

THE PROMETHEAN FIRE*An education in the art and science of responsibility***ALEX BLANES**

*'Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
 A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time.
 If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
 If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!
 If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
 By the fine, fine, wind that takes its course through the chaos of the world...'*
 D.H. Lawrence from 'Song of a Man Who Has Come Through'

On a cold grey Sunday in the early spring of 2010, a 21-year old student was reading Martin Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology, spellbound. If you watched him for a time, you would notice his eyes groaning at the tortuous speed at which he was aiming them; you might see he was holding his breath until eventually, his maternal lungs pounded on the door of that tabernacle, fearful of the mysterious strangers entertained therein. Exhaling at last, he staggers with the gravity of that release — relinquishing super essential darkness and his role as its host, eyes alight with a Promethean fire.

That was my first experience with phenomenology, although I didn't know to call it that at the time. I could only recognise its inner movement as the same basic gesture of an internal conversation which I had written down several years earlier (Blanes 2008):

'What gives something power?'

'Well... I guess whatever gives it definition, however it is transcribed from potentiality to physicality.'

'Makes sense. Define definition.'

'The limits that give an object its properties.'

'Okay. What about people?'

'That's a bit harder. We are alike to objects in most ways excepting that we are able to consciously shift our current definition of anything in our field of awareness; ourselves, others, objects, and so forth. In this way, reality is very much subjective.'

'Agreed. In fact, what room is there for objectivity in such a subjective universe?'

'It is from the physically specific, limited by the rules established by reality, that we may derive personal interpretation. An object becomes meaningful from what we make of it, however, so it all links back to subjective awareness and experience.'

'So objectivity allows for variety in experience between sets of awarenesses?'

'Yes, exactly.'

I now see this conversation, written by a curious 18-year old, as an inchoate archetype — in the same careful definition suffered by Bortoft (2012: 83) — for the orientation in thinking I would later come to develop through apprenticeships under David Abrams, Martin Heidegger, Martin Buber, and now, Henri Bortoft, Goethe, Owen Barfield, and further yet to come.

It must be conveyed that these apprenticeships were the product of no idle curiosity, but borne of a primal Question of my soul, an attentiveness which has accompanied the more meaningful events of my admittedly young life. It is that Question which perpetually moves the vector of this listening; it hints at the silhouette of self-actualisation, of that magnetism of a lush truth, of participation in the cocoon of our zeitgeist.

This is the spirit, the context ('with-weaving') by which I arrive at phenomenology, as expressed within holistic science — recited for the same reason context is important to the scientist: in order to re-present, one must become again; or more appropriately, one must become One again. Just as the poet must become her poem in order for its meaning to become resonant and mobile, so must the scientist be changed by the science in order for truth to live 'livingly' in the world of things.

To my understanding, this is the basic premise of 'a science with qualities'; '*... which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory*' (Goethe, 1829, cited in Holdrege, 2005, p. 51). It is peace in the positive sense—as opposed to the absence of conflict—expressed through the basic gesture of science.

It is life in service to truth.

As Philip Franses communicated during the first week on phenomenology:

'When we meet wholeness, it's always in a kind of elusive way, hinting at a path that leads through that moment to other moments; it's not something finished. It appears to us in particular ways at a particular moment, but that particular moment doesn't exhaust what wholeness is...' (Franses 2015: 10m11s).

It is this subtlety of encounter demanded of the holistic scientist which distinguishes her work from the hegemony of 'finished' knowledge (Bortoft 2012: 84–85) which today presents itself as 'science'. This subtlety is what appears as the 'active absence' evoked by Bortoft (1985: 289–291): a way of orienting our attention 'which makes us available to meaning' (*ibid*: 288). By cultivating 'active absence', we create the conditions for a substrate to emerge between our attention and the object or concept under attention, and it is only upon this substrate that meaning, 'the fertile idea' (Goethe, 1831, cited in Holdrege, 2005, p. 51) may grow. It is the beholding of this 'fertile idea' which possesses us — our instinctual enthusiasm in response is fuel for the extension of our sight along those invisible lines of history and relationship which work to inform the idea.

In this moment, our way of knowing changes. A useful template for understanding this change can be found in the two French verbs for knowing, *savoir* and *connaître*. Whereas *savoir* refers to a knowing that is a discerning (arising from the same root as *sapiēns*)—a knowing about, or a knowledge of how to do something—*connaître* refers to the quality of knowing which emerges from relationship; '*Je sais que*', I know that, is hardly the same as '*Je connais cet endroit*'; I know this place.

Here, it is crucial to pay attention to the act of distinction (Bortoft 2012: 21). The essential difference between *savoir* and *connaître* is created at a bifurcation or choice point, at which the agent of knowing must participate—or else relinquish participation—in the phenomena of knowing. The result of this choice effectively creates an ontological cascade, appearing eventually as the ostensibly separate epistemologies of *savoir* and *connaître*. However, as Bortoft relates, these are 'downstream' concepts from the phenomena of knowing—'*the appearing of what appears*' (*ibid*, 24; own emphasis)—which is dependant on participation of the knower in order for the known to become itself; to become known as what is known. Bortoft relates this to the unitary event (2012: 94) of hermeneutics in Aristotelian philosophy:

'In Aristotle's language, a text has the potential to mean and a reader has a potential to understand. There is a single actualisation of both... if we participate the meaning, it is because primarily the meaning participates us—and this is understanding' (*ibid*: 104–105)

Having travelled upstream in this way, it becomes clear that *savoir* represents not a choice to relinquish—for this would mean psychosis or suicide—but to sublimate participation. In the sense of morphology, sublimate invokes sub-, 'up to'; limen, '[the] threshold', and -ate; an inflectional suffix from Latin, used in the forming of participial (i.e. verb-like) adjectives or nouns (OED Online). In the modern sense of psychology, to sublimate means:

'To divert the expression of (an instinctual desire or impulse) from its unacceptable form to one that is considered more socially or culturally acceptable' (Anon, Merriam-Webster).

Seemingly innocuous, the implications of this defining circumstance burden the human mind with the explicate order they have unleashed upon the world. With the aid of its morphology and contemporary usage in psychology, sublimation—at its most neutral—reveals itself as the epistemological twin of technological manipulation; the episteme of *techne*, the fundamental means by which science, technology, and civilised culture are made possible, the '*action mode of organisation*' (Bortoft 1985: 291) which results in '*an analytical mode of consciousness attuned to our experience with solid bodies*' (*ibid*). At its most zealous, however, sublimation may reveal itself—crucially, not through nature's, but through its own self-referential lens—as an irresponsible autism which demands to set the conditions of appearance. In the language of Heidegger, it becomes Ge-stell: the unseen essence behind modern technology, which challenges nature to reveal itself in a ordered and regular way (Heidegger 1977: 16):

'Man's ordering attitude and behaviour display themselves first in the rise of modern physics as an exact science. Modern science's way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces. Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies apparatus to the questioning of nature. Rather the reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a

coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way' (ibid: 21).

Bortoft further contextualises this in his discussion of how the modern scientific method must proceed by virtue of its faulty premise:

'Science believes itself to be objective, but is in essence subjective because the witness is compelled to answer questions which the scientist himself has formulated. He never notices the circularity in this because he believes the voice of 'nature' speaking, not realising that it is the transposed echo of his own voice' (Bortoft 1985: 292).

As this study easily overreaches the bounds of our current topic, I will leave the topic of sublimation—and the contextual implications of its ontological cascade—for the reader's further consideration. The question remains, however, of an alternative, for which we must return to the phenomena of knowing and thereby, the original distinction between *savoir* and *connaître*.

Following his description of the unitary event in Aristotle's thought, Bortoft cites Richard Palmer's morphological definition of phenomenology as a manner of contemplating what he describes as 'the hermeneutic reversal':

'The combination of phainesthai and logos, then, as phenomenology means letting things become manifest as what they are, without forcing our own categories on them. It means a reversal of direction from that one is accustomed to: it is not we who point to things; rather, things show themselves to us. This is not to suggest some primitive animism but the recognition that the very essence of true understanding is that of being led by the power of the thing to manifest itself' (Palmer, 1969, in Bortoft 2012: 105).

Goethe introduces this essence as Anschauung, 'a living perception of nature' (Goethe, 1807, in Holdrege 2005: 36), the phenomenological encounter of which Holdrege describes as 'a glimpse of another being' (ibid).

It is here that *connaître* retains its currency as a way of knowing capable of realising the entangled participation of Nature and perceiver, for the very act of Saying 'another being' implies both difference and relation (Bortoft 2012: 22–23). Just as the act of Seeing another being is an act of participation in both Being and selfhood simultaneously, the Seeing and Saying of another being—impression/expression—reveals itself as 'authentic wholeness' (Bortoft 1985: 285–286), the phenomena of Being itself.

An important step in developing this way of knowing is 'the recognition of the other as something in its own right' (Holdrege 2005: 31); in *Doing Goethean Science*, Craig's extensive observations of skunk cabbage—as well as his intensive observations of his experience of skunk cabbage—provided an entry point for my own understanding. Here, a short anecdote is helpful.

My topic of study in this exercise was *Rubus fruticosus*, the common bramble. After spending the majority of two afternoons with the bramble, not being caught by anything in particular (save its thorns), I realised I was stumped by something: the number of leaves per stem was either three or five, no more and no less. Upon musing on this riddle for the remainder of the afternoon, I returned to the bramble on the third day and, nearly immediately, 'caught' the bramble in an act of transformation: Suddenly, in this moment of liminality, I glimpsed the productive no-thing behind the material surface of the bramble. It shone inside my imagination as a lusty gesture in time, a leafy-spiky-hiding-growing out of and against surrounding darkness, just behind my eyes and yet, just in front of them, too. I could see the emergence of a strengthening of central veins across the lower leaves, and recognised the myriad possibilities acting behind and through that act of strengthening. In the words of Craig Holdrege, 'where before I seemingly had solid objects.... now I'm dealing with the qualities which are expressed through these parts' (2005: 44). As my attention shifted inexorably back to the parts of the bramble, I realised I was looking at a) something inherently unfinished, and b) something utterly absorbed in conversation with the life around it.

As I would later come to write:

'I feel a simple, but nonetheless profound, sense of wonder in this discovery. Truly, it is by being deliberate in our approach, by tolerating uncertainty for extensive lengths of time, that our reward for perceiving the actual life of another Being is so great.' (Blanes 2015)

Literally translated, *connaitre* means 'born together'. In that moment when we glimpse the life of another being, Life sees itself through us—"when it occurs, it fills you with the greatest joy and you realise: 'now I am knowing.'" (Holdrege 2005: 50). Now I join life.

The promise of this—of what is fairly referred to as the essence of a holistic science—is the premise of a new science entirely. It is a way of knowing which realises itself as participating within a single actualisation of Being becoming itself differently. It is a knowing which not only tolerates, but attends to that which is inherently unfinished, in the mode of conversation. As Craig Holdrege muses, "*its practice belongs to a 'highly evolved age,' since it is dependent on transformation within the human being*" (2005: 33).

Collectively, we have only just begun the process of unlearning—of realising the damage we can cause through a sublimation of our participation in the world, and of building the way to a new form of participation that attends to the coming into being of all Beings.

We must suffer an education in the art and science of responsibility — the ability to respond, tolerate, and attend to unfinished meaning. The capacity to be truly led, and thus to be changed, by appearances. If we cannot achieve this, the work loses its possibility as possibility, and thereby, becomes meaningless. This becomes the groundwork of a holistic science: to assume responsibility—not culpability or obligation, which denies the freedom inherent in responsibility — for the meeting and ushering in of wholeness, via the tools previously used for fragmentation, as well as the newly-seen gifts of attention, conversation, and authentic enthusiasm.

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