

ENCOUNTERING THE WHOLE



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In her apocryphal 1969 novel, *The Four-Gated City*, British-African novelist Doris Lessing defined love as the “delicate but total acknowledgement of what is” (Lessing). This description encapsulates the heart of Henri’s masterful work. He allowed things to be as they are. Through that “be-ing,” 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.

Getting to know Henri

In October, 1972, as a 24-year-old American, I arrived in the small Cotswold village of Sherborne to become a student at philosopher J. G. Bennett’s International Academy for Continuous Education. 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, Gurdjieff’s sacred dances called “movements,” and seminars from visiting specialists, one of whom was physicist and science educator Henri Bortoft. During the 1972-73 Sherborne course, Henri offered us students two four-day seminars, one of which was called “The Hermeneutics of Science.” Henri had worked with Bennett in the 1960s on his 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.

Of the many ways in which Bennett’s Sherborne experience transformed my self-understanding, Henri’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. Henri’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 *Theory of Colours* (1810). I still have the notes in which I copied the key questions that Henri had us keep in mind as we looked at and attempted to see colour 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 Henri’s two seminars are cloudy. I do remember the sparkle in his eyes: Henri had an extraordinary way of radiating enthusiasm and profound regard for his subject. I also 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 Henri’s seminar.

For the time he was with us, Henri would teach two sections of seminar daily so that all three student groups experienced the same set of lectures. I remember his telling us in one session that, each time he repeated the same lecture, it arose and arranged itself differently. He explained that part of the uniqueness of the approach he sought to actualize was the spontaneity of the moment playing an integral role in how and what things ended up being said. So much of what he taught was grounded in a trust that, by making an effort to see and say, one could discover new, surprising insights. For me, each session was magical 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 Henri was presenting. I did vaguely understand however, that if I could see and know in the way that Henri saw and knew, my future as a human being and potential academic might be entirely different than otherwise. I remember a moment of revelation in which I realized 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 that one fellow student became quite upset and angrily left the room when Henri suggested that one does not see or know if one cannot say what one sees or knows. He quoted hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that, "in language the world presents itself" (Gadamer, p.449). This point, of course, prefigures the argument laid out in Henri's last work *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: p.145-146)

What I encountered in Henri'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. Already, in 1971, Henri 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 that Henri 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, Henri 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" (Bortoft, 1971).

Developing ideas

After returning to the United States in 1973, I continued my graduate studies and, in 1977, completed my doctoral dissertation that drew partly on Henri'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 unique possibilities for a *lived* environmental ethics, I invited Henri to rework his 1971 article as a chapter in the proposed collection that Bob and I eventually published as *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Toward a Phenomenology of Person and World* (Seamon, 1985). Henri's revision, entitled "Counterfeit and Authentic Wholes: Finding Means for Dwelling in Nature," included his first extended discussion of Goethean science. In that chapter, he concluded by advocating a more receptive, empathetic way of encountering the natural world.

Authentic whole

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 (Bortoft, 1985, 299-300).

In the later 1980s and early 1990s, Henri would write 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 the world that will grow in intensity and significance as the 21st century unfolds. As we typically are, we don't fully make contact with the world or with the things, places, and living beings in it. Henri taught a way of seeing that graciously meets with 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 through that understanding, may better care for our world.

One of Henri'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, Henri 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).

Relationship to J.G. Bennet

In ending this commentary, I want to mention Henri's relationship with the ideas and work of J. G. Bennett, who profoundly shaped my life because of the Sherborne experience. Though Henri said little publicly about how Bennett influenced his thinking, one should recognize that the impact was significant. As I mentioned earlier, Henri worked with Bennett in the early 1960s to develop new modes of educational practice that would facilitate experience-grounded synthesis rather than cerebrally-contrived analysis. Drawing both from Western secular philosophy and science as well as Eastern and Western sacred traditions, Bennett explored the interpretive power of number as a conceptual means to describe the multivalent wholeness of a particular phenomenon. He called this approach *systematics* and demonstrated how each integer—1, 2, 3, and so forth, up to 12—could be drawn upon to explore different aspects of the phenomenon. Thus, "one" revealed aspects of wholeness, just as two revealed aspects of contrast and complementarity; three, relationship and process; four, activity; five, potential; six, event; and so forth (See Bennet, 1993 and 1995-6).

From Bennett's perspective of systematics, Henri's work is significant because he gave much of his intellectual attention to the nature of oneness—in other words, the whole and wholeness or, as Bennett called it, the *monad* (see Bennet, 1993 ch. 1). A good portion of Henri's teaching and writings highlight the manner and means of encounter with the phenomenon—locating the thing, meaning, or the idea *as a whole* by engaging

with that thing, meaning, or idea in a gracious, generous, comprehensive way. In this sense, Henri is an important figure in systematics research. He continuously sought to locate and intensify the first moments of engagement with the thing whereby the whole could be seen *as whole* through a progressively intensive encounter with the parts through which the whole could break through via an increasingly comprehensive clarity. To encapsulate this manner of seeing and understanding, Henri often repeated Goethe's dictum that, "One instance is often worth a thousand, bearing all within itself."

Conclusion

For those who wish to commit themselves to Henri's way of seeing and understanding, they must soberly recognize that the effort is not easy or certain. The style of encounter and understanding that Henri so perspicaciously delineates requires dedication, persistence, hope, and a deep wish to see, no matter where that wish takes one. I last talked with Henri in Oxford in the summer of 2011 when he had just finished a presentation for the annual International Human Research Science conference. Gordon Miller, the historian and photographer who had just completed a new illustrated version of Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants*, had organized a conference session on Goethean science and Henri was one of the speakers. After his presentation, Henri and I talked only briefly 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 a prolonged, engaged encounter with the phenomenon itself. In his writings, he called this hurdle to understanding 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 his emphasis on hazard suggests, Henri's Goethean phenomenology offers no guarantees. There are no shortcuts to seeing. One can readily read too much or too little into the phenomenon. One can sometimes go off track entirely. In this sense, Henri's vision and method are a life-long endeavour not easy to learn or to master. This approach to seeing and understanding requires steadfast devotion over a long period of time. If successful, however, this way of discovery stirs tremendous personal satisfaction and helpful insights that might inspire others. Perhaps most significantly for the future of humankind, Henri's work points toward a workable way whereby we might re-invigorate a sense of reverence and love for our world and Earth.

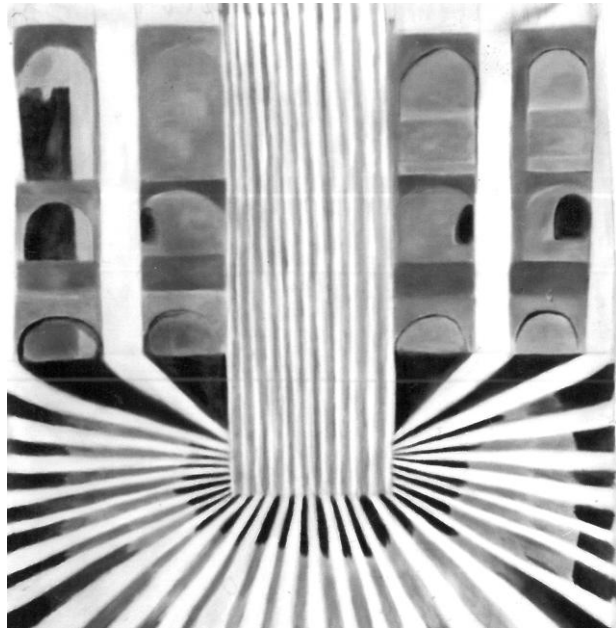
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Ancient Observatory, Delhi – Original Painting by Patrick Henry