

Smuts defines 'holism'

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"The highest wisdom has but one science – the science of the whole – the science explaining the whole creation and man's place in it."

Leo Tolstoy - War and Peace

Introduction to holism - from politics to philosophy of science



Family politics brought me to the concept of holism. My father, as parliamentary journalist, followed Smuts as South African prime minister. My uncle, Willem, was Smuts' personal bodyguard. Willem was inspired by Smuts' passion for botany and through what he learned on their long walks on the farm in Irene. He developed a keen interest in trees and would later publish articles on the subject. It was in reading the biography of Smuts by his son, J. C. Smuts that my love affair with the man and his philosophy began. I, like my father, had followed the world of communication and this led to a period in politics. Coming after Smuts, whose focus was moving to greater political unification of the races whilst acknowledging levels of development and cultural diversity, the governing National Party was implementing 'apartheid' – fragmentation. But for me personally, the implications and potential applications of holism began to take shape in my thinking. How could we have unity in diversity?

Smuts' book, 'Holism and Evolution', published in 1926, begins:

"Among the great gaps in knowledge those which separate the phenomena of matter (physical), life (biological) and mind (mental or psychological) still remain unbridged."^[1]

Smuts' view was that 'action', rather than physical 'parts', constitute the foundation of existence, both material and non-material. Now scientists recognize complexity and emergence' as being a significant feature of the holistic science Smuts imagined. 'Complexity' describes a non-linearity that cannot be tracked. It is from this non-linearity that emergence presumably takes place – in which 'creation' is to be found – and it is still somewhat beyond our ken. We learned at school that Shakespeare's Hamlet admonishes:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Holistic science acknowledges that there is far more to existence than can be defined in our physics and mathematics, especially through the lens of the Newtonian mechanistic model. And rather than seeing this as a scientific limitation it could be seen as portending a vast new field of understanding. It challenges us to transform our examination of the world from a focus on parts to an observation of wholes and the action and interaction constituting those wholes. Smuts, it is contended, made a key contribution to this understanding. How did he gain these insights?

Early years

Jan Christiaan Smuts was born in 1870 near Malmesbury in the Cape Colony. His father Jacobus, a farmer, played a leading role in the social and political affairs of the neighbourhood. He was elected as the Member for Malmesbury in the Cape Parliament. Smuts' mother, Catharina, was a woman of some education and culture, having studied music and French in Cape Town. The Smuts family were traditionally Afrikaner. Custom dictated that the first son would carry the family expectations. They would strive to provide the best possible education with the goal of paving the way for his entry into one of the professions. The others would be put to work on the farm, while receiving a rudimentary home education. Jan, the second son, thus remained at the farm.

Farm work combined with lessons from his mother would be Jan's life for his early years. Too young to be given formal responsibilities, he accompanied the farm labourers as they went about their daily work. He listened to their stories and observed the ways of the land. As his knowledge and confidence increased he began to venture further into the rugged countryside by himself, exploring the hills and valleys. Later, as an older boy, his chief responsibility was as a herd boy of the cattle alone out on the veldt. When at home from the work on the farm, he received rudimentary home schooling from his mother.

On the death of his elder brother in 1882, Jan was sent to school for the first time at the age of twelve. After four years of education, he had made exceptional progress, gaining admission to study at Victoria College in Stellenbosch. He graduated in 1891 with first-class honours in Literature and Science. With this strong academic background he won the Ebden scholarship for overseas study and elected to read Law at Christ's College, Cambridge. Here, much later in life, Smuts would ultimately become chancellor. After further academic success, and being the recipient of many prestigious academic awards, he graduated in 1894 with double first-class honours. After graduating, Smuts passed the examinations for the Inns of Court and entered the Middle Temple. However Smuts' love for Africa saw him eschewing an obvious illustrious legal career and return to Africa soon thereafter. Of his childhood time in the veldt he would write:

"How well I remember the years I spent tending the cattle on the large farm, roaming over all its far expanse of veldt, in which every kloof, every valley, every koppie was endeared to me by the most familiar associations. Month after month I had spent there in lonely occupation — alone with the cattle, myself and God. The veldt had grown part of me, not only in the sense that my bones were a part of it, but in that more vital sense which identifies nature with man ... Having no human companion, I felt a spirit of comradeship for the objects around me. In my childish way I communed with these as with my own soul; they became the sharers of my confidence." [2]

Smuts' initial 'awakening' to a different form of consciousness was a function of experience of the natural environment coupled with the requirement of responsibility and autonomy. He was largely on his own. So the mindset that at a much later stage than normal began to engage with formal education had already been pre-formed through a combination of his own inherent intellectual capacities and his direct experience of nature – a holistic experience. Herein lay the source of the great gift he would bring to the world.

The Origin of Holism

Smuts is generally credited with the introduction of the notion of 'holism' in his book 'Holism and Evolution'. He began writing it after his government was voted out of power in the South African general election of 1922. Smuts was able to overcome this setback and utilize his time in opposition creatively. As a South African Jungian analyst, Roger Brooke (1990), put it:

"The requirement now is a shift from heroic conquest to reverent embrace..." [3]

Smuts was able to do this – his life exemplified a trust in process – holism enabled this, as, for him it was purposive. His capacity to re-engage creatively with the British after the deep humiliation of the Afrikaners during the Anglo-Boer War demonstrated this. So too did his compassion for the conquered Germans after the First World War accompanied by his plea for reconciliation rather than retribution. That plea unfortunately fell on deaf ears and as he predicted, precipitated the Second World War. Holism, for Smuts, was not just a theory to explain the world, it was an objective to be followed and for him it had deep spiritual implications.

Smuts presented his views in his keynote presidential address formally to the scientific fraternity in 1931 at the Centenary Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. It was on this occasion that he suggested the fundamental structure of the universe was not matter but action. An understanding of the universe would not be found merely in the examination of 'parts' but in the recognition of 'wholes' and the observation of process. And the nature of this process was towards the formation of such wholes in turn constituting ever more complex wholes. Consequently holism was purposive – there was, he suggested, an imminent 'telos'.

Holism and the scientific community

Einstein, Bohr, Haldane and a few others were among the early scientists able to engage with holism. Einstein had already declared, after he studied 'Holism and Evolution' soon after its publication, that two mental

constructs would direct human thinking in the next millennium: his own mental construct of relativity and Smuts' of holism. Einstein also said of Smuts that he was "one of only eleven men in the world" who conceptually understood his Theory of Relativity. Smuts' views would serve to impact an expanding array of disciplines. Certainly in respect of epistemology, holism would have an impact, as it called for a transformed ontological understanding of the world as non-materialist process, emergence, organic action in energy and information. In respect of formal science. It is recognized as having given rise to systems thinking, contributed to notions of chaos and order, fundamentally influenced the science of complexity, emergence and complex adaptive systems and generally having established the platform for holistic science. In respect of ecological sciences, Smuts is seen as a seminal thinker.

Smuts postulated that the existence of 'wholes' represented a fundamental feature of the world. In his early thinking, he had deeply pondered the question whether there was a 'whole' either conceptually or existentially, and if so, how could it be defined or explained? Was 'it' knowable – and, if so, how? Some of Smuts' arguments from his keynote 1931 address are now well known and include the following:

- The whole is not resolvable into parts - putting together parts will not produce wholes or account for their character and behaviour.
- The (standard) scientific scheme has been undermined by scientific discoveries in physics and mathematics in which matter is resolved into variable energy - this has challenged notions of the homogeneity of space and time and shaken the basis of fixed standards and accurate measurements
- Holism justified the claim of the spirit in the interpretation of the world.
- Relativity reduced substance to configurations or patterns.
- Structure and pattern are at the very root of the universe and of mind.
- Quantum physics gives indications of indeterminism in nature, which provides the milieu for creativity.
- There are six discernable stages or manifestations of holism – matter, life, mind, personality, society, culminating in absolute values.
- The most important result of the idea of the whole is the appearance of the concept of creativeness.
- It is in the interpenetration of fields that creation evolution arises – hence nature's implicit holistic tendency.

"If we had the mental vision, our object would be to penetrate to that concept of the Whole which is no mere aggregation or sum total or compound of parts, but which is itself one and indivisible, a real vital organic unity of which the multiplicities of the universe are not the constituent parts but aspects, phenomena or manifestations."

Significantly he echoed Leibniz' monadology and anticipated Wolfgang Pauli's holon theory, that the activity of the Whole expressed itself through all space and time in the cosmic process of individuation, as he put it, the continuous creation of lesser wholes in its own image. And he concluded:

"There is one ultimate Whole with ascertainable character, and human personality is the most highly developed form and function of this whole. Our human ideals of thought, conduct and faith follow from the nature of that Whole, and find in terms of that nature their true expression and explanation."

References

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2. Smuts, J., C., (1952), *'Jan Christian Smuts.'* Cassell & Co., Cape Town
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