

**PHILOSOPHY AS LIVED****INGRID L STEFANOVIC**

More than a decade ago, while an Associate Chair in Philosophy at the University of Toronto, I encountered in the elevator a colleague who had just returned from teaching his first class in our introductory, first-year course. He proudly declared that he had managed to, “chase away a good third of the class.” He explained that he only wanted to retain students determined to be philosophy specialists.

My jaw dropped as he left the elevator. In my Associate-Chair capacity of what was then the largest philosophy department in North America, I still hoped our professional aim was to attract and *retain* students in our programs. But, beyond those administrative musings, I was appalled that my colleague envisioned philosophy as a discipline only for “specialists.” My view is that philosophical questions are important to everyone, whether or not one chooses dedication to academic study. In fact, to be human is to naturally reflect upon philosophical questions.

This colleague retired shortly thereafter but many philosophers still think as he did, and many journals—even those focusing on interdisciplinary environmental ethics—provide opportunities for philosophers to debate exclusively among themselves. Few academics possess the talent to communicate beyond the discipline in a way that preserves the academic integrity of ideas while making them accessible to a broader audience.

Henri Bortoft was the very opposite of my philosophy colleague. He was the quintessential teacher, able to straddle physics, philosophy and the study of the environment. Brilliantly adept at taking complex philosophical ideas about hermeneutics and holism and translating them, without loss, to non-philosophers, he was able to make these ideas legible and exciting. This talent is especially important in the environmental field, where issues such as pollution, climate change, declining biodiversity, ecological health risks and loss of sense of place are increasingly prevalent and where academics have a responsibility to contribute, beyond the comfort of their discipline, to solutions to these problems.

My first encounter with Bortoft’s writings was his 1985 article, *Counterfeit and Authentic Wholes: Finding a Means for Dwelling in Nature* (Bortoft, 1985). To my mind, this article remains one of the best introductions to hermeneutics, phenomenology and holism.

Within philosophical circles, there have been important critiques of holism. For instance, in *The Case for Animal Rights*, ethicist Tom Regan claims that environmental holism is necessarily “eco-fascism” because individuals, such as animals, are sacrificed to an omnipotent whole, such as an ecosystem. Bortoft, however, demonstrates that authentic holistic thinking has nothing to do with creating a dominant “super-part” to rule over individual components sacrificed for the good of the whole. On the contrary, by brilliantly contrasting the image of a hologram with an ordinary photographic plate, he shows how the “whole” is properly reflected in the “parts.” He writes:

*“If the hologram plate is broken into fragments and one fragment is illuminated, it is found that the same three-dimensional optical reconstruction of the original object is produced. There is nothing missing: the only difference is that the reconstruction is less well defined.... The entire picture is wholly present in each part of the plate, so that it would not be true in this case to say that the whole is made up of parts... On the contrary, because the whole is in some way reflected in the parts, it is to be encountered by going further into the parts instead of by standing back from them “. (Bortoft, 1985: p. 282-284)*

What a lucid example to show how holistic thinking is more than merely additive! Bortoft suggests a different kind of understanding that preserves the interaction and relation between whole and parts. He then makes links to hermeneutics and to the act of grasping meaning in a text. He speaks of a fundamental distinction between the whole and the totality. When we read a text, for example,

*“We do not have to store up what is read until it is all collected together, whereupon we suddenly see the meaning all at once, in an instant... We reach the meaning of the sentence through reading the words, yet the meaning of the words in that sentence is determined by the meaning of the sentence as a whole.... We can say that meaning is hologrammatical “.* (Bortoft, 1985: p.284-285)

Why do these ideas matter to the study of environment? They are important, first, because we realize how describing holistic phenomena, such as a sense of place, means more than only describing its component parts or even compiling an inventory of these component parts. To think holistically is to think in an essentially non-reductionist, non-calculative manner. It is to move beyond the study of delimited *things*, uncovering the ontological condition of the possibility of the meaning that is revealed in the relation *between* things, in the essence of the individual things themselves, and in the taken-for-granted context and interpretive horizon within which things appear in the first place.

The challenges of such holistic thinking are huge: If Bortoft is right (as I think that he is), then thinking holistically about problems of urban planning or global climate change means developing new research approaches and study methods. This new way of thinking means that, in addition to complex engineering or Newtonian scientific models, we need to draw on a wider range of sources. Besides climate change science, for instance, we need to reflect on climate ethics and critically evaluate value systems sustaining particular calculative worldviews.

From Bortoft’s perspective, we need to rethink the way we do science in the first place. In this connection, he turned to Goethe’s method of “delicate empiricism” for guidance. In *The Wholeness of Nature*, Bortoft explains how we must move beyond the “organizing idea” of “naïve empiricism” or “factism” which assumes that facts are “independent of an ideational element” (Bortoft,1996,p.144). Drawing from Goethe’s “whole way of seeing” the unity of the phenomenon, he introduces a new way of scientific thinking to supplement mainstream science—an approach that points toward a “radical change in our awareness of the relationship between nature and ourselves” (Bortoft, 1996, p.144).

*The Wholeness of Nature* is a powerful book that speaks for itself, and I invite readers to read this important work that can dramatically shift one’s understanding of understanding. Also significant is his recently published *Taking Appearance Seriously: The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought*, which continues to reflect upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and a new vision of science. Here we read how, “phenomenology seems to take the ground away from under our feet, whilst at the same time, gives us the sense of being where we have always been—only now recognizing it as if for the first time”. (Bortoft, 2012, p.17) Interestingly, this description of phenomenology actually captures the essence of Bortoft’s own reflections, which make us aware, as if for the first time, of so much of what we take for granted about our relation to the natural world.

Henri Bortoft has left a significant legacy that enriches the phenomenological literature and reflects a profound and unique understanding of the meaning of holism. He is a thinker whose writings will continue to have impact for a long time to come. His was a life well lived and his accomplishments deserve to be preserved and celebrated.

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#### References

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