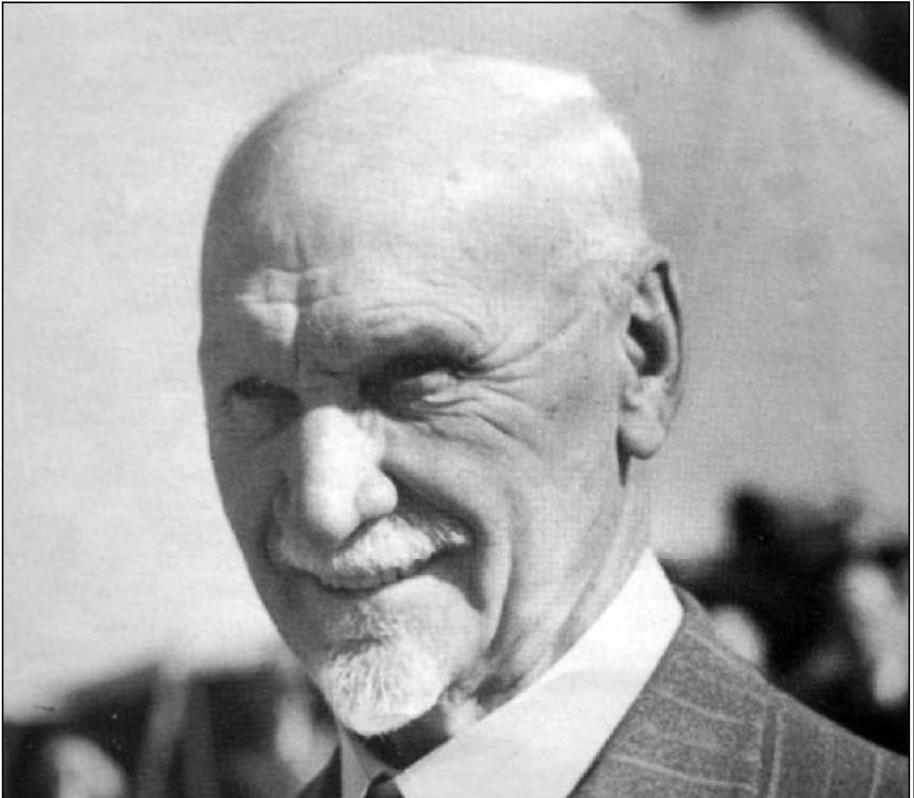


SMUTS HOUSE MUSEUM

**AN INTRODUCTION
TO HOLISM**



THE GENERAL SMUTS FOUNDATION

INFORMATION SERIES: NO 2

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Authors: Howard Savage, founder member and first chairman of the Friends of the General Smuts Foundation, and Penny Grimbeek, curator, Smuts House Museum, 1992-2000

Edited: Prof Elwyn Jenkins, Committee member, Friends of the General Smuts Foundation

Layout & DTP: Cheryl Dehning, Committee member, Friends of the General Smuts Foundation

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Friends of the General Smuts Foundation,
P O Box 80, Irene 0062 South Africa and
Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa,
Northern Areas Region, P O Box 435,
Ferndale 2160

Info@wessanorth.co.za

www.wessa.org.za



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www.smutshouse.co.za

e-mail: friends@smutshouse.co.za

General Smuts had a very much wider experience of life than was usual for an educated man of his time.

He was born on a farm in the Western Cape. He attended school for only five years before going on to Victoria College in Stellenbosch, where he obtained a combined degree in Arts and Science. He was awarded the Ebdon Scholarship to Cambridge University, where he read Law. At Cambridge he distinguished himself by being the only person ever to have written both parts of the Law Tripos in one year and achieve a Double First. He won the George Long Prize for Roman Law and Jurisprudence.

He was appointed State Attorney (1898) in Paul Kruger's Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek at the time of the developing friction within the Republic with the "Uitlanders", who had strong affiliations with Britain and Germany.

He became a successful Boer general during the Anglo-Boer War. After the war he was a senior administrator and negotiator, pressing for reconciliation between Boer and Briton in South Africa.

His reconciliation policy was really a practical form of intellectual holism.

He played the part of conciliator more and more clearly from then on. In 1917 he put forward the idea of a Commonwealth of Nations which would replace the old concept of Empire. This world-embracing application of societal holism was a masterstroke, as it produced a unique blend of loyalty to the Crown plus the national pride of the component countries. Smuts's and Botha's convictions on the need for reconciliation with the defeated Germany after World War I were not heeded. Smuts predicted that the Versailles Treaty would be the prelude to the next great war.

Smuts's holistic philosophy is also evident in the pivotal role he played in the founding of the League of Nations and later the United Nations, organisations which would strive for world peace.

To all this must be added Smuts's grasp of the science of his day. In Jan Christian Smuts we find a unique combination of intellect, talent, and experience. We are fortunate that he expounded his life view in the philosophical approach which he called *holism*.

An Introduction to Holism

When examining holism, one studies the formation and the functioning of combinations (wholes). These wholes, in their turn, combine with others to form more complex combinations.

It is clear that this is quite different from scientific analysis, which deals with separating the parts of combinations.

Smuts's definition of *holism*, as given in the Oxford English Dictionary, reads: "The tendency in nature to form wholes, that are greater than the sum of the parts, through creative evolution."

Thus holism is:

1. natural;
2. an ever-present process using energy;
3. a process of combining, not just mixing, which creates original material by evolutionary processes. This "material" can even be abstract, like music or philosophy.

To elaborate on point 3:

One must grasp the fact that the components sometimes surrender the characteristics they had before combining, and that the combination is a different substance. e.g. sodium and chlorine, harmful to man individually, when combined as common salt, are an essential part of man's diet; or, hydrogen and oxygen, two explosive gases, combine to form water, a substance which is essential to life and which has very different behaviour and uses from the two gases.

Combinations go on to form further, more complex, combinations. Think of the chain of events in which inanimate minerals nourish living cell material (like grass), which nourishes cattle, which, with their milk and meat, nourish people (very complex organisms), who have the ability to create, both in the material and the abstract sense.

To elaborate on point 2:

At the most basic level, these combinations are formed by the fortuitous proximity of materials, and the occurrence of natural phenomena such as heat, cold, pressure, light, drought or saturation, giving chemical combinations (like metallic oxides).

At a higher level, all living cells assimilate these chemicals, and, stimulated by the phenomena, regenerate themselves in accordance with their life-cycle. We enter here the realm in which one life depends on another for survival – lions eat buck, fleas feed on animal blood, one plant is a parasite on another. You can see that plants and animals are wholes in themselves but are also the interdependent parts of greater and more complex wholes, such as an environmental system. Think how complex a forest is and how important it is that it is healthy and keeps the rivers that flow through it clear.

At the human level, the elements of intellectual diversity (choice, compatibility, imagination etc.) enter the picture.

People can choose with whom they wish to associate, to what extent and for what purpose. Experience has shown that people who come together for a purpose will often produce ideas and select a course of action very different from the ideas held by any one individual before the meeting.

This is understood, correctly, as creative evolution, and the combination is said to be “greater than the sum of the parts”.

A deeper study of Smuts’s definition shows up an anomaly which disturbed Smuts himself. It is the phrase “greater than the sum of the parts”. The difficulty lies with the scientifically established facts that energy is not lost and that the energy-mass aggregate is constant.

Smuts was aware that there was an unmeasurable aura of possibilities round each part, and suggested that in these auras, when combined, the apparent creative evolution takes place which makes the whole “greater”. (Other authors, particularly Laurens van der Post and Konrad Lorenz, draw attention to the existence and importance of the unmeasurables in life.) So perhaps we are left with substituting “different” for “greater than”.

At the time Smuts was writing, in 1924, the general public was very aware of three major scientific debates. They were:

1. Einstein’s theory of relativity, which emphasised that the universe is a very large whole.
2. The general composition of the acorn – a small, very powerful whole.

An Introduction to Holism

3. Darwin's theory of evolution, which showed how a variety of species evolved from a common ancestor.

Smuts's work collected these theories into a major observation.

The nations who had been enemies during World War I formed an international body to keep world peace, the League of Nations. It was an attempt to use the immense power of the Holism process to prevent the development of evil power.

Sadly, it failed, but a lesson was learned: that in the human field, the outcomes of the holistic process are not always and automatically benevolent. Constant intellectual guardianship is required to direct and adjust the process towards the declared goal, such as lasting peace.

"So," you ask, "what use do I make of all this knowledge of Holism?"

First: You can recognize well-functioning wholes when you see them and protect them from damage and even help them forward. These could be flourishing parts of the environment, well-run farms or industries, happy families or contented communities.

Second: You could look for wholes that are not functioning well and are damaging others. These you could set about trying to improve. Examples would be people damaging the environment by polluting it, removing fuel wood without a replanting programme, or uncontrolled open-cast mining.

Third: You could make sure that all the groups of which you are a member use the tremendous power they have, for the good of those around them and of their environments. This is not always easy but it gets easier the more success you have.

There are some further thoughts connected with Holism well worth studying. A few are:

1. Dead material can support life. Grass that will never grow again feeds cattle, bread keeps us alive, medication restores health, and so on.
2. Holism is closely linked to systems engineering. A car has:
 - i. a fuel system
 - ii. an ignition system
 - iii. a propulsion systemand many others.

The parts undergo no change themselves and surrender none of their characteristics, but combine to form a motoring system with the possibility of controlled powered motion.

3. When people are brought together synergetically, it is very close to Holism. Although the effect of the people working together is said to be greater than the sum of their individual efforts, there is no creation of original material.
4. Nature, as a whole, is less wasteful than any of its parts taken separately. For example, there are many species of fish that lay thousands of eggs at a spawning. Many are not fertilized and they become food for other species. Further down the line, many of those fertilized are eaten by sea birds or seals before reaching maturity.
5. No life is independent. No man is an island. Life is always drawing on the rest of nature to sustain itself. Think of how dependent we all are on rain, fresh air and the events of day and night, to say nothing of our dependence on each other.
6. Perfection is sterile. Perfection is taken as that state that neither gives off, nor consumes, energy. That is an unachievable state for any living whole. Even the components of atoms are in constant motion. It is thus very interesting that sterile, inanimate substances can support life.

Once you have grasped the idea that the universe is composed of functioning wholes, of differing sizes and with different parts to play, and that we are all parts of these wholes, you will appreciate that there is nothing daunting in the idea of Holism. It is simply a way of looking at life which helps you to see that life is systematic, not without purpose, and that you, as an intelligent part of it, have a responsibility to make your input creative, constructive and conservative of existing good.



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e-mail: friends@smutshouse.co.za

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Smuts House Museum
P O Box 36
0062 Irene
Tel: +27 (0)12 667 1176/1180
Cell: +27 (0)71 100 8481
e-mail: smutshouse@iburst.co.za

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