

A short presentation of the Three paradoxes theory

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Let us put a goldfish in a bowl. What happens ? Not to the goldfish but to us. We look at the goldfish in the bowl. And as we look at it moving, checking that it is indeed moving and not still, that it is alive, what does happen to us ?

It might happen that we hold breath, sustain attention, find ourselves caught by something we didn't imagine before. We are simply staring at the goldfish, doing nothing – as both the goldfish and ourselves are.

The goldfish is free. Obviously it's in a bowl so it is not free to move beyond its limits ; but still it appears freer than us, or at least it makes us look a bit more odd because of it. We can't be as – apparently – careless as the goldfish. Because we know that we can't, or else we'd find ourselves be locked up in any institution that is up to prevent the actual social order from being disrupted by people thinking that they could be as careless as a goldfish. Which means doing whatever comes up to be doable, just as carelessly as walking may make us free to go on walking as carelessly as one goldfish swims.

Then hold breath, because the best part is this : during this time you did not think about what was happening in your life, by staring at the goldfish, you experienced something else : curiosity. Somewhere, you entered a vacuum room that is not allowed to exist in your daily life. You extracted yourself from the straining obligations of social behavior and allowed yourself just to be some kind of a fish.

And fish get caught. That's why we can't be a fish when living in society. We can be a fish when we are being trustful, when we are playing in some childish moments, where we forget we do have social and moral obligations that we might be working or struggling with. We even allow ourselves to be fish when we are having sex or an equivalent with a chosen partner. But those times never last, because we are reminded everyday in our lives that being a fish is dangerous. That we have to obey. And that moral domination does always prevail over us.

Now, what was this allegory for ? What if you were a monkey – for example, a chimpanzee – *at once*. It is most likely that you won't stay put in a position that wouldn't suit you. Whatever it is that is standing before you – a table perhaps – you might just climb onto it. Of course, someone may chase you out of it. You can't even be sure the table isn't actually a living being that won't slip under your feet. And maybe you'll learn to fear this particular possibility in the future, but will that haunt you to the point you will adapt your every move to it ?

The point made by the theory of the three paradoxes here is that we inspect the relationship between violence and morals, that is intimate. The french philosopher Paul Ricœur stated in his conference on hermeneutics that « because there is the violence, there is the morals »¹, which is related to the golden rule of the latter : « you won't do to others what you'd hate it would be done to you ». But it can turn both ways : also, because there is the morals, there is an induced violence. Because violence is not just aggression² : it is contained aggression, that is at the same time potentiated, always striking, and phantasmatic.

It is something that you cannot reach, that you often can't express properly. It is an urge that does indeed have an actual object, but most of the time an object that is hidden, that has necessarily been hidden by the teaching of morality. The object of the desire – in the way psychoanalyst

¹ In Paul Ricœur, *Écrits et conférences 2. Herméneutique*, texts gathered and annotated by Daniel Frey and Nicola Stricker, p.74, Éditions du Seuil, coll. La couleur des idées, 2010 (french edition).

² Which has been investigated on by both psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott and founder of ethology Konrad Lorenz.

Jacques Lacan formalised it³ – has been buried in language, in the codes of what signifies and what should not be signified in any other way than the one that splits from its intimate and though forbidden purpose.

The theory is then putting forward a connection between the object of psychoanalysis and the way neurobiologist Francisco Varela approached evolution in a proscriptive manner. Better than seeing evolution as an optimal adaptation of the species to arbitrary rules given by their environment – that is a prescriptive vision, similar to the vision of computationist early cognitive sciences' theories, and to the vision of morality -, Francisco Varela suggested that as long as the survival and reproduction of the species aren't threatened, those species can in fact adapt as they please or simply come to do conveniently. It is not forbidden to adapt in a non-optimal way, as long as you can manage to survive and to reproduce, for what concerns the maintaining of the species.

Founder of ethology Konrad Lorenz observed himself that many features in some of them tended to remain throughout their phylogenetic development even if these features were not of any apparent use anymore. He took the example of the horns above the eyes and on the back of the little coral fish named *Heniochus varius*, saying that it was most likely to be a disadvantage in terms of mobility, to hide itself amongst the coral. Yet it occurred that it was actually relevant as part of a ritualised confrontation which form is specific to the species.⁴ The motor disadvantage had in some way to be compensated by this behavior that made it a sustainable balance.

It appears then far more accurate to observe things in the species' own perspective, trusting that they had been finding their own way into an environment that they (re)create as well through the particular way they have to respond to it. It appears a better challenge to the curiosity of the scientist than to inflict unilateral rules that we think the species should comply to in order to fit a reality that we human observe from its tip. The living world doesn't need our consent nor regulation to exist and finds itself viable enough ways to do it.

The concept of enaction put forward by Francisco Varela shows in that way that the interaction between the individuals and their environment should form the basis of any investigation on cognition and evolution. Instead of considering that all that is not permitted by the rule of optimal adaptation is then forbidden, we should rather consider that all that is not forbidden – because threatening both the survival and reproduction of the species – is in fact permitted.⁵

Minding those ideas, there are three paradoxes we wish then to explore : first, the psychoanalytic paradox of the single word *me*, that cannot fully reach its object without facing an impossibility – once you say it, you are out of it - your attention is sent out with the word it carries to somebody else, because it's meant for the others and begging for existence - and because the sensorimotor activity is mobilised in the pronunciation of the word, sound and mental representation.

Second, the paradox of staring at one's own hand, that is a sensorimotor paradox : the hand you wish to seize, you cannot seize it with itself, though it would be your first impulse to do it.

And at last, the paradox of the fixity of silence : one usually fears to cut the stream of the conscious and face the silence, as the latter rely on the muting of one's effort to maintain the activity of thinking, that is signifying through the thoughts and its many composite voices. The unconscious is acting to save the subject from collapsing and from the authority of others over them.⁶

It means a new theory on anthropogenesis. While progressively standing up, pre-human species found themselves deprived from the primary motor utility of their hands they had on four legs. Uselessness implies carelessness. But one cannot stay alive if this uselessness occupies the vital limbs, the ones that start and convey most of the individual's intentions. As the face and mouth, as the snout, the primary senses, get distanced from its objects, the hands on their side remain to

³ In Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre VIII, Le transfert*, Ed. Seuil, 2001 (french edition).

⁴ In Konrad Lorenz, *Les fondements de l'éthologie*, Ed. Flammarion, coll. « Champs sciences », 1984, pp.50-54 (french version)

⁵ In F. Varela, E. Thompson & E. Rosch, *L'inscription corporelle de l'esprit*, p.264 (french edition).

⁶ Read psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott's *Capacity to be alone* and Georges Devereux's *Renunciation of identity*.

grant one's impulse to reach whatever stimulates their will with a yes. Yet the hands also remain of (almost) no more use now as to our ability to walk.

Moreover, they oddly make us wonder about ourselves while we see them crawl in the air, toward what we want them to get and touch and explore. So we might just as well look at it. And while we look at it, we realise that if we turn them into what we want, into the object of our curiosity, here again, they are useless – especially when focusing on one hand. Because while I'm wishing I would go to this hand - as it is at good enough distance to appear like something else, like something strange, like something *not me* - I cannot grab it with itself.

Nor can I go to it without breaking the fragile spell that lies in the distance between it and I, and that says that I will never exhaust the self, that I will never get to be the fish by putting it in a jar - that a word just like the word *me* could never reach its source in using one sound that has been meant to signify its object to someone else.

The turn of the theory is that language and human mind's structure may have leant on the birth of both violence and morality, as the strangeness of my own hand became the scene of *my self represented to myself*. While I'm presenting it, I'm representing it on a scene that is in fact *out of it*. If the hand represents me, if the word *me* represents me, it can however never *be* me, and I can never reach my self through it. To do that, I need to put language at silence, and break the stream of the conscious, as well as I need to deconstruct the chain of the signifier.

This primary frustration is intimately connected to the early and fundamental relationship between morals and violence. And any further investigation on how the human mind's structures could have taken place should take this relationship into account. It should start an investigation on the prominence of one's own inner and often hidden moral obligations - that every one of us feel and that every one has to challenge everyday, in every creative move we make.

It is the privileged reference to interpretation and signification that we grant our environment with through a system of values. The early experiences of it should be analysed in the interactions of the child with the familial and social structures – as well as in the prehistorical childhood of the human kind.

From Freud's interpretation of the Fort-Da game to Ellen Dissanayake's interest in mother-to-infant expressive interactions as well as her concept of artification in the field of neuroaesthetics, creativity – as the human mind required a great amount of creativity to emerge - should always be seen as a peculiar response to the restrictions of a deeply moral environment. Because morals is the only archetypical structure that is founding societies on arbitrary rules, due to its inner relation to language.

Here begins our investigation.