earlier uses of the word to mean a fool or noodle. It makes sense to see the practice of doodling as a modern one, because it is only in recent times, when paper was plentiful and implements of writing easy to acquire and use, that doodling could be cheaply indulged. The most emphatic disproof of this, however, might be medieval manuscripts, in which the intensely laborious nature of the work did not at all inhibit the production of elaborate marginal sideshows, strewing and stravaiging irrelevantly and irreverently round the main business of the liturgies or scriptures they festoon. The fact that bagpipes, the traditional instrument of fools, which, as we have seen already, feature frequently in such manuscripts, were called 'doodle-sacks' until the eighteenth century, is a pleasing coincidence. The World War II flying bombs known as 'doodlebugs' were probably named for the insect-like sound they made at distance, but the name doodlebug was perhaps given to various insects in the first place on account of the erratic nature of their track or flight path, for example the antlion larva (*Myrmeleontidae*), which is known in the US as the doodlebug because of the winding, wandering tracks it leaves in the sand while looking for a location for its trap. Doodling is a mode of search, it is a way, not of annihilating space, but of opening and adorning it, optimising chances and amplifying responsiveness.

Doodled form emerges through improvisation, or through a constantly-shifting plan, rather than from a blueprint. Doodles can sometimes take the form of faces and figures; but most doodles take the form of abstract patterns; cobwebs, networks, flaring arcs, foam-like clusters of bubbles. Doodles are often cellular or segmented. Perhaps the most important thing about a doodle is that it is semi-automatic. This means, not that it has no rules at all, but that it has no ground plan or sense of the big picture. It must be put together out of local inclinations rather than global strategies; add a line here to close off that box, add a diagonal there to nudge the whole just a little away from equilibrium again. It is a kind of systematic fidgeting with the pen, which wants to be able to complete the drawing, but keeps finding itself off-kilter, and so unable to seal itself off. Because the doodle operates according to no plan, it sidles up on space rather than effecting a frank takeover of it. Doodles are timid; like spiders, they begin in corners, and creep along margins, clinging to their own edges. Doodles, like fidgets, keep things open, forming a structure that is at once all-inclusive and open to more variation. James Joyce told Eugene Jolas that, while some of the puns on which he toiled in his *Finnegans Wake* were trivial, others were quadrivial (Givens 1948, 24). Joyce, the great geographer of the world of language, was drawn to deltas, the places where the unidirectional, go-ahead shove of the river starts to ramify and spread, interweaving, turning back on itself, and the outward flow of the river and the inward tug of the tide meet and parley, so that the river seems to be able to go in all directions at once. Continually, continuously turning back on, turning back into itself, the idling,

doodling, distracted, fidgeting mode of reflection similarly allows the playful thinker to ‘dwell in possibility’ (Dickinson 1970, 327).

I have come to think that there is no act of thinking that does not in part seek an image for its own operations – reaching for some kind of external ‘thinking thing’ that can serve to embody and entertain the act of thought itself, that is otherwise so slippery and impalpable (Connor 2010a). I think the best of whatever I am able to do as a teacher is to help students to find ways of holding together and working on their own thinking. Thinking about the kinds of things that are apt to become the body-doubles of our own thinking, ravel the whole cat’s-cradle up exquisitely.

The seventeenth-century philosopher Ralph Cudworth is at pains to insist, against his materialist opponents, that thinking cannot be reduced to mere fluctuations of atoms ‘it is certain that *Cogitation* (*Phancy, Intellection* and *Volition*) are no *Local Motions*; nor the meer *Fridging* up and down, of the Parts of an Extended Substance, changing their *Place* and *Distance*; but it is Unquestionably, an *Internal Energie*’ (Cudworth 1678, 831). And yet the word ‘cogitation’ ultimately derives from *co-agitare*, to move or work together – to rub, fidget or frig, perhaps. In Latin, as in English, cogitation, the favoured term for thinking about the act of thinking since Descartes coined his *cogito ergo sum*, means not so much to reason, as to reflect, to ruminate, to chew or turn over in the mind. No wonder, then, that we should so habitually accompany this mental action with physical actions of turning over, reflection, reversal, revolving, rubbing things up the wrong, and right, way. The ‘*Internal Energie*’ of thinking always seeks an external theatre of cogitable, fidgetable things in which to work itself out. Thinking on these kinds of things, we cannot help but think with them. The secret magic of such things is their capacity to give our thought to itself as we give thought to them.

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