

# **A Holonic View of Conflict**

## A Holonic View of Conflict

The *Holon* is a concept first introduced by Arthur Koestler to designate something that is both a whole in its own right and a part of a larger whole. For example, an atom is a whole in itself. When it is also part of a molecule, it becomes a holon, or a whole-part. The molecule that is also part of a cell is a holon, as is the cell that is part of an organ, becoming yet another holon, the organ being a whole as well as part of the body system, etc. From this example, going from the smaller to the bigger, one may easily infer that this kind of “holism” is hardly distinguishable from the more conventional idea of a hierarchy, wherein some form of ranking can be identified between the components.

To distinguish this from conventional connotations of the term “hierarchy”, Wilber notes that Koestler used the term *holarchy* to denote a collectivity of holons from one point of development to another (Wilber, 1995, p. 21). There is, in fact, considerable debate surrounding hierarchy versus holarchy as ways of thinking about and describing the relationships between components in any kind of living system, according to Ken Wilber, a penetrating philosopher of transpersonal psychology. The holarchy proponents say that hierarchical views stem from worn-out paradigms of social ranking and domination, and to see things as they really are, this “higher” versus “lower” kind of thinking, motivated by an underlying belief in exploitation, must be eliminated. For holarchists, a true grasp of the *wholeness* of a system can only be had if the distorting factor of hierarchy is removed.

The hierarchists respond that ranking is inherent in systems, that without the “glue” of hierarchical relationships, there would only be heaps of components, not an interrelated whole; indeed, to be able to see and define what is a part of any whole, the notion of hierarchy is indispensable in making distinctions so that a description is even possible. Wilber’s view is that both parties have elements of the truth: there are indeed natural hierarchies, as in modern psychology, evolutionary theory, and systems theory, which hold, “... a ranking of orders of events *according to their holistic capacity* [emphasis in original]” as shown by changes in systems that take place with any rearrangement of any of its parts. This is not to say that there are not also hierarchies that are pathologically oriented to dominance (Wilber, 1995, pp. 15-16).

It is in plumbing the *deeper* significance of the concept of the *Holon* that Wilber is able to go beyond the conundrum of hierarchy versus holarchy. One mistake is to think of hierarchy as somehow *linear* in nature; this is to mistake our ways of conceptualizing (before and after, above and below, etc.) with the actual unfolding of developmental events. It is perhaps better, says Wilber, to think in terms of nested Chinese boxes or sets of concentric spheres, etc. It is further helpful to think in terms of dimensions beyond linear diagrams, wherein a given component can contain other components within it, much like what is seen in one mirror in a house of mirrors. The acorn does indeed become the mighty oak, for the acorn contains the entire blueprint of the oak tree, and *mutis mutandis*, the oak contains as its most fundamental and indelible element the original acorn from whence it sprang.

The only qualifying condition is the one-way or *asymmetrical* nature of the process, from acorn to oak but not the other way; as the essential dynamic of systems is *growth*, both within holons and between holons which collectively become larger, more encompassing ones. Thus, there are *stages* of growth, as one that comes later *includes* that which came before (in actuality previous holons), but not vice versa (Wilber, 1995, pp. 17-20) .

Once our re-examination has drawn us away from the ranking aspects of hierarchy in favour of a nested conception, we can then admit that, after Hegel's value-added theory, each stage is perfectly adequate in its own right, but that additional adequacy may be found in that which is added later on, but only as the characteristic of being *more encompassing*.

## **Reference**

Wilber, K. (1995). Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution. Shambhala Publications Inc., Boston, MA.