

Wholeness

From the Theoretical to the Experiential

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In his book 'The Wholeness of Nature' ^[1]Henri Bortoft explores the concept of wholeness and uses his words to guide the reader towards an understanding of what he calls 'Authentic and Counterfeit Wholes'. The concept of wholeness isn't easy to discuss, because in the very discussion of it, it is turned into an object, it therefore appears to be separate from those discussing it, it becomes a 'part' and therefore no longer whole. This is what Bortoft refers to as a counterfeit whole. Wholeness has been turned into a part for examination. This is the problem that conventional science or anyone predominantly using their thinking function to explore wholeness will run into. The thinking function, by its very nature, creates a sense of a self which is separate from that which is observed. Therefore whatever is observed using the thinking function becomes either a subject or object. This is the conundrum which many explorers of life and cognition have grappled with over the course of human history.

In this essay I am going to write about wholeness which in an absolute sense is impossible but in a relative sense it can guide the thinking mind towards letting go into the beingness of wholeness. It is said that enlightenment is like climbing to the top of a 60 foot pole, and then taking 3 more steps. This same methodology can be applied to wholeness, the thinking mind can help to climb the 60 foot pole but then it needs to let go in order to take the '3 more steps' into wholeness. I will also go on to talk about the organizing idea in cognitive perception which will explain why wholeness requires a different approach in order to know it experientially and why it is misunderstood by those who approach it with the thinking mind alone. Finally I will use some examples from Goethean science and Henri Bortofts work to illustrate a practical example of how Goethean science and wholeness can be applied in a practical exploration of a subject and how it can be turned towards its self to explore the nature of knowing.

To help with this exploration of wholeness I will talk in terms of the four Jungian functions. The four functions are thinking, feeling, sensing and intuition. they could be thought of as four ways of knowing the world. 'In what I call the Jungian 'Mandala', sensation, or sensory experience, yields a direct apprehension of the things around us through the medium of our physical bodies. Thinking interprets what is there in a somewhat logical, rational manner; feeling grants a negative or positive valance to each encounter, and so helps to ascribe value to the phenomenon, and intuition yields a sense of its deeper meaning, as Jung says, "by way of unconscious contents and connections". ^[2]

Wholeness is a difficult phenomenon to discuss, it requires a different way of seeing the world. The default way of seeing which seems to be present in our western society at the moment, views the world as something which exists independently of our knowing of it. This seems to be so normal and obvious that it is very often just taken for granted. This way of seeing can serve us well in everyday life. It allows us to communicate with each other and to make understandable references to phenomena in the world. Wholeness though, requires a more intuitive way of seeing, experiencing the interconnectedness and relationships of phenomena, using the intuitive and sensing functions of the mind. The reason that it is necessary to use the intuitive and sensing functions for this, is that in terms of direct experience they are our primary functions. Not primary in a linear time sense but primary in the sense of their proximity to wholeness.

Because of the difficulty in approaching wholeness, using words and concepts, it is useful to look at some examples where the idea of wholeness is visibly present in everyday objects and constructs.

The first example of wholeness given in 'The Wholeness of Nature' is that of a hologram. If you had a holographic plate with a picture of a person on it and cut it in half, unlike cutting a photo in half where you would be left with two halves of a person, when you cut a holographic plate in half you have two images of the person, one on each half. If you were to cut the two halves in half again, you would then have four images. You can carry on dividing the holographic plate and there will always be the same image on each of the parts, although it will fade the more times you do this. This is a useful example of wholeness and the relationship between the whole and the parts. The whole holographic image is present in every part of the holographic plate which is why you can divide the plate into separate parts and the whole image will still be present because it is present in every part of the plate.

The relationship between the whole and the parts is an important feature of the concept of wholeness. The whole is contained in each of the parts and the parts give rise to the whole. Henri Bortoft talks about this reciprocal relationship between the whole and the parts using the idea of the Hermeneutic Circle. The idea of the Hermeneutic Circle says that in order 'to read an author we have to understand him first, and yet we have to read him first to understand him' ^[1] This may seem a strange concept, because from a logical linear point of view, it implies that to understand a text you need to have read it before you read it. What this reveals though, isn't just philosophical nonsense. It reveals that the linear logical way of thinking can't be applied to meaning because meaning is not linear. It is an emergent co-arising. Meaning is holistic. Through reading the parts of a text, the meaning arises and simultaneously the meaning makes sense of the parts. This is an example of the necessity to move from viewing the world as a collection of objects to a network of relationships, if we are to understand and experience wholeness.

Another area in which Wholeness is reflected is that of matter. 'Einstein imagined, following Ernst Mach, that a single particle of matter would have no mass if it were not for all the rest of the matter in the universe' ^[1]. This kind of thinking shows a shift from the view that an object has an inherent existence which is separate from its environment, to the view that an object exists in relationship to its environment. This way of thinking, in terms of relationships, is present every time we use language, although it may seem to be overshadowed by the objectifying which occurs when we use words. When we conceptualize and communicate our concepts through speech, we are involved in the process of distinguishing. According to Bortoft, distinguishing isn't, however, just the act of separating and categorizing, as it is often mistaken to be. Distinguishing cannot occur separately from relating, because in the very act of distinguishing something we are simultaneously relating it to that which it was distinguished from. Therefore the act of distinction is the act of simultaneously differentiating and relating, not just the act of separating or categorizing.

Wholeness is always present, it is all that is. So how do you go from a theoretical knowledge of wholeness to an experiential knowledge, when it is already present but is indistinguishable because there is nothing outside of its self to distinguish its self from? How do we make the transition from the theoretical knowledge of wholeness to a phenomenological knowledge of wholeness? For this it may help to look into the nature of knowing.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe was a German scientist and poet who died in 1832. He worked in a holistic way and did a body of work on colour using a phenomenological approach.

Goethe's methodology begins with direct observation of the phenomena. According to Bortoft his method of science involved putting the attention into the *seeing* instead of focusing on what is seen. He would then repeat the observations that he had made in his imagination. This he called 'exact sensorial imagination'. In the case of colour, this involved visualizing the colours when looking through a prism at a boundary between black and white. He would then transform the image so that the boundary was the other way up and back again. This process of switching between the two he referred to as 'recreating in the wake of ever creating nature'. This method of research revealed to Goethe qualitative relationships between the colours which wouldn't have been discovered using conventional science or the thinking mind alone. For example he discovered that black, violet and blue belong together. These qualitative relationships, which he discovered, helped in turn to form his theory on colour.

Goethe was then forced to use his methodology of phenomenological investigation to start to question the nature of knowing. He was forced to do this because after he presented his theory of colour, 'contributions to modern optics' (1791), 'He had believed that physicists would simply repeat his experiments and their truth would be evident'^[1]. They did repeat his experiments and they rejected his findings. This led Goethe on a journey of investigation into the nature of cognition. How was it, that what he saw in his experiments couldn't be seen by others when they repeated them? He turned his method of phenomenological scientific investigation towards his own mind, his own experience of existing. What he discovered was that his view had been 'epistemologically naïve'. He had believed that what he saw was "just there" as he saw it, so that seeing it was a visual experience which did no more than reflect what was present already in a purely factual way'^[1]. What he now realized was that the world was not "just there" as our default way of seeing assumes it to be. He discovered that the world that we experience arises in our minds as a result of our process of cognition. How we come to know the world gives rise to the world that we experience and this is different for each person. In order to explain this more fully I would like to talk about the 'organizing idea' in cognitive perception.

In order to understand the organizing^[2] idea in cognitive perception, we need to begin by examining our act of knowing the world. According to Henri Bortoft there are two main difficulties we need to be aware of when we look in to the act of knowing. Firstly, the act of knowing happens so quickly that we are unaware of the process as it happens. For example, we don't experience photons entering our eyes, hitting our retina, sending messages to the parts of our brain involved in seeing and linking what is seen with our memory in order to identify it. We just experience seeing the world around us as a cohesive whole. The act of cognitive perception happens so quickly that we are unaware of it as a process. What we experience is the end result of the act of perception. 'This problem can be overcome to some degree by having recourse to situations in which the normally smooth-running process breaks down, so that the process of knowing is revealed instead of just the result of the process'^[1]. I experienced this myself while meditating. I went through a period of time when I could see circles in my vision. When I was asked to describe these by my teacher, the best way I could describe them was to say that it was as if I had a circular clear glass plate in front of my eyes. I could only make out the edge of this circle because what I saw inside it didn't quite line up with what I saw outside it, there was a circular 'chink' in my vision and the images inside it were clearer than those on the outside of it. My teacher pointed out to me that what I was experiencing was a direct perception of my eye ball. I was seeing the world through the circular lens of my eye. This is a good example of being given recourse to a situation where the normally smooth-running process of seeing has broken down. I was seeing an aspect of the process of seeing instead of the end result of the process of seeing.

The other difficulty that we encounter when looking at our experience of knowing the world is that we are participants in the process of knowing. We can't get outside of the process in order to observe it as an onlooker. In fact, the process of knowing not only gives rise to the object which is known, it also gives rise to the subject which is doing the knowing. Our very sense of self is a result of the process of knowing. 'The inner dynamic of the process of cognition is also an inner dynamic in the process of the self. What this means is that the "self-entity" itself emerges from the process of cognition and is not there as such before'^[1]. In our current default way of seeing the world, we experience ourselves as existing before the act of knowing takes place (I am here, something happens and I experience it). When we look more deeply we can see that we are simultaneously created by the same process of cognition which is creating that which we observe. We are created anew in every moment in relation to that which is known. So just as we cannot turn wholeness into a part for examination, we cannot turn the process of knowing into a part for examination. It is however useful to use concepts as pointers to lead us towards direct experience.

So how do we look more deeply so that we can see the process of distinction as opposed to the result of the process of distinction? According to Bortoft, if we want to come to a deeper experience of wholeness in relation to cognitive perception, we need to catch the distinguishing in the act. That is, to see the 'distinguishing which is relating' as opposed to just seeing that which is distinguished (which is our normal default way of experiencing the world). So in order to examine the process of cognition we have to examine it as a whole, in our experience as it arises. It cannot be directly examined using concepts or the thinking mind because the concepts arise as an end result of the very phenomenon which we are trying to observe. In order to investigate cognitive perception we need to plunge into the experience of 'knowing' as a dynamic participant in the 'here and now', as the experience arises. The difficulty is that as soon as we conceptualize

what we experience, that is, as soon as we have a thought about our investigation, we are no longer in the process of cognition, we become a result of the process of cognition. So in order to do any significant phenomenological research into cognitive perception or wholeness (in the absolute sense) we need to be able to first refine our awareness, so that we can functionally begin to investigate the process of cognition instead of the result of the process of cognition, that is, our concepts.

Take a moment to pause and breath. How long is the gap between your thoughts? Is your observing the length of these gaps a thought in itself? Where do thoughts come from and go to? The space in which we can investigate cognitive perception is sometimes thought of as the space between our thoughts. Fortunately this isn't strictly the case as an absence of thought is difficult to maintain. It is, however, important to make the distinction between thoughts which obscure the experience of wholeness and thoughts which arise as an experience of wholeness. There isn't space in this essay to go into this in detail but a thought which obscures the experience of wholeness can be normally be recognized because it has obscured the direct sensory or intuitive experience. The thinking function has obscured the sensing/intuitive function, which is primary in relation to our experiencing of wholeness. A thought that arises as a manifestation of wholeness doesn't obscure the direct sensory/intuitive experience. So once the thinking mind is quietened to a certain degree, the clouds that obscure our direct sensory/intuitive experience of being are to a certain extent removed.

Goethe referred to something similar in terms of visualization. When he talked about 'exact sensorial imagination', his aim was to 'think the phenomenon', not to 'think about it'. He was trying to bring a more sensing/intuitive and perceptive quality to the act of thinking. So for him thinking became dynamic and participatory, (in terms of the process), as opposed to the more abstract function of *the mind* that we normally use the term for.

In a way this is the great work of humanity, a potential next step in the evolution of human consciousness which is becoming ever more a necessity as we gain amazing powers in the realm of engineering and organization on a global level. The rational mind is reaching the pinnacle of its dominance which has evolved over thousands of years. It has also in many areas reached its limit of usefulness to us. We now desperately need to contextualize all of our human endeavours and achievements, to make sense of who we are and our role in the unfolding of evolution. This contextualization doesn't require a new re-imagination of our place in the world, it doesn't require a new ideology or to learn about a new world view as is so often said. It doesn't require a top down approach, a bottom up approach or both working together simultaneously. These would all be considered 'downstream' thinking in Bortoft's terminology, they would be just another example of counterfeit wholeness, or 'trying to get to the milk by the way of the cheese'. In fact the great transformation requires nothing new to be created, all that this contextualization of our place in the world requires is a direct perception and embodied experience of who we are as human beings. We just need to see what is already there.

References

1. Bortoft, H. (1996). *The wholeness of nature: Goethe's way toward a science of conscious participation in nature*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press.
2. Harding, S (2006) *Animate Earth: Science Intuition and Gaia*, Green Books
- 3 Organizing here refers to the primary act of distinguishing not the organizing of that which is distinguished.

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