

Wholeness - perceiving dynamic unity

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Abstract: While the ancient Greeks saw wholeness as essential for recognising the many (Klein, 1968; Lowry, 1980), modern culture has a different perception of the whole and the parts; where wholeness lies hidden behind ‘the many’ (Franses, 2016). In today’s analytical mode of consciousness, the parts create the whole - proceeding in linear fashion from one element to another (Bortoft, 1996). While traditional Western science is currently dominated by ‘reductionism’ – explaining wholes in terms of their parts (Sheldrake, 2013) - as a discourse, holistic science creates conditions to rediscover wholeness through the parts by developing a holistic mode of consciousness (Bortoft, 1996). Inspired by Goethean Science, phenomenology, and modern advancements in quantum theory (Franses, 2016), a holistic approach to the world considers the importance of relationship – i.e., that understanding the whole and the part lies not in their abstraction, but in their *dynamic relationship*. This paper shows that real engagement with wholeness is made possible by cultivating a different mode of perception which is able to move dynamically between two modes of consciousness (Bortoft, 1996; Kastrup, 2015; McGilchrist, 2009). From such a point of view, perception of the world can neither be categorised into the whole nor the part; rather, it suggests a paradoxical *process* within which unity of the whole and the part can be conceived as the same phenomenon. While not without its problems, such a different way of seeing could have deep implications for how the modern West currently engages with global challenges.

Introduction

When writing a paper on ‘wholeness’, one of the fundamental questions one might ask is “what is wholeness?” Situating this exploration within the discourse of holistic science,¹ I will attempt to illuminate the difficulty that this question poses within contemporary consciousness and attempt to reframe the idea of wholeness in a more epistemologically enabling way;² moving towards a holistic appreciation that provides an opportunity to consider, and hold, the *quality* of wholeness. Finally, I will suggest some possibilities and limitations that such an approach might offer in the light of current challenges facing our modern world.

¹ Holistic science focuses on the study of complex systems, holding that any system is more than merely the sum of its individual parts; focussing on observation of phenomena within the ecosystem as part of reciprocal, participatory relationships; of which the observer is also a part. This is in contrast to the reductionist approach, which reduces an idea or system to its component parts; suggesting that an understanding of the parts explains the whole. In this approach, the observer’s presence is generally removed from analysis.

² When referring to consciousness, I am referring to a *state of awareness* as an embodied reality (i.e., one’s own existence, sensations, thoughts, etc). This paper will not explore the scientific question of the origin of mind which followed on from the theory of evolution, or, more specifically, the origin of consciousness in evolution

What is wholeness?

In the mid 1990's, philosopher of science Henri Bortoft published a book entitled *The Wholeness of Nature – Goethe's Way of Science* (1996). Examining the phenomenological and cultural roots of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) way of science, Bortoft brought to life Goethe's intuitive style of investigation and learning, showing Goethe's way of science as an opportunity for experiencing 'authentic wholeness'; a method of enquiry which is largely ignored in modern science with its preferred detached, reductionist, intellectual and analytical approach. Indeed, this modern scientific approach is being increasingly recognised as foundational in the creation of many contemporary problems – stemming from an escalating divorce from nature (Bortoft, 1996; McGilchrist, 2009; Sheldrake, 2013). Certainly, since the time of the Scientific Revolution the West has come to overly value the 'fragmented' (part-focussed) experience of reality, within which the skills of rational thought and the intellect thrive (McGilchrist, 2009).³ As a result of this approach to life, "everything we encounter becomes one thing or another; different things *distinguished* from one another, with each thing *outside* the other, and all things *separate* from one another" (Livingstone, 2016, p. 2, referencing Bortoft, 1996, p13, my italics). According to neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, today's modern Western epistemology and ontology is so fixed on this one position that humanity now has difficulty moving beyond rational and literal ways of relating to each other and nature as a whole (2009).⁴ However, although this epistemological position has been dominant for several hundred years, it has not been the only way of approaching the world, as the work of Goethe, and similarly oriented scholars show (for example, Schelling, Hegel and Coleridge).⁵ These aforementioned thinkers did not oppose the strict mind/matter divide, but "went beyond it", considering the relation of the human mind to the world as participatory (Tarnas, 1991, p. 433), and which, in its own way, could be known and experienced.

Certainly, in sharp contrast to the empirical scientific method, Goethe's approach to science particularly valued the intuitive mode of human consciousness, which aimed for an 'encounter' with the whole of the phenomenon being observed – i.e., as it presented itself *in*

³ Precise dates for the Scientific Revolution are disputed, however, according to traditional accounts it began in Europe at the end of the Renaissance period and lasted until the mid 18th Century. The scientific method prioritises mathematically precise, logical, rational, quantitative thinking.

⁴ In his book entitled *The Master and His Emissary* (2009), McGilchrist sets out a case of epistemological duality within the Western mind; arguing that the left and right hemispheres of the brain have differing insights, values and priorities, with distinct 'takes' on the world. While both hemispheres have been proven to be involved in everything that human beings do and have considerable ability to perform any task, the striking difference is that each hemisphere goes about their tasks in different ways. The left hemisphere's thinking is decontextualised and tends towards logic, dealing efficiently with abstraction and categorisation (i.e., the parts). The right hemisphere deals preferentially with actually existing things in the real world, concerned with interconnectivity and the relation between phenomena (2009, p. 50) – i.e., 'wholeness' of experience. McGilchrist's thesis suggests that our contemporary society has grown left hemisphere dominant; leading to our "forgetting of everything that makes us human" (2009)

⁵ These thinkers, who were part of the speculative philosophical movement of German idealism, reacted strongly to the growing popularity of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and its effect upon contemporary thought (scientific, political, cultural). This movement was closely linked with Romanticism.

relationship with the observer. Rather than starting from a point of division and abstraction – removing the living presence of phenomena from the natural environment - Goethe investigated his objects of study in their lived environment, exploring the parts in order to reveal the true nature of the whole. In this way, for example, he arrived at an understanding of light and colour that contrasted with the theory of Sir Isaac Newton. ⁶

Authentic and counterfeit wholes

Making a distinction between authentic and counterfeit wholes, Bortoft suggests that through the lens of contemporary science we are accustomed to thinking that the parts create the whole in “some summative manner” (1996, p. 9). Suggestive of what Bortoft calls a counterfeit whole, this approach denies the primacy of the whole, meaning that it is approached and developed via an “integration of parts” (1996, p. 9). Such a way of seeing places the whole secondary to the parts, implying that the whole comes after the parts. However, Bortoft argues that the whole is far more complex than our current epistemic position of linear progression would suggest, and that in actuality, the whole and the part cannot be separated into “disjointed positions”, for they “are not two as in common arithmetic” (1996, p. 11). Moving towards the notion of an “authentic whole”, Bortoft writes:

We do not have part and whole, though the number category of ordinary language will always make it seem so. If we do separate part and whole into two, we appear to have an alternative of moving in a single direction, either from part to whole or from whole to part. If we start from this position, we must at least insist on moving in both directions at once, so that we have neither the resultant whole as a sum nor the transcendental whole as a dominant authority, but the emergent whole which comes forth into its parts. The character of this emergence is the “unfolding of enfolding,” so that the parts are the place of the whole where it bodies forth into presence. The whole imparts itself; it is accomplished through the parts it fulfils (1996, p. 11)

The whole is therefore present in each part, emerging simultaneously with the accumulation of the parts; immanent within them. With each part a place for the “presencing” of the whole (Bortoft, 1996, p. 12), the part shows the way to the whole – *through the part itself*. Subtly different from approaching the whole through the parts, in this sense “authentic wholeness”

⁶ Sir Isaac Newton’s theory of light provides an example of traditional, scientific thinking which concentrates on abstraction – the ‘parts’ – as a way to understand the ‘whole.’ Using a prism as a tool to investigate light, Newton projected a hypothesis onto the phenomena of light using both his mind and the tool (the prism). Newton demonstrated, through experiments and mathematics, how this theory of light without colour can be shown as many colours within light when shone through a prism. This theory was later interpreted by his contemporaries as showing the separation of light into separate colours. However, this theory actually demonstrates a ‘*way of seeing*’ projected on the colours as they appear through a prism. The separation of colours cannot be seen by the senses alone in any experiment. By contrast, Goethe offered a *relational* approach to light and did not believe tools were necessary to see how light and colour behaved. Understanding that each phenomenon is its own theory, Goethe suggested that a theory of light should be able to be perceived through observing the phenomenon directly. Realising that colours appeared *only where there was a boundary*, Goethe saw that for colour to arise there must *be light and dark; not just light*. Indeed, this ‘coming into being’ of colour through the relationship of light and dark can be observed directly in nature – at the horizon, at sunset, at sunrise etc. In this way, Goethe was expressing the phenomenon of light and colour as its own living theory – seeing dynamically the unfolding of the process of wholeness; the living *relationship between light and dark*. (Bortoft, 1996)

manifests itself as nested and relational, whereas “counterfeit wholeness” is linear and summative. Authentic wholeness, therefore, is characterised by a dual movement into the whole through the parts and back again; an encounter made possible by passing through the parts. Demonstrating this particular reflexive movement by using the experience of speaking, listening, reading and writing as an example, Bortoft states:

We can see that in each case there is a dual movement: we move through the parts to enter into the whole which becomes present within the parts. When we understand, both movements come together. When we do not understand, we merely pass along the parts (1996, p. 12).

Essentially, interpretation of the “authentic whole” recognises the way in which the whole, which is the meaning of the text, comes into presence through and in the parts – i.e., through the sentences, which themselves are created from words, created from letters, etc. When one contemplates wholeness in this way, it is possible to see the “slipperiness” of the quality of such an idea; for where does wholeness begin and end? Indeed, for Holistic Science Lecturer Philip Franses, wholeness is elusive; a quality which one meets “on a path through that moment to other moments” (<https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/blog/the-creative-relation-of-whole-and-part> - accessed, 27/6/2017). When considering letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books, it is clear to see that wholeness is never finished, appearing to us in a particular moment, and always suggesting there is something beyond; a continually unfolding process of becoming something new. As Franses continues, “the implication of this understanding is that wholeness is always something we are meeting newly” (2015), leading us beyond where we are, taking us further, asking for our participation, never reaching the end. Wholeness, therefore, can only ever be a *quality*; a dynamic process of unfolding, which continually arises and changes through the parts.

In contrast to our modern “spectator awareness” (Bortoft, 1996, p. 13) resulting from the empirical method, the revealing of authentic wholeness asks something more of the observer – asking us to go beyond normal ideas of reductionism, certainty, linear logic and rationality. Indeed, Bortoft and Franses suggest that we cannot possibly know wholeness in such a limited way; i.e., as a thing. In trying to see the whole as a thing, rather than a quality, the authentic whole is lost, as it can only come into presence through the parts themselves. In the contemporary scientific approach, authentic wholeness is hidden from the person who has formulated his/her own questions about the phenomena. Only able to hear “an echo of their own voice” (Bortoft, 1996, p. 17), counterfeit wholeness is the whole produced from fragmented things, which must, somehow, be put back together again. Authentic wholeness, on the other hand, is an *encounter with the dynamic process of life itself*.

The difficulty of wholeness – a personal encounter

My own encounter with ‘wholeness’ is grounded in direct experience through the discourse of holistic science. In September 2013, I started the MSc in Holistic Science at the Schumacher College, Devon, UK. During the first week I was introduced to Goethean Science – an ecological method of understanding the living world through the development of “thinking and perception that integrate self-reflective and critical thought, imagination, and

careful, detailed observation of the phenomena” (<http://natureinstitute.org/nature/> - accessed 16/04/2017) negating the need to extract phenomena out of the natural environment.

The practice of Goethean Science, invites a participatory movement with nature; rather like a two-way conversation, giving space for the phenomenon of one’s study to disclose itself. Requiring a fundamental shift of attention within everyday experience, Goethe’s goal was to enter into a relationship with an ‘object’ (he particularly studied plants and the phenomena of colour) by actively studying it without the blinkers of established theories, classifications and pre-formed mental models – known as ‘exact sensorial perception’ (Bortoft, 1996). Then, through a process termed ‘exact sensorial imagination’, Goethe deepened his understanding by actively remembering/reliving every detail of the phenomenon in his imagination, inwardly recreating his original observations; paying close attention without preconceived ideas, labels or judgements (Bortoft, 1996). In this way, Goethe discovered that he could anticipate the forms each phenomenon of his study would take as it unfolded into the future; i.e., seeing dynamically in terms of what these phenomena are and what they will become.

By cultivating openness, curiosity, and interest through his imagination, and paying attention to thoughts and feelings, he [Goethe] slowly brought forth words to describe what he perceived... (Livingstone, 2016)

My own experience of practising the Goethean method was with a plant called Groundsel, and it was probably one of the most difficult and challenging activities that I have ever participated in. As the week progressed, I found myself increasingly devoid of language, struggling to articulate my experience. Indeed, as the days passed, Groundsel made me acutely aware of my difficulty in finding appropriate words; showing me the limitations of my default mode of cognition and inviting me towards a fundamental shift of attention with regards to my experience *in relationship* with this plant. It was then that I realised that I must be touching upon what ‘authentic wholeness’ might be. Instead of meeting the plant from the standpoint of already knowing how to know (Bortoft, 1996), and subsequently preventing the phenomenon from revealing itself truthfully in its authentic wholeness, I was able to contemplate the plant from a place of unknowing and openness. Through exact sensorial perception and exact sensorial imagination, I was able to appreciate the relationship of Groundsel to the world, and the plant’s relationship with the earth, sun and rain, which all provide the means for Groundsel to live – the expression of the dynamic wholeness of nature living through the plant. Indeed, such a “participatory epistemology” (Tarnas, 1991, p. 434) suggests consideration of phenomena within the larger web of life, opening up an understanding of the world that is filled with dynamic, integrated and interconnected beings.

Certainly, Goethe’s scientific method involved months, even years, of study of one particular phenomenon; carefully exploring, detailing and sensing the nature of the object of his study. However, what was interesting for me as a result of this brief experience, was to note the different mode of perception that I needed to engage in, in order to sink into a different, and deeper, recognition of wholeness – i.e., to be able to perceive nature and the world as a dynamic interplay of relationships. Becoming acutely aware of the implications that such an epistemological stance could have with regards to contemporary problems and challenges, I

was also distinctly aware of the difficulties involved in conceiving of the world in this way; particularly from my own struggle articulating my understanding of Groundsel, and from the standpoint of the modern world's reliance on mechanistic, reductionist science, reason and human progress (Sheldrake, 2013, Chapter 1) - all of which limit an encounter with authentic wholeness.

Wholeness – possibilities and limitations

The Ancient Greek culture saw wholeness as essential. Indeed, in relation to number, Aristotle spoke of every quantity being recognised through the one, as the one is the source of number as number (Klein, 1968, p.53, quoted in Franses, 2015). Similarly, in 5th century AD, Proclus, while undertaking existential exploration, suggested that the concept of the “One” is the ground of the cosmos (Lowry, 1980, p48-49, quoted in Franses, 2015). In both cases, the one becomes ‘other’ which then returns to unity. However, in contemporary society, this relationship seems to have undergone a reversal, where wholeness is now secondary and the parts (the many) are the focal point of reality. Indeed, modern society has a different perception of the relation of wholeness to the parts, where wholeness is hidden and the perception of the many has become the dominant paradigm upon which the Western world is based (Franses, 2015). In this analytical mode of consciousness, the parts create the whole - proceeding in a linear fashion from one element to another (Bortoft, 1996). While traditional Western science is currently dominated by ‘reductionism’, as a discourse, holistic science creates conditions to return to the whole through the parts by developing a holistic mode of consciousness (Bortoft, 1996) – a change in the currently accepted relationship where wholeness is always present and revealed dynamically through the ‘presencing’ of the parts; a simultaneous movement.

At this point, I would like to suggest that our current reductionist perceptions of reality might be proving inadequate for addressing the complex, interconnected problems of the modern world, and as advancements in holistic science show, there is a growing understanding that addressing the global crises that face humanity will require new methods for knowing, understanding and valuing the world. An integrated epistemology that embraces both the rational knowledge of scientific empiricism and inner knowledge may well provide a different way of approaching these global challenges, creating new ideas and new understanding. Of course, there are limitations; which, I suggest could potentially arise from trying to engage with these ideas from a contemporary approach. Indeed, a major limitation to the ideas discussed in this paper, centre on the fact that our current epistemological model is unable to hold the idea of paradox, and is uneasy with the skills of the intuition and imagination. Therefore, trying to define and explain such a way of approaching the world is, by its very nature, challenging, difficult, and ‘slippery’; as our current thought processes, and resulting language, are unable to provide an adequate container for the quality of ‘wholeness’ trying to reveal itself.

However, in a tentative move beyond such limitations, and towards possibilities, I would like to conclude this paper with the ideas of three scholars who, in their respective ways, are exploring techniques for encountering the whole; opening doorways *towards wholeness*.

Firstly, McGilchrist explores the idea of wholeness through brain hemispheres and epistemological duality; suggesting that the right hemisphere sees the ‘whole’, and the left hemisphere sees ‘parts’ (2009, pp. 46–47). According to McGilchrist, our experience of reality originates in the right hemisphere, which hands the process of ‘being’ over to the left hemisphere where the ‘parts’ can be known intellectually (i.e., through categorisation; words, numbers, symbols and metaphors). However, if the process stopped here, reality itself would remain decontextualised. The circle is only completed when the process continues, and what has been deconstructed is made whole again by being returned to the “world grounded by the right hemisphere”; where the whole process is able to ‘live’ again (2009, p. 195):

There needs to be a process of reintegration, whereby we return to the experiential world again. The parts, once seen, are subsumed again in the whole...So what begins in the right hemisphere’s world is ‘sent’ to the left hemisphere’s world for processing, but must be ‘returned’ to the world of the right hemisphere where a new synthesis can be made...It seems that, the work of division having been done by the left hemisphere, a new union must be sought, and for this to happen the process needs to be returned to the right hemisphere, so that it can live (McGilchrist, 2009, pp. 195–199)

In McGilchrist’s theory, the right and left hemisphere create an understanding of the wholeness of human lived experience in a dynamic, unfolding process of *forever becoming* (my italics); where rigid boundaries between whole and parts melt into each other, yet at the same time, delicately remain.

Secondly, engineer and philosopher Bernardo Kastrup explores the idea of wholeness and parts through his theory that the brain is merely the image of a self-localisation process of mind, in a similar fashion to the way that a whirlpool is the image of a self-localisation process of water (2013). Kastrup rejects the theory of materialism and suggests that in our contemporary society we continue to take the “package for the content, the vehicle for the ...cargo” (Kastrup, 2013, p. 209). Suggesting that life itself is a grand metaphor playing out on the membrane of mind (the whole), he suggests that it is “self-reflectiveness that gives us a chance of interpreting...life at all” (2013, p. 211). However, the idea of self-reflexivity suggests an illusion of separation and prevents us from seeing our full nature and making something from it. Nevertheless, in Kastrup’s theory, all mental contents fall in the field of self-reflection. Negating the need for dualistic thinking, self-reflection becomes all-encompassing – i.e., part of the unfolding whole. Essentially, Kastrup’s theory moves towards the idea that the parts and whole become a process of one great unfolding; a style of thinking similar to McGilchrist.

Finally, Franses speaks of wholeness revealing itself in its elusiveness. Using a phrase “*That which is not yet set*” (Franses, 2015), Franses captures the idea of something emerging from the parts, “still undefined; not yet categorised, fixed or compartmentalised” (Franses, 2015). It is in the playful dance that the whole and the part arise, before they actually commit to form, into a definitive relation; each resting upon the other, in a circular logic which in contemporary thought leaves us unsure where to begin – i.e., with the part, or with the whole? However, according to Franses, it is by taking a leap of faith and surrendering to the moment

of “*That which is not yet set*” that the dynamic nature of wholeness can reveal itself - the possibility of life expressing itself.

By committing to yield to the primal relationship of part and whole, beyond our contemporary understanding of it, and beyond the imposition of labels, thoughts and judgments, perhaps we may well discover the gateway to new levels of understanding and knowing the world; realising new ways of engaging with current challenges and difficulties.

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