

A Response to David Bohm

By
David Wasdell

The paper 'Religion as Wholeness and the Problem of Fragmentation' was presented by Professor David Bohm in September 1983. David Bohm's brilliance as physicist is never in question. This paper, however, highlights some of the flaws in his psychodynamic analysis as he turns his attention to the behaviour of social systems. Particular attention is paid to his treatment of the origin, implications and management of fragmentation in human behaviour. [1985]

Produced By: Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14
0AE

Hosted By: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN), Charity Reg. No.
284542

Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk

A Response to David Bohm

[Some notes in response to the paper: "Religion as Wholeness and the Problem of Fragmentation", by David Bohm, Professor of Theoretical Physics at Birkbeck College, University of London, and author of "Wholeness and the Implicate Order", (R.K.P. London, 1980), who gave this paper originally as a lecture at St. James' Church, Piccadilly, on 21st September 1983. The text has subsequently been published as 'Centre Space Occasional Paper, No. 2', in January 1984 copies of which are obtainable from Center Space, Coakham Farm, Crockham Hill, Edenbridge, Kent.]

David Bohm perceives fragmentation as potentially the most destructive phenomenon in human behaviour. So he writes:

"Fragmentation has produced severe and destructive conflict on every level. This now threatens the possibility of maintaining civilisation throughout the world, and indeed, ultimately even the very existence of mankind."

He also describes the widespread and endemic nature of the problem, noting:

"... fragmentation between nations, races, religions, ideologies etc. going on down to smaller groups, including the family. Indeed, even the individual himself is fragmented ... Each human being is divided into conflicting interests, passions, aims, loyalties, motivations, etc. to the point of neurosis, and even of psychosis ."

Then in almost a throwaway phrase, David Bohm indicates what he perceives as the obvious source of fragmentation and introduces a facile and very deeply erroneous diagnosis. He writes that these contradictory features are those which man has:

"picked up from the collective mixture in the surrounding society."

So the core evil of fragmentation is introjected from the environment and is socially conditioned. In this David Bohm's analysis is very close to that of the younger Marx, his concept of fragmentation being parallel to Marx' description of alienation and its effects. Both saw the depth of evilness in the condition as environmentally and socially generated. It would appear that David Bohm, as physicist, is unaware of the process of projection and reification within social constructs by which intrapersonal phenomena, shared across large numbers of people, generate the structures which then reinforce the intrapersonal agendas of the next generation and so on. There is an interplay between the intra and the extra, between projection and introjection which is collusive yet slowly developmental. It is the fracture of the human psyche, projected into his social environment, which becomes mirrored in the social construct - a resonant projection of the intra on the larger canvass of the extra. So the next generation, perceiving in the wider social paradigm that which rings such deep bells with the internal, assumes that the internal has come from the external, denies the internal origin of the material, and so completes the defensive block of owning the psychotic splitting. This block in turn has the effect of reinforcing the defences involved, maintaining the fragmentation, and rendering absolute and absolutely unalterable the constructs in the social

system which are in fact reified displacements of the common intra-psychic structures of neurotic defence.

With this diagnosis, there is no way that David Bohm allows within his systemic field access to the causal parameters of the problem whose solution he seeks.

David Bohm continues to examine first religion and then science as approaches to the integration of world view, neither of which have succeeded in overcoming the fundamental fragmentation, conflict and ultimately pessimistic outlook for the human species. He proposes that the healing of fragmentation within the human experience is an essential and fundamental challenge to be met if the species is to survive, and to survive with any sense of well being in a stable future. He proceeds to seek some kind of rapprochement between science and religion in such a way that the fragmentation between these two basic responses might be annealed. I would argue, however, that both disciplines represent in different areas a mapping of the fundamental fragmentation of the human psyche. Attempts to generate synthesis out of the fragmented symptoms is doomed to failure without integration of the underlying causes of the fragmentation so displayed. This is not a level to which David Bohm addresses himself. What he does do is indicate that the understanding of the physical universe within his own concepts of the implicate and explicate orders indicates an enfolding of the totality of all that is, at each point and distributed throughout the whole. It is a concept that comes very close to the understanding of immanence of the wholly other, so that the convergence between science and religion may be seen in the understanding of ground of being with 'being' standing for the whole psycho-physical entity of space/time as it becomes explicate at any particular point within the universe. However, David recognises that even this kind of sophisticated treatment does not really get to the root of the problem. He writes :

"Nevertheless, I feel that our scientific and religious self-world views are not the main source of fragmentation. Something much more powerful and pervasive is the identification of self or Ego as absolutely separate and distinct from others. What is relevant here is not only the individual Ego, but also the collective Ego, in the form of family, profession, nation, political or religious ideology, etc. Fundamentally, all human conflicts arise in the attempt to protect such Ego interests, which are generally regarded as supreme, over-riding everything else, and not open to discussion or rational criticism."

He goes to pin very accurately his understanding that:

"even the fragmentation due to scientific and religious self-world views, can be seen to arise ultimately because the Ego, individual or collective, takes such views as a secure basis for absolutely certain knowledge about itself."

David notes the ultimate aim of religion to overcome the fragmentation of the Ego through "salvation" or, when this appears to fail, at least to bring some sense of control over errant Ego functions and to limit their destructive effects. Where religion breaks down in its capacity for control, science and social structures take over, with psychotherapeutic techniques and chemotherapy. The failure of these two approaches to achieve anything more than marginal control leads David to pose the further set of probing questions.

"It seems important therefore to inquire more deeply into why the Ego is such a 'hard-nut' to crack. In such an inquiry, several questions arise immediately. Why is the Ego, individual or collective, so important? Why must it be considered to be essentially perfect and always right? Why do people explode into violence and anger when they are insulted personally, or even more, when family, religion, nation or ideology are treated in what they regard as an outrageous way?"

It does not appear possible to answer the four times repeated 'Why' question without a very clear understanding of structures of anxiety defence which constitute the skeletal framework of the Ego. Where such defences are challenged as being not absolute, or are invaded in some way, the psychotic levels of anxiety held up behind the defences begin to burst through, leading to the irrational behaviours and the conflicted responses. Without some fairly detailed background in depth psychology, David does not appear to have the tools to answer the questions he so clearly asks. To turn, as he does to the Mosaic confrontation with the great 'I Am' in the last part of his paper, is no answer at all. His thesis appears to be that the fragmentation of the Ego structures and the conflicted emotional responses when they are challenged, stem from predicating the 'I Am' with some particular characteristics, which then become defensible and vulnerable. The resultant process in his thesis appears to be the emptying of all predication from the underlying 'I Am' - in other words a reduction in differentiation and distinction, in order to avoid the conflicted defensiveness associated with such differentiation. His solution is, I suggest, an avoidance or coping mechanism, very similar to certain patterns of regression to the undifferentiated state, rather than a programme of integration which allows the differentiated elements their distinct and identifiable nature, but anneals the splitting, fragmentation and anxiety states associated with the differential boundaries. This latter process requires clear analysis of the cause of the underlying fields of psychotic anxiety, the function and structure of the resultant defences, and practical ways of cathartic release and integration of the material within the human psyche, both individual and collective.

Sadly I am left with the impression that in spite of the sharpness of his inquiry, David Bohm's prescription represents the manipulation of symptoms and not a resolution of causes.

D. Wasdell
10th October, 1985