

Beyond Attachment Theory: The Hollows and Joints of Being¹

Rex van Vuuren

St. Augustine College of South Africa

Introduction

Attachment theory has too often relegated the human propensity to attach, to hold onto something, to the sphere of biosystemic necessity, where it may be reduced to the causality of “predictable” patterns of human encounter. But we might equally, in stead of viewing attachment and detachment *only* as linear, one-directional and biologically determined processes, seek to understand them in the sphere of “human affairs,” through encounter with others. It is in this sphere, where we freely participate, that we become fully human. This world is an *inter-esse*, since here we find ourselves and are given to ourselves among, between, and for others. In this sphere of the human and home-world, at different points in our lives and for different reasons, we attach to and detach from something and someone, *whilst at the same time* we ourselves can also be the person, the object to which and from which others attach and detach themselves.

This essay is an attempt to hold attachment and detachment together from their beginnings, and to explore these phenomena beyond traditional attachment theories. Attachment has been much more thoroughly studied for the first years of life and those preceding puberty than for adolescent and adult years. The epistemology and ontology of attachment theories loom large in our understanding of the temporality of becoming and the unfolding of the human lifespan.

Attachment and detachment, as features of our whole life and world, take place primarily in the context of intersubjectivity. I will adhere to a philosophical concept of intersubjectivity as a fundamental characteristic of human existence, as well as a developmental view that understands development as rooted in the intersubjective space between parent and infant, which is inherent and inseparable from human existence.

Decisions to hold on or let go are often complex, and spring from diverse and even paradoxical motives. Even for the first orbit of a human life’s significance, researchers offer various reasons for our primary attachment to a caregiver. Nor is the struggle to arrive at a decision to forsake something or someone always simple, or based on a pure act of will. Experience teaches us that some people may leave, let go of, or forsake something or someone out of frustration, because they could not succeed in getting what they wanted. Some people live in such anxiety about losing something or somebody that they prefer not to attach at all. Others, again, might rationalize their lack of perseverance by claiming that ideas of success and ambition were not worth clinging to or pursuing. As we interact with the things around us, encounter, and engage with others, we may discern, if only tacitly, that while we are distinct from others, we can never be fully separate from them. Ethical value may be attached to both forsaking and

never forsaking, depending on the context and perspective. Both attachment and detachment (in Dutch, *hechting en onthechting*) may be in our own best interest. Either can lead to our contentment or our ruin. Wisdom literature generally warns against attachment to “worldly things” and advocates a striving towards a form of serene detachment so that we may (paradoxically) “take hold of the life that is truly life.”² I believe that it may be in our best interest to forsake self-interest since, in the words of Merleau-Ponty:

The central phenomenon, at the root of both my subjectivity and my [reaching out toward others] consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world—*I am given to myself*.³

But first let me digress to a wider context of the history of psychology, where attachment and detachment emerged.

The Age of Psychology

Almost a hundred years have passed since Gerard Heymans announced the “age of psychology” in his inaugural lecture as the newly-appointed Rector of the University of Groningen, in 1909. In this famous lecture he predicted the future of humankind from a psychological perspective. Heymans was convinced that psychology could control the problems of living and that psychological knowledge would contribute to human happiness. With the passion of a prophet, he claimed that psychological techniques would make us stronger and better, that those who received a good education would understand personality types and developmental possibilities. This knowledge would, for example, preclude the wrong choice of a marriage partner. With the dawn of the age of psychology, Heymans envisioned a shift for psychology from a peripheral position to the centre of interest in Western culture, allowing even for a more profound development of our spiritual lives.

A hundred years after Heymans announced the rise of the discipline, psychology still marches on, and the age of psychology and its progeny, the “age of the child,” have unfolded with both scholarly and popularizing endeavour and resources worldwide. The popularity of psychology, as the most widely consulted of the social sciences, needs no elaboration. Although a natural-scientific, objectifying psychology remains the dominant voice, at least in academia, we are faced, in the postmodern world, not only with the same alienation noted by Heymans and others, but also with a plurality of views and lifestyles tearing at much of the fabric of society. Cries of family in crisis, marriage in crisis, and the eclipse of fatherhood are evidence of fragmentation throughout many societies. It is in this age that psychology attempts to make a contribution and, hopefully, a difference. Yet psychology, like many other human sciences, reflects these same societal trends: a plurality of many psychologies and many therapies, putting a unifying and integrated psychology beyond reach.

In an attempt to understand the “rise of psychology and psychological man,” psychologists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers have asked a related question: What is it, above all else, that psychology has discovered? Peter Homans formulates a simple and economic answer. It is an answer that will serve as one of the cornerstones of my contribution:

Above all else, psychology has discovered the world of childhood and the formidable influence which this world exercises upon the mature, adult self. Put more concisely, I believe psychology has discovered the developmental infrastructure to adult functioning.⁴

The major contribution of psychology is not to be found in psychological measurement or its applications in industry, the world of work, nor in psychopathology or in psychotherapy—but is found primarily in the developmental architecture required for becoming a fully functioning adult.

Homans, like various authors before and after him, tries to find and illuminate the connection between the life and work, between the personal and professional lives of the “originative,” or first psychologists, as well as of other accomplished psychotherapists.⁵ His argument is compelling. For him, the personal struggles of the first psychologists, which gave rise to their developmental theories, had a double focus:

On the one hand, there was a struggle with the parents—especially the father—who limited the narcissism of the son. On the other hand, there was the struggle to overcome grandiosity and self-love in order to be able to reach out to others.⁶

If we follow Homans’ thinking, the primary motive underlying all original psychological development theories, such as those of Freud, Jung, and Rogers, is an attempt to transcend ourselves. To become fully functioning adults, we need to overcome the distortions of our self-love, our narcissism, and our self-centeredness, and to seek not only our own well-being, but that of others too. Understanding and applying the knowledge gained about the developmental architecture of human beings is an attempt, in Nietzschean terms, to “rise above ourselves” and to solve the “riddle of self-conquest.”

The profile of psychology I am focusing on—knowledge about human development—emerged because of the struggle of the first psychologists with the values their parents re-presented. It was a struggle to detach or separate from the values of their parents, rooted, specifically, in a Judeo-Christian tradition. This process of separation created a space in which a different view of humans became possible, culminating in what Philip Rieff⁷ has termed “the triumph of the therapeutic” in “levelling the received vertical in authority, in breaking every rung of the old ladder languages of faith and so destroying the means of ascent to a higher life.”⁸ Many psychologists, it has been observed, have had and continue to have similar struggles, beginning their adult careers with some study in theology before moving on to study psychology. More recently, we notice a reverse movement from psychology to interests in spirituality, as seen, for example, in

the development of transpersonal psychology. The interface between psychology and spirituality is receiving much attention from scholars, perhaps in an attempt to restore Rieff's ladder.

But my interest here is not so much in the therapeutic as on the phenomena of attachment, as an attempt to forge a foundation, and detachment or separation, which leave wounds and gaps, creating a new space leading to and finding a further attachment. This is often expressed in everyday language in terms of pairs, such as cleaving and leaving, holding on and letting go.

The Age of the Child and the Importance of Attachments and Detachments

Of psychology's wide range of personality and developmental theories, some are more popular, and some have generated more and continued research activity than others. The search for an overarching and integrated personality or developmental theory had lost its impetus by the 1970s. Different themes, focal points, and approaches in psychology have also emerged, been submerged, and have reemerged with time and change. The concepts of attachment and detachment have been two such interrelated focal points from the 70s onwards. Notions about attachment and separation have always been a part of psychology and remain the doorway through which much of our understanding of the developmental architecture of human functioning, in the forms of child psychology, developmental psychology, and developmental psychopathology, must pass. In psychology, the concept of separation remains dominant, with Margaret Mahler's notions on separation-individuation as the prevailing paradigm. Development begins with an attachment, which is viewed, from various perspectives, as a state of dependence and symbiosis. A process of separation then occurs. To become is to separate; separation serves our growth and becoming. Development is a movement from attachment to separation, only to find another attachment: cycles and spirals of holding on and letting go. Attachment and detachment behaviours are now somewhat better understood in the written psychological constitution of everyday life—a theme much more prominent across various approaches and domains in psychology than before.

A study of the large and still expanding body of knowledge on an infant's early attachment to a nurturing figure reveals that scholarship in this area has been dominated by three approaches. The first includes psychoanalytic and object-relations development theories, beginning with Freud and extending through Balint, to Klein, Margaret Mahler, and many others. John Bowlby's theoretical framework on infant attachment is the second; attachment theory has been vastly extended in the decades since *Attachment and Loss* appeared in the early 70s. Then there are the new evolutionary models such as life-history theory, which assumes that different life plans are adaptive in different environments, so that early infant attachment patterns are designed by natural selection to produce different kinds of well-functioning adults.⁹

Before I focus more sharply on the attachment theory initiated by Bowlby, allow me a brief preamble. In psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex governs Freud's perspective of

psychosexual development. Yet van Haute¹⁰ reminds us that Freud's description, in 1931, of the development of female sexuality, forced him to focus his attention on the pre-oedipal period in both boys and girls. Van Haute points out that this text is the first in which Freud recognizes the importance of an original "exclusive attachment" to the mother, preceding the dependence on the father. A child's first love object is the mother. For Freud, a child becomes attached to the mother *because* it depends on her for survival and needs her in order to be taken care of. Yet in Freudian psychoanalysis, the nature of this attachment is always underpinned by sexuality, as is re-presented and reargued lucidly and with convincing detail in van Haute's work.

Freud concluded that the infant's attachment to the mother is dissatisfying, leaving the infant with a sense of disillusionment. Enter Michael and Alice Balint. Following Freud, they introduced the concept of "primary object-love" as an archaic and original phenomenon. This instinctual urge, grounded in our biology and tolerating no frustration, is geared to one's self-interest. Primary love as an early condition occurs before infants perceive the mother as a whole person separate from themselves and their needs. However, Balint takes the notion of primary object-love one step further by claiming that not only is the infant's need satisfied, but the mother's (repressed) instinctual urges are also satisfied by the infant. At a primitive level, both mother and child attach to each other. Behind the mother's adult love lurks the original desire to be loved, leading inevitably to what Balint terms "confusion of tongues" and "errors of upbringing." A mother's language and messages of tenderness are confused by her language and messages of (repressed) passion. The similarities and differences between the views of Freud and Balint, as well as some suggestions by Klein, have been explicated and argued by van Haute.¹¹

Attachment Theory

We are indebted to John Bowlby and his associates, particularly Mary Ainsworth, for a new way of thinking about an infant's connection or attachment to the mother and the effects of its disruption through separation and deprivation. John Bowlby's work on attachment started shortly after he graduated from Cambridge University. His observations in a home for maladjusted boys and the impression made on him by two boys who had suffered disruption in their relationship with their mothers were later published as "Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home Life."¹² The origins, early development, and growing points of attachment theory are well documented.¹³ Seeking a new understanding through experimental research on the reason the mother is so important to the child, Bowlby chose to focus on a well-defined area: mother-child separation. Not satisfied with traditional psychoanalytic theories, he ventured into fields such as evolutionary biology, ethology, cognitive science, and systems theory.¹⁴ Because of its tie to survival, the attachment behavioural system is conceived as "standing first in the hierarchy of the infant's behaviour repertoire."¹⁵ The biological function of attachment behaviour appears to be that of ensuring survival and gaining protection from predation and elements such as temperature, the need for feeding, and even keeping up with the (nomadic) troop. The goal of the attachment

system is not the regulation and maintenance of the attachment relationship, but rather the experience of the availability and responsiveness of a parent or principal attachment figure which should lead to “felt security.” From this base Bowlby, claimed that “attachment behaviour is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave.”¹⁶

The present status of attachment theory is reflected in various publications.¹⁷ The most comprehensive overview and synthesis of knowledge about attachment and loss, in children and adults, is the *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, edited by Jude Cassidy and Phillip Shaver. In the preface, the editors write that attachment theory has spawned “one of the broadest and most profound and most creative lines of research in 20th-century psychology”:

Anyone who today conducts a literature search on the topic of “attachment” will turn up more than 2,000 entries spread across scores of physiological, clinical, developmental, and social psychology journals; packed into numerous anthologies; and dealing with every age period from infancy to old age.¹⁸

Attachment behaviour unfolds in accordance with an *unknown genetic programme*. On this basis, Bowlby rejects the psychoanalytic view that attachment is derived from something else and is therefore a secondary drive. Attachment behaviour is a system. According to this systemic view, as soon as the system is initiated, it “seeks” a target. Until the infant finds this target it will remain uneasy but, having found it, it will function predictably.

Attachment theory replaced the general undifferentiated notion of mother love with a specific postulated mechanism by which a loving parental relationship might have effects on a child’s psychological development—the essence, attachment theory would claim, is the primacy given to social relationships.

According to attachment theory, the attachment of infant to mother is a unique form of affectional bond. To prevent confusion with a range of other attachments, and to preserve the distinguishing features of the infant’s attachment to the parental figure, Mary Main pleads that the technical use of the term “not be used for affectional bonds in general.”¹⁹ The reason, she argues, is the importance of specifying attachment as different from the mother’s bonding with the infant; nor are attachment and caregiving believed to present the entirety of the parent-child relationship.

Despite the vast range of research, we remain “embarrassingly uncertain of the effects of early nurturing in human development.”²⁰ We have not solved the riddle about what is good for children and for families, and are still a long way short of knowing what is best for children and families because we lack evidence about the *lasting* effects of early childhood experiences. What we can say is that human infants are born predisposed to form attachments. These can be blocked by deprivation, but they are inevitable.

Attachment is a lifespan phenomenon or, to put it another way, a developmental phenomenon across the cycle of our lives. Within this perspective and its language we could say that attachment behaviour is the primary system which initiates our development. The secure or insecure attachment of the infant with its sought-out primary caregiver has a ripple effect throughout its life.

To Summarize

Clearly, attachment and detachment form a crucial hinge in the service of human development across our lifespan. Scholarly attempts to understand attachment and separation present it as an inevitable and predictable mechanism *causing* social relationships. These efforts have led to attachment theory focusing on the biological bases of attachment behaviour. From there on, attachment theory is characterized, firstly, as an evolutionary perspective viewing attachment formation with a biogenetic bias. Secondly, the organization of attachment behaviour is explained systemically as a behavioural system which can be distinguished from, but remains related to other behavioural systems, such as the caregiving system, the exploratory system, and the affiliative or social system. Then the infant's attachment behaviour and the bonding behaviour of the primary caregiver are seen as the *cause* of healthy or unhealthy behaviour. The nature of the attachment to a particular other will explain many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbance, including anxiety, anger, depression, and the organization of adult sexuality. Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that the use of the infant's attachment to mother, as a measure of determining long-term effects on social relationships, is weak and inconclusive.²¹

It must also be noticed that scholarly and research efforts have focused much more on attachment than detachment phenomena. Yet one could claim that separation or detachment phenomena impact on people's lives as much as, if not more than, attachment. In everyday life, the concern is often for wisdom to deal with separation experiences. Besides, the experiences of early attachment and separation, the dialectic of holding on and letting go over our lifespan—especially in early and mature adulthood—has not received the same attention.

Critical Comments—Some Features of Attachments and Detachments

My first thesis is that framing attachment only as a biogenetic system, and then employing it as a causal explanatory principle for the nature of social relationships, at another level, veils the dialectic process of this polarity. The occurrences of attachment and detachment are not merely social facts or ideas, but rather dynamic processes. They are the means by which the patterns of individual and social reality unfold themselves, not as wooden predictive formulas or rigid archetypes, but as reenactments of our participation in spirals of signification that are always repeating and transcending themselves.²²

It is correct to view attachment as a reciprocal connection: an active, affectionate, reciprocal relationship between two human beings. And yet it is also much more than that. Even to extend attachment to the group level, as Smith, Murphy, and Coats²³ argue, and to articulate an overlap between close personal relationships and group identification, does not reach and include different horizons of the inestimable series and spiralled cycles of attachments and detachments with which we engage across our lifespan. Attachment theory has isolated one side of this crucial polarity as an automatic mechanism to explain *involuntary attachments*. One could argue that the focus on involuntary attachment, without choice, disregards the dialectical tension between involuntary and voluntary attachment *and* involuntary and voluntary separation as conditions for becoming and for disclosing the world, people, things, ideas, and the divine.

Attachment and detachment are not abstractions, but concrete occurrences. They fulfil our being in the world as a pivotal mode of human behaviour and as ways of relating toward fellow human beings and things. Attachment *and* detachment must presuppose our standing in the openness of existence. This openness discloses the world with all the context and references required for relating to others and things in meaning—disclosing encounters. The intense and emotional nature of attachment and detachment form both the foundations for human experiences and the crevices from which the geological upheavals of our emotions and thought emerge, shaping, for better or for worse, the geography of the life-world.²⁴ Where scientific investigation has identified the features of attachment and, to a lesser degree, of detachment, a phenomenological reflection may seek to reconcile these seemingly contradictory phenomena. As centrifugal and centripetal movements, attachment and detachment are different vantage points profiling prereflectively what and who is encountered.

Voluntary and involuntary attachments and detachments are mostly concrete, unpredictable, and even disorderly occurrences in people's daily lives. At various uncomfortable junctures in our lives, we are encouraged to "hold on" to our secure and trusted attachments, and, in others, to "let go" of painful and sometimes destructive and unstable attachments. Should we see the strain of holding on and the discomfort of letting go as injuries or as events? Are these occurrences a disappointment, a problem, a dilemma, a crisis? Or are they the joints and hollows of being?

The second thesis is that all human activity is mediated by and moves through attachment and detachment. Human activity is characterized by an indeterminate number of such series and cycles. Attachments and detachments are "placed" at critical junctures of our development: attaching to a caregiver, weaning, adolescence, and its culturally determined passage rites such as initiation, engagement, and marriage ceremonies. Others are "scattered" throughout our lives: being attached to a country, leaving home, and emigration, or being attached to a career, then resigning or finding oneself retrenched or jobless. It might be useful to distinguish these scattered attachments and detachments not only as voluntary and involuntary, and also to recognize ongoing or background affectional ties or situational detachments. A parent's importance persists over time, for example, although I need not always have been

conscious of it. The awareness of mortality, similarly, persists unnoticed throughout adulthood. We may take our health for granted until some circumstance brings it into question. Being deeply offended by a friend can divide a close friendship. And so the choices we have exercised lead us to and confront us with the hollows and chasms of our existence.

The range and types of attachments and detachments are as high, wide, and deep as life itself. Consider the range of words available for attachment: *reaching out, grasping, holding on, bonding, committing, cleaving,*²⁵ *connecting, joining, owning.* The other side of the polarity offers terms such as *to detach, separate, let go, disengage, withdraw, secede, disown, divorce, tear, forsake, abandon.* Even selling a possession is a form of separation. It is striking that the key concepts in the domain of popular self-help literature emphasize the difficulties of attachments and offer advice on “letting go.”²⁶ Recently, Denise Fourtounas contributed to a phenomenological understanding of letting go as the experience of the self in the process of change. In her review of the psychological literature, she discovered only twenty-five articles, published over the last twenty-three years, with *letting go* in the title.²⁷ In spite of all these attempts at counselling, there is no simple conceptual framework or technique that can account for the processes of attachment and detachment, holding on, and letting go. Each can be either positive or negative. The pathologies of attachment (like addictions) and detachment (such as living an encapsulated life) still need to be understood and articulated. It may be that attachments and detachments are best understood where they hurt, where a gap or wound appears, as happens, for instance, with terminal illness, loss, and bereavement. Separation as detachment is a form of “psychic surgery—even amputation,” such as the separation from the securities of childhood through weaning and rites of passage. The meaning of attachment/detachment junctures point toward issues in the realm of the formation of character and becoming, in the personal realm of vulnerability, isolation, fear, mastery, and power.

Becoming, as the art of living, requires, on the one hand, a *trust* in the security of attachments, and, on the other, a *trust* in the power of detachment as leaving behind, and a *hope* of transcendence (as well as for the transferability or portability of the wisdom gained through experience).

Toward a Phenomenology of Attachment and Detachment

Husserl’s ideas show striking similarities to those of Balint when he writes that there is a preconnectedness between the ego and the Other that does not depend upon an active constitution of intersubjectivity, but is a passive connection functioning prior to the active constitution. Donohoe notes that “Husserl associates this with sexual life, meaning that he is indicating that a relation to the Other already exists for the ego at the level of the sexual drive.” Then she allows Husserl to speak for himself: “Thus at the lowest level, a sexual community is already established through the instinctual sexual life, even though it may only disclose its essential intersubjectivity when the instinct is fulfilled.”²⁸

Following Buytendijk,²⁹ attachment phenomena reveal our being in the world not as a “witnessing consciousness,” but rather as an “engaging consciousness” in the sense that to be able to engage requires both *giving* and *receiving*. The movements of appropriation and disappropriation involve perception, which means that the moves from attachment to detachment, and the other way around—receiving entailing a taking hold and holding on, whilst giving requires letting go—are grounded in perception. The attachment behaviour of the infant and the bonding activities of the mother point to existence as grounded in both a constituting intersubjectivity and a constituted intersubjectivity.

Attachment theories have established the constant tension between parent and child, but have failed to mark this tension as one of the ways we relate to the world and to fellow humans—our subjection to the dialectical tension between nature and freedom.³⁰

From the perspective of existence as a force field of opposites or polarities, attachment and detachment form an experiential polarity. In my view both sides of this dialectic of polar opposites contribute to the *luminating nature* of our humanity. In other words, in accordance or in consonance with Dasein’s actual attunement or mood (*Gestimmtheit*), every attachment and detachment action discloses—or luminates—the meaning and content of every concrete relationship and action in the world.

Various Husserl scholars (like Steinbock and Donohoe) focus on the development of Husserl’s ideas from his earlier to later works. One major theme emerging is the methodological development from a “static phenomenology,” which is an egological account of the phenomena of social existence, to “genetic phenomenology,” which reveals the facticity of the individual and the world of contemporaries. A third dimension of phenomenology, which is captured by Husserl’s term “generativity,” is developed by Steinbock:

By generativity or “generative” Husserl means both the process of becoming—hence the process of “generation”—and a process that occurs over the “generations”—hence specifically the process of “historical” and social becoming.³¹

Each of these three methods (static, genetic, and generative) examine a different dimension of experience. Phenomenological psychology has benefited largely from genetic phenomenology by studying that which is given to consciousness: the objects of experience investigated as perceived, remembered, valued, phantasized, and so forth. Husserl’s development of a genetic analysis brought the recognition and understanding of the intersubjective nature of a subject’s being. With this move phenomenology allows temporality “to infuse subjectivity and intersubjectivity at every level.”³² For Steinbock, the limits of subjective sense constitution require going beyond birth and death phenomena, which are to be integrated into a constitutive generative phenomenology.

Accordingly, we belong to a homeworld “in the unity of generatively bounded history.” No longer is there merely a genesis of sense, but a *generation of sense*; no longer is temporality merely self-temporalization, but generatively formed intersubjective historicity; no longer is there merely a question of intropathy (for it cannot take place with our dead or unborn homecomrades, with our ancestors, with those unknown while nevertheless familiar, but a problem of sense constitution through sense propagation and inheritance.³³

For my purpose, situating attachment and detachment as the joints and hollows of being *requires the Other*. Whereas attachment theory isolates the infant’s attachment behaviour as a mechanism seeking a target, Husserl asks: “What is necessary for the emergence of an Ego-consciousness in the ordinary sense? Obviously, human consciousness requires an appearing Body and an intersubjective Body—an intersubjective understanding.”³⁴ This means that the ego is never isolated from a community of Others. However, Husserl has to acknowledge and give account of the fundamental structures that allow the ego to experience a world at all. He is forced into a position of constructing a fundamental structure which is similar to and different from attachment theory. In this surprising and rare case, Husserl does so by speaking of two drives or instincts, which he refers to as “the original drive to Objectification” and the “instinctually inherent intersubjectivity,” which is the *how* of the drive to objectification.³⁵ *Instinct*, for Husserl, is the drive that functions behind original perceptions to reveal the subject and the world to the subject. The drive toward revealing the world is the first kind of instinct. The second kind is an “instinctual relationship that exists between the ego and the Other”—“an instinctive primal intentionality of communization which pre-grounds the constitution of community.”³⁶ From her analysis, Donohoe concludes that “what instinct allows us to accept is the notion of a level of intersubjectivity that is not constituted but is preconstitutive.”³⁷

The biogenetic systemic view of attachment theory is unidirectional and does not provide for a way to make a regressive inquiry into both the origins of the ego and its surrounding world. Nor does it provide for an understanding of the historical nature of experience. If attachment is the first, the primary behavioural system of the infant, then it emerges from what Husserl called “the streaming living present,” a prephenomenal temporality, an “attempt to address the constitution of the temporal by the temporal.”³⁸ Attachment, understood phenomenologically at the level of the anonymous streaming living, is a position where there is limited separation between the I and the Other. To understand the infant’s attachment in relation to the mother’s bonding requires the discernment of different levels or spheres of movements. Attachment and detachment experiences are mediated and immediate experiences that reveal the character of the Other in various ways. Put more strongly, the attachment and detachment experiences over the life cycle lead to encounters *with* many other phenomena, figures, and people.

Trevarthen³⁹ has coined a valuable distinction between “primary intersubjectivity” and “secondary intersubjectivity.” Primary intersubjectivity describes the prereflective state of being, a “protoconversation” between caretaker and infant which does not posit awareness or introspective capacities in the infant. It is an emotional, interpersonal

understanding expressed in gestural, facial and other nonverbal and sensory means of creating relation and affect. From six months to the first year of life, a greater sophistication in shared affective states and interpersonal understanding emerges. Secondary intersubjectivity is the infant's developing understanding of mother's intentions, the potential to play and use humour, and a shared sense of meaning of a third mediating object, of another human being.

Attachment theory sees the primary attachment behaviour as a system securing the infant's survival and, on another level, the survival and propagation of the species. A generative phenomenology would steer away from biologically rooted conceptions of home and generation. Following Husserl through Steinbock's analysis, one could claim that attachments and detachments are generative and renewing connections and disconnections—joints and hollows—which arise by participating in a community and a tradition. Steinbock says that “the generative constitution of sense includes the contributions of ancestors and descendants, predecessors and successors in the formation of a generative historicity.”⁴⁰ These generative connections and disconnections concern a variety of styles of home-life—childrearing and family relationships, public and private life, taking up and appropriating or rejecting the values of a home-world, repeating or criticizing a style of living, religion, and culture through past and future generations—a diachronic intersubjectivity in which “we become other through others.”⁴¹

Attachment and detachment are bodily perceptual mediations of our being in the world. Our attachment to the primary caregiver gives rise to desires and projects. On the other hand, a movement toward detachment may elicit resistance and strengthen the desire for expansiveness. Attachment and detachment then require us to reformulate our *being* in the world as *becoming* in the world and *becoming with* the world. Attachments serve to create a foundation, joints, a place for living, while detachments create hollows or openings—space for regenerating and renewing further living.

The infant's attachment begins as a set of activities performed instinctually and out of necessity, but soon, much of our activity is purposeful and voluntary. We are involved in attachment and detachment behaviours as an attunement within the relation towards things, ourselves, and our fellow human beings, tied to our *eigenwelt*, *umwelt*, and *mitwelt*, to bodily self, self-identity, self-extension—consciousness and intentionality. Both positive and negative attachments and detachments characterize basic moods or attunements.

Attachment and detachment behaviours are the embodiment and expression of our attempts at self-transcendence, to realize our projects and goals, and sustain our adult functioning.

Conclusion

Beginnings and endings, life and death. Life cycles have been embodied and narrated in religion, mythology, and legend since time immemorial. It took the age of psychology with its discovery of our developmental infrastructure to uncover the complexities of a beginning: the infant's attachment to a primary caregiver. Shortly after our first birth, when the umbilical cord is cut, the attachment process emerges from the anonymous, streaming, living present, seeking and encountering a primary object-love. Later, as part of our identity formation, a process of separation takes place and a second birth, our psychological birth, occurs. A third birth, a spiritual birth, might lie further down the path of becoming. Freedom and choice describe our critical distance from our tradition, our culture, our history, our religion, our generativity.

Fifty years after Heymans' lecture on the age of psychology, another Dutch psychologist, A. L. Janse de Jonge, revisited this lecture with a reflection, not on the extent to which Heymans' predictions had been realized, but on the very possibility of predicting the future of humankind from a psychological perspective. In his reflections, published in 1962, Janse de Jonge argued the loss of a belief in a future age of psychology. Like those of many other scholars, his position is that our vision for the achievements of a scientific psychology is much more limited and sober than before.

Let us pause at Janse de Jonge's conclusion, made 50 years ago. The thinking of natural science-oriented psychologists like Heymans, he believes, reveals a theme about the nature of human existence, which could be formulated as a "detachment from trusting attachments."⁴² Janse de Jonge does not explain the precise meaning of a "trusting attachment." It could mean that, even then, there was a loss of trust in our connectedness to a significant other, such as mother, father husband or wife, or institutions such as marriage or the family, religious and civic institutions. The trend in many societies today is the loss of community, leaving people less connected at many levels. More importantly, a psychology inclined to objectify human phenomena and then posit detachment as alienation or derealization, as a fundamental theme of human existence, contributes to detaching phenomena from their "sympathetic relations in which such phenomena flourish."⁴³

It could also mean that we have detached ourselves from and disappropriated the means by which the everyday home-world, as community, is generated. From the constitutive function of the punctuations of a day's length and structure; from shared modes of orientation—toward heaven and times to pray—the sun rising in the east and setting in the west; from methods of counting, now replaced by electronic calculators; from social habits and customs, simple everyday courtesies, traditional and family meals and table manners, personal events such as celebrations of birthdays and anniversaries; from religious rites such as marriages, baptisms, and funerals, to secular rituals such as Labour Day, Freedom Day, and Women's Day celebrations; from stories passed down by elders to memorials that reawaken the sedimented past in order to bring us together and appreciate our common heritage and our common suffering.

The dialectic character of attachment and detachment stresses its mediational, two-sided character: It can unite us or separate us from the world of things and persons, containing or separating, limiting or grafting us to one another, providing individual and inherited entry and exit points into and away from different landscapes in the world. Attachment and detachment form a double movement serving our ascending and descending, our encounters with the hollows and joints of being, renewing, regenerating, and transforming a stagnant, decaying, dying everyday life. They challenge us to a more authentic intimacy and critical renewing distance. They repudiate our understanding of who we are and the meaning of life. Attachment and detachment have one thing in common: They repudiate the *taken-for-grantedness* of daily life and home-world.

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Appendix

Listed here are a few of many recent popular self-help titles dealing with the difficulties of attachment and detachment:

- Beattie, M. (1998). *The language of letting go*. New York: MJF Books.
- Coxe, P. P. (2004). *Finding peace: Letting go and liking it*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc.
- Frazier, V. (2002). *The art of letting go: A pathway to inner freedom*. Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing.
- Giampolo, C. (1990). *Art of letting go: From separation to fulfillment*. New York: Bantam Dell.
- Guntzelman, J. (2004). *Blessing life's losses: Letting go and moving on*. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications.

- Hallowell, E. M. (2006). *Dare to forgive: The power of letting go and moving on*. Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI.
- Hemfelt, R., Minirth, F., & Meier, P. (2003). *Love is a choice: The definitive book on letting go of unhealthy relationships*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.
- Karson, B. (2003). *Don't look back, because I'm letting you go*. La Vergne, TN: Lightning Source Inc.
- Potter-Efron, R., & Potter-Efron, P. S. (1995). *Letting go of anger: The 10 most common anger styles and what to do about them*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Scott, S. J. (2003). *Baggage handlers: My road to letting go of life's painful luggage*. Lincoln, NE: Iuniverse Inc.
- Tadd, E., & Blanchard, K. (2003). *Death and letting go*. Lanham, MD: Biblio Distribution.
- Weston, W. L. (2006). *Emotional release therapy: Letting go of life's painful emotions*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads.

Endnotes

¹ The metaphors “joints” and “hollows” are from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The visible and the invisible*. With these metaphors, Merleau-Ponty wanted to point out that philosophy seeks to “show rather than say” the hollows and joints of Being. Toward this end, metaphorical thought and speech are indispensable. I found them very fitting to say what I saw in attachments and detachments.

² I Tim 6:18.

³ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *The phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 360.

⁴ Homans, P. (1982). A personal struggle with religion: Significant fact in the lives and work of the first psychologists. *The Journal of Religion, University of Chicago*, 62(2), p. 139.

⁵ See, for example:

Barton, A. (1974). *Three worlds of therapy*. Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books.

Homans, P. (1978). The case of Freud and Rogers. In A. R. Buss (Ed.), *Psychology in social context*. New York: Irvington Publishers.

Homans, P. (1979). *Jung in context: Modernity and the making of a psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

More recently, the various ways in which a therapist can be a living expression of his or her theoretical approach is explored in Spinelli, E., & Marshall, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Embodied theories*. London: Continuum.

⁶ Homans. A personal struggle with religion. *The Journal of Religion*. p. 140.

⁷ Rieff, P. (1987). *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁸ Ibid., p. ix.

⁹ For example, the attachment and separation patterns amongst the !Kung, who live in the Kalahari Desert of northwest Botswana and in the northeast of Namibia, have been documented (See Hrdy's *Mother Nature* and Konner's *Tangled wing*).

¹⁰ Van Haute, P. (2005). Infantile sexuality, primary object-love, and the anthropological significance of the Oedipus complex: Re-reading Freud's "female sexuality." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 86(6), 1661-1678.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bowlby, J. (1944). Forty-four juvenile thieves: Their character and home life. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 25, 19-52 & 107-127.

¹³ For a more recent view, see: Bretherton, I. (1991). The roots and growing points of attachment theory. In C. M. Parkes & J. Stevenson-Hinde (Eds.), *Attachment across the life cycle*. London: Routledge. This chapter was presented as a paper in honour of Bowlby's eightieth birthday, June 1987.

¹⁴ Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

¹⁵ Main, M. (1999). Epilogue. Attachment theory: Eighteen points with suggestions for future studies. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*. New York: The Guilford Press, p. 853.

¹⁶ Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation*. New York: Basic Books, p. 129.

¹⁷ See, for example: Parkes, C. M., & Stevenson-Hinde, J. (Eds.). *Attachment across the life cycle*. London: Routledge.

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¹⁸ Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.). (1999). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*. New York: The Guilford Press, p. x.

¹⁹ Main. Epilogue. Attachment theory. In Cassidy & Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment*, p. 846.

²⁰ Konner, M. (2002). *The tangled wing: Biological constraints on the human spirit*. New York: W. H. Freeman, p. 308.

²¹ As far back as 1958, J. H. van den Berg presented a critical analysis specifically of the research of Spitz and of the early work of Bowlby on hospitalization. Van den Berg is critical of the research findings and conclusions of these early works on attachment and detachment, and specifically of the advice on caring and loving offered to mothers. Hence the title of this work: *Dubieuze liefde in de omgang met het kind [Dubious love in the interaction with the child: On the later effects of too much or too little mother-love during childhood]* (Author's translation).

²² Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *Signs* (R. C. McCleary, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p. 117.

²³ Smith, E. R., Murphy, J., & Coats, S. (1999). Attachment to group: Theory and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 94-110.

²⁴ Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

²⁵ In the sense of adhering, as in the King James version of Gen 2:24.

²⁶ A recent selection of a few of the many titles available in the self-help book market dealing with various forms and difficulties of attachment and detachment is included as an appendix.

²⁷ Fourtounas, D. (2003). *The experience of letting go: A phenomenological study*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, p. 6.

²⁸ Donohoe, J. (2004). *Husserl on ethics and intersubjectivity: From static to genetic phenomenology*. New York: Humanity Books, p. 115 (footnote 77).

²⁹ Buytendijk, F. J. J. In Boudier, H. S. (1989). *Ontmoeting: Correspondentie van F. J. J. Buytendijk met Ludwig Binswanger*. Zeist, Netherlands: Kerckebosch, p. 128.

³⁰ Mirvish, A., & Rechten, L. (1998). Positive conflict and the incipient self: Sartre contra attachment theory. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 29(1), 4-22.

³¹ Steinbock, A. J. (1995). *Home and beyond: Generative phenomenology after Husserl*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p. 3.

³² Donohoe. *Husserl on ethics and intersubjectivity*, p. 72.

³³ Steinbock. *Home and beyond*, p. 193.

³⁴ Husserl, E. In Donohoe. *Husserl on ethics and intersubjectivity*, p. 101.

³⁵ Donohoe. *Husserl on ethics and intersubjectivity*, p. 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

³⁸ Donohoe. *Husserl on ethics and intersubjectivity*, p. 58.

³⁹ Trevarthen, C. (1978). Secondary intersubjectivity: Confidence, confiding, and acts of meaning in the first year. In A. Lock (Ed.), *Action, gesture, and symbol: The emergence of language*. London: Academic Press.

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⁴⁰ Steinbock. *Home and beyond*, p. 193.

⁴¹ Husserl, E. (1931). In Steinbock. *Home and beyond*, pp. 196 & 305 (note 35 of chapter 12).

⁴² Author's paraphrase.

⁴³ Janse de Jonge, A. L. (1962). Vijftig jaar na Heymans' Rede. *Verkenningen in de Psychopathologie*. Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, p. 95. (Author's translation)