

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

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This paper is filled with promise for anyone interested in the development of philosophical counselling. The authors (Gary Du Plessis and Robert Weathers) tell us they will explore “the utility of Jan Smuts’ theory of Holism within the context of philosophical practice”. In particular, they state they will argue that “Smut’s theory of Holism is ... (a) potential uplifting philosophy which can be of value to philosophical practitioners to inspire, educate and guide their counselees” when dealing with problems. This paper is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, while Smut’s Holism received attention in the 1920’s and 1930’s, since then it has largely been ignored. A merit of this paper is that Smuts, as the originator of holism, may get a wider degree of contemporary recognition. Secondly, the authors explicitly connect Smut’s metaphysical Holism to philosophical counselling. While some philosophical practitioners claim to use an array of philosophical ideas and / or works in their practice, few provide detail concerning which philosophers they use, to what end and in what manner. This void makes the practice of philosophical counselling entirely dependent on the understandings and expertise of the particular practitioner. While on the one hand this could be regarded as a boon, it could, on the other hand, undermine the reception and / or success of philosophical counselling, especially if the understanding and expertise of the philosophical practitioner is not adequately developed and refined. This is a very real possibility given that philosophical counselling is not a profession. This ‘void’ could be addressed if there were a repository of philosophies that are relevant to philosophical counselling, that detailed how they might be used, and in service of which ends. In this respect this paper might contribute to philosophical counselling by identifying and elaborating on an additional philosophical ‘tool’ that could be available to the philosophical practitioner. Finally, and for more personal reasons, by arguing for the relevance of Smuts’ metaphysic to philosophical counselling, the authors make the first connection, that I am aware of, between a South African philosopher and philosophical counselling. As a South African interested in philosophical counselling this move is momentous.

The authors begin by offering a historical background which provides the context in which Smuts grew up and developed intellectually, the range of his life experience, (botanist, soldier, philosopher, politician, and statesmen) and the contributions he made to world political history. Following this, they offer an account of the influence he had on Anglo-Saxon psychology. His influence on Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy, in particular, is highlighted. In addition, they point to a level of influence Smuts’ Holism might have had on psychiatry. The authors then introduce Smuts’ theory of Holism and discuss the origins of his holistic thinking, and go on to introduce his seminal text – Holism and Evolution.

They detail four foundational concepts that underlie Smuts' theory of Holism. These include: the relationship of parts to wholes; the notion of fields; mind-body problem; the rejection of materialism and idealism. While the authors state that the four foundational concepts "all have a significant contribution to make to metaphysical and existential issues arising in philosophical counselling" they make no attempt to identify what these issues might be, or to illustrate or argue for the contributions the concepts might make. While this is in itself confounding, of greater concern is that, having expounded on the four concepts, the paper abruptly ends with so much unsaid and unexplored.

The authors suggest, in the title, that Smuts' metaphysic may be an uplifting philosophy, but do not explore this at all. If they, at the very least, provided an account of what constitutes an uplifting philosophy, or offered an example, the reader might have been in a position to determine for themselves whether or not Smuts' offers an uplifting philosophy. In the absence of detail, it is difficult to know if Smuts' philosophy would uplift the individual, the community / society, or humanity as a whole; what sort of upliftment it would offer - intellectual, emotional, spiritually; or how such upliftment might occur. The reader is left asking - would mere exposure to Smut's philosophy be sufficient to uplift them, or would it have to be applied in some specific way to achieve said upliftment? In the absence of answers to these questions, the reader is also left wondering about the role the philosophical practitioner would assume. Would they merely introduce the participant to the idea or text, or would they perform a more integral role in the upliftment process?

While the authors express that their intention is to explore the utility of Smuts' philosophy within the context of philosophical practice, they take an extremely narrow view on philosophical counselling as they only mention Cohen's Logic Based Therapy (LBT) approach. While some philosophical practitioners, in concert with Cohen, advocate problem solving and therapy as ends of philosophical practice, not all do. Some, such as Achenbach and Lahav, openly oppose the idea of philosophical practice having instrumental ends, and instead endorse the pursuit of intrinsic ends, such as skepticism, virtue or wisdom. Admittedly, focusing on Cohen's approach is not, in and by itself, problematic for this project. There would be value in exploring how Smuts' philosophy could be used in a single approach to philosophical counselling. Unfortunately, the authors make no attempt to explore and explain Cohen's method other than mentioning it in passing. For example, they state that it entails 'six steps', but do not name them or describe how they operate. Moreover, having stated the main concepts of Smuts' Holism, the authors do not return to explore how his Holism might be applied within the framework of Cohen's LBT approach.

In addition, if the authors wish to assert that Smut' Holism can help us to confront 'the problem of living', they should not only clarify which problems of living they are referring to, they should also illustrate how an application of Smuts' philosophy might inspire, educate or guide us to effectively deal with these problems. While the authors are correct that there is a lack of literature regarding the "therapeutic value and existential implications" of Smut's philosophy, sadly, as a result of the above omissions, they make no venture, however tentatively, to filling this void.

The authors end the paper with the statement: "to the best of our knowledge, Smuts theory of Holism has not yet been discussed in the context of philosophical counselling – this essay is the first attempt at such an endeavour". Since they

hardly venture into the domain of philosophical counselling, and make no attempt to point to the possible contributions Smuts' Holism might make to philosophical counselling, the reader is regrettably left with a sense of a promise unfulfilled. Having said that, the paper had a positive effect on me as it has inspired me to make my own explorations into Smut's philosophy in a bid to understand it more and to discover its potential relevance to philosophical counselling.