

The tiniest world : 'Give me a restraint'

By Clémence Ortega Douville

A part of our work has focused on aggression. More precisely on its relation to violence as a moral feature. We also discussed the relation to object and the transitional area from psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's work. We talked about the restriction induced by the moral laws, as to the potential aggression of the individuals towards objects they are not supposed to damage.

Now we will discuss : what is a conduct ? More specifically, how are moral laws restraining aggression to the point it creates a social conduct ? And how does this social conduct drive us into a narrative of what we do on a daily basis ?

We addressed some of the ideas developed by psychoanalyst Darian Leader in his book *Hands*. According to his work, we might see the constant activity of the hands as both a way to always be doing two things at the same time, in order to introduce some distance with the others, to be elsewhere – idea also put forward by Winnicott in his *Capacity to be alone* -, as well as to cope with the excess of agitation in the body.

The latter would have come from the attempt to repeat a satisfying experience – like eating -, reinforced by a secondary activity that would match the first one in achieving a successful repetition, or at least giving it more chances. For example, reading and having a cup of coffee at the same time. The action of manipulating the cup of coffee comes up to give balance to this excess in the body – part of which is from not being doing anything with the hands in the meantime.

This idea was inspired by Freud's work on repetition compulsion, notably in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, taken up again later by psychologist Jean Piaget. Darian Leader analyses then how this relation to objects as means to reproduce reassuring patterned behaviours intervenes in our relationship to the others.

There is a constant watch on what we are doing with our body. We tend to control ourselves to fit a behaviour we judge to be adequate and acceptable to the person we are talking to. We have to pay attention to the other and to show we are available for discussion, for example, unless we are seeking power over the other or a full escape. Yet we cannot be dominated by them unless we accept to be assimilated by them.

To accept to be assimilated by the moral laws of our societies is an indirect way to tolerate the possibility to bend under the power of others over us, for good or bad. To find a way to be still original as a behaving person is deeply connected to this issue of *what we do with our hands*. The transitional objects that we manipulate to keep contact with a genuine expression of our body are in a way intimate to us, whether they are concrete or ideal objects.

To be absent, to be elsewhere while we are with others – the idea Winnicott developed -, we experience it as we are thinking of something else or serving tea – either a secret or a shared ritual. Otherwise, how would we manage the discomfort of promiscuity if this had to be happening with someone that we couldn't touch ? But also, how can we write on our computer without climbing on our desk when we happen to be searching for words and ideas ?

Why can't we step everywhere that we could step on, with no regards for the moral value of the objects we would step upon ? We know that if we did, we would break a contract, a moral contract with society, which would fear that we should not respect individual property and moral integrity. We would become a danger to anyone. Then we need to show signs that we are no danger to anyone who belongs to the society that we live in.

Yet, what is in my hands, those small objects, technological objects or even me rubbing my palms with my fingers, what is in them that allows me to break and destroy those bits of insecurity from *not being able to move* ? If I can't assimilate and devour my hands, that are a small, detached

portion of my body, can I eat and devour what is inside of it, even imaginary, symbolic ?

Ethnopsychanalyst Georges Devereux talked about the fear of the cannibalism of the other. Me, as the Other in question, is the savage side of the self. Me, is the *what I could eat* that I can't eat, within my knowing of my social self that won't do such a thing. 'Give me a restraint', say the cells, to borrow from Dylan Thomas' poetry. I serve you coffee because I don't want to symbolically eat you, to touch you or runaway. If I touched you without being intimate to you, it would not do. If I ran away, it would surely be impolite. Yet, there is no place in the geography of the urban world to run away - except from running away from the same urban world that means *society*.

At the birth of American literature, to authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving or Henry Thoreau, the problem was much about creating a proper American culture out of the Old Continent's. Yet they were confronted to the *wilderness* of the American territory, that had no History in the sense of Western civilisation.

Nature was owned by signs. Mysticism lead the way. Today, one's desk can reflect what we mean by the wilderness of the unconscious. I would get to the latter only by stepping onto my own desk, which is civil. My hands on the platform would merely be a support to lift my feet onto it. My hands and my feet would cooperate together as one organism.

Instead of that, my legs have to remain neutral. Too many movements from my hips would be interpreted as too suggestive. Expression would be up to my hands to tell something to the person in front of me about who and what I am. What kind of social and moral object am I to the other ? How will the other interpret my movements ? Am I readable enough as an acceptable person to society? Am I going to be rejected ? Am I going to do something wrong ?

But we don't want to do anything wrong. Generally, we just want to be accepted and that it causes no complications. We cohabitate with the only part of our body that remains for expressiveness outside of its vertical area : our hands, that we can see moving freely in their tiniest world, making connection so we can disconnect as much from the others. I give you my hand to shake so I won't be shaken myself if we are not intimate enough to be shaken together too closely.

Otherwise, the fascination to the other that I cannot touch nor embrace – like in fact I cannot embrace my hands while trying to absorb the tension of seeing them – is giving me a straight information : you cannot but tame the tension or run away. As to my hands, I cannot but return them to the outside objects it had to take and fiddle, what they hold to suspend time, or turn away from them.

It is hard, but one cannot resorb the fascination by itself. We are calling for a restraint, otherwise, we would give in to symbolic cannibalism. We would devour our ties to the moral construction of the social behaviour – to madness. Hence we try to make people understand that we are or should be welcome in the territories of shared social landscape and network of cooperation.

As to my hands, they are small animals, and let us trust they actually are a tiniest world by themselves.