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Jan Smuts and Personality Theory: The Problem of Holism in Psychology¹

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In the early twentieth century, psychology as discipline crystallised much of its epistemology and methods around positivism and the associated experimental method. For the developing scientific discipline, this modernist foundation seemed the most valid means with which to produce empirical facts that were reliable, verifiable, and which acceded towards the goal of establishing universal truth claims. At that time, very few schools of psychology in Anglophone contexts worked with the challenge of holism. Rather, experimental psychology's penchant for elemental reductionism was the mortar of fact building, consonant with a positivist approach. In contrast, those schools that did pursue holism in psychology were outside of the Anglo-American favoring of Humean³ informed approaches (e.g., German psychology). The implicit rationale for a rejection of holism was that it chimed too closely with the introspectively based realm of philosophy, especially metaphysics, to which the new science of psychology had recently split from and wished to retain a demarcated distance. However, such a split was artificial; from its disciplinary inception in the late nineteenth century through to the present day, psychology has engaged underlying cross-fertilizations with philosophy—hence the Humean aspect (Danziger, 1990; Tolman, 1994).

This chapter explores the generally unthought-of, yet lasting contributions that the statesman and philosopher of holism, Jan Christiaan Smuts, has made to Anglo-American psychology. Whilst there are those in psychology who remain ambivalent towards holism, preferring knowledge claims based on elemental reductionism, the active adoption of holism via Smuts nevertheless transpired within certain threads of psychology and psychiatry. Over the course of the twentieth century, psychology continued to develop and entrench itself as a distinct discipline, containing a plethora of sub-disciplinary threads. From its

disciplinary beginnings, psychology's variegation was seeded (such as through the work of William James) and multiplicity ensued. Hence, psychology also extended itself beyond its core attempts at enshrining elementalism, evolving into an umbrella discipline to which holistic schools such as Alfred Adler's Gestalt therapy theory and Adolf Meyer's psychobiology (the latter associated primarily with psychiatry) are contained. In terms of holism, Smuts played an inconspicuous yet instrumental role in this extension.

Jan Smuts lived an illustrious, prominent, and interdisciplinary life combining an erudite knowledge of biology and botany with contrasting and overlapping interests in philosophy, psychology, law, literature, and politics. He was born in 1870 to a Boer family in rural South Africa, near the Cape of Good Hope. As a young man he entered Victoria College in Stellenbosch, graduating in 1891 after studying science and literature. Subsequently Smuts earned a scholarship to Cambridge where he graduated with a law degree in 1894. Before returning to South Africa he completed a study at the British Library in London on the personality of Walt Whitman, a work that was published posthumously (Smuts, 1973). The Whitman study preceded Smuts' major scholarly contribution (written decades later in South Africa): his 1926 publication *Holism and Evolution*. Smuts, in retrospect, was an interdisciplinarian, and *Holism and Evolution* is a text of interest to multiple disciplines—a treatise positioned on “the borderland between science and philosophy” (p. v.). The earlier Whitman study foreshadows his later concentration on personality theory and its relation to the doctrine of holism. Indeed, a substantial portion of text is devoted to exploring the nature of personality in *Holism and Evolution*.

Upon his return to South Africa, Smuts entered politics and was eventually elected to hold several cabinet positions in the national government. He was subsequently elected prime minister, a position he held from 1919-1924, and again from 1933-1948. Two other key political accomplishments were as equally eminent; he was a founding member of the *League of Nations* and its successor the *United Nations*.

In addition to his political achievements, Smuts also garnered two notable academic accolades, a honorary Doctorate [D.Sc.] from London University in 1931 followed by a prestigious post of leadership at the helm of British science: President of the *British Association for the Advancement of Science*. These were remarkable achievements considering that Smuts was a political figure—a professional politician and statesman—and one who never claimed to be a professional scientist.⁴ Nevertheless, Smuts retained a keen interest in science until his death in 1950. Ansbacher (1994) notes that, “Tragically, after his second political eclipse in 1948, a fast deterioration set in, so that his country is today far better [remembered] for *Apartheid* than for *holism*” (p. 488). It is an extraordinary case of irony that a philosopher and statesman concerned with the ideal of the “whole” should find his legacy trumped by those who radically partitioned—pulled apart—the peoples of South Africa. The subsequent devel-

opments in the contemporary South African polity, with the spectacular collapse of apartheid in the 1990s, constitute one of the greatest human rights advances in the twentieth century. The end of apartheid moves the South African state towards reconciliation, perhaps again in the direction of holism.

Holism and the Holistic Personality

Holism and Evolution is primarily a philosophical treatise relevant to science and, as this chapter argues, psychology especially. Through this book, which brought together ideas formulated in an earlier unpublished paper, Smuts argues that the concept of *holism* is grounded in evolution and is also an ideal that guides human development and one's level of personality actualization. As Smuts's biographer Hancock (1968) notes, holism, which he equated with the German term *Eenheid* (unity), "became his philosophic quest" (p. 177), it was his "*vera causa*" (p. 188).

Smuts coined the term "Holism" in the early twentieth century (Esfeld⁵, 2001; Harper, 2001). He was acknowledged for the contribution by writing the first entry of the concept for the 1929 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Contemporarily, the Oxford English Dictionary defines Holism as follows: "(1) the theory that certain wholes are to be regarded as greater than the sum of their parts (compare *reductionism*); (2) the treating of the whole person including mental and social factors rather than just the symptoms of a disease" (p. 673). For Smuts, holism elevates the synthetic over the analytic and the organic over the radically discrete element.

Smuts's Critical Thesis on Holism and Personality

Smuts considered the thesis of holism as an apt refutation of the predominant reductionist psychology of his day; he was philosophically opposed to positivism. He argued that a reductive, conceptual abstraction produces a view of the natural world that constitutes "a mere collection of *disjecta membra*, drained of all union or mutual relations, dead, barren, inactive, unintelligible" (as cited in Hancock, 1968: 180). Instead, Smuts argues for a general synthetic principle that is universal. He grounds this principle in the biological stratum, accepting Darwin's thesis yet disagreeing with the post-Darwinians and their penchant for reductive and causal mechanics. Smuts counters that, "Evolution is nothing but the gradual development and stratification of [a] progressive series of wholes, stretching back from the inorganic beginnings to the highest levels of spiritual creation" (Smuts, 1926: v.). Although grounded in biology, Smuts nevertheless envisages wholes as bearing relevance to problems of general philosophy, ethics, art, psychology, and "the higher spiritual interests of mankind" (*ibid.*: vi.). The first great pinnacle of wholes, having risen through evolution from a primordial, base level of matter (or lesser wholes), is to be ideally found in human personality: "Personality [is] the highest [potential] form of Holism" (*ibid.*: 292). Drawing from Immanuel Kant's *synthetic unity of apperception*,

Smuts argues that the idea of the self, which he describes as “the most elusive phantom in the whole range of knowledge” (p. 263), is the key to understanding the holistic foundation of personality.

In his analysis and summary of Smuts’s philosophy, Linden (1995) ascertains that there are seven levels of holism:

(1) Definite structures of synthesis with little internal activity, e.g. a chemical compound; (2) Functional structures in living bodies, the parts co-operating mutually for the maintenance of the whole, e.g., the plant; (3) Co-operative activity co-ordinated and regulated by a central, mainly implicit and unconscious control, e.g., the animal; (4) Centralizing control that becomes conscious and culminates in personality, e.g., human beings; (5) Central control interacting with its field forming composite holistic groups, e.g. society; (6) Superindividual associations of central control, e.g., the state and/or institutions; (7) Emergent ideal wholes or holistic ideals, e.g., truth, beauty, and goodness that lay the foundation for a new cultural order. These wholes are hierarchical and expansive. (pp. 254-255)

Smuts’s life work was concerned with all seven levels of holism: His ebullience for science and nature (levels 1 through 3); a passion for understanding human personality (level 4), which as a middle category, intersects the lower levels with the higher; his concern for society as expressed in his pursuit of a law degree and political office (level 5); while his extra-political work as a statesman is apparent in levels 6 and 7. For example, Smuts’s (1926) remarks on the ideals for the League of Nations express his holistic beliefs, arguing that the organization served as

the chief constructive outcome of the Great War, [it] is but the expression of the deeply-felt aspiration towards a more stable holistic human society. And the faith has been strengthened in me that what has here been called Holism is at work even in the conflicts and confusions of men. (p. 344)

Implicitly, the United Nations, as successor to the League of Nations, is consonant with the same general aspiration that he espoused.

The last and highest pinnacle of wholes is expressed in metaphysical and teleological conceptions of perfectionist ideals, a supraordinate pull towards what he describes as the highest conceptions of “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness” (ibid.: 345). He summarizes this ideal pull, “The rise and self-perfection of wholes in the whole is the slow but unerring process and goal of this Holistic universe” (ibid.: 345). Moreover, an actualized personality potentially propels it from its mid level ranking to the “highest form” of holism, a matter to which attention now turns.

Smuts’s Ideals of Personality and the Holistic Self

Smuts (1926) views “Personality”⁶ as potentially the highest form of Holism, yet due to its general “infancy” in the diachronic scale of evolution, it is often fragile and can be subject to maladaptiveness,

Not seldom, of course, the personality finds it impossible to overcome the defeats it has sustained and goes under; for it is as yet weak and inchoate as a function of Holism, and in some cases it is weaker than in others. (p. 299)

Ascending towards greater wholeness is construed as a core teleological ideal of personality, one predicated on a governing *self* whose task is that of striving for unity. This premise is akin to William James's (1890) "I," which delegates the integrating task—a function of cohering the various "me-s" that populate the self over time. Personality refers to the uniqueness of the individual self. And, Personality, in whatever its evolutionary state, is viewed as a constituent feature of the holistically motivated self. Smuts's articulation of the self resonates strongly with James's original tripartite conceptualization of the self (material/social/spiritual)—a self that was also configured holistically and in ways that saw the necessity of the conception as integral for any human psychological inquiry. Danziger (1997) notes that after James's pre-disciplinary self was conceptualized at the disciplinary birth of Anglo-American psychology, the concept was subsequently disavowed by a nascent psychological establishment. Early academic psychologists were concerned with strict adherence to Humean inspired empiricism and methods to which the elusive self would not submit. The self carried too many Romantic features that were in defiance of the *Zeitgeist* shifting as it did from Romanticism into late modernity (Brinich and Shelley, 2002). The Anglo-American repudiation of Wundt, aside from hearty celebration and importation of his experimental method, was also a move away from a perceived and disdained introspectionism,⁷ the psychologically stated flaw of philosophy. Moreover, the complete evasion of Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* (which posited a social-developmentally relevant psychology, see Diriwächter, 2004) cemented an Anglo-American tradition of a psychology that was (and in many cases remains) either ambivalent or even hostile towards intangible concepts that defy disciplining. But without the self such a psychology became barren, irrelevant, and to many, meaningless. Hence, Danziger (1997) also notes that Gordon Allport long ago made a famous plea for the readmission of the self back into psychology. And it did return but operationalized so heavily that its parochial representation bore no resemblance to James's original outline.

Smuts argues that personality is holistically contained within physical embodiment, a conceptualization that challenges the longstanding problem of Cartesian dualism by replacing the polar doubling of mind/body with synthesis. The whole of personality is both above and beyond the natural world (metaphysics), yet simultaneously and irrevocably an aspect of it. This premise sets-up a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction in Smuts's holistic thought, human subjects are natural yet also simultaneously beyond the natural. The embodied person is posed as a product of evolution that is underpinned by an unknown creative force, one that ultimately synthesizes towards "universal Holism."

Within this conception, Smuts proposes four characteristics of personality: (1) Creativeness, (2) Freedom, (3) Purity, and (4) Teleology.

1. *Creativeness*

Smuts (1926) maintains that, “Our very conception of Personality is that it is a unique creative novelty in every human being” (p. 275). The uniqueness and originality of personality variance is grounded in the notion of a creativeness that is universal.

Each human individual is a unique personality; not only is personality in general a unique phenomenon in the world, but each human personality is unique in itself, and the attempt at “averaging” and generalising and reaching the common type on the approved scientific lines eliminates what is the very essence of personality, namely, its unique individual character in each case. (p. 279)

Hence, Smuts adopted an early critical stance against psychology as empirical science, a project that he dismissed as “unintelligible” (p. 292). “The province of psychology is much too narrow and limited for the purpose of Personality; and both its method and procedure as a scientific discipline fail to do justice to the uniquely individual character of the Personality” (p. 280). This disavowal is the basis of his rejection of psychology’s attempts to abstract and sort personality into measurable types. As an opponent of a science of Personality, he argued that Personality would fare better if taken-up by *personology*. Such a shift, he believed, would remedy the epistemological problems that subject personality to psychology’s insufficiencies, such as an often-unthought-of retention of Cartesian dualism predicated on the enigma of the subject/object binary. A reductive and mechanistic psychology fails, according to Smuts, to capture the creative and synthetic foundation of enduring uniqueness. Objective measurements of disposition elide the possibilities of transcendence, the freedom to realize what is not yet apparent, that which defies measurement. Like the psychodynamic theorists, Smuts contends that there are limits to human agency. Recognizing and overcoming these limits increases the freedom of the personality.

2. *Freedom*

“Freedom means holistic self-determination, and as such it becomes one of the great ideals of personality, whose self-realization is dependent on its inner holistic freedom” (Smuts, 1926: 291). One of the ideal aims of Personality, freedom is achieved through the process of self-realization, through *conscious* acquisition so that the human subject is less swayed or menaced by *unconscious* forces.

It will be generally admitted that this province of the subconscious is most important, not only for mental science itself, but more especially for the knowledge of the Personality in any particular case. For most minds, perhaps for all minds, the conscious area is small compared with the subconscious area; and beyond the subconscious area is the probably still larger organic or physiological area of the nervous, digestive, endocrine and reproductive systems, which all concerned the personality most vitally and closely. (ibid.: 280)

For personality to reach towards its ideal, Smuts constitutes it as “an organ of self-realization” (p. 290), “the whole is the essence of Personality, so wholeness in self-realization and self-expression is its essential aim and object” (p. 295). He suggests that awareness through conscious control is the goal of the “Free Personality,” “the fuller and more complete a personality is the greater its power of central self-control, or the fuller its Freedom. Weak characters have much less freedom than strong characters” (p. 310). The extent to which a Personality is free becomes “the measure of its development and self-realization” (p. 311). The two principles cited in the achievement of a self-realized and Free Personality are *Libertas* and *Imperium*. The ability to exercise these principles propels the holistic personality upwards: “To be a free personality represents the highest achievement of which any human being is capable” (Smuts, 1926: 312).

3. Purity

The function of freedom in the personality is to achieve what Smuts refers to as Purity (Gr. *Reinheit*). “A pure, free, homogenous spirit is the ideal of Personality” (p. 312). Purity is posed as a guiding principle for mental health, the resolution of all dissonance leading to dispositional harmony, or a pure state of unfettered mended-ness, the ideal of wholeness, healing (etymologically traced to “holiness”).

If a person keeps out of his nature any warring or jarring elements or complications, keeps himself free of all moral or spiritual entanglements, and is nothing but himself—whole, simple, integral and sincere—he will also be pure in the vital holistic sense. (p. 303)

Assimilation of all fractures, the healing of all splits and final resolution of conflict are the overriding ideal aim. This idealist sense of purity suggests that direct access to the transcendent ideal of the “whole” is attainable, yet naively overlooks the realm of context and the concrete social facts of life; it glaringly lacks pragmatism as to who is better poised to access these ideals and how this might be achieved. However, Smuts is also positing a guiding ideal, directionality and aspirations that seem more than worthy of pursuit independent of such factors as material barriers. The pursuit itself may bear fruit regardless of any woolly-minded sense that this may necessarily be concretely achievable by everyone in all contexts and settings.

4. Teleology

The final premise of Personality overlaps with the previous points. Teleology points to the realm of ends in which the evolution of Personality carries with it a directional purpose with a conclusive aim. This purpose is completion, achieving a final life goal of unification, the striving for a state of perfection. Personality in Smuts's scheme is pulled towards universal Holism,

The ideal personality is a whole; it is a whole in the sense that it should not have in it anything which is not of a piece with itself, which is alien or external to itself. Any such extraneous or adventitious element in it which does not really harmonize with it prevents it to that extent from being whole. Now as the personality as a self-realising holistic activity in us, it follows that its imminent end and ideal is to realise and develop itself as a whole, to establish and secure its wholeness. (p. 302)

The unique aspiration that Smuts points to is his contention that, "Personality transforms the material into the spiritual" (p. 304). The implication is that the evolutionarily 'weak' Personality is capable of healing itself given the proper conditions and facilitation. For Smuts such healing occurs if aligned in the correct direction of self-realization and the synthetic pull of Holism. His point of view is aligned with, but not explicitly credited to, Kierkegaard (who emphasised self-realisation) and, separately, German idealist philosophy and its varied discourses, which generally argue for the merits of holism (Bowie, 2003).

Smuts's writing on personality constitutes a narrative that is faithful to much of the Western/humanist discourses on the fulfillment of the individual self. However, this faithfulness is not intended to be solipsistic. He tempers his ideas with a curious and confounding threat to the individual self,⁸ "earnest men will always find that to gain their life they must lose it; that not in the self but in the whole (including the self) lies the only upward road to the sunlit summits" (p. 316). Hence, he cautions against viewing the process of becoming self-realized as being self-indulgent or egoistic in aim. The goal of integrating self is akin to Jung's process of *individuation*, neither whimsical nor hedonistic but rather a process of acquiring wisdom and maturity, realizing one's self so that in the end it may ultimately be surrendered. In one of his more esoteric passages, Smuts proposes that self-realization is the implicit solution to the affects of pain, suffering, and sorrow:

Learn to be yourself with perfect honesty, integrity and sincerity: let universal Holism realise its highest in you as a free whole of personality; and all the rest will be added unto you - peace, joy, blessedness, happiness, goodness and all the other prizes of life. (p. 315)

As an important early theorist on holism, what impact did Smuts's philosophy have on personality theory within psychology? A recent *PsychInfo* database

search of hundreds of thousands of psychological abstracts yields no direct reference whatsoever to Jan Smuts. However, his term “Holism” does garner a substantial number of articles, though only a minutia of each abstract refers to Smuts directly. Was Smuts’ doctrine irrelevant to the genesis of Anglo-American psychology? Indeed not, both his holistic thesis and holism more broadly have played, and continue to play, a crucial theoretical role in some threads of Anglo-American psychology.

Alfred Adler’s *Individual Psychology*

Adler’s (1956) school synthesized Smuts’s holistic philosophy in a conscious and evocative way. For Adler, the adoption of Smuts’s doctrine served the purpose of further distancing his school of depth psychology, known as *individual psychology*,⁹ from a persistent historical association with Freud’s drive psychology, which Adler notoriously departed from. Ansbacher (1994) notes,

Among the first [of the psychodynamic thinkers] 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. (Italics in original, p. 490)

Linden (1995) notes that Adler’s adoption of Smuts’s philosophy occurred long after his break with Freud in 1911. Adler synthesized his subscription to Smuts’s doctrine with a similar endorsement of the neo-Kantian philosophy of Hans Vaihinger (1925). Vaihinger’s philosophy of *as-if* emphasizes constructivism through the construct of perceptual fictions, hence, Adler speaks of the guiding influence of *fictions* in mental life. For example, Adler’s concept of *fictional finalism*, the striving for an unconscious fictional goal (e.g., perfection), follows Kant, Nietzsche, and Vaihinger’s thought. This is clear in his positing of the *private logic* or *biased apperception* of the subject who purportedly constructs fictions as a way of dealing with reality and to compensate for deep feelings (often unconscious) of inferiority. These constructs are part of the *style of life*¹⁰ that loosely constitutes Adler’s particular take on the idea of character or personality. One’s style of life, constructed with deep and pervasive fictions, is generally unconscious. It functions to unify the person (although often in less than ideal ways) and is creative rather than solely libidinous in force. Adler’s school is intrinsically and fundamentally an analysis of the self in the social and ideal context of a *feeling of community*¹¹ (Gr. *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*). The self/social dynamic is conceived of in a holistic way, yet with the hybrid incorporation of Vaihinger, holism is often reconfigured by Adlerians under the guise of being a useful fiction (Slavik, 2006). This reconceptualization of “holism” appeases

those constructivist Adlerians who are less comfortable with the metaphysical and transcendent aspects of Smuts's more orthodox views.

Upon hearing of Adler's death in 1937, Smuts wrote to the British Adlerian Hertha Orgler, one of Adler's biographers:

*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. ... 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.* (Italics in original, Smuts as cited in Ansbacher, 1994: 491)

Fritz and Laura Perls's Gestalt Therapy Theory

Gestalt Therapy Theory also actively endorsed the work of Smuts. When the Nazi threat was too great to endure, "Fritz" and Laura Perls fled from Germany to South Africa. It was here that they became acquainted with Smuts's *Holism and Evolution*. They subsequently imported and interwove Smuts's work as one of many philosophical influences underpinning Gestalt Therapy. They particularly approved of the ways in which Smuts's ideas complimented another central influence, that of the holistic work of Kurt Goldstein (1939). Gorten (1987) outlines the philosophical and psychological influences that aided the Perls in constructing Gestalt Therapy, and Smuts is prominently listed as a prime influence—a point also validated in a similar analysis by Wulf (1998). Smuts also indirectly affected the course of the Perls's lives. In an interview, Laura Perls describes why they fled from South Africa to the USA:

Because Jan Smuts (then Prime Minister of South Africa) was retiring and a young man of about forty-three, a very brilliant guy, a Wunderkind, who was supposed to succeed him, suddenly died of a heart attack and there was no one who was in the Union party, which was the democratic party, to have a chance to be elected. We knew what would be coming because the nationalists had been working all along. They were pretty well organized and we wanted to leave before the 1948 elections. Fritz left in 1946 and I left in 1947. (Rosenfeld, 2004: 15)

The Perls were able to immigrate to America by recourse of an affidavit provided by Karen Horney—another figure who makes use of holism by reference to her brand of psychoanalysis which she termed *Holistic Psychoanalysis*. However, like Carl G. Jung who also championed the idea of holism, one is unable to find a reference to Smuts's work in their collective writings. Gestalt Therapy and, to a slightly lesser extent, Adler's Individual Psychology are network modalities under the umbrella term *Humanistic Psychology*. In his analysis of

the general paradigm (content, method, approach) Aanstoos (2003) argues that the humanistic vision has historically been constituted on holism. The author further argues that holism is necessary to resolve crucial contemporary and future problems such as posed by the interrelationship between globalization, ecology, and health.

Adolf Meyer and Psychobiology

Logan (2003), Lidz (1985), and Neill (1980) point out the ways in which Meyer (1951) was concerned with either holism or the issue of unity in the human being (such as mind-body integration). In the U.S. and also Britain, Meyer was a monumental figure often described in an historical salutation as “the Dean of American Psychiatry” (Neill, 1980: 460).

Meyer¹² wrote to Smuts in 1945 supporting his goals for the United Nations, those of “Respect of Self-and-Others and Equity for Peace.” The letter concluded with a disclosure of admiration:

Long one of your admirers, and cheered with your declaration of a wonderful conception of the San Francisco [UN] conference goal, I beg to send you my words of admiration and gratitude...

Deeply stirred by your gift to the cause, I send you these words,
Sincerely, your humble fellow-*holist*. (Italics added)

Meyer’s statement, “Long one of your admirers,” demonstrates that he was familiar with Smuts’s work. Moreover, the “fellow-holist” insignia further suggests a general concurrence with Smuts’s holistic thesis. It seems no great leap to suggest that Smuts also influenced one of the great founding figures of American psychiatry. Lidz (1985), in explicating Meyer’s doctrine of *psychobiology*, writes:

Meyer had been primarily concerned with the mind-body unity and the integration of the individual. He had stopped with his important realization that human behaviour is integrated through mentation . . . Man has two heritages—a biological and a cultural—and it is necessary to understand their interrelationship and fusion to achieve a general “field” theory. (p. 49)

Meyer was clearly a holist as reflected in his psychobiological conception, however, as Lidz (*ibid.*) also notes, he failed to clarify cultural and social factors in such integration—tending to focus on illness patterns and psychiatric approaches. However, his field theory approach clearly left the question of etiology open to *include* covariant factors drawn from the contextual/social world (Neill, 1980).

Having outlined the general thesis of Smuts’s holism and briefly traced its importation into at least three schools of psychology/psychiatry, a critical discussion of the potential limitations of holism more broadly is warranted.

Critique of Holism

Smuts was clearly a structuralist and sought to articulate a totalizing grand narrative that unites dualisms through positing a teleological conception summarized in the following formula: smaller wholes synthesizing with larger wholes, and so on, towards universal Holism. Wholes are not isolated, abstract, or frozen entities. Rather, they are dynamic structures that contain an intrinsic motility, striving for further and more comprehensive integration. Contemporary critics of structuralism and their modernist penchant for master theory as expressed in totalizing meta-narratives, disagree with universal theories such as that of Smuts. For example, postmodern and poststructural refutations of the “one and the whole” point in contrast to the ubiquity of multifarious incongruencies, splits, fractures, and disjointed points. These discourses implicitly counter Smuts’s hybrid thesis of a Romantic/modernist claim to the panoptic singular. In deconstruction, critics draw attention to glaring fissures and absences that render holistic grand narratives as merely a novel representation of the impossible, an erroneous postulate, and if remotely “true” then certainly beyond the actual telling (Gergen, 1991). These discursive discourses challenge the thesis of a logical progression towards (original/lost) wholeness as another manifestation of modernity’s grand narrative of progress. Postmodernists perceive the contemporary desire to “be whole” as an outcome of the decline of certainty or a yearning for a return to Romantic idealism based on the nostalgia for a lost (original) home—to which holism tries to remedy (for example, as expressed in the yearning for such things as belonging, union, or reconciliation).

Yet a detailed reading of Smuts’s thesis reveals a paradox; he does not preclude the fractures of difference to which grand theories of unity tend to mask. Nor does he deny the implicit multiplicity that could be revealed through the critical task of deconstruction. For example, plurality and multiplicity are clearly acknowledged in Smuts’s (1926) discourse on the self and personality expressed in his phrase, “self of our very selves” (p. 263). He further elaborates,

The individual self is not singular, springing from one root, so to say. It combines an infinity of elements growing out of the individual endowment and experience on the one hand and the social tradition and experience on the other. (p. 246)

Smuts also proposes that the human personality is often distorted, mystified, obscured, and conflicted by an unconscious¹³ dimension. In psychoanalytic thought, the unconscious is claimed to be a realm of conflict that undermines a false (defensive) sense of unity to which the ego maintains its perceptual task of a rational ordering and mediating between internal and external demands. Psychoanalytic theorists such as Lacan (1977) argue for the impossibility of an ego that is whole or unified insisting on the fragmented constitution of the human subject (Rose, 1986). However, Smuts’s acceptance of the unconscious concurs more strongly with Adler’s (1956) and Jung’s (1957) view of the phe-

nomenon rather than psychoanalytic accounts. In exploring consciousness as an act of legislative agency, Smuts writes of the influence of the unconscious on human subjectivity,

Much of this control and direction is conscious will, but far more is unconscious and operates in the subconscious field of the personal life, and it is only on great occasions or crises that light comes suddenly to be thrown on this inner leading in the personal life, and the individual becomes conscious that he has been guided or led along paths which were apparently not of his choosing. (Smuts, 1926: 296)

There are postmodernist-influenced psychologists who retain a problematized holism. For example, Andrew Samuels (1989) writes from a post-Jungian paradigm, preserving the influence of the personal and collective unconscious stratum yet abandoning Jung's more problematic holistic metaphysics. Others, like the personality and developmental psychologist Dan McAdams (1997), explore possibilities of integrated selfhood by acknowledging the postmodern insistence on multiplicity, plurality, and the striving for congruence and consistency with/in the apparent absence of the singular whole.

The developing self seeks a temporal coherence. If the me keeps changing over the long journey of life, then it may be incumbent upon the I to find or construct some form of life coherence and continuity in order for change to make sense. (p. 62)

Hence, McAdams refers to the process of "selfing." Selfing constitutes the phenomenal self as having the purpose of lending a constructed sense of unity and coherence to the ontology of multiplicity in an increasingly fractured and contradictory (postmodern) world (Gergen, 1991). Such a world at least threatens the annihilation of self and certainly challenges its classical understanding.

The observation of contradiction and splits as articulated in *cognitive dissonance theory*, such as those demonstrated by the famous work of Festinger (1957), are anticipated and rationalized in Smuts's thesis by recourse to the evolutionary state of the human Personality; "Personality is still a growing factor in the universe, and is merely in its infancy. Its history is marked by thousands of years, whereas that of organic nature is marked by millions" (Smuts, 1926, p. 297). He concludes that Personality, "is still indefinite and undetermined" (p. 297); it is in a dynamic state of evolution, evolving towards the whole and therefore should not be confused with the ideal: Personality as a finished whole. Yet, resolution of splits, contradictions, dissonance, and so on are nevertheless envisaged in his thesis, which is posed as the tension between lesser wholes that are striving to integrate into larger ones. Smuts's paradigm views resolution/integration as both natural and desirable: people are to strive to be whole. Critics may very well take issue with this presumption, arguing that disunity has, in some circumstances, merit of its own that does not require unification or resolution. Holistic theses tend to deny the prevalence

and utility of fracture in human subjectivity; such as the Lacanian insistence on the fundamental split of subjectivity, the infant's gradual realization of being separate from (m)other and the painful quest for individuality (beginning with the mirror phase where subjects come to recognize their reflection in ways that divide them—one is two, not one). In Lacanian and poststructural theory, the subject is fundamentally a split subject. Melanie Klein's psychodynamic theory also articulates a similar insistence on splitting. As O'Connor and Ryan (1993) note, "Klein stresses the impossibility in every psyche of ever achieving complete and permanent integration: there are always residues of paranoid and schizoid feelings and mechanisms" (p. 82). These fractures may be the source of tremendous creative output to which the subject requires rather than to have them extinguished through resolution.

A final problem in Smuts's discourse is a general failure to adequately *foreground* his own prejudices in the construction of his grand narrative. Donna Haraway (2004) refers to the imposition of an all-encompassing master narrative as a "god-trick" (p. 87)—one that does not account for the complex construction of history or the impact of culture. For example, Hau (2000) traces the social construction of a holistic approach to medicine that predominated in early twentieth-century Germany, a "masculinist . . . synthetic gaze" based loosely on "the art connoisseur who appreciated works of art as a coherent whole" (pp. 499-500). This cultural configuration,

was reminiscent of the aesthetic gaze of the male educated bourgeois (*Bildungsbürger*), and only a physician who shared the aesthetic sensibilities of the *Bildungsbürgertum* could truly judge whether a person was normal, healthy, and beautiful. (p. 495)

Smuts does not acknowledge his holistic philosophy as being culturally embedded. This is a politics of visioning a quasi-utopia that fails to contextualize the concrete social dynamics of *who* can become self-realized, of who is or is better poised to become whole. Nor does he say *how* one can become a "Free" and "Pure" Personality. In this sense, he elides the second definition of Holism as represented earlier in the Oxford Dictionary¹⁴ which refers to social factors. The paradox is that on the social/political level, holism has been used to both subjugate groups (a utopia of the master's) and to promise an ideal of liberation (such as the Marxist ideal of solidarity and a unified worker's utopia). In what ways has holism been justified as a social force that curtails or subjugates others? For example, in early twentieth-century German medicine, Hau (*ibid.*) notes that holism was used to exclude women from medical practice because,

women and the uncultivated were neither capable of creating great and timeless works of art nor capable of practicing the art of medicine. In German medicine, empathy, the ability to build a bridge from soul to soul and intuition, the ability to grasp the essence of a human being in its wholeness as a piece of art, represented the values and aesthetic ideals of the male educated bourgeois. (p. 524)

Smuts's "partial and situated knowledge," to borrow a phrase introduced by Haraway (2004), was from the center standpoint of being a white statesman in South Africa—one who carried on with the imperial project of Euro-centric colonization that he and his historical compatriots were an inextricable part of. Smuts did not see the world from the peripheries or the margins, but from the center, above from the platforms of power. Smuts cannot escape his historicity nor his role as an imperial leader. For example, he held only a cursory sympathy and an undemocratic regard for the South African Black majority of his day denying them the right to vote. He also did not discuss the situation of women, who, in the early twentieth century, were still largely denied basic rights (such as voting, to own private property, or accessing the academy); and in most jurisdictions women did not have the full legal status as persons, they ostensibly lacked complete selves (de Beauvoir, 1989/1952). "Lacking selves," women, non-whites, and the "uncultivated" were delegated as "Other" (alterity), deemed a "foreigner," and the "foreigner has no self," they are not whole in a "civilized" or masculine sense, but "constantly Other" (Kristeva, 1997: 270). This theme was also taken up in regard to women by Luce Irigaray (1985) in her book *This Sex which is not One*. As Others, women have been historically represented in contradistinction to and deviation from the universal "Man," he who has apparently always had a whole self replete with "superior morality" and greater "rational capacities," one not bedeviled by irrationality or associated with being the source of original sin.

Foucault (1988) denied such a thing as the *a priori* self altogether. In his discursive and genealogical formulation, the *technology of the self*, he articulates the self as a socially constructed entity disciplined to serve the interests of ruling institutions (e.g., the church). Selves exist in the West, says Foucault, merely to confess to the authorities, such as the previous universal order of the Roman Church or in modern "confessional" settings such as the psychiatrist's office or the courtroom. Such surveillance, what Foucault terms *panopticism*, resolutely establishes the constructed self as subject to institutional cultivation, regulation, and complex networks of power (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). This "self" too is divided and not whole; its function is to reflexively evaluate one's inner transgressions (Sin/Law) and account for these interiorized infractions upon demand and external decree.

Having considered some of the criticisms levied against grand doctrines of the whole, I nevertheless contend that Smuts's ideas and contributions ought not be wholly discredited. His legacy of helping to found the United Nations and his influence in the eventual structural development of interdisciplinary study in the academy (which Julie Thompson Klein [1996] partly credits Smuts for) perchance redeems him. Indeed, the concept of interdisciplinarity has, after all, aided "the studies" such as women's studies, black studies, post-colonial theory, etc.—many of which focus on social justice and emancipation projects. As a social-justice minded psychologist, I remain enriched, edified,

and stimulated by Smuts's holistic account regardless of his historical impediments and transgressions which cannot be overlooked. In this sense, I agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1960) assertion that "the concept of the whole is itself to be understood only relatively. The whole of meaning that has to be understood in history or tradition is never the meaning of the whole of history" (p. xxxv). Smuts's holism was poised with prospective emancipatory aims such as the ideal of universal human rights to which organizations such as the United Nations still pursue.

Conclusion: Holistic Parallels with *Ganzheitspsychologie*

It is noteworthy to consider some rather obvious, if not striking, parallels between Smuts's doctrine and the second school of Leipzig: the *Ganzheitspsychologie*. Diriwächter (2003a; 2003b) points out that this school developed by attempting to resolve some arguable problems in German Gestalt Psychology (such as disputing objectivist representations of *form*) and Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* (psychology of a people or folk). Wundt argued for the starting point of analysis as the totality of the person, their synthesis. However, Wundt's students, in bringing forward the second Leipzig school, took issue with his assertion of a creative synthesis, arguing that his position was, "another form of aggregation based on . . . elements" (Diriwächter, 2004: 100). The second Leipzig School alternatively perceives *all* planes as consolidated wholes and, hence, more closely approximates a school of pure holistic psychology. Also, the *Ganzheitspsychologie* attempted to coalesce ideas gleaned from the philosophical tradition of German idealism (e.g., Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and so on) into a concrete psychology.

The main holistic parallels between the *Ganzheitspsychologie* and Smuts' work cluster around the premise that a person's psychological development does not proceed from scattered elements but rather, "progresses from one totality/whole to another" (Diriwächter, 2003b: 5). The *Ganzheits*-psychologists were more adept, however, at integrating psychology with the social context and provided a more socially relevant account. In this sense, the *Ganzheits*-psychologists held an immediate scholarly base to draw upon, the richness of the historical and social developmental *Völker* discourses stretching back to Humbolt, Lazarus and Steinthal, and culminating in Wundt's work (Diriwächter, 2004).

Ganzheitspsychologie fundamentally means "holistic psychology" and similar to Smuts's work represents a form of epistemological *structuralism* that was common in early to mid-twentieth-century psychological theorizing (as this present volume on holism demonstrates, the topic of holism remains a prevalent theoretical force). Moreover, the school of *Ganzheitspsychologie* proposed a similar argument to what Smuts declared, the idea that lesser wholes strive to synthesize into more developed ones and so on. Occasionally, however, Smuts lapses by invoking the term "element" in his argumentation in ways that confound and beg for clarification, for example:

When, however, we go on to analyse an organic whole into its elements, we notice at once that there must be something more besides those elements, something commonly called life which holds all those elements together in a living unity. This “something more” we have identified as Holism, and we have explained it as not something additional quantitatively, but as a more refined and intimate structural relation of the elements themselves. (pp. 272-273)

The *Ganzheitspsychologists* cautioned against any analytic digression into elements, asserting a notion of *Komplexqualitäten* (complex quality) that negates elemental existence (Diriwächter, 2003b).

Diriwächter (2003a) suggests that the *Ganzheitspsychologie* is an approach that has largely been forgotten or “lost in time.” And whereas this school is peculiar to the genesis of German psychology, its ideas are not limited to Germanic spheres. Jan Smuts may have arrived at some similar conclusions to the first Leipzig school (Wundt) but stronger parallels are evident with the second school (the *Ganzheitspsychologie*). Smuts impacted threads of Anglo-American psychology through the humanistic and psychodynamic works of Alfred Adler (an Austrian émigré to the U.S.) and Fritz and Laura Perls’s Gestalt therapy school (German/South African émigrés to the U.S.). Moreover, Smuts probably influenced Adolf Meyer (a Swiss émigré to the U.S.) and his school of psychobiology. Finally, Smuts’s philosophy and the second school of Leipzig arose at similar points of time in history, arriving in culturally and linguistically distant contexts. I have uncovered no evidence to suggest that Smuts was familiar with the original *Ganzheits*-psychologists or vice-versa. However, Smuts was aware of the Nazi’s enigmatic and dangerous distortion of holism, an appropriation which did not follow the second Leipzig School’s original formulations. Hancock (1968) cites Adolf Meyer’s suggestion (to Smuts) of opening an Institute of Holism in Germany:

Smuts told him the idea was premature. Yet he soon found out that Germans could do worse things to his ideas than bury them in an Institute. “Ganzheit-Theorie”, as some Nazi writers were expounding it, shocked him. He thought it a monstrous parody of everything he believed in—“a queer compound of Holism, romanticism, racialism, ethics and religion . . . a ruthless scrapping of ideas and methods which we consider part of the moral and political heritage of the human race.” (pp. 300-301)

Brush (1984) notes that the term holism was challenged by critics as being both “totalitarian” and “imperialist.” Hitler, however, despised Smuts’s version of holism (he banned the German translation of *Holism and Evolution*) and his Nazi government forbade Adolph Meyer, who was in allegiance with Smuts, from opening a proposed *Institute of Holism* in Hamburg (Hancock, 1968).

Karl Popper (1961), who misunderstood Smuts’s holism and conflated it with the tendency towards totalitarianism, warned his readers against the dangers of *all* holistic doctrines. The totalitarian inclination (the whole equals the Total) that the Nazi’s picked up in their political version of holism is a case

in point that Popper seized upon. Indeed, holism as political doctrine (such as expressed in fascism) points to a potential problem with the concept, the misuse of the organic metaphor of “blood and soil” for heinous political purposes. This metaphor has been consistently distorted by fascist ideologues that seek, for example, to “cleanse” a land/“race” by rhetorical recourse to the abhorrence of the dark “Other,” which led to campaigns of racialized exclusion, pogroms, and genocide. Popper was not entirely wrong in pointing out potential misuses, indeed, holism is an idea that requires political and scholarly care; it can succumb to totalitarianism, new age dogma, religious fundamentalism, and other unsavory manifestations.

For Smuts and the second Leipzig School, however, their mutual yet unknowingly similar conclusions suggest that they were on to something significant. Their simultaneous emergence strikes one as an aspect of the same *Zeitgeist*, developing in parallel. A revival of their collective ideas and (re)engagement with current philosophical problems in psychology and the social world (e.g., globalization and ecological degeneration) will generate further interest, scholarly criticism, and innovations. Such engagement could produce cross-fertilization and problem posing for those of us who believe that these conversations generate new questions and contribute in meaningful ways to the whole.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in: *From Past to Future: Clark Papers in the History of Psychology*, 5(1): 40-53, under the title: “Holism, Personality Theory, and the Self: The Contribution of Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870 – 1950) to Anglo-American Psychology.” The present edition is an elaborated version of a paper presented to the 11th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, June 2005.
2. The author expresses gratitude for permission to cite from the *Adolf Meyer Papers*, which was granted by *The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives* of the John Hopkins Medical Institutions.
3. David Hume (1711-1776), Scottish philosopher.
4. The BAAS appointment probably carried some political overtones considering Smuts’s faithfulness and service to the British Empire during World War I.
5. The Swiss/German scholar Michael Esfeld (2001) (University of Konstanz, Germany) also acknowledges Smuts as the originator of the term *Holism* (Gr. *Holismus*; e.g., *die holistische welt*). In German and English there are obvious and similar conceptions that predate Smuts’s usage (e.g., whole/unity/completion or *Ganzheit/Einheit/Vollständigkeit* respectively). German philosophical discourse holds a long history of contemplating the idea of the whole (Bowie, 2003). Smuts was undoubtedly influenced by these discourses through secondary means, such as ideas that filtered through English translations of the German idealists, philosophers with which he had some intellectual acquaintance.
6. In *Holism and Evolution*, Smuts generally spells Personality with an upper case P (as he also does with Holism and the Self).
7. The perception of Wundt as an introspectionist (such as along the lines of J.S. Mill) requires clarification. Diriwächter (2004) writes: “Wundt was opposed to

- the form of introspection (*Selbstbeobachtung*) that J. S. Mill or Edward Titchener would much later advocate. For Wundt, as for many other psychologists of those days, introspection was closer to retrospection, or the observation of an unreliable memory image” (p. 96).
8. This premise was, incidentally, also echoed in a rather provocative paper by Harry Stack Sullivan (1950), another uncommon interdisciplinarian in the history of psychology.
 9. Adler’s social and psychodynamic school of “individual” psychology uses the term “individual” in a very specific sense, drawn from the Latin root *individuus* meaning indivisible.
 10. Adler sometimes referred to the German: *Lebens-Schablone/Apperzeptionsschema*, however, the translated English term “style of life” is intended to be much broader in meaning.
 11. Also referred to, especially in North America, as *social interest*.
 12. Adolf Meyer to J. Smuts, 4 May 1945, folder I/22/I, Adolf Meyer Papers, The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the John Hopkins Medical Institutions, Baltimore, MD.
 13. Whilst Smuts speaks of the unconscious in *Holism and Evolution*, he strangely elides Freud, Adler, and Jung in the process.
 14. “[2.]: The treating of the whole person including mental and social factors rather than just the symptoms of a disease.”

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