

Book Review

Review of *Understanding Gregory Bateson: Mind, Beauty, and the Sacred Earth* by Noel G. Charlton, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008, 358 pp., hardcover US\$74.50; paper US\$21.95.

Reviewed by Michael T. Caley

I first encountered the work of Gregory Bateson in the 1970s. My copy of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* is dated 1978. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, *Mind and Nature*, and *Angels Fear* have all been instrumental in my developing epistemologies and my ontological understanding of the universe. Raised an Anglican, I have been for the past three decades becoming a Daoist, in the classical pre-religious sense. Bateson's work fits me like a hand-in-a-glove.

Noel Charlton has written an extraordinary little book. He is an exquisite biographer of Bateson and, it seems, a passable philosopher in his own right. "This book, intentionally is a project in the *application of philosophical thinking*"¹ Charlton goes on to identify the factors and forces that influenced Bateson's development as a scientist and as a philosopher.

1. He was strongly influenced by family – especially his father;
2. born into an exceptional family and social milieu composed almost exclusively of English intelligentsia;
3. heir to a tradition of highly independent, even conflictual thinking; and
4. the whole web of influences . . . was centered around the understandings of evolution and genetic inheritance of what he would come to see as ideas.

Charlton tells his readers that "my task is to help you, reader, to penetrate Bateson's unique thought and to uncover the rare beauty of his writing." With the exception of the last chapter, "Chapter 8: Wise

Action,” Charlton has fulfilled his task with clear writing and an admirable analysis of Bateson’s written works and his interactions with his peers.

I find this book to be a wonderful learning experience and I look forward to perusing it many times in the future. Charlton has opened ideas of Bateson’s that heretofore had been opaque to me. Zhuangzi tells us that “the Way is made by walking.” It is undoubtedly true that, in order to understand Bateson, as anyone else, you must walk, at least part of the way, their particular way. Charlton has opened many of Bateson’s ways for me and others.

“Bateson believed that we have lost our wider, deeper, more-than-conscious minds.”² The more-than-conscious mind is the being so-of-itself in a structurally coupled dance of organism and environment, where each perturbs and adapts to the other. This leaps out at me every time I indulge myself in Bateson’s unique thinking.

Unfortunately, *for me*, the book fails in the last chapter, “Wise Action.” Charlton asks, “What, given the ideas of Bateson and other comparable environmental thinkers, can we *do*?” He goes on to describe “current applications of the insights we have been considering throughout the book.” He then discourses on The Centre for Eco-Literacy, The En’owkin Centre, The British Eco-congregation Program, Christian Ecology Link, A Rocha, The Web of Creation, The Eco-justice Working Group, and other programs as kernels of development and action. He seems to think that, if some unknown number of humans can be engaged in ecological thought and action, an unperceived threshold will be exceeded and we will become ecosophic.

Charlton then devotes more space to Matthew Fox’s Creation spirituality movement and its British offspring Green Spirit. Emerging from his particular understanding of Bateson’s ideas of mind, spirit, and grace, he is searching for organizations to counter the current global political-economic predatory capitalism. While the organizations and approaches he describes are each noteworthy, they do seem to me to be the seeds of such movements. And this is precisely, for me, where *Understanding Gregory Bateson* fails. Regaining the “use of the wider, deeper, more-than-conscious understanding,” if I understand Bateson at all, will not emerge from green programs, eco-literacy, or spiritual development programs based on Bateson’s work. I suspect that Bateson, himself would find such approaches off-putting.

Given the problems that I have with Chapter 8, this remains a tour-de-force on Bateson and his ideas. It is the best introduction to Bateson, since Morris Berman’s analysis in *The Re-enchantment of the World*. It

ought to be required reading in every program or course that examines ecology, economics, psychology, government, business, and praxis.

Notes

¹ Noel G. Charlton, *Understanding Gregory Bateson: Mind, Beauty, and the Sacred Earth* (SUNY Press, 2008) p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.