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Jan Smuts' Theory of Holism as an Uplifting Philosophy for Philosophical Counseling

Guy Du Plessis¹

¹ Utah State University

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Abstract

This article explores the utility of the philosopher and Commonwealth statesman General Jan Smuts' theory of Holism within the context of philosophical practice. It is common practice that philosophical counsellors or practitioners apply the work of philosophers to inspire, educate and guide their counselees in the philosophical counseling process. In this essay we will briefly explore Smuts' theory of Holism as a potentially uplifting philosophy which can be of use for philosophical practitioners to guide their counselees "for confronting problems of living." We highlight that Smuts' contribution to philosophy and psychology is often not adequately credited, and it is therefore not surprising that, to the best of our knowledge, Smuts' theory of Holism has not yet been discussed in the context of philosophical counseling. We begin the essay by providing a brief historical view and outline of Smuts' theory of Holism, and his influence on Anglo-Saxon psychology. We then discuss several foundational concepts that underlie Smuts' theory of Holism as articulated and developed in his book *Holism and Evolution*.

Central to the philosophical counseling process is philosophical counsellors or practitioners applying the work of philosophers to inspire, educate and guide their counselees. For example, in logic-based therapy (LBT), a form of a philosophical counselling method developed by Elliot Cohen (2003, 2007, 2013), the counselor helps the counselee find an uplifting philosophy that promotes a guiding or transcendent virtue that acts as an antidote to "self-defeating, unrealistic conclusions from irrational premises in their practical reasoning" (Cohen, 2013, p. ix). The methodology of LBT is defined in six steps and according to Cohen (2016) these "six steps provide a rational framework for confronting problems of living" (xix).

In this essay we argue that South African philosopher and statesman General Jan Smuts' theory of Holism is one such potential uplifting philosophy which can be of value to philosophical practitioners to inspire, educate and guide their counselees "for confronting problems of living."^[i]

To the best of our knowledge we are not aware of any other books or articles that explores the "therapeutic value" and existential implications of Smuts' theory of Holism within the context of philosophical practice. This is not surprising as

Smuts' contribution to philosophy and psychology is often not adequately credited (Shelly, 2008; Du Plessis & Weathers, 2015). It is remarkable that out of the numerous books and autobiographies written about Smuts, only two deal directly with his theory of Holism. (See Kolbe, 1928, *A Catholic View of Holism: A criticism of the theory put forward by General Smuts in his book, Holism and Evolution* and Beukes, 1998, *The Holistic Smuts, A study in personality*).

The lack of acknowledging Smuts in philosophy is exemplified in the field of integral metatheory. Contemporary integral metatheorists, such as American philosopher Ken Wilber (1995, 2000, 2006), acknowledge many antecedent foundational influences, and proto-integral thinkers.[ii] Yet, Smuts' theory of Holism is seldom acknowledge as a key progenitor of contemporary integral metatheory, although it has significantly contributed to the development of integral metatheory (Du Plessis & Weathers, 2015). In the canon of published integral theory literature Smuts is only explicitly mentioned once (that we are aware of), which is in the opening paragraph of the Prologue of Wilber's early book *The Atman Project*.

Everywhere we look in nature, said the philosopher Jan Smuts, we see nothing but wholes. And not just simple wholes, but hierarchical ones: each whole is a part of a larger whole which is itself a part of a larger whole. Fields within fields within fields, stretching through the cosmos, interlacing each and every thing with each and every other. Further, said Smuts, the universe is not a thoughtlessly static and inert whole—the cosmos is not lazy, but energetically dynamic and even creative. It tends (we would now say teleonomically, not teleologically) to produce higher- and higher-level wholes, ever more inclusive and organized. This overall cosmic process, as it unfolds in time, is nothing other than evolution. And the drive to ever-higher unities, Smuts called holism. (1980, 3)[iii]

In the next part of the essay, we provide a brief historical view, including Smuts' influence on Anglo-Saxon psychology, and outline some of the key foundational elements of his theory of Holism, as articulated in his book *Holism and Evolution* (1926).[iv]

Historical Background

In Smuts' eighty years of life (24 May 1870 – 11 September 1950) he contributed greatly to many areas of South African and world history, with his philosophical work on Holism being but one of his many undertakings. It is not the intention of this article to explore Smuts' political and other pursuits, yet it will be useful to place Smuts' philosophical thought within a historical context.

In addition to being the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa (known today as the Republic of South Africa) from 1919 to 1924 and again from 1939 to 1948, he was an accomplished botanist, philosopher, jurist, soldier, politician, and Commonwealth statesman.[v] In terms of his political views, Smuts was an avid supporter of internationalism – the idea of international government -- and was fierce opponent of totalitarianism. He exercised this belief in internationalism by being one of the two principal drafters and architects of the covenant of the League of Nations. Smuts' holistic philosophy is evident in the pivotal role he played in the foundation of the League of Nations and later the United Nations (see Hancock, 1962).

He was born on 24 May 1870 on his family farm, Bovenplaats, near Malmesbury, in the then Cape Colony. During his childhood, he often went out alone, exploring the surrounding countryside, while performing his duty of looking after the free roaming cattle. This instilled in him a lifelong a passion for nature, which was “an early awakening of the feelings and faculties that were shaping him as a person and would one day shape his thought about the atom, the cell, mind, personality, the whole universe” (Hancock 1962, 8).

In those days a full formal education was typically reserved only for the first son, and being the second son of the family dictated, by rural custom, that he would remain working on the farm. When Smuts was twelve years old his older brother died and, and now as the eldest son of the family, he was then sent to school. Despite his late start he caught up with his classmates within four years and went to Victoria College in Stellenbosch where he attained a combined degree in Arts and Science. At Victoria College he won the Ebdon scholarship for Christ’s College Cambridge University, where he studied Law, and became the only person ever to have written both parts of the Law Tripos in one year while achieving a Double First. While at Cambridge Smuts was described by Professor Maitland, a leading figure among English legal historians, as the most brilliant student he had ever met. Lord Todd described Smuts, alongside John Milton and Charles Darwin, as one of the three most outstanding figures to graduate from Cambridge (see Hancock, 1962).

After practicing law in the Transvaal he became a Boer general during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902, and led many successfully raids against the British troops. He was instrumental in the signing of the treaty of Vereeniging, which marked the end of the Anglo-Boer War, as well as convincing Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (the leader of the then newly elected Liberal Government) to give independence to the Boer republics four years later.

During the First World War, he led the armies of South Africa against Germany, commanding the British Army in East Africa, and from 1917 to 1919, he was a member of the British War Cabinet.[vi] Smuts’ conviction of the need for reconciliation with the defeated Germany after World War I was not heeded, even though he clearly predicted that the way the Germans were treated by the Versailles Treaty might well serve as prelude to yet another Great War, which it did indeed do.

In World War II he served in the Imperial War Cabinet under Winston Churchill, and became a field marshal in the British Army in 1941. He was the only man to sign both of the peace treaties ending the First and Second World Wars (see Hancock, 1962).

In addition to his political accomplishments, Smuts also achieved two exceptional academic honors: the first, in 1931, when he received an honorary Doctorate in Science from London University; and second, when he was subsequently inaugurated as the President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. These are all the more remarkable achievements in light of his never having even been a scientist by profession!

Smuts' Influence on Anglo-Saxon Psychology

When conducting a literature review search of psychology databases, one will find very little direct reference to Smuts, however his term Holism does relate a substantial number of articles. From the lack of references to Smuts one might assume that Smuts' Holism was irrelevant to the genesis of Anglo-American psychology. This is not the case, as Shelly states that "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" (2008, 97).

For example, Fritz Perls (1947), co-founder of Gestalt Therapy, was greatly influenced by Smuts' work while living in South Africa after fleeing Nazi Germany, and wrote his book *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* in that time.[vii] Barlow (1981) states that "[t]his basic premise [holism] was not only adopted by Gestalt psychology, but also by Gestalt therapy, and in fact all of the humanistic and existential psychologies" (Back, 1973, 1). Perls approved of how Smuts' ideas complemented the holistic work of fellow Gestaltist Kurt Goldstein (1937). The greatest value in the Gestalt approach, according to Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951), "lies in the insight that the whole determines the parts, which contrasts with the previous assumption that the whole is merely the total sum of its elements" (p. 19). Both Gorten (1987) and Wulf (1998) list Smuts as a significant influence in the development of Gestalt Therapy.

Kurt Koffka (1935), another of the founders of Gestalt psychology and author of the book *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, enthusiastically read *Holism and Evolution* and in a letter to Smuts indicated that was "interested in the wider principle of Holism..." (Smuts in Blanckenberg, 1951, p. 159). In 1937 Koffka sent Smuts his book *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. In a reply Smuts (in Blanckenberg, 1951) said that "[y]ears ago I read your 'Growth of Mind' with deep interest and much instruction. Ever since I have followed, so far as my circumstances allow, the great developments which have taken place in Gestalt Psychology" (p. 159).

Alfred Adler (1956) was one of the first psychoanalytic thinkers to synthesize Smuts' holistic philosophy into his school of thought (individual psychology). Ansbacher (1994) notes,

He [Adler] 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)

Adler (in Blanckenberg, 1951) used *Holism and Evolution* for his university lectures in Vienna (even having had it translated into German), and described Smuts' Holism theory as "supplying the scientific and philosophical basis for the great advance in psychology which had been made in recent years" (p. 81).

In the U.S. and also Britain, Adolf Meyer was a highly influential thinker, often referred to as "the Dean of American Psychiatry" (Neill, 1980: 460). In 1945 Meyer (in Shelley, 2000, p. 99) to Smuts in support of his goals for the United

Nations, he concluded:

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.

Meyer's statement, "Long one of your admirers," clearly indicates that he was familiar with Smuts' ideas. Shelly (2008) notes that: "[I]t seems no great leap to suggest that Smuts also influenced one of the great founding figures [Meyer] of American psychiatry" (p. 99).

In his book *Psychosynthesis*, Roberto Assagioli (1975) acknowledged Smuts as a contributor to the holistic approach in psychology, as well as of the psychology of personality. Assagioli (1975) describes Smuts' holistic approach as one of the most "significant and valuable contributions to the knowledge of human nature and its betterment" (p. 14).

Smuts' Theory of Holism

Although the concept of holism has been implied by many thinkers, the term *Holism*, as an academic term, was first introduced by Smuts, and appeared publicly in print in 1926 in his key text: *Holism and Evolution*, a book that is "primarily a philosophical treatise relevant to science" (Shelly, 2008, 91). Smuts wrote that: "Holism (from ολος = whole) is the term here coined for this fundamental factor operative towards the creation of wholes in the universe" (p. 86). Soon after, Smuts wrote the first entry of the concept of Holism for the 1929 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Today, the concept holism is commonplace across many fields of study, including physics, general systems theory, biology, anthropology, medicine, cybernetics, and multiple subdisciplines in contemporary psychology. Although it must be noted that the concept of Holism as introduced and applied by Smuts is in many cases not the same as the use of the word holism as it is often applied in various of the above disciplines.

Smuts used the word in a metaphysical sense (as an ontological principle/process inherent in nature), not as a broad principle as it is often used today indicating that the sum is bigger than its parts. Smuts (1927) defined Holism as "the ultimate synthetic, ordering, organising, regulative activity in the universe which accounts for all the structural groupings and syntheses in it, from the atom and the physico-chemical structures, through the cell and organisms, through Mind in animals, to Personality in man" (326). He goes on to say that, "[e]volution 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). At this level of "spiritual creation" he envisaged the emergence of ideal wholes which he saw as fields disengaged, and set free, from human personality, hence operating as creative factors on their own account in generating a spiritual world. Human personality, to Smut, thus becomes a creative factor in the universe, capable of generating such ideals as Truth, Beauty and Goodness.

Although Smuts' Holism is grounded in the natural sciences he did claim that it has relevance to problems of general philosophy, ethics, sociology, psychology, and "the higher spiritual interests of mankind" (1926, vi.). For Smuts the great pinnacle of wholes, after evolving from matter to life to mind, is to be found in the human personality: "Personality [is] the highest form of Holism" (1926, 292). Smuts argues that the notion of the self, drawing from Immanuel Kant's synthetic unity of apperception, is "the most elusive phantom in the whole range of knowledge" (263), and "is the key to understanding the holistic foundation of personality" (Shelly, 2008, 92).

Although Holism is an "attempt at a synthesis" it is not to be understood as a system of philosophy, as Smuts (1942), like Friedrich Nietzsche, did not "believe very much in systems" and stated that Holism "tries to emphasize one aspect of thought that has hitherto been a neglected factor. I am trying to hammer out this neglected factor, which is, to my mind, all-important in getting the synoptic vision" (147).

The Roots of Smuts' Holistic Thinking

The origins of Smuts' holistic thinking can be traced back to his days as a student at Cambridge University, although it could be argued that even earlier roots of his holistic vision were born out of his childhood walks across the *veld* (Afrikaans word for field) in the Malmesbury district of the Western Cape of South Africa.[viii]

One of Smuts' favourite boyhood recollection in later years was walking around the *veld* with 'Old Adam', an aged Khoikhoi shepherd and veteran of the Cape Frontier Wars, who loved to teach him various aspects of the *veld*, like where to dig for edible roots and look for tortoises (Hancock, 1962). Old Adam was his only childhood friend and mentor, and in later years Smuts fondly recollected that Old Adam "used to delight me with stories from his native folklore...and could tell me of his own wonderful feats of arms in those border campaigns [Cape Frontier Wars]. I listened enthralled" (1940, p. 47). What is remarkable is that this relationship with Old Adam could be seen as a pivotal influence on Smuts - influencing his philosophy of Holism, military campaigns in the Anglo-Boer War, World War One and World War Two, international politics, and the formation of the League of Nations and eventually the United Nations. Obviously one can only speculate about the influence Old Adam had on Smuts, but the nature of the influence of the illiterate Old Adam on one of the greatest men in modern history, and consequently on some of the most significant ideas and events in our modern is a fascinating point to ponder—and could certainly be an interesting topic for further study.

In 1891, as a first-year law student he wrote a commentary called *The Nature and Function of Law in the History of Human Society*. Although never entirely completed it was nevertheless published as a shortened version, then titled *Law, A Liberal Study* in the college magazine (Anker, 2001). In this article Smuts, like integral theorist Ken Wilber would later, applied a developmental approach to culture, and understood it as a "gradual evolutionary liberation from the biological realm" (Anker, 2001, p. 43). Moreover, he also viewed the history of civil law from a developmental perspective, that is, as developing from an archaic form of law in "the embryonic stages in society" to a more sophisticated form of law in modern "Teutonic Europe" (Smuts, 1893/1996a, p. 40), arguing that public law evolved "from the primitive Family to the modern State" (Smuts, 1893/1996a, p. 41).

He pointed out “that public laws gradually progressed towards more and more respect for individual freedom and greater unity within humanity” (Anker, 200, p. 43). Smuts (1893/1996) says that “[t]he Person is recognized more and more; the rights of personality become more and more inviolable,” with “one law for all humanity” as the endgame for the evolutionary process of civil rights (p. 41). All Smuts’ subsequent ideas on Holism and politics were a modification and further development on the basic ideas expressed in this article.

Shortly after the aforementioned article Smuts (1892) wrote an essay, *On the Application of Some Physical Concepts to Biological Phenomena*, where he attempted to point out the natural law that is responsible for the evolution of civil rights in culture. In this essay he points out that there is an inherent process in the natural world that accounts for the gradual evolution from the inorganic to the organic world, and served as the “ultimate foundation for human evolution and the progress of civil society” (Anker, 2001, p. 43).

In 1895 he completed a manuscript on 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman, this after Smuts’ having received an honorary grant, which allowed him to write on a topic of his own choosing. The manuscript was later published in 1973 as *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality*. The aim of this book was to investigate the development of Walt Whitman’s personality “like any other organism” (Smuts in Hancock and Van der Poel, 1966, p. 53). Smuts understood Whitman as “an organic personality developing all his lifetime like a product of nature, travelling through the successive cycles of his growth.” (Smuts 1895/1973, p. 30) Smuts believed personalities like Whitman and Goethe had achieved the highest possible development as humans, and therefore would prove to be valuable subjects of study when trying to understand the personality as a whole. Smuts (1895/1973), believed that Whitman was “a true personality, strong, original, organic...a whole and sound piece of manhood” (p. 30) and that a study of his life, like other evolved wholes, could reveal a deeper insight in the nature of the evolutionary process of the universe.

Smuts believed that the human mind and personality was not “an herbarium” of dead species; it was rather a synthetic, creative whole, a “Hegelian *Idee* inherent in the personality” (Smuts in Anker, 2001, p.44), where its diverse appearances are more than the sum of its parts. “The application of the idea of evolution has hitherto been too analytic,” Smuts lamented and instead advocated a holistic view of evolution because “life is the most synthetic phenomenon we know” (Smuts 1895/1973, p. 31).

Between 1911 and 1912 Smuts worked on a manuscript called *An Inquiry into the Whole*. In this manuscript he continued to deepen the ideas explored in his earlier writing. It is in this manuscript that Smuts first coined the term “Holism”, which later appeared in print in 1926 in *Holism and Evolution*. In 1912 Smuts sent a draft of the book to his lifelong Cambridge University friend and mentor, H. J. Wolstenholme. To Smuts’ disappointment Wolstenholme was highly critical of the book and sceptical about the concept of Holism. Many of the ideas contained within *An Inquiry in the Whole*, was later expanded upon and reworked in *Holism and Evolution* (Hancock, 1962).

Holism and Evolution

Smuts wrote *Holism and Evolution* in 1926, in which he provided an overview of his theory of Holism, during a time that a materialistic worldview was dominant in philosophy and science. When Smuts developed his theory, the deterministic views of Hegel were popular, and Smuts strongly opposed the deterministic view of Hegel, setting out to explore the deeper structures behind Darwin's theory of evolution. *Holism and Evolution* can be understood as a reaction against the reductionist science and philosophy of his time, and an attempt to provide an understanding of the seemingly creative and progressive nature of evolution. Smuts (1926/1987) states:

At present the concept of life is so indefinite and vague that, although the Kingdom of life is fully recognised, its government is placed under the rule of physical force or Mechanism. Life is practically banished from its own domain, and its throne is occupied by a usurper. Biology thus becomes a subject province of physical science—the Kingdom of Beauty, the free artistic plastic Kingdom of the universe, is inappropriately placed under the iron rule of force. Mind again, which is closest to us in experience, becomes farthest from us in exact thought (pp. 3 – 4).

Philosophers point out that all theories have ontological and epistemological ancestry or foundational assumptions, whether implicitly or explicitly stated (Polkinghorne, 2004; Slife, 2005). As mentioned already, Smuts' notion of Holism is not meant to be a complete integrative system of thought, and can be seen as one of many such foundational concepts in science and philosophy. Smuts' (1926) book *Holism and Evolution* was an attempt to provide such a new foundational concept that could contribute to a more synoptic understanding of the world, and which he hoped would show that life and mind "are in their own right as true operative factors, and play a real and unmistakable part in determining both the advance and its specific direction" (p. 15), and not "to reduce life and mind to a subsidiary and subordinate position as a mere epiphenomena, as appearances on the surface of the one reality, matter" (p. 8), as the scientific materialists proposed.

Smuts (1926) was well-versed in Albert Einstein's theories of general and special relativity and pointed out similarly that the universe was created in successive and progressive increments as the result of activity in Space-Time "which expresses itself actuality as a passage, a process, a passing beyond existing forms and structures" (p. 337). As in Einstein, Smuts asserted that any phenomenon is really a "synthesised 'event' in the system of Relativity" (p. 89).

Smuts (1926) concluded that there existed an "inner driving force" and "creative principle" as an intrinsic part of the progress of evolution and referred to this creative and active force as Holism (p. 101). Holism was the creative factor responsible for the progressive evolution from matter, to life, to mind and finally the human personality. "Holism constitutes them all, connects them all, and so far as explanations are at all possible, explains and accounts for them all" (Smuts, 1926, p. 329).

Smuts (1926) suggested that when observing material structures the traces of Holism would be barely detectable, but when we study complex organisms we would find that "something more" exists beyond the elements which holds them all together. "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" (p. 282).

A superficial reading of Smuts can easily give the impression that he is suggesting a type of teleological animism, but Smuts rejected the theory of animism, and he also rejected a commonplace idea at the time, namely, that a transcendent spiritual realm acts on physical matter to animate it (Whitford, 1998). He believed that it was equally inaccurate "to reduce the lowly organisms at the beginning of life to pure mechanism," as it was "to explain them on the assumption of their having a complete personality like human beings" (Smuts, as cited by Hancock 1962, p. 292). In critiquing other approaches that attempt to explain the emergence of life from matter, Smuts (1927) points out that Naturalism does not account for creative evolution; Monadism incorrectly attributes mind and spirit to the inorganic realm; Idealism inaccurately assumes that "spirit" was present from the beginning of evolution and does not recognize that spirit evolved creatively (as proposed by Wilber and Hegel); and Spiritual pluralism fails to recognize the "really creative work of evolution" (p. 327).[ix]

Foundational Concepts of Holism

There are several foundational concepts which underlie Smuts' theory of Holism. In the next section of this current analysis we explore four of these foundational concepts. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive discussion on all the key terms and concepts of Smuts' Holism. However, we will focus on what we believe are four essential foundational concepts in understanding Smuts' Holism, which all have a significant contribution to make to metaphysical and existential issues arising in philosophical counselling.

The Relationship of Parts to Wholes

Smuts (1926) suggests that "wholeness is the most characteristic expression of the universe in its forward movement in time" (p. 101) and "individuation and universality are equally characteristic of Evolution" (p. 93). Smuts distinguishes his notion of wholes from earlier concepts of wholes, especially from Leibniz's Monads. In making his distinction he points out that his notion of wholes are not unchanging philosophical concepts and or mere mechanical systems that are confined to the biological domain (Whitford, 1998). "Not only are plants and animals wholes, but in a certain limited sense...atoms, molecules and chemical compounds are...wholes; while in another closely related sense human characters, works of art, and the great ideal of the higher life are or partake in the character of wholes" (Smuts, 1926, p. 100).

It is important to note that for Smuts the concept of wholes does not refer to the whole domain of nature as one unity. "When we speak of Nature or the Universe as a Whole or The Whole...we do not mean that either is a real whole in the sense defined in this work" (p. 352). Nor does Smuts refer to a spiritual Absolute. "The great whole may be the ultimate terminus, but it is not the line which we are following. It is the small natural centres of wholeness which we are going to study, and the principle of which they are an expression" (Smuts, 1926, p. 103). Consequently, the idea of God, Spirit or supernatural force active in evolution cannot be inferred from his notion of whole or whole-making.

For Smuts the whole and its parts are a synthesis which reciprocally influence and determine one another. He points to this fact by observing that "holism is of the parts and acts through the parts, but [it is] the parts in their new relation of

intimate synthesis which gives them their unified action" (pp. 125-126). This is not the same as the Hegelian viewpoint, often associated with holism, which propose that the whole determines the parts (Whitford, 1998). Although Smuts believed that wholes are more than the sum of their parts, he clearly pointed out that it was the result of the "structural relationship between the parts" that comprised the whole (in Whitford, 1998, p. 56).

For Smuts (1927) a chief feature of organisms is that "they involve a balanced correlation of organs and functions" (p. 125) and that they display a degree of self-regulation. Smuts believed that if there was an anomaly or disturbance "among the parts which upsets the routine of the whole, then either this disturbance is eliminated by the co-operative effort of many or all the parts, or the functions of the other parts are so readjusted that a new balance and routine is established" (p. 131).

The Notion of Fields

According to Smuts, to be able to have an adequate understanding of how wholes function and evolve one must turn to the notion of "fields." He considered the idea of fields as central to understanding his Holism, and also that for philosophy and science to adopt the notion of fields it will be "[o]ne of the most salutary reforms in thought" (Smuts, 1926, pp. 18 - 19).

Smuts (1926) believed that one of the great mysteries surrounding life is that "the sensible data are insufficient to account for its character and properties" (p. 116). Consequently, he believed that an analytic and reductionist understanding is hopelessly inadequate in providing an intelligible understanding to living organisms, as well as how life evolved from inorganic matter. To unlock some of the mysteries of life he suggested we must understand that each object, as well as concepts, also exists as fields beyond their observable "luminous points." Smuts (1926) writes:

We have to return to the fluidity and plasticity of nature and experience in order to find the concepts of reality. When we do this we find that round every luminous point in experience there is a gradual shading off into haziness and obscurity. A "concept" is not merely its clear luminous centre, but embraces a surrounding sphere of meaning or influence of smaller or larger dimensions, in which the luminosity tails off and grows fainter until it disappears. Similarly a "thing" is not merely that which presents itself as such in clearest definite outline, but this central area is surrounded by a zone of intuitions and influences which shades off into the region of the indefinite (p. 17).

Smuts' notion of fields influenced, and was in turn influenced by, his understanding of causality. He was critical both of Cartesian dualism, which emphasized a fundamental split between mind and matter, and at that time the prevailing mechanistic view of life that tried to account for life and mind in the same way as it explains the natural sciences. (See Medard Boss, 1983, for a similar critique of Freud's metapsychology.)[x] Smuts also criticized vitalism for being "nothing but a pale copy of physical force" believed to control an organisms externally (Smuts, 1927, p. 166). Smuts (1926) was of the opinion that these mentioned views represent an inaccurate view of cause and effect, and suggested that we should:

[c]onceive of a cause as a centre with a zone of activity or influence surrounding it and shading gradually off into indefiniteness. Next conceive of an effect as similarly surrounded. It is easy in that way to understand their

interaction, and to see that cause and effect are not at arm's length but interlocked, and embrace and influence each other through the interpenetration of their two fields (p. 18).

According to Smuts the deterministic concept of causality was due to the mechanistic view of things with rigid boundaries which ignored the fact that these observable “luminous” point in Space-Time also extend as surrounding fields. It is only within these fields that things and organisms interact with each other. Whitford (1998) suggest that Smuts’ view on causality is in keeping with modern systems theory; and his critique of the view that sees objects and organism as having rigid borders, is echoed in the work of Bohm (1984) and McNeill & Freiburger (1993).

Mind-Body Problem

Apart from suggesting that there are no rigid boundaries between objects and organisms, Smuts also did not see mind and body as having clear boundaries, nor is it correct to assume that they interact with each other. He believed the concept of ‘interaction’ is inadequate to decide the relationship between body and mind. Instead, he proffered the term “intro-action” as more accurately describing the relationship. “Mind does not so much act on Body as penetrate it, and thus act through or inside it” (p. 270).

Smuts alleged that mind evolved from matter and life to move the organism towards greater freedom. The concept of freedom played a central role in Smuts’ conception of the human condition, and correlates and predates Heidegger’s (1927) ontology of *Dasein* and notion of “being-in-the-world.” Smuts writes that Mind “through its power of experience and knowledge comes to master its own conditions of life, to secure freedom and control of the regulative system into which it has been born. Freedom, plasticity, creativeness become the keynotes of the new order of Mind” (p. 234).

Smuts rejects the idea of a disembodied and transcendent spiritual realm that interacts with, or influences, mind and the body. “The universal realises itself not in idle self-contemplation, not in isolation from the actual, but in and through individual bodies, in particular things and facts. The temple of the Spirit is the structure of matter; the universal dwells in the concrete particular” (Smuts, 1927, p. 93).

Smuts also rejects the Gnostic outlook that Spirit or Soul is to be given ontological priority and value over the body. “The view that degrades the body as unworthy of the Soul or Spirit is unnatural and owes its origins to morbid religious sentiments The ideal Personality only arises where Mind irradiates Body and Body nourishes Mind, and the two are one in their mutual transfigurement” (Smuts, 1927, p. 270).

Smuts furthermore rejects the dualistic mind-body view of Berkeley, which suggests that “God is the agent that acts between the two different substances,” and Spinoza’s view that mind and body operate “as two modes of action under one substance” (in Whitford, 1998, pp. 60 – 61). Smuts (1927) says “the fact is all these theories have an element of truth... Mind and Body are elements in the whole of Personality...This whole is an inner creative, recreative and transformative activity, which accounts for all that happens in Personality as between its component parts” (p. 270-271).

Smuts considered the human personality to be the latest and pinnacle manifestation of Holism in the known universe. In his theory of Holism he considered the movement toward human wholeness an important component. He states that "[t]he object of the holistic movement is simply the Whole, the Self-realisation and the perfection of the whole" (Smuts, 1927, p. 324). For Smuts this "Self-realisation" of the "holistic movement" manifests in the human realm as a movement towards greater freedom. This ontological notion of our being-towards-freedom has, for Smuts, significant existential implications. This position is in stark contrast to thinkers like Hegel (evolutionary determinism), and others who suggest humans are part of a greater collective movement towards realization of Spirit/God/State. For Smuts the highest manifestation of Holism is in the freedom of the individual.

To be a free personality represents the highest achievement of which any human being is capable. The Whole is free, and to realize wholeness or freedom (they are correlative expressions) in the smaller whole of individual life represents not only the highest of which an individual is capable, but expresses also what is at once the deepest and highest universal movement of Holism (Smuts, 1926, p. 312).

This notion of freedom also has significant existential implications from a socio-cultural and political perspective. The highest realization of mankind does not lie in some future idealized collective state-of-being, realized Spirit or collective level-of-consciousness, of which the highest existential duty of the individual is to contribute to this goal - but rather in the here and now, in the free individual. The State is not seen as a whole, for which the individual is only a means to an end, and only exists to contribute to it; but rather the State should serve and promote the freedom of the individual. The State should not be seen as a holistic unity or a holistic organism, but rather as merely aggregates of wholes (individuals), and never more than the sums of its parts. Smuts called these type of organisations "holoïds," which are mechanical and not true organisms.

Rejection of both Materialism and Idealism

Smuts rejected the materialist conception dominant at the time of writing *Holism and Evolution*. He argued that a purely materialistic view of the natural world constitutes "a mere collection of *disjecta membra*, drained of all union or mutual relations, dead, barren, inactive, unintelligible" (as cited in Hancock, 1968: 180).

Even though Smuts rejects a strictly materialist conception, he did not revert to idealism. While Smuts suggested that there is an inherent striving for continual growth in wholeness or fullness in the universe, he insisted that such striving is not towards a being of any sort or a whole of any type. He argued strongly against positing the existence of a deity as a "Supreme Whole" (Smuts, 1926, p. 338) of which all other things are parts, whether conceived as "Mind" or organically as "Nature," insisting that such reasoning was "unsound and false" (p. 341). "No inference to a transcendent Mind is justified," Smuts insisted, "as that would make the whole still of the same character and order of its parts; which would be absurd" (p. 342).[xi]

It is important to note that for Smuts the “spiritual order” (although he never fully elaborates on his use of the concept) is not something that has always been present in the evolution of the universe, but as a later stage of the process of Holism. “The evolutionary facts of Science are beyond dispute, and they support the view of the earth as existing millions of years before ever the psychical or spiritual order had arisen; and what is true of the earth may be similarly true of the universe as a whole” (Smuts, 1926, p. 340).

Moreover, Smuts did not adhere to a belief of Spirit as transcendent from matter, or that Spirit infused matter with some creative energy. “There is ... no spiritual Society of the whole universe, but there is Holistic order, which is something far greater, and stretches from the beginning to the end, and through all grades and degrees of holistic fulfillment. Holism, not Spiritualism, is the key to the interpretation of the universe” (Smuts, 1926, p. 344). One caveat here: it must be pointed out that when Smuts used the term “Holism” instead of “Spiritualism” is not a mere semantic switch where the concept of “Holism” now has similar foundational assumptions that “Spiritualism” has. Smuts (1926) was in agreement with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose book *A Critique of Pure Reason* he studied in great depth while fighting in the Boer War, that proof of a transcendent influence or being cannot be found in studying nature (as natural theology suggests), and suggests that such belief “must rest on quite different grounds” (p. 342).[xii]

Smuts does not see Holism in any way as a ‘spiritual’ force, with religious undertones. He adds that Holism negates “the far reaching spiritual assumptions of the Monadology, or Panpsychism” and “is ... in firm agreement with the teachings of science and experience” (Smuts, 1927, p. 344). For Smuts, wholes are co-creators in the process of evolution. “It is the synthesis involved in the concept of the whole which is the source of creativeness in nature” (p. 126). He also notes that apart from Holism’s creative features (Eros) it also contains repressive (Thanatos) aspects so that “the balanced whole of the Type is achieved” (Smuts, 1927, p. 192).

Conclusion

In this essay we will briefly explore philosopher and Commonwealth statesman General Jan Smuts’ theory of Holism as a potential uplifting philosophy which can be of use for philosophical practitioners to guide their counselees “for confronting problems of living.” We highlighted that Smuts’ contribution to philosophy and psychology is often not adequately credited, and it is therefore not surprising that, to the best of our knowledge, Smuts theory of Holism has not yet been discussed in the context of philosophical counseling—this essay is the first attempt at such an endeavor.

Endnotes

[i] For the purpose of the essay when referring to Smut’s theory we write Holism with a capital H and when referring to holism as used generally, we use a lowercase h.

[ii] American philosopher Ken Wilber's (2000, 2006) integral theory is often referred to as the AQAL model, with AQAL representing all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states and all types; these five elements signify some of the most basic repeating patterns of reality.

[iii] It must be noted that Wilber (personal communication, 21 July 2009) does acknowledge Smuts' book *Holism and Evolution* as having a significant influence on him when he was begging to develop his theories, but has not indicated this sentiment in his writings.

[iv] Parts of this article is adapted from a paper presented, The Integral Jan Smuts, at The Fourth International Integral Theory Conference, CA: San Francisco, 19 July 2015. (Du Plessis & Weathers, 2015).

[v] Smuts has at times erroneously been associated with institutional apartheid in South Africa. It must be noted that Smuts was the leader of The United Party, which was in opposition to D. F. Malan's National Party who officially implemented apartheid in South Africa 1948. Smuts was vehemently opposed to institutional apartheid as proposed by the National Party.

[vi] Being a member of the British War cabinet after being one of their fiercest enemies fifteen years before in the Anglo-Boer War is an unprecedented event in British war history.

[vii] Perls established a psychoanalytic training institute in Johannesburg and in 1942 joined the South African armed forces, serving as a military psychiatrist.

[viii] On October 17, 1934 Smuts gave a lecture at St. Andrews' University where he was installed as Rector. In this speech he mentioned the story about how Adam used to delight him "with stories from his native folklore" (Smuts, 1940, p. 57).

[ix] To assist in providing a comprehensible articulation of Smuts' Holism it will be useful to indicate out how Smuts' Holism resembles and differs from other concepts of holism. In his book, *Holistic Thought in Social Science*, Denis Phillips (1976) illustrates three philosophical positions that he calls Holism 1, 2, and 3. Phillips' (1976) analysis of the three types of holism attempts to define each of its basic tenets. "Holism 1 maintains, in part, that one has knowledge of the parts only, then at least some properties of organic wholes or systems cannot be predicted" (Phillips, 1976, p. 34). Holism 1, which he calls organicism, is derived from the Hegelian idea that the whole is prior to, and more than its parts (Whitford, 1998). Phillips (1976) notes that organicism is essentially a deterministic approach. Smuts' Holism is often equated with organicism (Barbour 1996). However, Smuts (1927) would not support Phillips' Holism 1 as he did not accept Hegel's deterministic views, as Smuts viewed evolution as essentially a progression of freedom (Whitford, 1998). Phillips' Holism 2 is a position that points out that, in contrast to holism 1, "that the properties of organic wholes or systems, after they have been found, cannot be explained in terms of the properties of the parts" (Phillips, 1976, p. 34). Phillips (1976) adds further

that it "is only Holism 2 that is directly opposed to methodological individualism" (p. 40). Consequently, Smuts (1927) would not support Holism 2 as he endorsed the scientific method (Whitford, 1998). Phillips' (1976) category of Holism 3 is the position taken by modern physics and is neither reductionistic or anti-reductionistic, but rather calls for definition of terms and methodologies to study wholes (Allen, 1991). Whitford (1998) believes Smuts' Holism is in many ways more closely aligned to Holism 3, but because Phillips (1976) does not address the existential dimensions of holism, it is not possible to place Smuts entirely in this category.

[x] Medard Boss (1983) points out that the natural scientific method has its limitations in explaining the human realm, as it originated from and is only sovereign in the non-human realm (natural sciences). Boss points out the dangers of explaining higher-order complex phenomena by using methodologies and epistemologies dominant in lower orders of complexity (inorganic matter). He believes that in Freud's metapsychology there is inevitably an abstraction and tapering from our lived engagement in-the-world (See Du Plessis, 2014, 2018).

[xi] Piet Beukes in his books *The Holistic Smuts* (1989) and the *Religious Smuts* (1994) makes the case that Smuts was a deeply religious man and a Christian (which was true until Smuts went to Cambridge, where he states that his reading of Walt Whitman freed "me from much of the theological or conventional preoccupations due to my early pious upbringings" (Smuts in Beukes, 1994, p. 66)). Although I (Du Plessis) hold the work of Beukes in high esteem, I believe that Beukes had a strong personal bias to describe Smuts as a Christian. Although Smuts had great respect for the Greek version of the New Testament and the historical figure of Jesus as a manifestation of a deeply evolved personality, one could not rightly call Smuts a Christian, as he did not believe in Christian and church dogma. Beukes fails to see, as Wilber (2006) points out, that any religious tradition can be understood from different levels of development. I have found no evidence in Smuts' writing that his interpretation of the Christian story would define him as a Christian in any conventional sense.

[xii] We the authors found it amusing picturing Smuts reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* around the campfire, and upon enquiry from his fellow Boer soldiers (who were mostly illiterate) as to what he was reading, trying to explain (and we image with little success) to them. Hence his endearing nickname amongst his fellow Boer soldiers, "Slim Jan", translated as "Clever Jan".

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