

What is Wholeness?

There is a wholeness that is given, and a wholeness that is to be achieved or experienced. Our ordinary perception seems by nature fragmentary, unwhole. The knower stands over against the known, apart from it, and the knowledge gained is ‘objective’ a la Popper, something which can be stored in books and libraries. Knower, known and knowledge thus remain three disparate realities, and the whole cannot be in this situation.

But today we have access to two other levels of perception, thanks to modern physics and modern astronomy. If we term our ordinary sense-perception the macro-level, there is below it the sub-atomic or micro-level, and above it the cosmic or mega-level. The mega level of astrophysics is partly perceivable through our telescopes and partly through our mental processes. The micro-level is less perceptible to our senses. The electron microscope does not lead us to direct vision of the sub-atomic level.

At the level of elementary ‘particles’, our eyes, even with the best magnifying instruments at our disposal, do not directly encounter the reality. We need elaborate tracing and measuring mechanisms even to get a good guess about the way an electron or a neutron functions. But in order to trace or measure a sub-atomic particle, we need to add a quantum of energy to the particle, even to detect it. But a single photon particle from the measuring device colliding with the measured particle already deflects its course and transforms it. So our knowledge of the subatomic level remains conjectural and not directly sensate.

Nor do we perceive the universe as a whole with our senses. Telescopes can reveal cosmic phenomena in a region of the universe, and electronic computing can bring together infrared or other photographs from various regions on a single screen. But there is no way for our telescopes to gather data from all the galaxies and all the ‘regions’ of the universe. So we cannot “set eyes on” the universe, as our space travellers in recent times set eyes on the earth as spaceship. In fact, the universe is not even conceptualisable, or “image-

able” pictorially. We cannot stand outside the universe to see it ‘objectively.’

The whole that we want to understand must integrate what we perceive at all the three levels, the sub-atomic, the ordinary and the cosmic/universal. But our perception of our own selves uses a different mode from that which we use at the micro, macro and mega levels. Any notion of the whole must include the one in whom the notion functions, the ‘subjectivity’ of the perceiver or conceiver, which effects and shapes the perception at all four levels - micro, macro, mega and mind.

The net results of the above observations is that the whole is not available, either to conceptualisation or to descriptive symbolic or linguistic depiction. Neither concept nor language can grasp the whole. If this hard fact is not firmly grasped, we are likely to fall into new delusions about our knowledge and concepts.

It is my humble view that Fritjof Capra, in his ‘The Turning Point’ falls precisely into this trap. After having exposed the faults of a mechanistic model of reality, he opts finally for “the Systems View of life”, seeming life on the model of a “self organizing system.” Since he includes the environments as part of the dynamic system, he gives the impression that he is dealing with the whole.²

Wholeness reflects itself at various levels, but cannot be objectified in any situation. The whole is the Absolute Subject, in which all subjectivity and all objectivity ultimately *merge* and from which they (subjectivity and objectivity) constantly *emerge* at various levels. Even that statement must be qualified with the further statement that it is only a conceptual linguistic statement, and therefore does not ‘describe’ the whole.

Once conceptual image which the Physicist David Bohm³ has popularized is the “Holoverse.” Conceptual images can sometimes help us to discern the defects of other conceptual images and Bohm’s concept of the whole as a Holoverse is eminently useful in this sense. The analogy for the whole is taken from the recent technology of holography,⁴ a three dimensional photography technique using wave

properties of light rather than the straight line propagation of light used by conventional lens photography. The important feature of the hologram is not merely its three-dimensional perspective, but the fact that each part contains the whole in miniature. Since the holograph analogy for reality suggests a static condition, Bohm uses the expression 'holo-movement.' His conception of the whole is in terms of a multi-layered order which is dynamic. Life is one of the layers of such order, consciousness another layer of different complexity, and ordinary inorganic matter a third order within the system, which included many orders unknown to us as yet. Bohm is sanguine in his belief that the various layers of dynamic reality in the 'holoverse' is in principle knowable by us.

Brilliant as the Bohmian concept of the universe as a mutually related multi-layered web of structures and patterns of dynamic energies, it remains a *concept* and as such inadequate to depict reality. We humans, however, are conceptual - linguistic creatures, and by training we have become incapable of dealing with reality without concept and language.

We should at this point reflect also on the question of the adequacy of our two-dimensional logic of non-contradiction to cope with the whole; the rules for valid inference, if confined to such a two-dimensional or binary logic or a prepositional calculus using Boolean Algebra, can only lead to inescapable contradictions.

Scholars like Bohm and Capra, though aware of the fact that the binary logic and calculus have their roots in the mechanistic Newtonian perspective, sometimes proceed as if a conceptual mathematical representation of reality was possible. Bohm discusses the problem of language in his *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*⁵ and comes out with some profound statements, e.g. that language itself is a human function which ought to be studied scientifically, and that language distorts when we take nouns (subject and object) more seriously than the verb (predicate). Language, the subject-verb-object mode, is one of the causes of the experience of fragmentation. Bohm offers us practically a new language called the rheo-mode, which emphasizes verbs, dynamic processes, rather than things or nouns conceived

statically.

But this does not solve the language problem. Even in the rheo mode, there is the temptation to mistake the map for the country, the language for the truth. Of course, Bohm admits that Reality and Knowledge are processes, as has been held from Heraclitus to Whitehead. “All is flux”, including knowledge, thought, statement, and language. Becoming is being. Knowledge too is a flowing river, a dynamic field. Even this writing is part of that flow. Bohm clearly sees this. But for him, the key question is: “Can we be aware of the ever-changing and flowing reality of this actual process of knowledge?”⁶ In other words, the best we can do is to be aware that awareness is a stream that keeps on flowing. Bohm has learned much from non-western cultures, but was still a westerner all the same in his sanguine confidence about conscious awareness of awareness as a flowing stream as the best we can do in knowing reality as a whole.

This certainly is not the view in an eastern way of dealing with Reality, such as Madhyamika Buddhism. This way begins by distinguishing between the “Two Truths” - one Truth of worldly convention and the other of ultimate meaning. According to Chandrakirti, the worldly convention (*samvrti*) can be true (*tathya-samvrti*) or false (*mithya-samvrti*), depending on the correctness or otherwise of the perception and the reasoning process. But even a “true” worldly convention or *samvrti* has only a “dependently co-originating” or *pratitya-samutpanna* reality. As Nagarjuna states it.

The reality of all beings
Neither arises nor passes away.....
Where there is quiescence of mental activity.
There the need for discourse ceases.⁷

David Bohm's *rheo-mode* of linguistic expression is still within that *samvrti* which is the result of discursive mental activity. Only when that activity is quietened, and the “thundering silence” of the *Sunyata* mode is experienced, there can be perception of the ultimate truth, in which the knower and the known are experienced as one, the knowledge itself being that experience. Wholeness, when fully

experienced, is an experience of liberating union, not of conceptual awareness, however dynamic that awareness may be. The west now puts a premium on dynamic as opposed to static. But there is a possible cessation of awareness, in which such dichotomies as static and dynamic are themselves surpassed. It is, for the Buddhist, *nirvana*, the blowing out of the analytical consciousness, where awareness itself is transcended in the liberating experience of the whole.

Can Christians reconcile themselves with such a perception? Is this not *monism*, *advaita* and all that kind of heresy? I personally do not think so. I think the Christian perception of reality is both holistic and apophatic as in Buddhist philosophy. Especially in the Eastern Christian tradition we always conceive the Creator with the Creation as a single reality within which the created order subsists only by the wisdom, will and word of the Creator, who continually sustains and guides it. And the cosmos without the Creator is not a whole. The whole cannot be conceptually grasped. We can only realize our own dependence on the Creator and in that realisation find meaning and sustenance. We cannot know the whole, but the whole makes it possible for us to fit into it, and there to find bliss and peace.

Notes

1. Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1983. Original Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982 and Wildwood House, London, 1982.

2. op cit. See especially chapter 9 on "The Systems View of life" - pp. 285-332, also p. 89. See also Ervin Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1972, and *The Systems View of the World*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1957, New York, Braziller, 1972.

3. David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

4. The technique of holography was developed by the Engineer-Physicist Dennis Gabor in 1947, He won the Nobel Prize in 1971. In conventional photography using lenses, only the straight-line propagation of light is utilized. In holography, which is a no-lens technology, the wave functions of light are utilized - one phase of the

wave being reflected by another 'reference wave', and the two together being recorded on a photographic film negative. The holographic theories of David Bohm and Karl Pribram are discussed in detail in the special issue of *Drornenon*, Spring/ Summer 1980, and in the special issue of *Re-vision*, Summer/Fall, 1978. For a Soviet account, see Yu. I. Ostrovsky, *Holography and Its Application*, Mir Publishers, Moscow, 1977.

5. op. cit pp 28 - 64 p. 64

6. ibid. p. 64

7. A free translation of *Mulamadhyamakarika* 18:7

For a fuller discussion see Gadjin Naga's *The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy*, Eng. Tr. John P. Keenann, State University of N.Y. Press, Albany, 1989.