

**BOOK REVIEW: *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*. By Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson (1987) MacMillan Publishing Company**

I have to admit, the more I grow as a scholar-practitioner the more I appreciate the foundational writings of great minds. I have read three of Bateson's books now: the one being reviewed here, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, and *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. All three are "foundational" in the sense of laying the groundwork for new ways of perceiving. "Great minds" are able to interpret what is needed by the collective at important junctures in the evolutionary progress, thus providing valuable contributions for the whole. I believe Bateson's work constitutes the foundational writing of a great mind.

*Angels Fear* is not so much a separate work as it is the continuation (and fairly the culmination) of themes initiated during the first two volumes – they certainly do form a coherent and comprehensive whole; and, "epistemology" is certainly one of the continuing themes. Bateson shares his conception of epistemology by page 93: "Your machinery of perception, *how* you perceive, is governed by a system of presuppositions I call your epistemology: a whole philosophy deep in your mind but beyond your consciousness." As such, I take this to mean that a person's "epistemology" is the accumulated subtotal of everything he or she has ever studied or read, stored and organized subconsciously as a personal philosophy. If so, I would caution people to be very careful of what they let into their minds! For those who are actively learning, an epistemology must be growing and evolving all the time.

A further insight into Bateson's conception of epistemology, and his thinking more generally, can be gleaned from this passage: "because what *is* is identical for all human purposes with what can be known, there can be no clear line between epistemology and ontology" (p. 19). Perhaps we can paraphrase this by saying that there is no clear distinction between "being" and "knowing." This would be fairly consistent with the rest of Bateson's philosophy, for, after all, his central project could be summed up by the saying "re-embodiment mind."

Yes, Bateson sought to repair the Cartesian split; the re-unifying imagery he left behind *is* his contribution to the whole – and I find his proposals to be just as relevant now as in the days he was writing them. Here is a central tenet of his holism: "[M]ind without matter cannot exist; matter without mind can exist but is not accessible. Transcendent deity is an impossibility" (p. 6). Bateson defines this worldview as Monism: "the conviction that mind and nature form a necessary unity, in which there is no mind separate from body and no god separate from his creation...an integrated world" (p. 12).

I ask you, is this not the opposite of what we have been taught and what is generally believed? Specifically that “mind” is separate from “body” and “god” is living “up there” in “heaven?” And Bateson challenges our inherited illusions even more neatly when he proposes, “mind is an organizational characteristic, not a separate “substance”” (p. 50).

I’ve had time to think about all this stuff, so I’ve had time to accept and integrate its veracity. For me, mind is a function of the body and yet extends beyond the body to include the immediate environment. Mind is more like a set of relations, grounded in the activity of nervous system sensory awareness yet able to move and reach beyond it. Mind is certainly not just the brain; and the idea, so popular with speculative philosophers, of a disembodied mind somehow existing floating in the ethers is not plausible from our holistic perspective.

I’ve fielded some criticism from my Fielding assessors for researching and relying on knowledge from “dated” sources; and I presume Bateson would be considered one of these dated sources. Yet I would disagree, and counter-point that the “mind and nature as a necessary unity” perspective is even more relevant and needed now than in the 1980s. These days, young people speak about traversing “virtual worlds” and engaging in on-line, bodily-absent “chat groups.” Their parents metabolize pharmaceuticals while sitting in traffic on their way to buy greasy industrial fast-food. Addictions are rampant. The culture for whom Bateson was writing still has not placed “body” at the forefront of attention, while mind is free to wander at the service of ego. I would call all this a cultural malaise; and I would recommend to anyone wishing to amend this malaise by re-integrating body and mind to read Bateson’s foundational books, where they will discover such re-integrating passages as this:

What has been said so far can be read as argument or evidence for the reality of very large mental systems, systems of ecological size and larger, within which the mentality of the single human being is a subsystem. These large mental systems are characterized by, among other things, constraints on the transmission of information between their parts (p. 135).

Or:

The conceptual separation between “mind” and “matter” will be seen to be a by-product of – a spin-off from – an insufficient holism. When we focus too narrowly on the parts, we fail to see the necessary characteristics of the whole and are then tempted to ascribe the phenomena resulting from wholeness to some supernatural entity (p. 170).

For Bateson, the “sacred” is not transcendent or supernatural: it is the appreciation received as embodied minds from complex integrated wholeness. We would do well to start piecing our worlds back together, beginning with re-integrating body and mind. That’s the whole purpose of yoga by the way. Could Bateson be a yogi?