

Legosophy
(*Legosophie*)

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INTRODUCTION

I'm a philosopher, and I'm passionate about Lego, and I've made my home in Paris for many years. Here, at Les Halles, in the heart of the city, a magnificent Lego store opened its doors in 2016¹. Since then I've tried to visit this temple of the humble brick, with its exhaustive inventory, at least once a month.

I love going to these stores; I love feeling a little shiver of wonder at discovering each new item; I love thinking about how the disparate and ever-changing parts of our world are all represented by the same bricks, the same characters. I love watching generations mingle, and I find myself amused by my own nostalgia for those iconic sets that shaped my childhood and aren't available anymore (pirates and the Middle Ages, particularly), and by my disdain for the fact that nearly half the products on sale are licensed collaborations (Star Wars, Marvel, and DC Comics, not to mention Minecraft, Angry Birds, Ghostbusters, etc.). This feeling of violated orthodoxy fades when I realize that the enthusiasm felt by children—the main intended consumers of what is, after all, just a toy—is the same now as mine was twenty years ago. In fact, each visit to the Lego Store, each purchase, each session with my Lego is an opportunity to philosophize².

None of that has been enough, however, to transform my thoughts into *a book on the philosophy of Lego*. For that to happen, I've had to spend time thinking about *plastic*. The “discovery” of the material of which Lego bricks are made is one of the reasons, truly, that drove me to write this book.

Modern society is witnessing the widespread flourishing of the cult of biodegradability, renewable resources, carbon, and eco-friendliness. Plastic and the feelings it provokes aren't doing much to improve the consumer experience. Plastic packaging will negatively affect the opinion we form of a new technological device—especially in the case of high-end products—and, indirectly, our potential desire for it. Plastic objects aren't pleasant to handle, unless you're seeking a vintage experience to send you back to the last decades of the twentieth century. But there are a few exceptions to what you might call the “plastic blues”, and Lego is one of them.

While reading *Brick by Brick*, a book on the history of the company³, I came across a passage describing the exploits of the founder, Ole Kirk Christiansen, the owner of a wooden toy manufacturer in Billund, Denmark, who experimented in the 1950s with the possibility of using new materials to create an innovative, modular, composable toy. This gentleman, with the help of his son Godtfred, initially tested cellulose acetate but eventually obtained better results with acrylonitrile butadiene styrene, a type of plastic better known as ABS.

Plastic. What a disgrace.

So humble, so outdated.

¹ The Lego Store at Les Halles has a philosophical advantage over other stores: it's laid out on a single floor. Visitors walking through the front door can take in the whole Lego catalogue in one sweeping glance. The sense of being aesthetically and intellectually transported that this cohesive view provides shouldn't be underestimated; Aristotle, in his book *Poetics*, argues that a tragedy should be as long and richly detailed as possible, as long as its plot can be grasped in a single glance.

² I spend hours building little Lego dioramas whose degree of realism varies, but whose internal consistency I take great care over. I don't have time anymore to play with the scenes I build the way I did when I was little, but all I have to do is look at them for them to come to life and for my imagination to kick into gear.

³ David C. Robertson and Bill Breen, *Brick by Brick: How LEGO Rewrote the Rules of Innovation and Conquered the Global Toy Industry*, London, Crown Business, 2013.

And yet I felt a shock. What did I think Lego was made of? We're so used to models made of the little the bricks that we think of things "made *with* Lego" as if they were "made *of* Lego". As if Lego were a material in itself, an alternative to wood or metal—or plastic. As if the periodic table of elements should have a Lego square. But no: the truth is that the bricks, the people, the whole universe is made of *plastic*, not of Lego. How is it possible? Plastic may be the quintessence of Lego, but there is nothing plastic about Lego!

I kept reading, but the sense of dissonance stayed with me. Was the transcendence of Lego really so powerful that a self-evident statement revealing its true composition could disturb me this much? Such an assault on my peace of mind had to be avenged! Especially because this was proof that the philosophical thoughts inspired by Lego weren't simply the pulsations of a childish mind I'd never fully managed to quash, but true reflections on an object that continues to amaze and enchant us. An object capable of configuring itself in the minds of those who love it like an element in itself, to the point that they forget what it is made of.

The best way to avenge the assault, then, was to write a book on the philosophy of Lego, and Legos. A *Legosophy*.

How have I presented my Legosophy?

I've followed three major lines of thought, each of them corresponding to a chapter of this book. Chapter One, "Lego at the Acropolis", describes the similarities between the origins of Lego and the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece. The next chapter is dedicated to "Cognitive Bricks" and analyzes the act of playing with Lego through the prism of cognitive science and more recent philosophical theories concerning the nature of the mind, to understand what links can be established between Lego and the way we think. Finally, the last chapter, "In Bricks We Trust", addresses the astonishment that may greet the very existence of a philosophy of Lego: why has Lego become an object of worship? Can we speak of a veritable *faith* in Lego?

It's important to point out from the beginning that this book isn't a philosophical history of Lego. I will employ relevant historical elements to establish or develop a train of thought, but my goal here isn't to provide a comprehensive chronology of Lego. There are already many excellent books out there on the entrepreneurial history of Lego, encyclopedias listing every model sold, analyses of parallel projects inspired by the Danish bricks, films, video games, books. This book is a book of suggestions, and of passions. My passion for knowledge and my passion for the game are intertwined; each one echoes the other.

Lego and philosophy are similar because they both combine method and freedom. Lego's method is its system of interlocking bricks, the famous Lego System, and it is realized via its instructions. These show how to build the models contained in each box, obviously, but they can also be broken down and adopted as strategies, guides to assemble certain parts: axles, vaults, load-bearing or swiveling structures, etc. In philosophy, the method is the way of guiding thought. There are as many methods as there are philosophies. What is fundamental is the respect for logic (in the more or less formal sense) and for the reasoning that allows us to move from one thought to another without contradicting ourselves.

In philosophy, as in Lego, method goes hand in hand with freedom. The freedom to combine multiple sets, to test one method in another domain, to reproduce one constructive skill in a completely different register or even to vary the scale of structure. Philosophers and Lego-builders feed on the same freedom. Both Lego and philosophy are *modular* by definition. The builder claims his (or her) independence in from the instructions by letting his imagination run wild, but in doing so he applies the techniques he has learned thanks to those very instructions. Moreover, a builder goes

beyond himself, not by rejecting his earlier models, but by incorporating them into a surpassing of the self. In the same way, the disciple of a thinker deconstructs the theses and arguments of his master not simply to destroy them, or to go back to the starting point, but to show that there are other ways of assembling these same elements, of applying these thoughts to other subjects; that they can be turned upside down, or examined backwards. No Lego model is ever truly complete, any more than any true philosophy. Lego has used “Play on!” as a motto; philosophy could use “Think on!” as its own. Start with the instructions, and never stop being filled with wonder at what you can do.

Denmark, the homeland of Lego, has a special relationship with wonder, the foundation stone of philosophy. I’m reminded of Hamlet, prince of Denmark, and the famous phrase ascribed to him by Shakespeare: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Horatio has been skeptical of the ghostly manifestation of the dead king, a skepticism tinged with panic and paralysis. Hamlet is pushing him to transform that skepticism into wonder, urging him to “give it welcome...as [to] a stranger”. To accept what is strange; to wonder at it, and make something of it. Since its beginning, the history of philosophy has been the history of wonder and wonderment; it is only the things that we wonder at, and the ways in which we wonder, that have changed. To philosophize is to go from astonishment to wonderment, from the static to the dynamic, from anxious panic to the passionate study of life and the world, welcoming what we do not know and letting ourselves be guided by what is radically foreign to us. Hamlet encourages us to give the stranger the welcome that is due him, because *there are more things in heaven and earth, reader, than are dreamt of in your instructions*. Do you have an idea? A vision? Give your wonderment free reign. You don’t necessarily have to wait for it to go on sale. You have the method; you have the bricks. Play on! As they say, philosophy isn’t the science of great answers, but that of great questions. This book hopes to embody precisely that *legosophic* spirit: I will offer numerous reflections, with which the reader may choose to agree or not; I will sketch forks in the path of thought (like the kits that enable you to build multiple models out of the same bricks), and I will sprinkle the text with questions to which I won’t necessarily give an answer, but I invite the reader to explore them according to his or her own inclination and understanding.

Before we start in on our Legosophy, then, allow me to make one small clarification. This book is meant to be a love song. As everyone knows, love sometimes goes unrequited, and can almost never be controlled. All of which is to say that this little volume was not commissioned by Lego®, nor has Lego® given its consent, and it’s possible that Lego® won’t even approve the content. Nonetheless, I really love my Lego, so off we go⁴!

⁴ Note: LEGO® is a registered trademark of the Danish corporation The Lego Group.