

# The place the hands can't seek - IV - The unbreakable objects and the empty hands

By Clémence Ortega Douville

*'Lorsqu'il découvre les travaux des éthologistes, [John] Bowlby est à la recherche d'une théorie capable d'expliquer les observations cliniques qu'il a rassemblées en quinze ans de travail à la Tavistock Clinic de Londres. [...] le concept d'empreinte lui semble beaucoup plus intéressant [que les théories psychologiques de l'époque] : chez certaines espèces, on l'a vu, les petits sont génétiquement prédisposés à des réactions dont l'effet est de maintenir la proximité avec un individu particulier, bien différencié - en général la mère - qui sera préféré entre tous. [...] Il appelle attachement ce système biologique. Étant donné sa fonction de protection, ce système doit reposer sur des mécanismes sûrs, codés dans l'organisme, et être présent dès la naissance. Bowlby suppose alors que la succion, le sourire, les pleurs, l'agrippement, le babillage et la poursuite sont les réponses instinctives sur lesquelles repose l'attachement. Ce système de réponse constitue l'homologue humain de la réponse d'agrippement qui, chez les autres primates, assure la proximité avec la mère. Et, comme l'ont montré les travaux des époux Harlow, l'agrippement à la fourrure est l'une des bases du lien émotionnel entre le petit singe et sa mère.'* In *L'éthologie : Histoire naturelle du comportement*, Jean-Luc Renck & Véronique Servais, Ed. du Seuil, 2002, pp. 292-293

Psychoanalyst John Bowlby was very much influenced by ethologist Konrad Lorenz's concept of *imprinting* on the innate quality of attachment and its utility for survival. This imprinting is still present in our memory, as the quality of *what is in our hands* is omnipresent.

This article will not be a theoretical text as much as it is now a question of memories, of imprints. We learn very soon as children that there are objects we can break and some others that we cannot break, that we can't even touch. *We are not allowed to* and that is the first rule of the moral teaching. Our hands are empty of the objects we can't break, that seem to go fleeing from our reach.

If attachment is formed from the early moments of, first of all, mother-infant's interactions, this 'ballet' that paediatrician T. Berry Brazelton described, how do we cope with its fragmentation through the symbolic organisation of the law ? Temporal organisation of these primary interactions, studies show, is very precise. It is a mutual synchronisation - often reaching the range of tenth a second - and although very young, babies get to know the regularities of their interaction with their mother (or substitute) and develop expectations toward their reactions.

Brazelton's postulate was then that babies were not only passively shaped by their environment but on the contrary, very much active and sollicitating in their relation to their mother and surroundings.

But whenever you are introducing a delay in what psychoanalyst Daniel Stern called the *implicit relational knowing*<sup>1</sup> - as Brazelton shew with his experiment of the 'impassive face'<sup>2</sup> -, the world is shaken. There is a disruption occurring. As well, the dissociative connection from the hand(s) to its objects is turning unclear.

Memory won't bring the object back.

Now, let us be attentive to psychologist René Zazzo's marvel for the fact that he witnessed,

---

1 We discussed this concept in the second article of the Three paradoxes section, *Empirical and theoretical research*.

2 The mother presents herself in front of her two-month old baby and keeps, whatever happens, an impassive face for three minutes. Babies are first disappointed and try not to look at their mother (generally in vain), then seem desperate and overwhelmed, and eventually become withdrawn. Mothers also are much perturbed by the experience and often feel like abandoning their baby. Yet, the little child will generally recover from it to confidence again in time.

in 1983, that babies recognised their mother's smell since the tenth day of their life (so way before the two or three years it was believed to be before). After further experiments, psychophysicist Hubert Montagner's team reduced this time to three days from which babies could recognise and *prefer* their mother's smell from any other woman's with a baby of the same age. Montagner concluded that olfactory attachment, present amongst most mammals, was also an important feature of attachment in our species.

Psychologist Rachel Herz goes even farther by stating that the connection between smell and emotion is primary. In the brain, the rhinencephalon, developed from the ancient olfactory structures, is one comprising the olfactory bulb and structures having a part in the regulation of the organism's emotional responses (limbic system). To the psychologist, 'emotion is essentially an abstract and cognitive version of olfaction'<sup>3</sup>, their analogical function being to signal to the organism if something is good or not, if we should come closer to it or run away.

Ethology applied to human behaviour is then stressing something very important to us : what is missing that we miss so much ?

Now then, it is time to break the stick. The self is alien (we partly explained in previous articles why), but why is it so much ? If you are looking at your own hand(s), as to the paradox we were investigating into, what do you expect to find ? And what is missing ?

Precisely, something to grasp - but why ? Because they lost contact to the ground and to the branches of the trees they used to be the medium for. Now they are grasping other things but more importantly, they lost the smell of the other. Being constantly in touch with something else, they used to be defined by their relation to their surroundings. As they lost touch with their surroundings, by being lifted in the air, thanks to bipedalism, they lost the quality of being something else *for a reason*.

If my hand is covered with a substance that is alien to me (dirt, for example, or an edible substance), they are alien for a reason : because their smell and touch and taste are altered. And if I look at them closely, I will recognise that they are empty, that the alien part that should be here *as the hands are supposed to bring up and carry the alien things*, is not; and then, I will wonder what *is* alien in them being empty, missing an altered thing to give them the meaning of *bringing them to me*. The short-term feature expected from them, activating short neural circuits, is to touch alien contact and to bring those of interest to *me*.

Primatologist Jan Van Hoof proposed in 1972<sup>4</sup> a phylogenetic line to the evolution, for instance, of our laughter and smiling. The latter would notably appear among chimpanzees as a friendly or neutral signal from a dominant animal to invite one subjugated to contact. Laughter would on the contrary appear during more turbulent social games, like tickling. Yet, never laughter and smiling come together in the primate species.

Here we find something equivalent : the hands are not supposed to come without something alien in or on them to fulfill their short-term use. Yet by keeping them aloft standing in front of me, to be gazing at them and most especially at *it*, I realise that there isn't in or on it anything I would have expected to find. The short-term neural circuit is contradicted.

Yet if nevertheless I keep on staring at it and definitely wanting something from it, this contradiction is turning into a void expectation - fascination, that is here a psychotic feature. I would get nothing from it but my own smell, my own matter, my own skin, my own body. However it *has* to carry something alien. My hands are defined by the alien they carry or lean on - the ground. They are now not rooted in the ground, on the tree, in my surroundings ; but in my body.

---

<sup>3</sup> In Jean-Luc Renck & Véronique Servais, *L'éthologie : Histoire naturelle du comportement*, Ed. du Seuil, 2002, p. 299.

<sup>4</sup> In Jan Van Hoof, *A comparative approach to the phylogeny of laughter and smiling*, in R.A. Hinde *Non Verbal Communication*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 303-321.

My hands, represent *my* body, *my* reality because they are empty from further expected short-term and fixed action pattern (to use Bowlby's term). They carry the void, the emptiness and the capacity still to be wanting something, something very deep from them, one existence of something else, something meaningful, an intensity, a smell, a *different* smell still there and an arousal from that smell, that I can swallow - but that they don't have.

Hence, I start creating the first symbolic object of all : the desire that something that is missing comes to be. And for that, I start *delaying or lagging neural responses* (Gerald Edelman's imperative). And the images of what is missing that I would like to see being then start to come as something *possible*, but not yet achieved.

The unbreakable objects, the symbolic objects created by the others or their absence are the ones I can't assimilate or swallow or suck out, that can't vanish because they are not *here* - they are *there*, out there, somewhere and coming - fear being part of desire and one neural response we have with the lowest threshold. The fear to lose or the fear to be lost. Hands, what is *not different* but other than me, are the perfect mirror. But they are first because they always reflect the same thing : identity - the time for difference through repetition.

One cannot truly lose what they can't get. As well, they don't always get what they expect. That is why we keep on repeating : maybe next time, I will have more luck than the first. Like in the *Fort-da* game witnessed and reported by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). *Me, the child, I keep on throwing the spool and pulling the thread so it would come back*. Memory - what does come back ? And more importantly, what does *never* come back ?

Response: The fact that a constant contact to the ground has been lost. The fact that the constant touch of something alien, except the air, is lost. The fact that other objects have gotten in the way. The fact that I can't swallow or suck out most of my daily objects without breaking a social rule. The fact that the objects I can't swallow are swallowing me in their symbolical absence - the empty hand, grasping nothing and meaning nothing. The fact that I am in debt toward these objects turned unbreakable because they represent the social order and the moral laws. The fact that thinking is a sinking, only risen up again by the fact that the objects of social order are keeping me up or I will be expelled. The fact I have to choose the objects, physical or symbolical, that I want to be surrounded with.

The definition of the home is the one that means territory where my action is desirable. Empty hands are a way to mean that the house is still empty, that no territory has been set for me to be at one place.

The fact that we have lost contact with matter is significant. It is taking more and more advantage over us. The anguish of the empty hands is *when are they going to be full again*, with something I could assimilate and identify with. Identifying to my empty hand(s) is identifying to nothing *yet happened*. It is an abyss. And it is a sensorimotor paradox because I am delaying the use of my very hands - and I am losing the ground.

The symbolic, the *not yet happened*, has become the ground, and that is the articulation. We, in a ritualised pattern, usually slam the door when are upset, angry, contesting a familial or other forms of authority without allowing ourselves to destroy the persons or their symbol. We are only trying to destroy the pain by remotely manifesting our means for destruction through the delayed slamming of the door.

Symbolically, when I am performing the physical effort of throwing the door to its lock, the impact of it hasn't yet happened. But when it has, remotely, it is not I but the door who expressed, on a symbolical level, the fact that I am feeling upset. Delaying is essential not to hurt the people, the living beings, but the fact that I have to express attachment in another way than a direct form of *grasping the mother*, for instance.

There is nothing in my hands but the only symbolic objects I am left with : to acknowledge, possibilities to action, and maybe eventually, some realisations too.