Holism, Parts, Wholes

Chiara Thumiger

Abstract

‘Holism’, strangely enough, given the absolute quality it indicates, is a concept that can only be grasped through negative examples: what it is contrary to, the paradigms to which it constitutes an alternative. Definitions of ‘holism’ thus usually involve the interdependence among the parts composing an individual object; their relationship with that object as their container and sum; its insertion within a context, environmental or cosmic; and crucially, the existence of an additional *quid* which defines that object as a totality independent of its components – the idea that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’

In all these senses, the significance of the relationship between ‘parts’ and ‘whole’ can be much broader than the medical and anatomical discussions with which we would most immediately associate it, and which are under the spotlight in this volume. The breadth and malleability of the concept are key to a cultural history which is extremely long, despite the fact that ‘holism’ itself, like many such labels, can easily be seen as anachronistic if applied to the pre-modern world. This chapter aims to offer a glimpse of this long history and to illustrate the relevance of the Graeco-Roman past to our understanding of the idea of holism, and to its various manifestations throughout the centuries which separate us from the ancients.

1 The Challenges of Holism

The fact that ‘holism’ still lacks the status of a univocal, free-standing item in cultural history or philosophy is due to more essential reasons than those implied by its recent history and current popularity, with their sometimes imprecise and amateurish usages. A double challenge to defining the concept is posed by it being inherently relative and by its involvement in the idea of value.

First of all, ‘holism’ has a situated quality that resists any attempt at precision, a circumstance that far exceeds the contingent datum of the recent coinage of the name itself. The impossibility of a univocal ‘holism’ is due to the truism that ‘whole’ and ‘parts’ are relative, non-neutral entities. What we consider a whole, which ‘parts’ we choose to highlight, and ‘what we let into

the whole',¹ are key, ideologically loaded variables, the product of arbitrary choices. What a holistic view should entail is thus bound to remain a matter of perspective.

This takes us to the second point: the concept is marred by a component of evaluation, be it ethical or epistemological, which compromises a neutral discussion of holism. 'Whole' enjoys an inherent superiority to 'parts', so that the negotiation of the second with the first has the connotation of a transaction in value. There thus appears to be a philosophical, ethical and aesthetic anteriority of wholeness so implicit in our mentality that we feel no need even to argue for it. In part, as cognitivists would frame the issue, the human preference for wholeness must be grounded in self-evident considerations of biological survival: integrity and fulfillment versus mutilation and loss are obvious embodied experiences of advantage, seen in everyday events such as eating and growth, or in familiar contrasting forms of deterioration such as wounds and decline through age.² It is suggestive in this regard to recall that the English term 'health' is connected to the Germanic-Old English *hael*,³ 'whole' (cf. the English cognate 'hale' in 'hale and hearty'), as the use of 'wholesomeness' (in German *heil*) for 'health' indicates; already in Latin, the direct cognation between *saluus* ('safe', 'saved', 'healthy') and Greek *holos* ('whole') is telling. This immediate positivity of 'whole' applies to cosmological conceptions and sociological and political models, as much as to intuitions about the wellbeing of individual bodies. Ancient studies offer a good example of how the aspiration to entirety is so ingrained in our view of goodness that we can fail to notice how it shapes and biases the history of ideas about the human body as well as many other domains as a consequence.⁴ When Bruno Snell famously focused part of his historical anthropology on the Homeric inability (on his reading of the evidence) to perceive the body 'as a whole' rather than as the sum of its components ('nicht *als Einheit*, sondern *als Vielheit*'⁵) as a symptom of a historically located mindset and a defective view of personal identity, he was anachronistically projecting on the ancient material his own expectations of wholeness and integrity – most of all, of a *certain kind* of wholeness and integrity.⁶

1 Thus Holzhey and Gagnolati (2017a) 7–8.

2 These are 'basic dimensions of our experience' for Lakoff and Johnston (1980) 82: as human beings, we 'experience ourselves as having parts (arms, legs, etc.) that we can control independently' and 'impose a part-whole structure on events and activities. And, in the case of participants, we distinguish *kinds* of parts.'

3 As noted by Pitman (2006) xi.

4 Disability studies (on theoretical ground opened up by feminist scholarship) has been challenging these assumptions and thematising alternative angles; see Adams (2017).

5 Snell (1946) 17.

6 Cf. also Adkins (1970). For a critique, see Renehan (1981), and most extensively Gill (1996) 29–41.

Notwithstanding its relativity as a concept, holism maintains its efficacy and perspicuity. Consider the following passage:

But of course it is reason, that the whole is bigger than its parts! Otherwise, how is it that when the heart is heated or made cold, *melancholia* or *phrenitis* are caused and the reasoning of the soul is destroyed, but if the hand or foot is inflamed, nothing of the kind happens?

κοινή γάρ ἐστὶν ἔννοια, τὸ ὅλον μείζον εἶναι τοῦ μέρους. ἔπειτα πῶς τῆς μὲν καρδίας μᾶλλον ἐκθερμαινομένης ἢ ψυχομένης μελαγχολίαί γίνονται καὶ φρενίτιδες καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπόλλυται τὸ φρονεῖν, τῆς δὲ χειρὸς ἢ τοῦ ποδὸς φλεγμαίνοντος οὐδὲν τοιοῦτον πάσχει;

Thus wrote the fourteenth-century orthodox theologian Johannes VI Cantacuzenus, summing up an entire system of thought inherited from antiquity and using it for the purpose of theological argument.⁷ What is worth noting are the implications of the medical imagery used by a high-Medieval author: the writer's point – that it is obviously the case that ‘the whole is bigger, and better, than its parts’ – is illustrated via a corporal allegory. The whole (the ensouled human individual) is greater than the sum of its more trivial parts (feet, hands, limbs, etc.). Damage to one of the latter does not affect the overarching ‘reasoning of the soul’, which resides on a superior, ‘holistic’ level; damage to the heart (here ‘holistically’ conceived of as the governing seat of the soul), on the other hand, causes diseases of greater import (*melancholy* or *phrenitis*) that affect the reasoning faculties.

Modern readers immediately understand this schematic image and the message that lies behind it. The intelligibility of the passage rests on a number of less-than-straightforward assumptions rooted in ancient medical and philosophical ideas about human beings, and on a specific conviction about the *whole* and the *parts* of things: first, the well-known vitalistic point that the living whole is larger than and superior to its parts⁸ to the extent that it includes an animate force of some kind, just as the governing soul is superior to the inert matter of the body's limbs. Second, that certain elements in an individual qualify as ‘parts’ (hands, feet), whereas others, although at first glance equally parts of it, are its culmination and in a more abstract sense its holistic container or ruler (the soul), i.e. that there is a hierarchy among parts. Finally, and self-evidently, that the whole is superior to its parts. These ideas are easily understood by a modern reader. But they are understood precisely

⁷ *Disputatio cum Paulo Patriarcha Latino epistulis septem tradita*, Ep. 3.434–38.

⁸ Itself not a straightforward notion: see Coughlin in this volume, 239–42.

because this presentation is in line with a long tradition of medical ideas that goes back to ancient science and philosophy, combined with a highly influential concept of the living body as hierarchically organized that was ratified by the early encounter between philosophy (Platonic, Aristotelian and then Stoic) and medicine.

This Medieval example exposes a relevant fact: all reflections on holism have in one way or another the (human, animated) body at their centre, whether as concrete object of knowledge and intervention or as key figural referent. Holism, one might argue, is inherently body-centred, and as such literally or metaphorically medical. It is really only conceivable as a product of thinking by human beings in terms of the human body and the connections around, within and through it.⁹ This embodied analogy sustains holism as a productive scientific and cultural tool: it comes as no surprise that holistic models and images are to be seen everywhere in the life sciences, from the study of mimicry as a network of communication events reverberating through the natural world,¹⁰ to the notion of 'rhythms' as key to understanding the brain's internal structures and organized working,¹¹ to 'synchrony' as a biological force relevant to disparate fields such as technology, finance, molecular biology, physics, music, demographics, sociology and psychology.¹² Our understanding of universals and particulars is set out in terms of the human bodies we individually possess, through which we relate to a 'natural world' surrounding us.

2 A Case Study: Holism and the Sexed Body

An eloquent example of the centrality of the (human) body vis-à-vis holism as an equivocal notion *and* a naturalizing force with a long history behind it is the

9 Even when superseded by the artifices of a 'post-human' move of decentration within a holistic programme, the individual body remains in the middle – as in Coccia's ecological proposal in his recent *Life of Plants* (2018), where an account of the world as *mélange* dominated by non-animal forms of life is holistically construed, but the most animal (even mammal, lungs-possessing) experience of *breathing* remains at the centre.

10 Maran (2017) for a discussion of a semiotic interpretation of mimicry.

11 Buzsaki (2011).

12 For example, Jackson et al. (2018). On the origins of these models in Montpellier vitalism, see Wolfe (forthcoming) 156–57: he mentions (and interprets in the sense of an 'extended mechanicism') the images of the bee swarm or the flock of cranes to represent the coherent system of a living organism. On vibrational models for the nervous system as made of 'resonances' (my translations); see also Huneman (2008) on the eighteenth-century vitalistic label 'animal economy' for such connections. A varied exploration of the more general category of 'sympathy' is offered by Schliesser (2015).

imperative of a complementarity of sexes (and of the intrinsic goodness of this complementarity) incarnated by the Platonic *androgynos*. When Plato chose the two-sexed 'hermaphrodite'¹³ (a four-legged, four-armed, two-faced creature with two sets of genitals) as the representation of a perfect primeval creature endowed with extraordinary strength,¹⁴ he conjured up a representation of the two sexes as 'parts', and as exclusive parts composing a 'fitted'

13 In regard to sexed body(-ies) and their tradition, Laqueur (1990) proposed that until modern times a two-bodies sexual model was not recognised. According to him, the ancients conceived rather of a 'one-sex' body for both genders, with the female genitalia being an introverted or under-developed version of the male (in varying forms). See the definitive critique of this misrepresentation in King (2013).

14 'For 'man-woman' (ἀνδρόγυνον) was then a unity in form no less than name, composed of both sexes and sharing equally in male and female ... the form of each person was *round all over* (στρογγύλον), with back and sides encompassing it every way; each had four arms, and legs to match these, and two faces perfectly alike on a *cylindrical* neck (πρόσωπα δὲ ἑπ' ἀχύνει κυκλοτερεῖ, ὅμοια πάντη). There was one head (κεφαλὴν ... μίαν) to the two faces, which looked opposite ways; there were four ears, two sets of genitals, and all the other parts, as may be imagined, in proportion ... They were *globular* in their shape (περιφερῆ) ... Now they were of surprising strength and vigour (τὴν ἰσχὺν δεινὰ καὶ τὴν ῥώμην), and so grand in their ambitions (τὰ φρονήματα μεγάλα) that they even conspired against the gods ... Then Zeus, putting all his wits together, spoke at length and said: 'I think I can contrive that men, without ceasing to exist, shall cease from their iniquity through a lessening of their strength. I propose now to slice every one of them in two (διατεμῶ διχα), so that while making them weaker, we shall find them more useful by reason of their multiplication; and they shall walk erect upon two legs. If they continue turbulent and do not choose to keep quiet, I will do it again,' said he; 'I will slice every person in two, and then they must go their ways on one leg, hopping.' So saying, he sliced each human being in two ... Now when our first form had been cut in two, each half in longing for its fellow would come to it again (ποθοῦν ἕκαστον τὸ ἥμισυ τὸ αὐτοῦ συνῆει); and then would they fling their arms about each other and in mutual embraces yearn to be grafted together (ἐπιθυμοῦντες συμφύναι), till they began to perish of hunger and general indolence, through refusing to do anything apart. And whenever on the death of one half the other was left alone, it went searching and embracing to see if it might happen on that half of the whole woman which now we call a woman, or perchance the half of the whole man. In this plight they were perishing away, when Zeus in his pity provided a fresh device. He moved their genitals to the front – for until then they had these, like all else, on the outside, and did their begetting and bringing forth not on each other but on the earth, like crickets. These parts he now shifted to the front, to be used for propagating on each other – in the female member by means of the male; so that if in their intercourses a man should happen on a woman, there might be conception and continuation of their kind; and also, if male met with male, they might have satisfaction of their union and relief, and so might turn their hands to their labors and their interest to ordinary life. Thus from ancient times is mutual love ingrained in mankind, recreating our original nature and endeavoring to combine two in one and heal human nature (ἔστι δὴ οὖν ἐκ τῶσού οἱ ἔρως ἔμφυτος ἀλλήλων τοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ τῆς ἀρχαίας φύσεως συναγωγέως καὶ ἐπιχειρῶν ποιήσαι ἐν ἑκ δυοῖν καὶ ἰάσασθαι τὴν φύσιν τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην)' (Pl. *Smp.* 189e–91d).

whole – even ‘rounded’, ‘globular’ – as if in perfect accomplishment of a lost nature, a representation that would be massively influential and eventually naturalized in our tradition:¹⁵ eros in its highest form becomes the desire to ‘return to one’, to recompose the lost unity. To challenge and demystify this dominant holistic view, we do not need to reach for the champions of contemporary gender theory; only compare and contrast the *androgynos* with the famous prehistoric ‘Venus of Lespugue’ (fig. 1.1, 1.2) (whose age is established at 25,000 years), a formidable ivory figurine representing a fertility-like female figure with prominent breasts and buttocks, and/or, when one looks at it from a different perspective, a set of male genitals.¹⁶ As in the case of the Platonic mythological figure, here too the two sexes are associated. But unlike there, the holistic image is created by aggregation rather than perfect fit: the male and the female merge into a blend in which only by the angle from which it is viewed could each component be distinguished, both separate and exposed, by means of an optical trick, as one and the same thing. This visual example effectively exposes our two challenges: holism is unstable – what ‘parts’? and especially what kind of ‘wholes’? This permanent instability of metaphorical ‘holism’ and ‘whole’ results in moral fuzziness and ambivalence: forms of oppressive normativity can lie both, as Queer critiques would posit, with the binary, cis-gendered, heterosexual myth of the aspiration to entirety, a sexed being’s search for his or her complement in a lost ‘whole’;¹⁷ and from a different angle, for some feminist critics, with the ‘reduction to body parts’ as dismissive of ‘the whole of the person’, one of the main figures of objectification to which the female is seen as subjected (e.g. in pornography).¹⁸ In addition, we must

15 Lucretius vividly challenges this erotic ideal in his disenchanting description of the bodies of the lovers desperately struggling to melt into one another in search of an unattainable fusion (*De Rerum Natura* 4.1108–13): *adfigunt avido corpus iunguntque salivas / oris et inspirant pressantes dentibus ora, / ne ququam, quoniam nihil inde abraderi possunt / nec penetrare et abire in corpus corpore toto; nam facere inter dum velle et certare videntur*. Gender theory’s unveiling of the constructedness of gender(s) and of sex(es) – impossible to survey even cursorily here – can be in this sense read as demystification of a kind of holistic ideal (see Butler (1990) 1.5, ‘Identity, sex and the metaphysics of substance’ for key points).

16 See Barrow (2018) 5, exposing how the phallic component in these European Paleolithic figurines subverts their traditional interpretation as ‘emblems of female fertility representative of a single religion of the ‘Mother Goddess’ in a matriarchal society’; Joyce (2008) for the full argument in comparative anthropology (esp. chapters 1 and 2), 6–18 for the set of questions.

17 In this spirit, the category ‘holism’ as biologically associated with ‘reproductive sex’ is suspicious if not entirely negative in Haraway (2004), e.g. 38.

18 See Langton (2009) 228–29; McKinnon (1987) 76.

FIGURE 1.1

Vénus de Lespugue, paléolithique supérieur, ivoire de mammouth, France
MUSÉUM NATIONAL D'HISTOIRE NATURELLE, PARIS

FIGURE 1.2

confront the normative power imparted by the iconography of wholeness, of which the passage from the *Symposium*, with its immense cultural afterlife, is a trite but powerful example.¹⁹

These two points, relativity and involvement with value, so evident in the traditional image of the two sexes as coordinated parts yearning for erotic composition, make analysis of the heritage of holism rich and problematic in many ways. Our exploration must be of a meta-scholarly kind, in the sense that the object of scrutiny is simultaneously 'ontological' – the idea that something should be intrinsically holistic (e.g. health, as holistic by its nature) and methodological (e.g. believing in a holistic approach to ancient history and to holism

19 Irigaray's statement of the female as 'the sex which is not one' is all the more powerful against these classical intimations of holism (Irigaray 1985); see Gragnolati and Holzhey (2017a) 8; Braidotti (2011) 110–12 on the non-binary, composite sexuality in the insect world as exemplary model of 'nature's queerness' (with my paraphrase). Dworkin (1974) 162 criticizes the misinterpretations of androgynous myths as 'upholding patriarchal notions of sexual polarity, duality, male and female as opposite and antagonistic'; cf. Paglia (1990) 3–6, returning to the Platonic imagery of 'roundedness' – while undermining it – to celebrate the Venus of Willendorf (fig. 3) as 'solipsist, navel-gazing ... Femaleness is self-referential and self-replicating ... the egg-shaped Venus thinks in circles.'

FIGURE 1.3 A female Paleolithic figurine, Venus of Willendorf
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itself). This intertwinement between the ontological claim or faith and the methodology is fundamental in the case of holism.²⁰ The implications and the cultural and scholarly domains touched by the two are so numerous and varied that the risk is dispersion and dilution of the concept through its numerous reverberations.²¹ I thus begin with a schematic sketch of the territory covered by ‘holism’ in Western culture as generally defined above – whether terminologically explicit or not – before moving on to individual questions.

3 Ontological Holism

The most direct instance of ontological holism is the biological notion according to which a defining quality of animate life, and especially of animal (and

²⁰ This is Sober’s distinction: (1980) 104–5.

²¹ Horden (2013) 18 faces a similar issue (and turns it into a positive occasion) vis-à-vis the many implications of a concept germane to our ‘holism’, ‘balance’, across different medical systems: ‘balance must therefore be an abstraction, partially detectable only by its opposite.’ Compare also Horky (2019a) 15–19, and especially 23–26 in his approach to the idea of ‘cosmos’ in ancient philosophy and in philosophical historiographies.

human) embodied life, is that it forms a whole that can only be properly understood as a living system, not as a mere conglomerate of parts that mechanically suffice to determine life. On a medical level, for ontological holism the body is an 'organism', interacting parts that form a complex system, establishing a continuum between the two opposites of mind and body, itself a concept with a complex history in our culture and philosophy, beginning with Aristotle and developing in modern biology.²² To this quintessential pair, other homologous pairs are juxtaposed (reason and emotions, cognition and sensation, and so forth).²³

In the Western biological and medical tradition, this strand of holism (which, in practical terms, addresses the body diagnostically and therapeutically as an organic whole) was at various times seen as deeply rooted in aspects of Graeco-Roman medicine, as different generations of biological and medical thinkers interpreted them. This is most evidently the case with the reception of ancient medicine, in particular Hippocratic,²⁴ by various generations of European vitalism and elaborations on animistic views of nature,²⁵ whose key phase is associated with the *École de médecine de Montpellier* in the eighteenth century,²⁶ and which experienced an important revival in the middle decades of the twentieth century with various forms of neo-vitalism.²⁷

On a further and more comprehensive level, ontological holism identifies deeper (symbolic and analogical,²⁸ as well as substantial or mechanical) relationships that hold together not only beings within themselves, but also beings as 'microcosm' and as macrocosmic containers, or forming a *milieu*. The earliest theorised concept in this respect is that of the *anima mundi*, which

22 See Smith (2011) 97–234.

23 On pairing and the positing of extreme alternatives in Greek thought, see the classic Lloyd (1966).

24 Cf. Temkin (1991) 8–15 for an appraisal of this 'Hippocratic holism'; Williams (2009) 595, 609–10; Williams (2001).

25 See Lonie (1980) on the potential for both mechanicism and vitalism as appearing in Hoffman's reading of Hippocrates; Wolfe (forthcoming) 154.

26 Cf. Waisse (2011); Wolfe and Terada (2008) on the holistic concept of 'animal economy' in Montpellier vitalism; Wolfe (2008) 461; (2017).

27 See Lawrence and Weisz (1998), esp. 2–5; Rosenberg (1998) for an overview of medical holism; Harrington (1999); Poynton (1989) 141–42; Normandin and Wolfe (2013a) on contemporary vitalisms (and the collection in Normandin and Wolfe (2013)); Wolfe (2019) 307–41 on the twentieth century and returns to holism in biology.

28 For a discussion of the metaphorical connections between human micro- and macrocosm in ancient science, see Taub (2012), and the discussions in Wee (2017), especially Nyord (2017); comparatively Hsu (2013) 269–74 for 'microcosm-macrocosm homologies' in various medicines.

originates in Plato's *Timaeus*.²⁹ Here animal or ecological communities, the environment, the universe as a whole come into play.³⁰ In political or sociological contexts, on the other hand, holism puts forth a claim for interconnections among individuals and things and the society that derives from them as defining components of human reality.

In this way, the biological and medical are the most powerful archetypes of ontological holism, shaping other domains in turn. In modern Western intellectual life, the demands and failures of holistic ideals have exerted a powerful influence on the realm of psychology, and above all else on psychoanalysis from its origins to its French post-war developments.³¹ The integrity of identity as ideal is overt in Freudian therapy, with its reconstitution of the legitimate, hegemonic, active 'I' in mediation between and supervision of the excesses of its components and bodily drives, which Freud names *superego* and *id*: 'wo es war, soll ich werden.' This fundamental role of integrity is difficult to overestimate, despite the continuous demystification and complications disrupting its itinerary towards attainment.³² A holistic engagement also played a major role in the thought of the other founder of the psychoanalytic movement, Carl Gustav Jung. In contrast to Freud, Jung elaborated an extended theory of the human mind as participating in a collective unconscious (as well as possessing an individual one), in which an archetypal level of reality, a 'collective psyche', arises. This move strongly inserted man into a cosmic order and a metaphysical narrative, with points of contact with various spiritualist and vitalist environments ranging as wide as alchemy, Oriental religions and quantum physics.³³ Lacanian psychology best illustrates the heritage of these divergences in the history of psychoanalysis. Lacan emphasized the contradictions

29 See above (pp. 4–5); Helmig (2020a), Miklós (2010) 1–8 on the ancient idea and its legacy in the history of philosophy.

30 The two aspects are obviously interrelated in vitalistic accounts; cf. Canguilhem (2008) 111 'from a biological point of view, one must understand that the relationship between the organism and the environment is the same as that between the parts and the whole of an organism'; also, Laurence and Weisz (1998) 16. Vegetation is mostly excluded from these accounts, as noted by Coccia (2018) in his suggestive exploration of the world of vegetation as one of fluidity, 'a metaphysics of mixture'.

31 The inclusion of psychological aspects into the sphere of action of medical care can also be seen as having its roots in vitalism: Huneman (2008, 2008a).

32 For an early critique of this 'fetishism of the individual', one might turn to avant-garde twentieth-century experiences and theatre, especially surrealism; see Thumiger (2009) for a discussion in dialogue with and in opposition to ancient concepts of the (theatrical) person.

33 See McMillan, Main and Henderson (2020); Main, Henderson and McMillan (2019) on Jung and 'holism.'

in the Freudian project and centered his analysis on subverting the individual subject and fragmentating its delusory mirage of 'completeness': the full image of oneself in the mirror is dreamt of in vain by the child and never fully attained by the adult.³⁴ Mental life as a consistent course of action is irreparably and *a-priori* compromised by the plural, fragmented nature of our relation to the objects in the world and of our bodily responses to them. Post-Freudian thinkers Deleuze and Guattari push the bodily metaphor of holism further, factoring in the concept of a multi-layered 'body without organs' (to borrow Artaud's words³⁵) and rejecting a consistent 'one body image' as foundation of personal experience.³⁶

In all the directions briefly surveyed above, human positioning vis-à-vis 'wholeness' and 'partiality' assumes fluctuating definitions, playing now the negative, now the positive role: the individual can be idealized as 'whole' to reconstruct, but can also be negatively opposed to a greater, cosmic 'whole', or demystified by the complex ensemble of ever-changing embodied human experiences.³⁷ It is thus appropriate that for our purposes 'holism' should serve as a level of discussion, aural and dialectical, rather than as positive doctrine.

Something closer to a positive doctrine of holism appears in a separate chapter in the history of psychology, which from its beginning was characterized by a much stronger scientific background: Gestalt psychology, whose founders, Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka, claimed precisely that human mental life differs from the collection or sum of its sensations and cognitions. In a phenomenological spirit, *Gestalttheorie* also foregrounds human mental life as *experience*: perceiving and learning are based on 'common images' that are inherent in the objects we experience, and arise through the spontaneous organization of thought into structures as economical and simple as possible;³⁸

34 See for example Lacan (1973/1978) 190 for discussion of Freudian love as 'sexual passion for the *gesamt ich*', 196–200; (1977). For an interdisciplinary take on this long line of thinking about the human self and personal identity, see Tallon Russell (2009), a critique of the Western tradition of 'oneness' regarding the self, especially in Christian theology.

35 From his last radio piece (Artaud 1947).

36 Deleuze (1997) 15–20; Deleuze and Guattari (1983) 20–27, also 34–39 and 56–66. Deleuze (2004) 101 dreams of a holistic new dimension of the schizophrenic body, an organism without parts which operates entirely by 'insufflation, respiration, evaporation and fluid transmission.'

37 See McMillan (2018) for a discussion of 'organicism and holistic relations' in Jung and Deleuze and their sources.

38 Laurence and Weisz (1998) 6–8. On the *Gestalt*, Ash (1998); Harrington (1999) 103–39; Canguilhem (2008) 110, recognising the debts of his own reflections on the interaction between living being and environment 'as a whole to total objects' to *Gestalttheorie*; Poynton (1989) 139–41.

these can be deconstructed and studied. Thus Gestaltist thinkers too critique the idea of cognition as *a priori* and isolated within the individual, grounding their theory of perception and mental life in the ‘experienced world.’ When recent developments in embodied cognition and phenomenology refer to ‘common structures’ and ‘cognitive models’, basing their universalizing move on the study of human motor-sensory functions, the intellectual contributions of these earlier lines of research are easy to recognise, despite the radical differences in scientific or cultural premises and objectives – most of all in the pursuit of ‘universally human’ paradigms of embodied psychology.³⁹

Non-Western cultures and their influence, finally, should not be omitted from this overview, although extraneous to the terms of the internal discussion and disagreement that characterize Western psychology. They are relevant, first of all, in a comparative spirit, by virtue of the richness of these traditions, as well in regard to the mind-body question and to relations between micro- and macrocosm. When it comes to views of personhood and psychology, comparative perspectives help us relativise our own psychological fundamentals, those we have seen at work within the history of psychoanalysis. As Dumont first showed, proposing a notion of human subjects as naturally composite ‘dividuals’, as he referred to them, indivisibility, impenetrability and unity seem to be specific modern Western requirements or expectations of personhood and views of self.⁴⁰

There is another fundamental sense in which non-Western cultures are an inescapable part of the discussion when we consider ‘holism’: their perspective is also relevant as a point of reception by Western audiences, as recurring incarnations of an ideal of lost completeness, a desirable ‘elsewhere’ often colored by Orientalism.⁴¹ Eastern religious and spiritual systems, with their medical and therapeutic practices (Buddhist, Āyurvedic, Chinese), conspicuously refer to a holistic understanding of the human body and its life cycles, as

39 Only an episodic selection of current directions in this sense, in which holism is positively applied to embodied cognition and phenomenology: Frisch (2014) n. 3 on the connections between holism, phenomenology, Gestalt and cognitive embodiment; Clark (2010) for the classic account of ‘extended mind’; Cornejo (2008) for a reading of holism vis-à-vis intersubjectivity and phenomenology; see also Short in this volume.

40 Cf. Dumont (1965). This plural conception of personhood in Indian culture was then influentially applied by Strathern to Melanesian society: Strathern (1988) 13, 15 for the explanation; Smith (2012) for a survey of the influences of these discussions.

41 See Slingerland (2019) on China and the ‘othering’ potential of the unscrutinised attribution of the ‘holistic’ label to non-Western cultures (1–64, and 1–21 for the broader intellectual context); Zimmermann (1995), esp. 1–26 on ‘les poisons de l’ethnicité’ with reference to the construct of ‘alternative’, ‘traditional’ Eastern medicines in Western merchandise and medical cultures.

well as to a metaphysical belief in the universe as a system of interconnected strands, as illustrated by Zimmerman in his classic study of 'ecological' aspects of Hindu medicine.⁴²

4 Methodological Holisms

'A fox knows many things, the hedgehog one important thing', as Berlin's use of the ancient animal fable has it: one can approach knowledge by tackling several partial, illuminating details, or by focusing on a single defining idea.⁴³ So too the ontological opposition between 'wholes' and 'parts' is reflected in a variety of scholarly and historiographical postures.⁴⁴ In studies of the ancient world (as in cultural studies generally), anti-canonical approaches (interdisciplinarity, reception and comparativism, for example) can be seen as holistic sets of demands in themselves that employ holistic tools (whether diachronically or synchronically) variously aimed at comprehensiveness, multiple perspectives, relativism or demystification of the particular situated datum as such. A holistic methodology *qua* holistic recognizes the need to place historical or anthropological evidence within its net of interconnections, whether bio-genetic, geographical, economic, social, cultural, traditional or even logical.

On the other hand, the canonical, Classicist⁴⁵ approach to antiquity (most visibly in its Romantic idealization) comes with a hegemonic mission which is also of a holistic kind: the reduction to meaning, the explanation, the categorization, the fitting within an order, historiographic or critical, that allows a tradition to be organized and controlled. The very concept of *tradition* – a package handed over, *traditum*, to us – is in this light a holistic profession of faith.⁴⁶ Many of our historiographic strategies are based on versions of holistic fantasies of exhaustiveness, where the wholes of philological *corpora*, of

42 Zimmermann (1988/1992). See e.g. Pitman (2006); Horden (2013); Hsu (2013); in this volume, Zimmermann on Āyurvedic, and Wee on ancient Near Eastern systems.

43 Isaiah Berlin's essay (1953), whose title quotes Archilochus fr. 201 West.

44 Rosenberg (1998) 338 distinguishes two categories of what we are calling 'methodological' holism: 'metahistorical', reading health and disease of humanity in terms of its distant past, in an evolutionary perspective; or historiographical – for example, reference to Hippocratism as an ideal of medical practice, on which see Sturdy (1998).

45 As implied by the evaluative and political implications of the term 'Classics' itself: see the reflections on the 'historic connection between socio-economic hierarchies ('class') and also the differences between the cultural and imaginative lives of people in different 'classes' offered by Hall and Stead (2020).

46 The concept of 'tradition' as preservation of cultural material unchanged has longed been challenged; see the seminal discussion by Pouillon (1977).

opera omnia, of individual thinkers recomposed from *fragments*⁴⁷ to their *whole* are painstakingly pursued with an eye to the ultimate goal of complete reconstruction.⁴⁸

The negative aspects of this attitude are more evident in some areas than others. Critics may denounce these historiographic attitudes as grounded in oppression and in a conservative safeguarding of a cultural *status quo* representing a tradition drawn 'from above' and run through by grand unifying narratives, held together by relations of power. The focus on the particular, the individual, the minority case, then, perhaps emerges as a more truthful form of inquiry, which finally rescues the subaltern and marginalized historical actors from death by statistical reduction, as in the micro-historical genre pioneered by Ginzburg and others in a Marxist spirit: the story of an otherwise unknown sixteenth-century Italian miller, in this way, can become a window open to the socio-cultural reality and religiosity of an entire era.⁴⁹ The difficulties for scholars of antiquity, as they face these two sets of alternative 'holisms', defy an easy choice and impose a composite strategy.⁵⁰

The irreducible burden of truth carried by the particular is evident in medical literature in the highest degree. Indeed, medicine *is* the model environment from which casuistry originates and finds full legitimization. Medical and biological realities are of course expressed through statistical 'big data', but they also dwell in irreducible casuistic particulars, as Forrester argued in a seminal article.⁵¹ In its own way, then, biomedicine with its reductionism is also holistic in its project – arguably impoverishing – of reducing human data to a homogeneity of average outcomes and statistics. This is very far from the 'positive' holistic connotations of complementary medicines, but it responds to the same exigency of exhaustiveness.⁵² The methodological dialectic or tension between universalisation and particular is unresolved in the life sciences, as it is in Western thought generally.

47 On the cultural history of fragment collection, see the introduction to Most (1997); Most (2009) 18–19.

48 With reference to classics, see Holmes 48–55 in this volume, and Holmes (forthcoming); Holmes and Güthenke (2018).

49 Ginzburg (1976/1980). On microhistory as 'history from below', Port (2010); see for example Ginzburg (1976/1980) *preface*; Ginzburg, Tedeschi and Tedeschi (1993); Ginzburg (2018).

50 As proposed by Holmes and Güthenke (2018).

51 Forrester (1996); see also Asper (2019) 1–3; Langholf (1990) 194–208 on cases and types in the *Epidemics*, and Wee (2015) on 'minority reporting'; Chiaradonna (2013b) on universals in ancient medicine, especially 382–91 on Aristotle's views of generalisation in medicine; Thumiger and Petridou (2015) in general on patient-perspective as individualizing force in medical accounts.

52 On patient cases and big data, see Graumann and Thumiger (2019).

In all these methodological stances and scholarly strategies, *holism* has the potential to incarnate an ideal, an abstract target. The most famous and in-the-face examples of militant commitment to holism are found in forms of ecology, alternative medicine and totalitarian politics.⁵³ Ultimately, however, it is implicit in the ideological superiority of 'whole' that works as a fundamental premise in most levels of cultural and scientific discussion we have explored, and one cannot help but think that the longing for a lost wholeness (which is at least in part a universal human experience) is *also*, to an important extent, a specific Western malaise, which haunts the history of the 'classical tradition':⁵⁴ a kind of existential holism, of *Sehnsucht* for a primeval totality of which we contemporaries have only pieces at our disposal. This trope of classical antiquity as an inheritance of ruins and fragments is a recurring one (of Romantic origin) in the disillusion twentieth-century modernist poets express at our civilization, which for them '(unlike that *'organic world of antiquity'*) ... is all *in bits, in fragments*.'⁵⁵ This loss, and the presence-through-absence that defines the aesthetics of ruins,⁵⁶ inspires both awe and despair, and moral engagement with the destiny of annihilated things. Again, the element of value is never absent from this particular discussion of parts and wholes.⁵⁷

This long intellectual survey sheds some light on the value of reflection on holism as a medical-historical project: the uncovering of a permanent, if ever-changing dialectic in human science and culture by examining ancient examples and their legacy. The relationship between mind and body in ancient philosophy, biology and medicine; the reception and manipulation of ancient (medical) traditions; the discussion of the human place in the cosmic order; the pragmatics and ethics of human intervention of any kind (political, therapeutic, economic, ecological): all these are implicated in the histories surveyed above, and in turn inform the way we operate as historians of medicine and readers of the ancient world.

53 Relevant to our discussion, Wohl (2019) 232 has important remarks about the normativity of the ideal of *kosmos* proposed by Greek thought and its later tradition as sustaining 'a political ontology of the whole, an aesthetics of politics that privileges unity, coherence, stability, and centripedality', to which dissonant, pluralistic models are opposed – '*chaosmos*' (300); see p. 300 n. 5 on reactionary politics and holism.

54 That is, *one* Classical tradition – see Stead and Hall (2020), above n. 45; Stead and Hall (2020a).

55 Silk, Gildenhard et al. (2014) 50, my italics. On this chapter of the classical tradition, exemplified through the words of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, see Silk, Gildenhard et al. (2014) 49–51; Kahane (2011a), (2011b) on ruins as a form of discourse in our relationship to the classical past; Settis (2011) on ruinism as 'peculiar to Western culture.'

56 Settis (2011).

57 Kahane (2011a) 635–36 on 'ruins and responsibility.'

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