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Books Reconsidered

Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Gregory Bateson

This is not a book, but a collection of essays. Reconsidering it has been a difficult task. Some pieces are stunningly fresh and inspiring, others infuriating and confusing. It began happily enough. In the introduction, "The science of mind and order", Bateson brilliantly frames the Old Testament as a scientific statement about order: "... and God divided the light from the darkness ... and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (p. 29). Modern science has neglected form for substance, yet thinking – making sense of the patterns in the world – is entirely a matter of form. This is the point of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.*

As the biblical quotation shows, Bateson's view of mind is universal. The creation of order out of chaos was itself a thinking process, even when there were no living things in existence. In this view a human brain is not required for thought. Bateson defines information as 'news of difference'. Differences do not exist in space or time. They are not quantities but they do have effects. In obtaining information only those differences that make a difference to the recipient are significant. This process occurs throughout evolution, but also in the mind. "In fact, information and form are not items which can be localised" (p. 385). This is one of the most useful and intelligible ideas in the book, and indeed in Bateson's work as a whole. It goes back to Plato, Leibniz, Frege, and William James, although Bateson does not always acknowledge his sources (Luepnitz, 1988).

For psychiatrists the most notable paper in *Steps* is "Towards a theory of schizophrenia", first published in 1956. This was the first report of the now famous double-bind project, which included Jay Haley, Don Jackson and John Weakland. Without it, Bateson would not, from then on, have entered the reading lists of generations of trainee psychiatrists, and you would not be reading this review. He was, after all, an anthropologist whose interest in mental illness was one among many. His primary concern was the formal qualities of evolving systems, and he was just as fascinated by dolphins as by schizophrenics. However, because the double-bind theory seemed to be a challenge to the prevailing view of the aetiology of the most formidable of all psychoses, psychiatrists had to read it and, if they could, disprove it. Since it was first published much has changed. Both the definitions of schizophrenia and of the double bind have been refined (e.g. in Bateson's paper, "Double bind", 1969 p. 242). But in 1956 Bateson and his colleagues could not escape from their own bind, and fell into the trap, later acknowledged, of blaming the patient's parents. The schizophrenic subject was seen, in effect, as the innocent victim of the wicked maddening mother and her ineffectual husband. Without being aware of it, Bateson and his colleagues were seeking to rescue the child from that snare. This would now be recognised as a professional response to child abuse, but it was another 20 years before the essential dynamic of child abuse – the imbalance of power between parent and offspring – was clearly articulated. Bateson did not see it that way. The concept of unilateral power, however persuasive, was for him an "epistemological lunacy" (pp. 462–463). The double bind, on the contrary, is not an abuse of power, but a failure of logic.

Bateson and Haley made the brilliant link between a philosophical riddle and the schizophrenic experience. The mind-bending problem generated by paradoxical statements such as "this statement is false" was addressed by Bertrand Russell in the early years of this century. The paradox arises because the statement refers to itself, thus operating at two logical levels at the same time. Russell's solution, proposed in the "Theory of types", is to separate it into two statements, one referring to the other. Similarly, the double bind is an experiential riddle that occurs when the subject is not able to distinguish between different levels of communication; between content and context. He cannot separate them and therefore suffers a loss of crucial information (news of difference). The parents might do things which the schizophrenic patient does not like but, because he is dependent only on them, he cannot verify with any external authority his sense that it is not right. Kafka's K would have recognised the predicament. They might say they love him (content), but behave in ways that disqualify that (context). If the young person, for example, were to comment on hostile behaviour in one or both parents, their response would

imply he had got it wrong: "It's just your illness that makes you think that, dear". Further, the young person is threatened with punishment, but the threat is denied. The threat applies most fiercely if he dares to comment on the process that is being denied. This is indeed maddening because the parents are not aware of what they are doing. It is very different from physical and sexual abuse. While parental power is also necessary for these to occur, the abusing parents know perfectly well what they are doing, and can only deny it by lying.

Bateson's primary purpose, however, was neither to rescue victims nor to ascribe causes. It was to decipher patterns in nature. Nowadays what is described by double bind is more readily understood as perverse relationship between family members, particularly the mother and child. It is neither exclusive nor necessary to schizophrenia, and I suggest that much energy has been devoted to linking, or disproving the link between, the double bind and the wrong condition. It is likely that the pattern prevails just as much in families where non-psychotic disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, arise. There is a whole range of adolescent disturbance that is hard to classify but in which a common factor is the patient's spectacular failure to take the ordinary steps towards independence, while the parents seem powerless to intervene, and hopelessly out of touch. Many so-called psychosomatic (or 'alexithymic') families fit into this category. The parents' marriage is weak, but they do not separate (Stierlin & Weber, 1989). The bond between patient and mother is one of mutual vigilance, a process also found where there is anxious, or insecure, attachment (Bowlby, 1988).

The double bind is just one instance of Bateson's general thesis about communication. The logical analysis of relationships showed that whatever you do, you also have to indicate somehow that "this is what I am doing". Bateson's original example follows an observation he made of two monkeys at play in a San Francisco zoo in 1952. One of them bites the other just hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to start a fight. This subtle and often repeated act communicates a negative, without language. It says "This is like a fight but it is not a fight, it is *pretending* to fight, that is, it is play". The core of his theory of play and fantasy is that communication of the most creative and significant statements is always given in a double message; an act or statement, and a context marker of it. In this case the fighting behaviour is one message, and the bite that is just not painful enough to initiate a real fight – which thereby indicates that it is not a fight – is the other. This is an impressive achievement in communication. Saying that something is *not* the case, without language, is no simple matter. "It is ... important to note that evolution of a simple negative would be a decisive step towards language as we know it" (p. 401).

The 'playful nip' is the starting point of a grand Batesonian sweep: "all perception and all response, all behaviour and all classes of behaviour, learning and all genetics, all neurophysiology and endocrinology, all organization and all evolution – one entire subject matter – must be regarded as communicational in nature" (p. 253). Included here is a whole range of psychological and social activities that are linked together by the capacity for metaphor, which Bateson regards as our mammalian inheritance, but at the same time as a condition of human culture. This is outlined in the chapter "A theory of play and fantasy", first published in 1955. The possibility of paradox is what prevents communication from being merely "an endless interchange of stylised messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change of humour" (p. 166). Paradox is, indeed, the basis of all these things – fantasy, ritual, humour, play (including sexual play), threat, drama, deceit, histrionics, gambling, kidding, art, magic, religion, sacrament, hypnosis (a 'temporary double bind') and psychotherapy. According to the double-bind theory, the defect in schizophrenia is the inability to manage ordinary metaphorical communication. Bateson emphasises the ethological importance of knowing where you stand with another, and the agony of disqualification: "severe pain and maladjustment can be induced by putting a mammal in the wrong regarding its rules for making sense of an important relationship with another mammal" (p. 248). The schizophrenic mammal cannot tell quite what the other is after: "For example, a patient comes into the hospital canteen and the girl behind the counter says, 'What can I do for you?' The patient is in doubt as to what sort of message this is – is it a message about doing him in? Is it an indication that she wants him to go to bed with her? Or is it an offer of a cup of coffee?" (p. 167).

There are 27 papers collected in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, covering Bateson's lecturing and writing output from 1935 to 1971. Only four of these are about schizophrenia directly, but no psychiatrist can dismiss these papers without reading at least one of them (I recommend "Minimal requirements for a theory of schizophrenia", p. 215). The earlier chapters of *Steps* introduce the far-reaching anthropological concept of 'schismogenesis' – the analysis of binary relationships in terms of symmetry and complementarity. This distinction was developed in field work (with his then wife, Margaret Mead) in New Guinea and Bali in the 1930s, and reappears in the 1971 paper "The cybernetics of self: a theory of

alcoholism" (p. 280), a brilliant *tour de force* in which many of Bateson's preoccupations are brought together. Like much of his work, it covers far more than the title suggests, and demands extraordinary attention from the reader.

Bateson spent a great deal of his time teaching and lecturing. Later chapters of *Steps* are mostly talks given from 1968 onwards, by which time he had become a guru of the new generation, who were intent on expanding their minds. In "Form, substance and difference", for example, he summarises his view of information-as-news-of-difference and goes on to explain how the concept of mind is therefore no longer bounded by the individual thinker. "Suppose I am a blind man, and I use a stick. I go tap, tap, tap. Where do *I* start? Is my mental system bounded by the handle of the stick? Is it bounded by my skin? Does it start half way up the stick?" (p. 434). Mind, it turns out, is a system, in this instance including the blind man, the stick and the road he is walking on. These are, I suppose quite literally, steps to an ecology of mind. "But when the blind man sits down to eat his lunch, his stick and its messages will no longer be relevant" (p. 434). "The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body" (p. 436).

From a cybernetic point of view the individual person is just one of the ways of perceiving differences in nature. When it was first put forward, this formulation was quite revolutionary and, in ordinary life, is still quite unacceptable. We prefer to mark the differences between people as qualities attached to each of them, not merely as information that is nowhere at all. But the idea that personal qualities do not have to belong to persons was music to the ears of the first family therapists. It meant that symptoms need not be confined to the patient, but could be passed around the family, or deposited elsewhere. This liberating perception is also disturbing. "In my epistemology the concept of self along with all arbitrary boundaries which delimit systems or parts of systems, is to be regarded as a trait of the local culture, not indeed to be disregarded, since such little epistemological monsters are always liable to become foci of pathology" (Bateson, 1978). By 'the local culture', Bateson is referring, I think rather contemptuously, to human thought.

The readers' discomfort mirrors the author's. I see Bateson as a highly sensitive and awkward person who used his great intelligence and breadth of learning to manage the riddles of human existence, partly by removing himself from an exclusively human viewpoint. Judging from his daughter's (Mary Catherine Bateson) remarks about him, he was not comfortable in ordinary company. He preferred aquaria and conferences, and he had "darkly complicated feelings about women" (Bateson, 1984). Gregory Bateson was not the first human to find dolphins sublime, and he seemed to understand them: "I personally do not believe that dolphins have anything that a human linguist would call 'language'. I do not think that any animal without hands would be stupid enough to arrive at so outlandish a mode of communication" (p. 341). Although in his writing he mostly avoids direct reference to personal experience, Bateson knew well enough about mental pain; perhaps too well. A rare moment of identification with the suffering soul is found in this passage: "If somebody attacks the habits ... which characterise me ... they are negating me. If I care deeply about that other person, the negation of me will be still more painful" (pp. 212–213).

Gregory Bateson is revered as a major theoretical figure in family therapy, where the obligation to think 'systemically' has sometimes acquired religious force. The arrival of this new epistemology in biological and social sciences from the 1950s onwards was indeed revolutionary. It offered a model of interaction without causal (linear) connections, and without power. Instead there are patterns. Even when they did not understand his finer points, many family therapists were drawn to the moral consequences of Bateson's ideas. "The end of blaming" is a memorable slogan, and one that seemed to set the new therapists clearly above traditional practitioners, mainly psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and psychologists, still stuck in the mire of linearity. Since Bateson's death in 1980, family systems therapists have had to come to grips with the reality of power in families, and in society. It does make a difference. In that time, new thinkers have added to the systemic opus, but none has written with such aesthetic passion as he. Speaking to psychiatrists in 1959:

> "The fact of our imperfect understanding should not be allowed to feed our anxiety and so increase the need to control. Rather our studies could be inspired by ... a curiosity about the world of which we are a part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty. It is a strange fact that every great scientific advance – not least the advance which Newton achieved – has been elegant" (pp. 239–240).

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