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/ Philip Franses

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In an age where Western Science is increasingly thinking ponderously along straight lines, the move Henri Bortoft made to drop his PhD along with a career in academia as a prerequisite to restore a balance of freedom for inquiry, now feels especially relevant.

It began in 1963 when Bortoft was surprised to find how difficult the act of description was, when one did not lean on existing patterns of thought or explanations one wanted to impose. “You think when you describe something, that you look at what’s there and put it into words. Really it isn’t like that at all, because it isn’t there. You find it’s not there until I describe it. Describing it, distinguishes it and it appears” (Bortoft 2013, 31). A description is building a subtle web of inference upon which a sudden flash of insight illumines the whole with a picture of what is there.

Bortoft, over the next five decades, pieced together Western thought - from the question of the role of the observer in quantum physics, to phenomenological philosophy in the early 20th century to Goethe’s ground-laying work of the 19th century. Western thought is not to be approached as a commentary making its way to an ultimate explanation. The path of Western culture would be born out of the source of despair and darkness from which the illumination of reason happens.

The essential thinking of Bortoft’s approach when working on a PhD with David Bohm (Hiley, 23) can be found in the enigmatic title to his 1970 *Systematics* paper “The Ambiguity of ‘One’ and ‘Two’ in the Description of Young’s Experiment”. Young’s experiment is as crucial to the study of the particle as the prism experiment is to colour. The participation of the observer influencing the outcome of the experiment requires a description that is two fold. The mind switches between seeing the reductive apparatus of the double slit that the single particle passes through and the whole illumination of the aggregate result. The experiment, Bortoft concluded, could not be properly understood as a description of material elements interacting in the “language with the numerical singular/ plural distinction”. To go further into how an elemental nature unfolds a description of itself “we must pass completely into the optical [non-numerical] arithmetic [discovered by G. Spencer Brown]” (Bortoft 1970, 243–4). The optical arithmetic does not distinguish between “one” and “two”, until seeing brings the unfolding of a description and the materialising of a form generatively together (see Louis H. Kauffman’s article “Compresence and Coalescence”, pp. 24–39 in this issue).

Light, even in the everyday act of seeing, switches between the “one” of an undifferentiated whole picture and the analysis identifying the composition of parts in the “two” of categorised reason. The manner of thought that moves towards a description as an illumination (of Young’s interference or Newton/ Goethe’s prism experiments) complements the hardness or boundary that separates an object in its existence physically. Meaning arises through the polarity of nothing and something, the crossing of which gives the “one” of appearance.

Bortoft also widened his focus beyond science into philosophy. At one point when about to begin a series of workshops, he was struggling to see a clear plan of how to communicate with his non-specialist audience. He spent a long time on a bridge at the Sherborne Academy in Gloucestershire looking at the water of a stream flowing towards him, in nervous contemplation of what awaited him. With the stream still in his mind, on entering the classroom he heard himself say: “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” (Bortoft 2012, 18). “Upstream-downstream” consolidated what Henri Bergson had coined as “reversing the direction of the operation by which the mind habitually thinks” (Bergson, 69), so that one was *catching the seeing* in the act. The “two” Bortoft relates as “upstream” and “downstream” is analogous to the current of thought that establishes the flow of discovering something arising from the nothing of where it began. In bringing attention from the world of finished forms to this stream of thought, one encounters the true generative source that leads one to the world separable into identities and existences.

A similar movement is made by Goethe to include darkness as a dimension of equal weight to light. In Goethean practice, different modes of seeing - from rational observation, through dynamic imagination, to catching the identity of the whole - are woven together not as instruction how to see, but to guide the ‘see-er’ to leave open the relation of the “one” and “two” systemically through the study (Bortoft 1996, 67–8). Goethe encourages us to trust in the process taking us from the darkness of unknowing into the insight and light of illumination. From this perspective, we arrive at the characteristic movement by which the different aspects form dynamically together.

Bortoft would get exasperated if anyone would try to point out that this was already an Eastern concept. He was not trying to establish this to dissolve duality into an overarching oneness. His audience was the scientist, the artisan and the philosopher. His work was to keep existence in the act of its appearance - what appears *in its appearing* (Bortoft 2012, 24) - so that neither “one” nor “two” had ground on which to be defined separate to each other, **until** the act of appearance. He saw this as a new way of opening out the Western mind, over its entire journey from Greece, through the Roman era into the Arab culture and eventually to renaissance Europe.

Bortoft took this ambiguity of language as the key by which the journey of Western culture into the materiality of rational subject-object duality could redeem its own meaning. All early philosophers and scientists from Descartes, Leibniz and Newton presented a mixture of wholeness - of their intuition, of their belief, of their thought - with the reductive mechanisms they proposed. Only later did science separate analysis from experience. Scientific method hardened around Newton’s optics, teasing out light into straight lines of material rays, passing from object to eye or source to illumination. Light was presented as acting like matter. The use of light rays to depict paths of light “illustrates how an explanation, once established, pre-forms subsequent description” (Bortoft 1970, 230). Light’s quality to communicate the whole without needing to divide things out into separate material existences, came thereby to be overlooked. If one tries to reduce the appearance of seeing into diagrams of straight-line rays, one destroys the capacity of light to act as its own medium of disclosure.



“Shade and Darkness – The Evening after the Deluge” (1843)
Joseph Mallord William Turner



"Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - the Morning after the
Deluge - Moses Writing the Book of Genesis" (1843)
Joseph Mallord William Turner

Goethe's challenge of Newton, his reinstating of darkness, was to rescue light from its subordination to matter. Light shapes material development in giving temporal elements a part in the whole they compose together. The organism, in Goethe's terms, is a journey to illumination of its whole form. Seeing, making a description, coming to insight similarly rely on the capacity of light to bring the different aspects of a dynamic picture together into a composite illumination. *A description through matter limits observation* to an abstraction of the known essentials governing reality. *An optical description starts with a vision* - of wholeness, of being, of spirit - allowing one to penetrate through successive stages of experience. Only at the end when one *sees*, is the threshold lowered by the process of arriving at the form which receives into it the energy of realisation.

To make sense of Western culture, from Goethe, through phenomenology, to science, one must free light to shape and deliver experience to the goal of whole insight. The light of romanticism, or experience, or self, are not peripheral to the mechanical knowledge of existence; the meeting with the "one" in the despair of darkness is what illumines the disciplines of science, philosophy and psychology as these became statements in dualistic reason of the "two".

In 2011 on the MSc in Holistic Science at Schumacher College, Bortoft took the class through Goethe's prisms experiments, in order to experience the moment together of illumination. One sees the colours neither dissolving into light nor arbitrarily constituted but standing in the freedom to articulate the world at its darkening or lightening. Colour characterises freedom in the dissolution or establishment of form. Colour is the key translating the drama of a world between death and life. The language of colour lends the means by which shadow and illumination happen. The whole integrity of the world is seen in its capacity to conceal or reveal. J.M.W Turner, the great British painter, portrayed Goethe's Theory by depicting colour in the translation between darkness and light.

It was Bortoft who above all made accessible a path by which the whole secret of Western thought is seen in the current of discovery itself. The "upstream" and the "downstream" are the "two" that can run together into the "one" of appearance. The optical insight together with the laws of matter, through the lens of Bortoft, foresees the existential ground by which observation responds to the touch of wholeness.

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