

## ON THE ORIGIN OF HOLISM

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The term "holism" was coined by Jan C. Smuts, as is generally recognized (2, 6). But his book, *Holism and Evolution* (12), in which the term originally appeared in 1926, is known today to most of us only by title.

Yet the book discusses in a remarkable way all the issues which are still central in the continuing controversy between those who adhere to elementaristic, deterministic, mechanistic points of view in biology and particularly in psychology, and those who tend toward holism and organicism, toward becoming, creativity, growth, self-actualization—including the latest champions of this side, the existential psychologists. The book is a strong reminder that in psychology there are essentially these two basic viewpoints (18), despite the great variety of particular systems. The book itself thus serves a holistic function in letting us see the larger wholes of the controversy.

For these reasons we count it among the blessings of the present era of paperback editions that it has afforded us now a reprint of Smuts' work, giving us occasion to examine it afresh, and bringing it within easy reach of a new generation to expand its intellectual horizon.

### MAN AND THEORY

Smuts spoke of personality as "fundamentally an organ of self-realization" (16, p. 290), with a meaning similar to self-actualization or self-transcendence, terms commonly found in the present-day holistic literature. But not only was this Smuts' view—his very life was an outstanding example of self-realization. He might well be included among Maslow's self-actualizing people (7, pp. 199-234).

His son tells us, "Whatever other qualities my father possessed, he was above all a scientist" (17, p. 278). Attracted first to geology, his interests extended eventually into the biological sciences, especially botany. In 1931 he presided at the centenary meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in London. At this occasion the University of London conferred on him the honorary degree of D.Sc., a distinction conferred only twice before in the nearly one hundred years of the university's existence, to Lister, the originator of aseptic surgery, and to Kelvin, the physicist (17, p. 286).

What was the making of this scientist? Born in 1870 on a farm in South Africa into a family descending from early Dutch settlers, he was second to an older brother among four sons and two daughters. Not until his older brother died, was Jan first sent to school, at the age of twelve (17, pp. 6-17). He was a brilliant student from the start, and eventually won a scholarship to go to Cambridge where he studied law with greatest distinction. After three years of law practice in Capetown and Johannesburg he became in 1898 state attorney of the South African Republic. He fought as an officer during the Boer War against the British. Subsequently he held several cabinet posts in the Union of South Africa. During the first World War he at first commanded the South-African troops against the German forces in Africa, then became a member of the British war cabinet. After the war, he became instrumental in the founding of the League of Nations. He was Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919-1924, when he suffered political defeat. He resumed his political career in 1933 and became Prime Minister once more from 1933-1948. Close to Churchill, he became active in the conduct of the second World War and was made field marshal in 1941. In 1945 in San Francisco he participated in the founding of the United Nations. He died in 1950 on his farm in South Africa at the age of 80.

It was after his political defeat in 1924 that Smuts wrote *Holism and Evolution*. "My father wrote it as a relaxation when he must have been suffering considerable mental depression after his rough political drubbing," writes his son (17, p. 254). "In laborious longhand, he wrote on and on. It was all done so unobtrusively and with so little fuss and bother that we barely realized he had tackled his great work" (17, p. 254).

The feeling for mankind, Adler's *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*, social interest (1), so characteristic of the self-actualizer (7, p. 217), permeated all of Smuts' life. Culminating in his efforts for the League of Nations and the United Nations, it found expression in small matters as well. For example, after the second World War he sent food parcels to his former enemy from World War I days, von Lettow-Vorbeck, then commander of the German forces in East-Africa, whom he always held in high regard. These parcels were much appreciated by the old man (17, p. 167).

While in government, Smuts imbued his country with a "spirit of cooperation and a feeling for tolerance" (17, p. 421). Tragically, after his second political eclipse in 1948, a fast deterioration set in, so that his country is today far better known for *Apartheid* than for *Holism*.

Recently Feuer has shown that Freud held essentially to what Dewey called a "spectator theory of knowledge," whereas Dewey's is what might be called "the reformer's theory of knowledge" (5, p. 125). The former is likely to be associated with a necessitarian bias, the latter with pragmatic interventionism. If we apply this differentiation to Smuts, whose life was primarily that of a great statesman, there would seem no question but that he held, with Dewey, to the interventionist's theory of knowledge. Dewey, in turn, can be counted among the holists. Holistic personality theory, according to Hall and Lindzey (6, p. 297), "drew nourishment from John Dewey's epoch-making article, *The reflex arc concept in psychology*" (4), in which he "took a stand against the elementism of his day . . . In his stress on total coordinations Dewey was anticipating the position of Gestalt psychology" (2, p. 554).

There is then apparently an intrinsic affinity between the reductionistic approach and non-committed spectator theory of knowledge, as against the holistic approach and a concerned participant-interventionist theory of knowledge. Maslow touched on this contrasting affinity when he discussed means centering versus problem-centering in science.

Overstress on methods and techniques encourages scientists to think (*a*) that they are more objective and less subjective than they actually are, and (*b*) that they need not concern themselves with values. Methods are ethically neutral; problems and questions may not be, for sooner or later, they involve all the knotty arguments about values (7, p. 20).

Smuts, at the end of his book, recalls the conflicts of men, their fratricidal strife, which he had seen first-hand in their wars and their council chambers. Yet, he concludes, "The real defeat for men . . . would be to ease the pain by a cessation of effort, to cease from striving towards the Good" (16, p. 345).

#### HOLISM AND EVOLUTION<sup>1</sup>

Smuts' basic thesis is:

Both matter and life consist, in the atom and the cell, of unit structures whose ordered grouping produces the natural wholes which we call bodies or organisms. This character or feature of "wholeness" . . . points to something fundamental in the universe, fundamental in the sense that it is practically universal, that it is a real operative factor, and that its shaping influence is felt ever more deeply and widely with the advance of Evolution. Holism is the term here coined (from the Greek *holos* — whole) to designate this fundamental factor operative towards the making or creation of wholes in the universe (pp. 87-98).

<sup>1</sup>All page references in this section are to (16).

From this starting point he develops a comprehensive theory which is in many ways prototypical of all present-day holistic-organismic biological and psychological theories. He takes a stand against the hard, narrow concept of causation which was characteristic for 19th century science and by which "creativity and real progress became impossible" (p. 1). He points out the "double mistake of abstraction and generalization" which led to a departure from the fluid procedure of nature (p. 2), a mistake currently the object of attack particularly by the existentialists. Like the Gestalt psychologists, but independently, he argues that "a whole is *more* than the sum of its parts" (p. 103). And he goes further; any whole found in nature "is not a mere mechanical system" (p. 103). The whole determines the parts; "it is the real factor from which the rest in each case follows" (p. 116). Thus for Smuts holism becomes an ontology opposed to materialism and spiritualism "to express the view that the ultimate reality of the universe is neither matter nor spirit but wholes" (p. 117). "But the primary and proper use of the term is to denote the totality of wholes which operate as real factors and give to reality its dynamic evolutionary creative character" (p. 117).

Smuts shows the inapplicability of the first law of thermodynamics with regard to living bodies. "Either the first law must be given up, or life and mind are nullities" (p. 164). Correspondingly, living bodies seem to contradict the second law, the law of entropy (p. 165). Yet, "The laws of life and mind are not in conflict with the laws of energy. An organism is more than a physical structure; but in so far as it is a physical structure it obeys the laws of energy just as if it were nothing but a physical structure" (p. 169).

In the particular area of psychology Smuts has this to say:

Mind has its conscious illuminated area and its subconscious "field." . . . It is of an intensely holistic unanalyzable character. . . . Through its dual activity of conception and conation, mind forms "purposes" which envisage future situations in experience and make the future an operative factor in the present. Purpose marks the liberation of mind from the domination of circumstances and indicates its free creative activity (p. 226).

"Personality is the latest and supreme whole which has arisen in the holistic series of evolution" (p. 261). "What we inherit is . . . a wide possibility and potency of moulding ourselves . . . the capacity of free and self-determined action and development in our individual lives" (p. 274). Smuts speaks of "creative metabolism" (p. 272): "Personality takes in and assimilates all the social and other influences

which surround it, and makes them all contribute towards its holistic self-realization" (p. 291).

Such self-realization is not merely egoistic. "Earnest men will always find that to gain their life they must lose it; that not in self but in the whole (including the self) lies the only upward road to the sunlit summits" (p. 316).

The introduction to the present reprint edition is by E. W. Sinnott, like Smuts a botanist, who believes that "in a sense, we are beginning to catch up with Smuts" (11, p. xvi), and that the book should have a much more favorable and understanding reception today than it had when it first appeared—despite its shortcomings which Sinnott points out, but which we did not intend to discuss here.

#### HOLISM AND INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

Among the first to appreciate the work of Smuts was Alfred Adler. He wrote to Smuts in January, 1931:

Reading your book *Holism and Evolution*, I felt very much moved by all your explanations. I could see very clearly what had been the key of our science. Besides the great value of your contributions in many other directions, I recognized the view in regard to what we have called "unity" and "coherence." I feel very glad to recommend your book to all my students and followers as the best preparation for Individual Psychology (3, p. 84; 8, p. 36).

Not since the publication of Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As if"* in 1911, had Adler expressed himself in such a way about another contemporary. To anyone at all familiar with Adler, the preceding section will have shown how very close indeed Smuts came to Adler's way of thinking. Adler's enthusiasm over Smuts' book was so genuine that he wanted to arrange for a German edition (9, p. 211), and he wrote to Smuts again a few months later: "Dr. Erwin Krausz, Vienna, has translated a great part of your work and is enchanted like I have been" (8, p. 36). But this translation was never realized, partly undoubtedly due to the political situation at that time. In 1938, however, a German edition did appear (15).

While Adler was not able to become instrumental in the German edition, he did publish in his journal a translation by Dr. Krausz<sup>2</sup> of the presidential address which Smuts had delivered at the centennial meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1931 (13, 14). This, incidentally, was probably the only

<sup>2</sup>We wish to express our appreciation to Dr. Erwin O. Krausz, now of Chicago, for having read the present paper in its manuscript form.

time that a psychological journal published a paper by Smuts. In this address Smuts certainly expressed what Adler very much stood for, namely, a scientific picture of the world which was, in Smuts' own words, "in a way closer to common sense and kinder to human nature than was the science of the nineteenth century" (17, p. 285). Today, Adler is credited exactly for having "restored to man a sense of dignity and worth that psychoanalysis had pretty largely destroyed" (6, p. 125).

In his last book, which was originally published in 1933, Adler embodied some of Smuts' thought, e.g., "There can no longer be any doubt today that everything, we call a body shows a striving to become a whole," and Adler referred to Smuts' work for further reading (1, p. 68).

Smuts, in turn, wrote to Adler in reply to a paper Adler had sent him: "I can quite well see how our two points of view are connected and mutually support each other" (3, p. 84). After Adler's death, Smuts wrote to Hertha Orgler in 1938:

Professor Adler was one of the first to write to me on the appearance of my book, *Holism and Evolution*, to express his agreement with my general standpoint, and to give the work his blessing. Indeed, he went so far as to say that he looked upon my theory of holism as supplying the scientific and philosophical basis for the great advance in psychology which had been made in recent years (9, p. 211).

And although Smuts did apparently not understand Adler as well as Adler understood Smuts, Smuts ended his letter with: "There can be no doubt that Adler has laid his finger on some of the most important aspects of human personality. . . . He has left behind him a solid and lasting contribution to the science of psychology" (9, p. 212).

#### SUMMARY

We have taken the appearance of a reprint edition of *Holism and Evolution* by Smuts as the occasion to show what kind of person its author was; to what extent he dealt with issues which are still in the focus of discussion today; and that Adler was among the first to recognize the significance of holism for psychology, in view of the great parallels in the thinking of the two men.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>As mentioned, Sinnott wrote the introduction to the reprint edition, in which he identified himself to a large degree with the views of Smuts. From this relationship of Sinnott to Smuts we find a further parallelism, which we cannot refrain from stating although it is only a minor matter: The present journal found a lecture by Sinnott (10) most congenial to its pages, just as the original journal of *Individual Psychology*, twenty-five years earlier, under the editorship of Adler, had published an address by Smuts.

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