

TRACES

DAVID BOHM

I would say that in my scientific and philosophical work, my main concern has been with understanding the nature of reality in general and of consciousness in particular as a coherent whole, which is never static or complete but which is an unending process of movement and unfoldment.¹

Tor Norretranders: Do you find that the kind of ideas that you present are easily understood in an environment like the Bohr Institute?²

Well, I haven't tried the Bohr Institute yet, I just came. But I think that scientists find it harder in some ways than many other people. Because there is a still strong commitment, even perhaps partly unconscious, to the old atomistic worldview.

So what you are saying is that science has shown us something that scientists do not want to see.

Well, they have become so used to the way of seeing it that they don't want to change it. They feel uncomfortable about changing and they feel that there is no reason to change, and many of them are saying: what we are doing is going so well now, why should we change? In one sense it looks like we are doing very well, you see, but if you look at the broader view it looks very dangerous. [...]

Where do you see the limits of the Western worldview?

It focuses too much on analysis and it tends to lead to fragmentation. What I mean by fragmentation is not just division, distinction, because the parts and the whole are correlative concepts, a part is a part only because it is the part of a whole [...]. A fragment means it is something you break up, that's the root of the word, to smash. If you smash something you would get fragments, not parts. The Western view aims at getting the 'true' parts of the universe but perhaps in some ways it gets fragments. This leads to confusion. [...]

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1 David Bohm, 1980. Wholeness and the Implicate Order, Routledge, New York, p.9

2 David Bohm at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen, 1989
Extract from the interview by Tor Norretranders, min. 2 and min. 17-20

So in the West you tend to confuse the parts with the whole?

You get confused about the parts and the whole because you take a fragment as an independent whole. [...] You see, when an observation is made, the two systems involved are not really distinct. The observer is an intrinsic part of the whole: that is what quantum mechanics is teaching us. So the observer and the observed participate in each other. You cannot therefore get an unambiguous meaning to the measurement. The same happens between human beings. If somebody tries to 'measure' somebody else, talk to him, there is a mutual change, which makes it impossible to get an unambiguous attribution of qualities.

So it is not possible to say what David Bohm would have said in another interview, tomorrow at the same time?

No it's not, because we are participating together, so what I am and do is affected by what you are and do, and vice versa. That's exactly the kind of thing that happens in quantum mechanical observations. [...]

There is a kind of communication that doesn't begin by denying this wholeness. If we say – here I am and there you are – then we have already divided it, right? But perhaps we could communicate in the spirit of the whole, without assuming that division. That means I am not trying to tell you what I think, and you are not trying to tell me, but rather together we are trying to discover how we are going to think, together. You see the difference?

Indeed. Is that possible in ordinary language?

Yes, it is. I think it depends on the attitude. Our language has been developed so as to emphasize the parts, but we can still use it differently. For example poetry uses language differently. It is always possible to use language in new ways.

So the basic obstacle is more the attitude of the people involved than the theoretical or verbal tool they use.

Yes. And you can't be forced to have a worldview, you can only really say that the evidence is such that you are convinced, and that it seems coherent to you.

The psychological attitude towards a new worldview though can be completely

opposite.

Yes, you might want to cling on to your old worldview or may feel happy that you are free from it. I think that people are becoming less satisfied with the old worldview today, generally speaking. They are not satisfied with this fragmentary view because it has lead to so many problems, so much incoherence in the human relationships and society, with the ecology and so on. For example, this fragmentary view has lead to treating the whole Earth as a set of fragments to be exploited, and that all adds up, in the whole, to this destruction going on. So as long as we think that way it will probably go on. People will take a fragmentary approach to repairing the ecology but it won't work