

**A JOURNEY INTO THE QUESTION****PAUL CARTER**

*I've been in prison / for many long long years / seems like you never gonna let me leave / I've got to stay right here. / I've got lifetime here baby / and you won't even look this way / you promised to come and see me / on every visiting day.* – John Brim, Lifetime Baby, Elmore James/John Brim, TOUGH 1968

Dusty twang, driving rhythm. Creaking-deep vocals ploughing the depths of emotion, squeezing every last drop of melody from life. This is the way I was hit by Blues, which is much more than just a kind of music. At university, I was really studying music and skateboarding while enjoying biology as something like an intellectual tourist.

Feeling lost as a student stuck in education, the emotional rawness and defiantly rich tones of Blues music resonated deeply with me. In Blues I found a way of celebrating the woes, struggles and wonders of life without feeling a shred of guilt. After lectures and between frustrating episodes with course-work, I would either pick up my guitar or head to the record shops for a refreshing breath of Blues to put the colour back in things. Such were my years in the concrete collage of Plymouth as a young student.

2008 saw to it that I got a job working in education – I couldn't seem to get away from it. This new "professional" perspective left a strangely familiar impression on me: I began to feel caged. Yet another instance of this kind of "trapping" was to find expression in my thinking.

*A robin redbreast in a cage / Puts all heaven in a rage* – William Blake, Auguries of Innocence 1863

I had studied biology for some years and was now aware that modern science didn't entertain questions I asked. (At university a good tutor once advised me, in a jocular way, to give up my degree and become a science fiction writer – I could see the serious side of my tutor's comment.) Proceeding by way of methodology was not going to tell me anything about value or Quality – something Wildlife Conservation, music and surfing all made clear to me, and which reading Robert Persig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance also confirmed. So I left empirical science and instead took up philosophy.

*Troubling mind, I'm blue / but I won't be blue always / sun gonna shine in my backdoor someday.* – Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Sun's Gonna Shine, on BROWNIE AND SONNY 1966

My departure into philosophy took place in my spare time and elicited from me a feeling of freedom. In philosophy I found the space to ask questions such as the ones Alice entertains:

*I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, that's the great puzzle!* – Alice from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland 1865

My formal adventure into philosophy coincided with my 25th birthday. In celebration I took a train ride to Canterbury that spring, and there I found myself buying a copy of Descartes' Discourse on Method and the Meditations. I studied the book closely for the next year, especially during the winter months, and attempted to write an essay considering the arguments Descartes uses to justify a *mathesis universalis* – a universal science based on mathematics. I was holding up the foundations of modern science for inspection and this seemed like the right way forward. It wasn't long however, before my initial feeling of freedom seized-up around me, like I was a fly that had entered a glass bottle. I had unwittingly reasoned myself into an impenetrable glass container of "mind" and, more troublingly, I hadn't left any clues to show myself the way out.

*What is your aim in philosophy? To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.* – Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations 1959

It's fortunate that life has a way of showing one the way out of an intellectual snare. No matter how far our movements in thinking go, no matter how abstract our conclusions, we are always faced with the immediacy of everyday, ordinary living: experience. It didn't take long before my senses and feelings naturally pointed to experience as a way out of my mind's glass bottle; listening to this intelligence took the form of taking up swing dancing, writing poetry and walking along to the beautiful ebb and flow of the river Avon. Eventually real ballast was brought to bear on the philosophical wonderings I had been on.

*Are you crying / I thought you was laughing? / Hold up your head baby and let me see. / If you want me to go why are you weeping? / Stop your crying darling you'll be alright; / Honey you know I cannot stand tears.* – Ted Hawkins, Stop Your Crying, WATCH YOUR STEP 1982

A dynamic pattern now stood-out in my experience: whatever I sought, whether I obtained this or not, I was left in the same place of empty-handedness – if anything I usually felt caught out by my circumstance, but some occasions were graced with a taste of complete freedom. A question of self-understanding was clearly at the heart of my adventures: I seemed to be at once the protagonist and the antagonist of my life, and I was yet to understand this dynamic properly.

Only a handful of people were willing to explore this theme seriously with me. A lot of my friends simply wanted talk about their jobs and relationships, and did not share my need to consider what the nature of reality is. This exploration was at its height when I lived with two of my good friends, one had long been a devoted Christian and the other was now a budding Buddhist. I called our household "the walk-in joke". Finding such good companions to journey along with is something I was very grateful for, and naturally I wanted this good fortune to translate into other domains of my life. Only a few avenues suggested themselves for exploring the nature of reality seriously. Philosophy was still a strong candidate and remained a passion of mine, but I needed a teacher, someone who knew what they were doing, not just an academic caught up in debates of metaphysics and theory of knowledge.

I had already heard of holistic science as an undergraduate, and the subject appeared to be the vehicle that would take me to the heart of my philosophical desires. I found it interesting that Schumacher College seemed to be the only institution hosting an academic conversation dealing with the question, What is wholeness? So there I rode.

*I'm a stranger that just rode in your town / Oh yes I am, I'm a stranger that just rode in your town / well, because I'm a stranger, everybody wants to dog me 'round. / Well, I wonder why some people treat the strangers so. / Oh, yes, I do, I wonder why some people treat the strangers so. / Well, he may be your best friend that you will never know.* – Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Just Rode in Your Town BROWNIE AND SONNY 1966

In Bristol I remember telling people "I'm off to study a course in holistic science". And I would invariably hear the reply "What's that?" To my surprise, the subject was becoming increasingly difficult to pin down. Every time I attempted to answer this question I found myself fumbling with the words "complexity theory", "Gaia theory" or "Goethean science". I think I gave the most accurate description of holistic science in a letter I wrote to my aunt: "I'm going to study the science of wholeness, in Devon ..." September 2011 saw my return as a student of the University of Plymouth, but my residence was now in Dartington. My new educational setting offered remarkable contrast to the main campus I was well accustomed to – not just in terms of location and environment, but also subject-matter.

Schumacher College introduced me to three different kinds of wholeness: (1) wholeness that is a thing; (2) wholeness that is no-thing; and (3) wholeness that is plain rubbish. The real challenge proved to be learning the art of carefully discerning the difference between kinds (1) and (2).

"Is complexity science holistic science?" was a question that occupied my first three months at the college. Speaking in terms of the logic of the part and the whole, complexity theory is a subtle form of reductionism (holism) whereby the whole is emphasised over the part. In other words, the relationship of whole to part is not one of mutual dependence, but of subordination (the part is of less significance). Primacy is given to the dynamic expression of the system as a whole.

*I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed. / Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles / Proceed from your great lips. / It's worse than a barnyard.* – Sylvia Plath, The Colossus 1960

I found complexity science at its best when used as a way of illustrating the limits of exactness in modern mathematical science: exactness does not tolerate any ambiguity or variation, but the “messiness” of dynamic systems as represented mathematically offers a door out of the conventional view of the perfect, idealised object. Authentic wholeness however, cannot be represented in complexity science. To show this I wrote an essay entitled “On the Problems of Holistic Thinking in Light of Considerations in Time”, the writing of which convinced me that complexity science should remain distinct from holistic science.

*This is the phenomenon: the appearing of what appears.* – Henri Bortoft, *Taking Appearance Seriously* 2012

A realisation accessible by careful and considered study of one’s experience. Experience here means the full spectrum of the known unfolding dynamic of the mind, body and world. Thus holistic science requires a shift in one’s perception that is not at first obvious. Put in the language of phenomenology, we know this phenomenon when we step back into the dynamic appearing of “what” appears. The amazing thing about holistic science is that its subject-matter doesn’t succumb easily to light treatment. One cannot simply answer what its content is in the format of a casual conversation. To borrow one of Heidegger’s expressions, to get into holistic science requires “doing violence” to the assumptions bequeathed to us as commonsense. As a discipline, holistic science offers a way of knowing the concrete phenomenon of wholeness as intrinsic to the dynamics of being

*If you came this way, / Taking the route you would be likely to take / From the place you would be likely to come from, / If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges / White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness. / It would be the same at the end of the journey, / If you came by night like a broken king, / If you came by day not knowing what you came for, / It would be the same, when you leave the rough road / And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull façade / And the tombstone. And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all.* – T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* 1959

In the spring of 2012 I was fully exploring the phenomenon of wholeness and the implications this has for contemporary biology. This is when the significance of Henri Bortoft’s teaching – which I was deeply impressed by – really began to flourish. In Henri’s seminars, a certain space in experience opened because his mastery of language allowed the unity of experience to presence in his teaching as a phenomenon. Henri’s words described this phenomenon with luminous clarity over and over again: “unity which is also multiplicity”, “going up-stream”, “the saying of what is said”, “the appearing of what appears”. The culmination of Henri’s work in *Taking Appearance Seriously* is so impressive because it works with this same insight to undo problem after problem. His movement in thinking is subtle because each problem poses its own intricacies and challenges and thus demands a specific way of being unravelled. Undoing such problems is what I considered the work of holistic science to be when writing my MSc thesis. However, presently, as I begin my doctoral work, I have found that holistic science asks one to go further than achieving an intellectual understanding of wholeness, i.e. when the questioner clearly sees whence a problem came, and sufficiently reconciles it without cause for doubt. I now see that this science is not just something to be thought through (an intellectual exercise collapsing logical problems), the real challenge is a practical one: to align one’s life with the values this knowledge gives foundation to. I believe this to be the ultimate expression of holistic science.

*Both bad and good. Last season’s fruit is eaten / And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail. / For last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.* – T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* 1959

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***A Beginning***

Whatever you think, in the evening, walk  
From your room turned stale from overuse.  
At the road's end, near open space, that's your house.  
Whatever you think.  
Your weary eyes which can hardly  
Free themselves from this doorway so worn;  
Lift up slowly to a black tree.  
Focus it on the sky: slim, alone.  
And you've rebuilt the world. It grows  
As an unspoken word still turning ripe.  
When your urge holds meaning in its grasp,  
Let awakened eyes now turn it loose.

***Patrick Henry*** Translated from Rainer M. Rilke