

Birth of the symbolic

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Experience may be a continuum, we don't have a linear position towards it as we try to gain a relative control over its flow. We postulated here the hypothesis that the genesis of the conditions of possibility to the capacities of imagination and thinking could have been connected to a situation of sensorimotor paradox during our evolution as a species. The development of bipedal stance and the relative liberation of our hands from locomotor functions would have encouraged this situation, as looking and gazing at one's own hand(s) would create a paradox to sensorimotricity : one has to freeze the latter up so that the object of their attention could remain as if it were any other object in the world. The identity and simultaneity of this object with the mean to usually grasp any other – the hand that grasps is here the very object to be grasped *at the same time* – is what creates a situation of paradox, an impossibility to resolve sensory stimulation into motor decision and enaction. As sensorimotricity is momentarily suspended, the memory image of that moment becomes abstracted from the possibility of its resolution into action, but then, it gathers another value, with a high emotional charge : being an image for the sake of imagination – hence, the possible birth of the imaginary, as a structure to be reproduced and re-enacted.

If this theoretical hypothesis about the conditions of possibility to the structures of the imaginary has been enough articulated to the general theory of the sensorimotor paradox, the shift to symbolic structuring had been left on hold. There was yet a gap untied between the use of the symbolic register in its psychoanalytic acception (notably, if we take Jacques Lacan's distribution between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary registers) and the evolutionary theory that we are developing here. Yet, we come now with a clue, as what differentiates the imaginary and the symbolic beyond their usual classifications, is mobility : an *image* is always dependent on the fixity of attention to the viewer, while the symbolic is meant to liberate mobility by embedding meaning and direction into a rather unconscious structure.

Let us take one silly example : one can manage observing two objects together, let us say two fingers ; beyond that, one's mind cannot stand the autonomous simultaneity of three, four or five fingers – so it has to browse, to simplify, to make a sweeping reduction, to synthesise into one single object of experience – let us say, 'the fingers' or 'the five fingers of the hand'. So, there is a movement and a grouping architecture inside of that operation forced by the very limitations of our cognitive system. That is consistent with the fact that sensorimotor experience, interaction and relation to one's surrounding environment works as a succession of investments to stimulations. We cannot invest sensorimotricity on more than one enaction at a time, even in situations of coordinated movements (the term *enaction* is here borrowed from Francisco Varela's work). Raising two arms simultaneously, for instance, are part of the same global attention.

But, what happens if sensorimotricity is frozen in a paradox : the succession of sensory events that we suddenly witness without being able to enact a consistent reaction are taken, as a whole, as a group of events *being part of the same intention*, the one to respond that is being 'delayed or lagged' (Gerald M. Edelman, 1992). Then, when the sensorimotor paradox is lifted – as we withdraw our hand, for instance –, we can get back to our capacity to enact our impulsion to respond to our stimulating environment (to whatever degree) and so, we seal the imaginary moment in with the grasp at reality of the sensorimotor resolution and conclusion into the same object : a symbolic turn, to which we know that we leave things behind.

In a symbol, one single object or sign is taken for an ensemble, a group, a series of others that are set aside, reduced and synthesised into the symbolic object that we can more easily manipulate. The sensorimotor paradox produces a virtual memory image, in an effect of dilatation, that the individual intents to close into an unit that would bring back a more frontal, binary and

approachable relation, but that would also carry with it the complexity of a groupal experience where multiple objects and sensory events were to be taken as one. After that, the individual can return to themselves and to the unity with their own body into sensorimotricity.

This symbolic binding of the image into enactive sensorimotricity is what would inscribe rich and complex ensembles of experience into the certitude that we could get back and return to ordinary interaction in a relative safety. That grouping movement to enclosing memory experience synthesises and thus, sublimates the lack of control that we have over that experience into a feeling of grasping onto something more concrete and palpable, that we can eventually act toward. And sublimation works with pain into trauma.

Trauma, in that sense, is the way that we enclose a complex sensory and emotional experience into a narrative that we could try to control, a posture toward experience that would allow us to get back to a certain form of agency, that is highly symbolic of our identity. To whatever degree, it all takes part in the symbolic functioning – registered as the symbolic into discourse – because it is meant to be forgotten, although the very act of affirming our agency was born from the necessity to take that control back from a moment of overwhelming stimulations and sollicitations. That is why, we can allege, the characteristic of the signifier in the symbolic activity is to be so volatile and mobile, as it may have been born from a serial and groupal framing of experience. The form of discourse uses that rhythm and sequencing of reality in order to maintain itself in some compulsive activity that is consistent to the body (Silvia Lippi, 2019).

In fact, as we generally try to get that amount of complexity into a more binary relational approach to experience (for instance, in the forms of speech), it is no wonder that a three-partite structure would rapidly stabilise as a main symbolic structure to subjectivity. As we are accompagnied and trained since we are children into the uses of language and body conduct, the complexity of the canonic mirror phase would be less about the complexity of the fragmented body image as it would be about the complexity of experiencing many things and not being able to return to oneself first, but to *somebody else*. I have to take the other in consideration and keep them in mind before I can get back to my own experience, to see if it agrees with them as we are taught and encouraged to. It is less the fact of watching, than of being watched, and having to learn how to separate our spontaneous reaction to experience from that presence even as we know that we are supposed to keep it in mind, to act always as if we were watched and held accountable for the way that we carry ourselves – and yet still try to get back from our initial position.

There is a tension to return to oneself, to resolve and release tension and attention, that is upheld by the other, either specific or the *other* as a symbolic function of vigilance. When this omnipresence becomes unbearable, we may easily be tempted to radically transform our perception of what this *other* means in order to return to ourselves away from the anticipation of a hurt – although we still keep it in mind in an alienated form – as we can suppose that it happens in what we call psychotic configurations and their degrees of overriding the possibility of return to body memory.

Then, again, we simplify. We reduce, for instance, the scope from three or more, to a two : ourselves and our discourse, coming and going, addressed to someone or a group of people. The symbolic is complexity reduced to a single binary relation that we maintain so to keep control over our body limits, carrying the charge of compensating the risk of losing ground. From there, everything that is carried and comprised into that unit of agency is engulfed into the symbolic, both dependent on the context and our own means of experience. We can hope to enjoy the ride, and run before the rumble.

Cited bibliography :

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Silvia Lippi, *Rythme et mélancolie*, Erès, 2019.

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