

Encountering the Whole: Remembering Henri Bortoft (1938–2012)

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Physicist, philosopher, and science educator Henri Bortoft died on December 29, 2012, at his home in England. He was 74 years old. Bortoft's work has an important conceptual and applied connection to this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* because it speaks to a particular mode of environmental encounter that might be called a "phenomenology of the natural world." His work is central to "environmental practice" because he presents an empathetic way of engaging the phenomena of nature whereby they "reveal" themselves in an accurate and comprehensive way.

In the early 1960s, Bortoft worked with British philosopher J. G. Bennett on the development of "systematics"—a method of encountering and understanding whereby one might explore the various aspects of a phenomenon through the qualitative significance of number (Bennett, 1956–66; Bennett, 1993). While doing his doctoral research in physics in the 1980s, Bortoft worked with British physicist David Bohm to consider the relationship between quantum mechanics and an understanding of wholeness (Bortoft, 1982; Bohm, 1980). In later professional life, Bortoft was invited by biologist Brian Goodwin (Goodwin, 1997) to teach in the innovative graduate program in holistic science at Schumacher College, in Totnes, England. There and elsewhere, many students were deeply touched by Bortoft's singular instructional style whereby he introduced the phenomenological approach phenomenologically.

Bortoft's best known work is the influential *Wholeness of Nature*, published in 1996 (Bortoft, 1996). His last book, released shortly before his death, is *Taking Appearance Seriously* (Bortoft, 2012). In both works, Bortoft aimed to help readers see and understand the world and human experience in a more integrated, compelling way. Invoking the perspectives of phenomenology and hermeneutics, he explored the confounding relationship between parts and whole: That to understand the whole, one must understand the parts, but to understand the parts, one must understand the whole.

Drawing particularly on Goethean science as it evokes one mode of phenomenological seeing and understanding, Bortoft argued that the key to circumventing the parts-whole paradox is a shift in attention from what is experienced to *the experience of* what is experienced. He explained how we can "step back" from what is seen into *the seeing of* what is seen. In this way, the whole comes to presence within its parts, which are the place for the presencing of the whole. In other words, the parts show the way to the whole, which can be encountered nowhere else except through the parts. By teaching ourselves to become more sensitive to this dynamic reciprocity between parts and whole, we learn to recognize how parts "belong" to the whole. We "take appearances seriously."

Early on in my academic career, I had the good fortune to meet and study with Bortoft. Here, I offer my recollections of the man and his work. My aim is to describe

some first-hand encounters with Bortoft and to suggest some of the ways that his work offers fruitful possibilities for “environmental phenomenology and environmental practice.”

First Encountering Bortoft

In October, 1972, as a 24-year-old American, I arrived in the small English Cotswold village of Sherborne to become a student at philosopher J. G. Bennett’s International Academy for Continuous Education, a remarkable educational experiment in facilitating self-knowledge and self-transformation (Bennett, 1974, chap. 28). Over the next ten months, Bennett’s major aim was to get some 100 students, most of them young Americans and Brits, to see and understand themselves and the world in deeper, more engaged ways. In working toward this aim, Bennett emphasized lectures, readings, meditative exercises, practical work in the big house and gardens, and seminars from visiting specialists, one of whom was Bortoft. During the 1972–73 Sherborne course, he offered us students two four-day seminars, one of which was called “The Hermeneutics of Science.”

Of the many ways in which Bennett’s Sherborne experience transformed my self-understanding, Bortoft’s seminars were one of the most important because he motivated us students to realize there was another way of seeing that was more open and intensive than the arbitrary, piecemeal mode of knowing that standard educational systems emphasized. In the seminars, Bortoft’s primary teaching vehicle was Goethean science, which he introduced us to through a series of do-it-yourself perceptual exercises laid out by Goethe in his 1810 *Theory of Colors* (Goethe 1970). I still have the notes in which I copied the key questions that Bortoft had us keep in mind as we looked at and attempted to see color phenomena:

- What do I see?
- What is happening?
- What is this saying?
- How is this coming to be?
- What belongs together?
- What remains apart?
- How does this belong together with itself?
- Is it itself?
- Can I read this in itself?

My specific memories of Bortoft’s two seminars are cloudy. I do remember the sparkle in his eyes: He had an extraordinary way of radiating enthusiasm and profound regard for his subject. I remember that the seminar sessions were held in the upstairs library of Sherborne House, the great country estate that Bennett had purchased to accommodate his educational experiment. As students in the program, we were divided into three groups of about thirty students each. Every third day one of the groups was responsible for “house duty”—cleaning, washing, and cooking meals for students and

staff—while the other two groups participated in learning activities, including Bortoft’s seminar.

For the days that he was with us, Bortoft would teach two sections of seminar each day so that all three student groups experienced the same set of lectures. I remember his telling us that, each time he did the same seminar session, it arose and arranged itself differently—that part of the uniqueness of the approach he sought to actualize was the spontaneity of the moment playing a central role in how and what things ended up said. So much of what he taught was grounded in a trust that, in making an effort to see and say, one could discover new, surprising insights. For me, each session was revelatory and inspiring. I gradually came to see how constricted I was by a limited, manipulative cognitive mindset that could only understand piecemeal.

At the time, I only grasped a small portion of what Bortoft was presenting. I did vaguely understand, however, that if I could see and know in the way that he saw and knew, my future as a human being and potential academic might be entirely different than otherwise. I remember realizing all of a sudden that seeing, saying, and meaning were all of a piece—the core of a deeper mode of understanding whereby things showed themselves as they were rather than as my narrow intellectual consciousness supposed those things to be. I remember one fellow student became quite upset and angrily left the room when Bortoft suggested that one does not see or know if he or she cannot say what he or she sees or knows. He quoted hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s claim that “Being that can be understood is language” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 474). This point prefigures the argument laid out in Bortoft’s *Taking Appearance Seriously*, in which he contends, after Gadamer and phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger, that:

Language is the medium in which things can *appear* as such, i.e., as what they are.... When things enter into language they enter the world. What appears in saying are things themselves—language is the medium, not the message.... [I]t is language which gives the world in the first place—i.e.... language is the condition for the possibility of there being ‘world’. The world ‘lights up’ in the dawning of language. (Bortoft, 2012, pp. 145–46)

Working toward Authentic Wholeness

What I encountered in Bortoft’s Sherborne seminars played a major role in giving direction to my future professional life: an interest in phenomenology and the particular mode of phenomenological understanding offered by Goethe’s unique approach to looking and seeing (Seamon, 1979; Seamon, 2007). Already, in 1971, Bortoft (1971) had written an article, “The Whole: Counterfeit and Authentic,” that expressed the kernel of all his work that would later follow. Significantly, that article was originally a talk he delivered on April 21, 1971, for a conference, “Developing the Whole Man,” which launched the fall, 1971 first-course start of Bennett’s Sherborne School that I would attend on the second course in fall, 1972. In the introduction to that article, Bortoft (1971) wrote:

If the theme of “Developing the Whole Man” is to have significance for us, it must have a distinct and unique meaning. Whatever this is, it must be integral. Which means that the meaning of “developing” which is particular to this phrase is mutually dependent upon the meaning of “whole man” within which the meaning of ‘man’ is dependent on the meaning of “whole,” and the converse. We shall go through the question, “what is the whole?” as it means to sounding out the meaning of “Developing the Whole Man.” We begin with situations where the whole is inescapable, and which thus can provide paradigms for the whole. We consider: The optical hologram, the gravitational universe, and the hermeneutic circle. (p. 44)

I completed my doctoral work in 1977 having written a PhD dissertation that drew partly on Bortoft’s ideas as they were in turn indebted to Goethe’s way of phenomenological science (Seamon, 1979). In 1983, I envisioned, with philosopher Robert Mugerauer, an edited collection that would explore the value of hermeneutics and phenomenology for topics in environmental and architectural studies. Because Goethe’s way of science offered singular possibilities for a *lived* environmental ethics, I asked Bortoft if he would revise his 1971 article as a chapter in the proposed collection that Mugerauer and I eventually published as *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Toward a Phenomenology of Person and World* (Seamon & Mugerauer, 1985). Bortoft’s revision, entitled “Counterfeit and Authentic Wholes: Finding Means for Dwelling in Nature,” included his first extended discussion of Goethean science (Bortoft, 1985). In that chapter, he concluded by advocating a more receptive, empathetic way of encountering the natural world:

It is widely acknowledged today that, through the growth of the science of matter, the Western mind has become more and more removed from contact with nature. Contemporary problems, many arising from modern scientific method, confront people with the fact that they have become divorced from a realistic appreciation of their place in the larger world. At the same time, there is a growing demand for a renewal of contact with nature. It is not enough to dwell in nature sentimentally and aesthetically, grafting such awareness to a scientific infrastructure which largely denies nature. The need is a *new* science of nature, different from the science of matter, and based on other human faculties besides the analytic mind. A basis for this science is the discovery of authentic wholeness. (pp. 299–300)

In the later 1980s and early 1990s, Bortoft wrote a series of essays on the nature of authentic wholeness (Bortoft, 1986). These essays would eventually become the chapters of his extraordinarily creative *The Wholeness of Nature* (Bortoft, 1996). To me, this book is one of the great, unheralded works of our time—perhaps arriving too soon for many people to understand. But, I believe firmly that this work is a harbinger of a new way of engaging with the world that will grow in intensity and significance as the 21st century unfolds. As we typically are, we don’t fully engage encounter the world or the things, places, and living beings in it. Bortoft taught a way of seeing that graciously meets and opens to the “Other.” In allowing the Other to become more and more present and dimensioned, this method of knowing not only deepens our sensibilities but facilitates an

emotional bond of wonderment and concern. We see more and, though that understanding, may better care for our world.

One of Bortoft's most cogent portraits of this mode of seeing and learning is the 1971 article mentioned above and published in Bennett's quarterly journal, *Systematics*. There, he wrote:

We cannot know the whole in the way in which we know things because we cannot recognize the whole as a thing. If the whole were available to be recognized in the same way as we recognize the things which surround us, then the whole would be counted among these things as one of them. So we could point and say "here is this" and "there is that" and "that's the whole over there." If we could do this we would know the whole in the same way that we know its parts, for the whole itself would simply be numbered among its parts, so that the whole would be outside of its parts in just the same way that each part is outside all the other parts... But the whole comes into presence *within* its parts, so we cannot encounter the whole in the same way as we encounter the parts. Thus we cannot know the whole in the way that we know things and recognize ourselves knowing things. So we should not think of the whole as if it were a thing..., for in so doing we effectively deny the whole inasmuch as we are making as if to externalize that which can presence only within the things which are external with respect to our awareness of them. (Bortoft, 1971, p. 56)

To make the parts-whole relationship more clear and grounded phenomenologically, Bortoft (1996, pp. 59–60) drew on Heidegger's discussion of "belonging *together*" vs. "*belonging together*" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 29). On one hand, the parts-whole relationship can be understood in terms of "*belonging together*"—a situation where the thing belongs in some larger structure because it has a position in the order of a "together" that is arbitrary or fortuitous (e.g., the names and addresses in a telephone directory). As a result, any parts will more or less suffice (Bortoft, 1996, p. 59). This mode of togetherness is typically assumed in conventional empirical research whereby the researcher arbitrarily decides on the parts of the whole and then defines and measures their consistency and connections accordingly. On the other hand, there is the contrasting parts-whole situation of "*belonging together*," in which the "together" is established by the "belonging" (Bortoft, 1996, p. 60). In this case, the parts are together *first of all because they belong* and, thus, each part is essential and integral, contributing to and sustained by the belonging. One reason for Bortoft's continuing interest in Goethean science was the fact that Goethe had searched for the "belonging" in the natural phenomena he studied—for example, the way prismatic colors always cluster together in terms of the darker (blue, indigo, and violet) and lighter (yellow, orange, and red) colors. This integral, non-contingent relationship marking out the appearance of colors eventually led to Goethe's provocative claim that color arises from the tension between darkness and light (rather than from light alone, as Newton had argued) (Bortoft, 1996, pp. 40–49).

Bortoft's Legacy for Phenomenology and Practice

The heart of Bortoft's work is that he allowed things to be as they are. Through that "being," he became a medium whereby they could speak, be seen, and offer meaning. In turn, his teaching and writings ignite that hopeful possibility for us. For those researchers and practitioners who wish to commit themselves to Bortoft's way of seeing and understanding, they must soberly recognize that the effort is not easy. The style of encounter and understanding that Bortoft so perspicaciously delineates requires dedication, perseverance, and a deep wish to see, no matter where that wish takes one.

I last saw Bortoft in Oxford in summer, 2011, when he had just finished a presentation for the annual International Human Science Research conference. Gordon Miller, the historian and photographer who had just completed a new, illustrated version of Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* (Goethe, 2009) had organized a conference session on Goethean science, and Bortoft was one of the presenters. After his presentation, he and I talked for only a short time because he was not feeling well and wanted to return home. What he did mention was his frustration with "followers" of his work—that too many took the Goethean approach too easily and fell too readily into cerebral, fantastical imaginings of phenomena rather than demanding of themselves an engaged, intensive encounter with the phenomena themselves. In his writings, he called this methodological difficulty the "hazard of emergence." He wrote:

A part is only a part according to the emergence of the whole that it serves; otherwise it is mere noise. At the same time, the whole does not dominate, for the whole cannot emerge without the parts. The hazard of emergence is such that the whole depends on the parts to be able to come forth, and the parts depend on the coming forth of the whole to be significant instead of superficial. The recognition of a part is possible only through the 'coming to 'presence' of the whole. (Bortoft, 1985, p. 287)

As this emphasis on hazard suggests, Bortoft's Goethean phenomenology offers no guarantees—one can readily read too much or too little into the phenomenon; one can easily go off track entirely. Bortoft's vision and method are not easy to learn or master. They require steadfast dedication over a long period of time. But they do promise personal satisfaction and helpful insights that might inspire others. Perhaps most significantly, his work points toward a way whereby we might reinvigorate a sense of reverence and love for our world and the Earth. In turn, that feeling of goodwill might transfigure environmental practice whereby we more comprehensively care for the natural environment and reduce the world's entropy rather than add to it. As Bortoft (1971) wrote:

[Encountering authentic wholeness] brings about a radical transformation in our attitude to the natural environment and the biosphere. Standing in the arrogance of subjective awareness, we approach nature as dumb and stupid, as something that needs to be re-arranged, harnessed, and put to good use by us, whom we imagine to be the possessors and sole bearers of intelligence. But [a] turning around into the

whole demonstrates that nature should be entered into watchfully with care. It shows that watchfulness is essential in that nature is a living presence that can communicate with us if we can turn around into the right condition for being spoken to and hearing ourselves being spoken to. (p. 64)

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