1988

Review of Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, "Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred"

Klaus Krippendorff

Review of Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, "Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred"

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

The Search for unity

Angels Fear: Towards an Episternology of the Sacred by Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson. New York: Macmillan, 1987. *224* pages. $18.95 (hard).

Klaus Krippendorff
University of Pennsylvania

Angels Fear is Gregory Bateson's well-founded fear for a culture, our culture, that may destroy itself by its very success. The book goes much deeper than the usual fears of atom bombs, genetic advances, and ecological disasters into the deep structure of these phenomena and roots them in mind, both human and social.

Although his *Mind and Nature* did some of this before, the warning in *Angels Fear* is clearer, tied to epistemology and to such concepts as dichotomy, logical typing, mythology (storytelling), information, redundancy, pattern and structure, circularities, description, the role of the unconscious, faith, etc. Many of these ideas are drawn from cybernetics and are extended here to human communication, social process, and culture. One could say that it is Norbert Wiener's program carried into the eighties and beyond, though much more tentative and caring.

Angels Fear is far less coherent than *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* and *Mind and Nature,* even with Mary Catherine Bateson's carefully constructed connective metalogues between chapters. They too raise important issues but often without making the effort of developing them toward some kind of conclusion. One can clearly feel Bateson's shortage of time before his untimely death and perhaps the editor's effort to preserve much of the material in its raw form. More than his other publications, *Angels Fear* seems reflective of a Bateson who was for most of his life at the cutting edge of thinking but, because he pushed the breakthrough point in front of him, never enjoyed the satisfaction of having gotten there. Perhaps there is a deep connection between his always almost getting there and his conservatism.

I particularly like how he contrasts his own approach with the California counter-culture in which he thrived and which made him into a guru. He could have taken a scientific perspective and dismissed certain practices and beliefs as untenable or meaningless; but in search of affirmative knowledge for "the sacred that would celebrate natural unity," Bateson positioned himself instead right "between the Scylla of established materialism with its quantitative thinking, applied science, and 'controlled' experiments on the one side, and the Charybdis of romantic supernaturalism on the other" (p. 64*).* In this respect his position resembles that of Carl Gustav Jung (whose "Seven Sermons to the Dead" led Bateson to the concepts of *Pleroma* and *Creatura),* who was equally unwilling to settle on either side of a distinction and instead advocated the search for a unity as well.

Is this a good book? I don't really know. Is it an important book? That depends on whether you are willing to look and able to remain sufficiently open to ponder the wide-ranging and unevenly distributed ideas. I for one found many mindboggling and am sure I will read the book many times for ideas yet to be discovered. Concerning his own epistemology, for example, the claim that "the gap between the observer and the supernatural is covered by faith" (p. 96) makes

Bateson far from being a naive realist, as some have accused him. He did not talk about the gap between the observer and the observed, the supernatural being beyond perception and a cognitive construction above the construction of the ordinary. Add to this "faith is believing that seeing is believing" (pp. 96-97) and his construction becomes a self-referential one, one that is constitutive of seeing. This links his work to radical constructivism, to which it brings concepts from psychiatry (the unconscious) and religion (the sacred and faith) and shows a deep concern for the wellbeing (absence of pathologies) of mind.

With a book so rich in ideas (at least for me) it is impossible to describe the chapters or examine its contributions. Let me therefore mention only a couple of uncertainties of my own. One has to do with easily misleading words. For example, Bateson had previously defined information as "any difference that makes a difference." This is a very seductive definition. Its first noun apparently locates differences in reality outside the human receiver-the difference between paper and ink, to use his example-and its second use of the same noun refers to the relative importance of this difference. Both paint the receiver as passive and merely responding to what an existing difference does. I am not sure whether Bateson intended this, in view of his later assertion (p. 166) that data are always made by observers (are descriptions of descriptions, forms of forms). Suppose observers, who see themselves as receiving information, actively differentiate whether there is a difference to begin with or whether the act of differentiation creates this difference as an important one. If this is so, information ought to be defined in receivers' terms and include a voluntaristic element. With all his emphasis on epistemology one could have expected greater clarity, at least on concepts that are essential enough to be listed in his glossary.

Another uncertainty, perhaps the same as the above but reaching further, concerns his unyielding reliance on Bertrand Russell's Theory of Logical Types. Bateson owes many productive concepts to this theory, and it is undoubtedly true not only that "the map is not the territory" but also that the map, being about a territory, is on a logical level above the territory it claims to represent. The Theory of Logical Types implies a hierarchy of logical types that supports an epistemology which in turn justifies social hierarchies. In fact Bateson devotes a whole chapter to the basic idea of feedback as a model for his approach and shows how one feedback loop is embodied in a part of a whole that embodies a higher-order feedback loop, which in turn may be embedded in a still higher-order loop, etc. The control hierarchy this entails very much resembles the social construction of industrial and military organizations. I can't deny the usefulness of such creations, but they may be faulty on the bottom, on the top, and in between.

On the bottom, the distinction among logical types makes sense only if one can compare the map with the territory. Bateson recognizes that the territory belongs to Jung's *Pleroma,* which "has no map, no names, no classes and no members of classes" (p. 21). How can we then compare such a formless and unknowable entity with its map? Yes, "the map is not the territory"; but there is no territory without a map. They mutually define each other, and any use of maps involves us in a constitutive (self-defining) circularity that is explicitly ruled out in the Theory of Logical Types.

On the top, the end is out of sight as well but for different reasons. As soon as we want to explain (make a map of) the master controller, we must resort to a logical level higher than that controller and construct a super controller who in turn needs to be explained by a hyper controller, etc. The infinite regress this entails is not inherent in nature but in the Theory of

Logical Types, as well as the desire to explain things. Bateson takes the theory as a logical standard when complaining that "most local epistemologies-personal and cultural- continually err, alas, in confusing map with territory and in assuming that the rules for drawing maps are imminent in the nature of that which is being represented in the map" (p. 21). I am convinced that the epistemology Bateson chides for erring may not be so pathological. It is an epistemology in which the top is reentered on the bottom and thus supports itself. Such a circularity (not to be confused with the circular causality of ordinary feedback) underlies Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form,* Francisco Varela's calculus of self-reference, Jon Barwise and John Etchemendy's *Liar,* and Heinz von Foerster's second-order cybernetics to name but a few-and is constructive of several autologies (autopoiesis, for example). Somehow I wonder if Bateson's Fear stems from being held captive by the Theory of Logical Types. Ecology, which he knows so well and draws on in many instances, is hardly hierarchical.

In the middle, the Theory of Logical Types leaves little choice. In control hierarchies, obedience *to* the level above is passed on as oppression to the level below, perhaps in support of a common goal. In descriptive hierarchies (descriptions, descriptions of descriptions, . . . descriptions of. . .descriptions) the syntax is fixed from above and the choice of terms is constrained by the content to be described. Either one leaves out self-determination, autonomy, and mind. The only way to get rid of these logical consequences is to replace the restrictive Theory of Logical Types with a theory that allows circularities to enter and that can then explain, among other things, why belief in the Theory of Logical Types reifies itself in all kinds of hierarchies whose experiential consequence almost always is oppression.

Bateson and Jung-to make a last observation-seem to have more in common than is often realized. The work of both is committed to science but also is prophetic. Both have probed deep into the unconscious, including their own. Bateson was an anthropologist, close to family therapy, and relied on cybernetic concepts; Jung was a psychoanalyst and relied on his own psychiatric practice. But whereas Bateson generalized a cybernetic notion of mind to the functioning of culture, Jung relied on culture (mythology and symbolism) to shed light on psychological realities inside individual beings. Most curiously, they came to rather different conclusions. Whereas Jung's fear for the survival of humankind is founded in the fear that individuals might not come to grips with their own unconscious, might not be able to balance and transcend the dichotomies language creates and prevent these oppositions from taking over their lives, Bateson's fear is rooted in just the opposite: that a certain core of things should be left in the unconscious, untouched, unanalyzed, and not talked about for fear that tampering with these might destroy the very fabric of society, the very ecological balance that enabled us to be.