

UPSTREAM THINKING

Bortoft's New Realm of Inquiry Into Different Possible Ways of our Being Human



JOHN SHOTTER

"This book is about a different way of thinking" (Bortoft, 2012, p.10).

"A change in the way of seeing means a change in what is seen" (Bortoft, 1996, p.143).

"What is said does not encapsulate its own meaning, as if it could be fully understood independently of the context within which it is said – where 'context' refers to everything that is meant 'with' the text (con-text) but which remains unspoken, What is said 'carries with it the unsaid', i.e., what is not said but is intended along with what is said" (Bortoft, 2012, p.162).

Downstream to Upstream Understandings

"Philosopher consiste à invertir la direction habituelle du travail de la pensée" (Bergson)



Henri Bortoft begins his book with an experience that was clearly of great importance to him – indeed, it seems to have been a major *guiding resource* in shaping his orientation toward the new kind of thinking needed in taking appearance seriously. He recounts taking a walk in the countryside in an effort to allay his anxiety before beginning a set of classes entailing a whole new way of teaching. Instead of talking to a class of students *about* hermeneutics and phenomenology, he faced the task of trying to give them at least, "a taste of this way of seeing for themselves" (Bortoft 2012, p.17). At a point in the walk, he stopped on a

bridge over a flowing river. Looking downstream at the river flowing away from him, he inexplicably felt uneasy. Only when he turned in the other direction to look at the river flowing towards him, did he feel better: *"I began to be drawn into the experience of looking, plunging with my eyes into the water flowing towards me. When I closed my eyes I sensed the river streaming through me, and when I opened them again, I found that I was experiencing the river flowing towards me outwardly and through me inwardly at the same time. The more I did this, the more relaxed and free from anxiety I began to feel"* (Bortoft 2012, p.18).

The feeling did not last, however, and as he walked down the long corridor toward the classroom, his anxiety was at its height. But as he opened the door, expecting to fall into an abyss of embarrassment, he heard himself saying: *"Our problem is that where we begin is already downstream, and in our attempt to understand where we are we only go further downstream. What we have to do instead is learn how to go back upstream and flow down to where we are already, so that we can recognise this as not the beginning but the end. That's phenomenology!"* (p.18). And it is this still not fully articulated, global whole – the idea that upstream 'things' are not yet fully formed but that they become more well-articulated in the course of their flow downstream – that Bortoft uses as a hermeneutic, as an "organizing idea" (Bortoft, 1996), that is *implicitly* at work in him *making sense*, i.e., giving *meaning*, to what, *explicitly*, he does say.

Indeed, Bortoft's turn here to hermeneutics is, I think, of even more importance than his turn to phenomenology. 'Brought up' as a student of David Bohm (e.g., see Bohm, 1980) to think in holographic terms – for in a hologram, a whole visual scene is 'present' even in broken-off parts of the plate, while every point in

the scene is 'present' in any part of the whole plate – “it became obvious that the holographic approach to wholeness – with which it was intended to replace the systems approach – had a form which is very similar to that of the hermeneutic circle, and hence that what we thought of as a 'holographic' survey could equally well be thought of as a 'hermeneutic' survey” (Bortoft, 2012, p.15). What is different, however, is that in our everyday lives, a *developmental* flow of undivided activity is at work. Thus, rather than simply being already 'present', both the relevant 'whole' and its 'parts', says Bortoft, using Heideggerian terminology, 'presence' or 'come-to-presence', i.e., they *emerge*, together within a period of time.

In this way of seeing, then, unique, uncompleted 'time-shapes' become more important to us in our inquiries than nameable, completed spatial-shapes, i.e., forms or patterns out in the world. They become more important because they arouse *tense feelings* within us, unique *expectations* as to what we next *need* to make contact with as we move around in our surroundings, if we are to relieve the *felt* tensions they arouse in us; they can thus both *motivate* and *guide* us in our conduct of our inquiries.

As we move upstream, so to speak, to those beginning-moments in the flow, say, of speech communication, we find events occurring of a quite *different kind* to those which can develop from them later. Upstream, although already articulated, differentiated, or specified to a degree, they are still open to yet further differentiation or differencing – but now, only *from within* the differencing or articulation that has already occurred. A male student says to a female student: “There’s a really interesting movie on at the campus cinema this evening.” And she straightaway replies: “Are you telling me, or asking for a date?” She’s relationally clever; she recognizes he is deliberately expressing a still *indeterminate* meaning, open to a number of replies, to avoid the responsibility of explicitly asking for a date.

Bortoft explores this point in a perhaps more strikingly material fashion in relation to plant growth. He notes that the difference between a wild and a cultivated rose is that, botanically, rings of stamens in the wild rose seem to have 'metamorphosed' into rings of petals, one organ seems to have turned into another, while in other flowers, we can seem to see the reverse: “So that when we look at a water lily the overall effect is that we [also] seem to 'see' one organ turning gradually into another one. *But this is not what is happening*: a petal does not materially turn into a stamen. Rather, what we are seeing here is one organ manifesting in different forms, and not one organ turning into another one – i.e., no finished petal. changes into a stamen The metamorphosis is in the embryonic stage of plant growth and not at the adult stage” (Bortoft, 2012:p.64, my emphasis). An earlier indeterminacy later becomes more specifically determined in different ways from within different developmental contexts.

It is at this point that he introduces what is, perhaps, the most important idea in the book: the idea of the *self-differencing* organ. What we find when we go upstream is that, “if one and the same organ presents itself to us in different forms, then each organ *is* that organ, but differently, and not *another* organ – Proteus is always one and the same Proteus, not another Proteus” (Bortoft, 2012, p.71). This means that, whatever nameable 'thing' or 'object' we might see before us at any one moment in time, we should look to see in its appearance, its *way of appearing* as such to us, for it is in this *movement* – from up- to downstream – that we can *sense* its *meaning* for us; its meaning is not only to be found in its finished, objective *form*.

This theme continues on into the penultimate chapter – *Catching Saying in the Act* – where Bortoft remarks: “Although we may talk about 'language and the world', the 'and' is fictitious because it implies that we could have 'language' and 'world' *separately*. But in fact we cannot, even though we are accustomed to thinking as if we could” (Bortoft 2012 p.147, my emphasis). Indeed, we meet exactly this separatist thinking when people talk of a person's “body language,” as if on the one hand, there is their spoken language and on the other, their expressive, bodily, *gestural* movements, when in fact they are all of a piece. “It only looks like language *and* the world – as if they exist independently and are brought together extensively – when we begin downstream with the world already languaged. But if we shift upstream to try to catch language in the act, then we find, not just that language discloses world, but that language and world are disclosed *together*. The 'language-world' is really the concrete phenomenon, from which 'language on its own without the world', and 'world on its own without language' are abstractions” (p.149). Our growing into a languaged world when young really is a matter of our growing into a certain, specific *way* of being a certain kind of human being. To fully learn to speak another *first* language, is learning to live in another *world* altogether.

All this means that, as Bortoft makes very clear in a short final chapter, that we have got it seriously wrong in thinking that we ‘picture’ or ‘represent’ *in consciousness* what is ‘out there’ in the world at large, and that we can find the *meaning* of people’s words as expressions of their ‘thoughts’, by assuming that it is *contained* in the *forms of words* appearing in their utterances – which is, of course, the assumption made in countless research inquiries based in interview transcripts. It is *transitions* that matter and we express our *meaning* in the *differencing* that occurs as we move on from one ‘state of affairs’ to another. Thus it is our *words in their speaking* that matters to us, not the *patterns in words already said*. We don’t have to wait until a person has finished speaking before we can sense ‘where they are trying to go’ in their speaking.

Conclusion: coming to be human, differently

As we saw above, as we grow into the languaged world around us, we grow into a *consciousness*, into a sharing *with* (con~) the others around us of a *languaged-awareness* (~scientia) of *our* surroundings. As such, it is a languaged awareness which in its upstream incarnation, as Bortoft (2012) makes magnificently clear, is forever open to yet further development, but which its downstream *forms* can easily become ‘fossilized’. And it is difficult not to over-emphasize the importance – in social policy making, health-care, financial affairs, economics, environmental thinking, etc., etc. – of the shift in our thinking that Bortoft is outlining in this book.

I began this review of it by suggesting that we currently seem to be living within a mass illusion. Bortoft (2012) succinctly expresses it as manifesting in our current assumption that, “truth is what is discovered by science... and as such it takes the form of being the very same for everyone,” and “we can see this very clearly in the universalism of the mathematical style of thinking which has gradually dominated since the time of Descartes – and which is now applied so widely that we just take it for granted, even though there are many kinds of situation where it is highly inappropriate” (p.168). Whereas, “what we can call the ‘hermeneutic style of thinking’ *turns this inside out*. What looks like the sheer plurality of many different viewpoints, and hence seemingly subjective becomes instead objective manifestations of something coming-to-be differently in different contexts and situations” (p.168, my emphasis).

Our current downstream thinking is, we can say:

- **Beside the point**, in that it orients us toward seeking regularities, already existing forms, This diverts our attention away from those fleeting moments in which we have the chance of noticing previously unnoticed events that might provide the new beginnings we seek.
- **After the fact**, for our aim is to understand the as-yet-non-existent activities involved in our approaching nature differently, not that of discovering already existing factual states of affairs. Or, to state it differently, as thinkers, concerned only to bring out what is necessarily implied our *a priori* concepts, we arrive on the scene too late, and then look in the wrong direction, with the wrong attitude.
- **Too late**, because we take the ‘basic elements’ in terms of which we must work and conduct our arguments to be already fixed, (i.e.) already determined for us by an elite group of academically approved predecessors.
- **In the wrong direction**, because we look backward toward supposed already existing actualities, rather than forward toward possibilities.
- **With the wrong attitude**, because we seek a static picture, a theoretical representation, of a phenomenon, rather than a living sense of it as an active agency in our lives.

To orient ourselves intellectually, in relation to still developing phenomena, we require another mode of inquiry. But where might we begin our explorations in the search for it, if we cannot begin from our *a priori*, theoretical assumptions and suppositions? We can only begin with our *noticings*, and with the *acutely discriminative sense* that we can have of their qualitative nature. We can thus begin, both with our own sensings, and with our noticing the spontaneous expressions of others as they respond to events occurring to them in their surroundings.

As an example of someone who has been very clear about the need to adopt such a different starting point, is Amartya Sen (2009) in his book, *The Idea of Justice*. He begins it by quoting Charles Dickens who, in *Great Expectations*, put these words into the mouth of the grown-up *Pip*: “In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt, as injustice” (p.vii) – where the grown-up *Pip* is recollecting a humiliating encounter with his sister, *Estella*. In other words, Sen wants to begin his

inquiries, not by asking what a perfectly just society would look like (Rawls, 1971), but from our *felt sensing of a something being* unjust, from our *disquiets*, from our feelings of *things being not quite right*.

Why? Because: “What moves us, reasonably enough,” he remarks, “is not the realization that the world falls short of being completely just – which few of us expect – but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate” (p.vii). Thus, by situating ourselves within a particular practical situation it is possible to have a *shared sense* – along with all the others around us – of a particular *injustice* at work; there is a real chance of all involved, working together, to arrive at a way of remedying it. For they can all find in such a situation both a guiding motivation, and, as they mentally move about within it, *ways* to bring to light the *resources* needed to move on from that injustice – where the *ways* needed will involve their *thoughts* and *ideas*... not to be used as explanatory devices, but as “organizing ideas” to think-with, to hold alongside themselves as aids in our coming to a *felt sense* of what the particular injustice in question is both *like*, and yet also *different* to.

Thus, my overall aim in exploring Bortoft’s new, dynamic way of seeing in *Taking Appearance Seriously*, has been to pursue this question: “Is it possible to devise, as part of a new approach to the study of actual everyday life activities, a special way of ‘seeing’ them which will not, on the one hand, distort their nature, but which will, on the other, allow us as professional social and environmental scientists to deepen and enlarge our understanding of them?” – and I think on the basis of what Bortoft offers us in *TAS*, the answer, clearly is: “Yes!” In other words, we need to relinquish the still unfulfilled dream – and, as he sees it, the *forever unfulfillable* dream – of our gaining the very general objective results we currently seek in our inquiries, and to be content with the limited, partial, and situated results that we *can in fact obtain* – which, in the end, both he and I believe, will turn out to be, perhaps surprisingly, of far greater practical use and value to us. In the process, we would become a very different kind of human being.

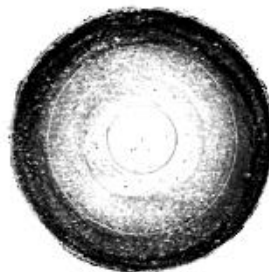
References

- Bohm, D. (1980) *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
 Bortoft, H. (1996) *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Toward a Science (Science) of Conscious Participation in Nature*. Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press.
 Bortoft, H. (2012) *Taking Appearances Seriously: the Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
 Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
 Sen, A. (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin Books



John Shotter is Emeritus Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, and works as an organisational consultant and doctoral examiner internationally. His long term interest is in the social conditions conducive to people having a voice in the development of participatory democracies and civil societies.

<http://www.johnshotter.com>



The space in between