

The Changing Meanings of Holism: From Humanist Synthesis to Nazi Ideology

Anne Harrington

Reenchanting Science: Holism in German Culture From Wilhelm II to Hitler

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. 309 pp.
ISBN 0-691-02142-2. \$39.50

Review by

William McKinley Runyan

Anne Harrington, professor of the history of science at Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts), is author of *Medicine, Mind, and the Double Brain: A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought* and editor of *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*. Harrington is also codirector of the Harvard Interfaculty Initiative in Mind, Brain, Behavior and a consultant to the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Mind-Body Interactions. ■ William McKinley Runyan, professor in the School of Social Welfare and research psychologist at the Institute of Personality and Social Research at the University of California, Berkeley, is recipient of the Henry A. Murray Award for contributions to personality psychology. Runyan is author of *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* and editor of *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*.

Ever since the Enlightenment, there have been a variety of romantic reactions against a harsh natural science reductionism, which seemed to see the world as nothing more than a causal mechanism, with no place for human experience, purpose, or meaning. Are these humanistic topics ones that science can contribute to, or that science should even try to address?

The title of Harrington's book, *Reenchanting Science*, comes from an address that Max Weber gave in 1918 at the University of Munich after the devastating Ger-

man defeat in the Great War. "Weber knew that the students listening to his talk were hungry for existential and moral orientation," and would appreciate a talk "that addressed their demands for personal relevance and larger meaning in their studies" (p. xvi). His lecture, "Science as a Vocation," argued that empirical science served to "disenchant" the world, stripping it of "spiritual mystery, emotional color, and ethical significance and turning it into a mere 'causal mechanism'" (p. xv). Weber's message must have been deeply unsatisfying to the students, since he argued that science "could give no answers to the burning questions of existence, and it must not try, regardless of the pain and unsatisfied hungers that it left in its wake" (p. xvi).

Not all scientists, however, accepted this view. Harrington's book tells the story of four German-speaking life and mind scientists who "argued that a continuing commitment to responsible science was compatible with an ethically and existentially meaningful picture of human existence; but only if one were prepared to rethink prejudices about what constituted appropriate epistemological and methodological standards for science" (p. xvi). A new conception of science, which viewed the world more holistically and less atomistically could, it was hoped, "reenchant" the world.

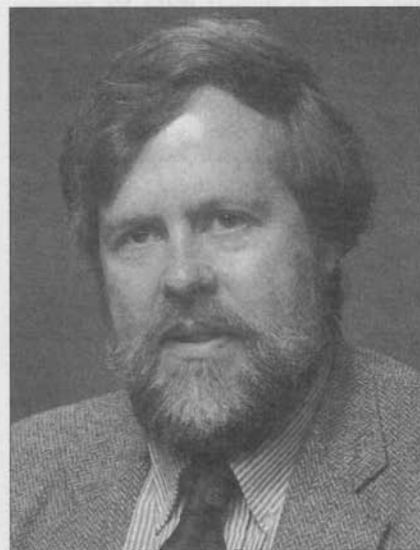
Changing conceptions of holism

American psychologists may be most familiar with the language of holism through

Gestalt psychology and perceptual wholes, or through humanistic psychology, with its concerns for subjective human experience, authenticity, and self-actualization. Humanistic psychology had significant links to the earlier German debates, in that holistically oriented German immigrants including Kurt Goldstein, Herbert Marcuse, and Fritz Perls helped to teach a generation of American youth "to speak an individualist language of wholeness, human potential, and inner transformation" (p. 211) which would resonate through the 1960s and after. However, it



Anne Harrington



William McKinley Runyan

may well be disturbing to contemporary advocates of holism to learn of the ways in which holism was at least one strand of early Nazi ideology, used to argue for a unified German *Volk* under Hitler, or to claim that Aryan holistic thinking should be prized over mechanistic, atomistic "Jewish thinking."

Harrington's book provides a brilliant and beautifully written historical analysis of the multiple and changing meanings of holism in the life and mind sciences in Germany. Its subtle and differentiated analysis of the many meanings of holism and their social-political implications is bound to complicate and deepen the ways that psychologists think about holism and the history of their discipline. The topic is not a marginal one for psychologists because of the ties of holism to Gestalt psychology, personality psychology, humanistic psychology, cultural psychology, eco-feminism, and so on.

Harrington argues that there is no single meaning of holism, but rather a family of meanings, of which she distinguishes four. First, holism could mean opposition to atomism, or to seeing organisms as merely the sum of elementary parts or processes. Instead, physiological processes should be understood in terms of their functions for the entire organism. Second, holism could mean an effort to reintegrate mind and body, with psychosomatic medicine as an example of such relationships. Third, holism could mean looking not just at an individual organism, but rather at organisms embedded in larger systems, such as in the "lived world" of organisms, or in nature as a whole, or in relation to the total evolutionary process. Finally, holism was sometimes used to critique politics, the community, or the individual's existence and to suggest paths for renewal. (Given my current understanding, I would want to differentiate between organic holism, perceptual holism, experiential holism, mind-body holism, political holism, and field or contextual holism, as well as to note philosophical distinctions between theoretical, epistemological, and meaning holisms.)

Harrington argues, and in my view, effectively demonstrates, that internalist histories of German holistic life and mind science which focus only on the development of ideas are not necessarily wrong, but rather can be "misleadingly incomplete" (p. xxiii) in leaving out the changing cultural and political meanings of holism. Harrington's work provides a model of how to relate internalist history of science to "external" history of science focusing

more on cultural, social, and political contexts.

The book is organized around four German-speaking holistic scientists, active between 1890 and 1945. This review will emphasize her discussions of the Gestalt theorist Max Wertheimer (1880–1943) and of neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein (1878–1965) because they have the most direct ties to psychology and may be of greatest interest to readers of *Contemporary Psychology*. The other two figures she includes are behavioral biologist Jakob von Uexkull (1864–1944), and clinical neurologist Constantin von Monakow (1853–1930), who illustrate other facets of the complex cultural and political meanings of holism.

Harrington uses these four biographies not to pursue a hagiographic "Great Man" approach to the history of science, but rather, to tell a story with "multiple viewpoints" (p. xxiv) and to convey some of the internal tensions and intellectual and moral ambiguities in German holistic science. In my view, a powerful advantage of this multiple biography approach is that it avoids the error in social studies of science of too often ignoring the personal and psychological in favor of the social and political. In spite of the pendulum swing in social studies of science replacing the biographical and psychological with the social and cultural, it is still possible to analyze internal scientific issues and wider social contexts without losing sight of individual human beings. A group biography strategy provides a valuable way of analyzing the local sites in which the personal, the scientific, and the sociopolitical continually co-construct each other.

Max Wertheimer and Gestalt psychology

Even though Gestalt psychology was initially perceived in America as a radical, new innovation when it was developed by Max Wertheimer along with Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka, it harkened back to prior meanings of gestalt, and was attacked by some for misapplying the older concepts (p. 103). While holism sometimes portrayed itself as fighting against the Machine (an overly mechanistic order), Gestalt psychology saw itself opposed to Chaos (a lack of order).

This dichotomy resonated back to earlier contrasts of Gestalt versus Chaos by Houston Stewart Chamberlin (1855–1927), who in *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) combined advocacy of Gestalt with what he saw as a golden-haired, blue-eyed Teutonic race, imposing

order on a lowly, chaos-spreading Jewish race, images later used in Nazi propaganda and in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. By the time the term Gestalt was used by Max Wertheimer, it had a German lineage going back to Martin Luther and to Goethe, along with quasimystical and often conservative political tones.

Only with these powerful original meanings in mind can we appreciate all that was at stake when Max Wertheimer made the decision to use this same culturally and politically loaded word, *Gestalt*, to describe his socially liberal, Jewish-dominated, and empirically oriented research program in Berlin. (pp. 111–112)

(For more details on the history of Gestalt psychology, see Ash, 1995.)

Was it necessary to concur with Tolstoy's view that "Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" (p. 118). Max Weber had said that it was indisputable that science provided no answer to this question. Wertheimer, in contrast, argued that such resignation was unnecessary and resulted not from science, but from an inadequate understanding of science. He argued that if science was properly done, it could study entire wholes and thus connect more closely with lived experiences that people cared about. This Gestalt vision, though not persuasive to all, was later used by those in America fighting against an aggressive behaviorism and in the development of personality psychology, culture and personality, and humanistic psychology.

With the rise of Nazism, Wertheimer left Germany in 1933 and moved to the University in Exile at the New School for Social Research in New York City, (where Abraham Maslow attended his first seminar in the fall of 1933). In his book, *Productive Thinking*, published two years posthumously in 1945, Wertheimer attempted to show how the clarity provided by Gestalt thinking was valuable in understanding freedom and ethical justice.

There is a certain poignancy in the fact that, during the same years that former colleagues in Germany were using Gestalt to promote mystical racism and fascist politics, Wertheimer was defining the term as a principle of clear thinking that would help defend threatened values of freedom and democracy. (pp. 138–139)

Kurt Goldstein and the self-actualizing brain

Kurt Goldstein was, like Wertheimer, born a Jew, although not strongly identified with

religious traditions. In the First World War, Goldstein organized The Institute for Research Into the Consequences of Brain Injury to assess and to develop programs for brain-injured soldiers, which operated in Frankfurt from 1916 until Hitler came to power in 1933.

Goldstein's closest collaborator in Frankfurt was the Gestalt psychologist, Adhemar Gelb (1887–1936). Working with a 24-year-old patient named Schneider, who became their paradigmatic patient, like Anna O. for Breuer and Freud, Goldstein and Gelb developed principles of holistic neurology. Schneider had received two wounds in the back of his head, and even though suffering from severe brain injury, he learned to compensate for his perceptual defects in elaborate ways that he was unaware of. The brain apparently strove to synthesize the chaos of experience to produce organized wholes, although with severe brain injury, it sometimes lost this capacity. After these experiences in the clinic, Goldstein began to argue for revised scientific principles and methods to accommodate them. In the older view, organisms were seen as a set of independent processes. "Atomistic" thinking and research was seen as misleading. "The nineteenth-century deterministic and piecemeal view of the organism appeared to have empirical support only because data had been obtained in misleading, faulty ways" (p. 151).

In 1933, after Goldstein had moved from Frankfurt to Berlin, a group of storm troopers marched into his hospital and began seizing staff members. Goldstein was taken to a prison, where he was beaten with sand-filled rubber hoses. After appeals from psychiatrist Eva Rothman, who later became Goldstein's second wife, he was released from prison with a promise to leave Germany forever. He went to Switzerland, then Amsterdam, and came to the United States in 1935, settling first in New York and later in Massachusetts as a visiting professor at Brandeis University. He maintained close ties with other exiles such as Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, Max Horkheimer, Paul Tillich, Karen Horney, Charlotte Buhler, and Albert Einstein. Goldstein developed new American friendships largely among humanistic psychologists, including his colleague at Brandeis, Abraham Maslow, and Gordon Allport, Gardner Murphy, Rollo May, and Carl Rogers.

Goldstein never fully adapted to the United States, having a continuing problem with the language and perhaps with the loss of his former socioeconomic position. He kept a portrait of Goethe in his

home, and it was said that his profile even looked somewhat like Goethe. In his later years, Goldstein "was increasingly vocal about his sympathy with Goethe's passionate attacks on the moral and aesthetic sterility of the Newtonian worldview" (p. 171). As others said, "more Goethe and less Newton" (p. 179). Goldstein argued for a Goethean approach which included both human values and experienced human reality. Goldstein felt that such holism might help "prevent the perspective of the physical natural sciences from leading mankind towards self-destruction" (p. 171).

Holism and Nazism

In 1935, when National Socialism was called "politically applied biology," holism and biology had taken a different course. Besides racist biology and anthropology, there was a call to return to "authentic 'German' values and 'ways of knowing,' to 'overcome' the materialism and mechanism of the 'West' and the 'Jewish-international lie' of scientific objectivity" (p. 175). There was a "condemnation of Jews as an alien force representing chaos, mechanism, and inauthenticity" (p. 175), and talk of the German people as an "organism" in which the individual was subordinate to the whole: "You are nothing, your Volk is everything" (p. 175).

Hitler himself used metaphors from conservative holism in *Mein Kampf*, speaking of the democratic state as a "dead mechanism," as opposed to his vision of Germany as "a living organism with the exclusive aim of serving a higher idea" (p. 175). Talk of Gestalts and wholes was sometimes used to justify the "führer principle," that since Hitler embodied the will of the people, his authority was absolute. In a hierarchical social organization, each level could claim its authority from the führer or leader at the next highest level, on up to Hitler.

In 1937, a psychology professor at Jena, Friederich Sander, argued that two basic motives could be found behind National Socialism,

the longing for wholeness and the will towards Gestalt. . . . Present-day German psychology and the National Socialistic world view are both oriented towards the same goal: the vanquishing of atomistic and mechanistic forms of thought . . . scientific psychology is on the brink of simultaneously becoming a useful tool for actualizing the aims of National Socialism. (p. 178)

One wonders though about the extent to which this can be taken as an adequate

representation of the motivating goals of National Socialism, a common cultural gloss on Nazism at the time, and/or a careerist bid for support for Sander's own research program. Such a mix of intellectual, political, and personal factors may, however, be needed to understand incidents throughout the whole history of psychology.

Holism provided a rich set of metaphors which were sometimes used in support of totalitarian and anti-Semitic thought, but they could also be used on the other side. Wilhelm Reich, for example, argued that fascism was not an example of wholeness, but rather a product of worship of the machine, with alienation from holistic and authentic biological impulses.

During the course of the Nazi era, the tide turned against holism within official party ideology. The Nazi state was not monolithic, but rather "polycratic," with different powers, such as the Nazi party, big business, and the army each competing with one another. One faction had Aryan and anti-Semitic racial ideals and was sympathetic to holistic thinking, including ideologues like Alfred Rosenberg, Julius Streicher, or Rudolf Hess; whereas a second faction was made up of medical technocrats under the SS who wanted to overthrow holism and critiqued it as a Roman Catholic plot. By the late 1930s, Nazi mechanists were winning out in a power struggle with the holists, as there was also a wider shift within the regime from ideology to pragmatics, in both increasing militarization and in the mechanics of racial screening, sterilization, and eventually, extermination.

Conclusion

When I came of professional age, receiving a PhD in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice from Harvard University in 1975, with an interest in subjective human experience, I was relatively sympathetic to holism, at least to what might be called "experiential holism." I found myself responsive to the psychodynamic and romantic interests of Henry Murray, and I was most interested in the psychodynamic and neo-analytic traditions, humanistic psychology, culture and personality, and the study of lives (Runyan, 1982, 1994), all being traditions that drew on various elements of holistic and experiential approaches to psychology. Along with other people interested in these traditions, I was exposed to what was seen as a "good" holism, as opposed to a "bad" mechanistic, behavioral, or reductionist psychology. At the same time, however, many others, for

intellectual, social, and personal reasons of their own, were uninterested in, or sometimes repelled by these "soft," holistic approaches to psychology, having greater faith in, and impatient to get on with building more objective, more experimental, "more scientific" forms of psychology.

After reading Harrington's book, I suspect that psychologists, whether initially attracted to or repelled by holism, will never be able to think in quite the same way about the meanings of holism, or the ways in which holistic discourse has operated in wider cultural and sociopolitical worlds. For advocates of holism, it can be distressing to learn that holism is not always linked with the good, the true, and the beautiful. Critics of holism, though, need to be mindful of the complementary lesson that objectivity, quantification, and "science" are not always on the side of the angels. Personally, I remain interested in what might be called "experiential holism" while cautious about "political holism," with its dangers of veering in totalitarian directions.

Much as I admire Harrington's exposition of the cultural and political meanings of holism, I would argue that a comprehensive historical analysis needs to include the personal meanings and significances of holism. Although touched on in her biographical portraits, much more could be done on the multiple personal meanings of holism to its advocates as well as to its critics. Current conventions in the history of science focusing on the "cultural and political meanings of science" need to be expanded to "the cultural, political, and personal meanings of science."

Is it still advisable to accept Max Weber's claim that science is unable to speak directly to issues of human experience and meaning? Or, with the development of alternative methodological and epistemological approaches, is it possible to develop more holistic, "experience near," and humanly relevant approaches to scientific psychology? This question is still unresolved and is interwoven with generations of debate about relations between the natural sciences and the human sciences

(Smith, 1997). The issues have been pursued in ever-changing intellectual configurations and social alliances for over two hundred years, yet still

Whether we like it or not, questions about the existential, cultural, and social adequacies of science—what it means to be named a "machine," what it will take to become "whole"—remain part of the unfinished business of our time. (p. 212)

References

- Ash, M. (1995). *Gestalt psychology in German culture, 1890–1967: Holism and the quest for objectivity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Runyan, W. M. (1982). *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Runyan, W. M. (1994). Coming to terms with the life, loves, and work of Henry A. Murray. [Review of the book *Love's story told: A life of Henry A. Murray*]. *Contemporary Psychology*, 39, 701–704.
- Smith, R. (1997). *The Norton history of the human sciences*. New York: Norton.