

Against Holism

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The limits of disciplinary approaches to understanding the world are widely understood and discussed. Holism is often prescribed as the antidote to disciplinary views of the world, especially in the context of applying formal understanding to human decisions. But holistic approaches to understanding are also inherently problematic. For one thing, holistic views must be derived from inter- or transdisciplinary approaches to problem solving that inherit not only the problems of disciplinary inquiry but also the incommensurabilities of different disciplines. Moreover, because the complex problems that most demand holistic approaches are characterized by system nonlinearity, complexity and openness, holistic views are always incomplete (i.e., wrong), and often in ways that are not apparent. Holistic approaches may yield general insights about a given system, but increased investigation often fails to reduce uncertainty about system behavior, and therefore does not add to—and may take away from—the ability of people to take action. These difficulties mean that holism is in fact more subject to political hijacking (either conscious or unconscious) than conventional disciplinary inquiries. At the same time, holistic perspectives can give rise to immobility and impotence exactly because they reinforce an appreciation of the difficulties of ever adequately specifying cause-effect relations in complex systems. Thus, a commitment to holism can have the dual and contrary effects of empowering some political commitments over others on the basis of understandings that are inherently incomplete or wrong, while reinforcing existing power relations by discouraging action due to irresolvable uncertainties. These dual and apparently contradictory effects can be seen in the political debates over how to address complex problems such as climate change, medical care reform, and reduction of poverty.