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Stafford Beer

A Personal Reflection
on the Nature of the
Stafford Beer Collection

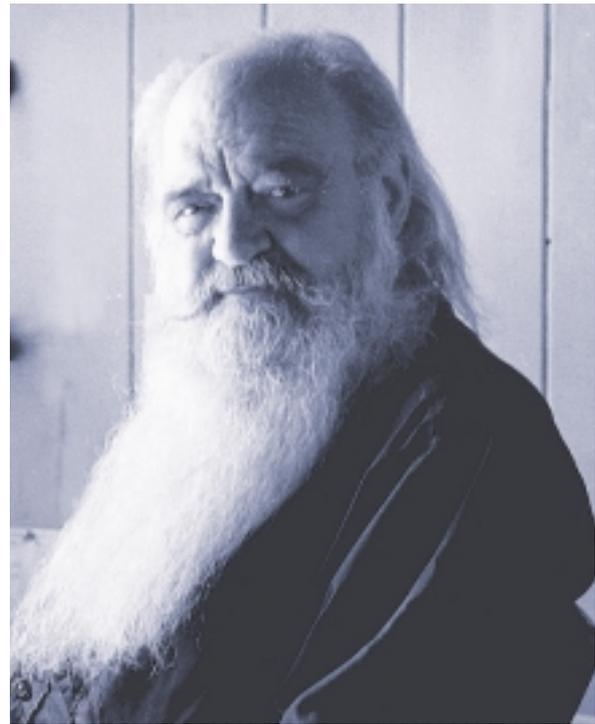
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A Personal Reflection on the Nature of the Stafford Beer Collection

I was 15 when I decided I wanted to be a philosopher. But I still was at school, and the official syllabus for me was mathematics. This already placed me in some difficulty, because I was also intend on studying both literature and classics and that put me into three different departments of the school. I could have only one and chose mathematics. That meant studying arithmetic and the theory of numbers, algebra, and geometry, under three different tutors. I still remember the tremendous shock and excitement when I realised that all three of these topics were one and the same. No one had ever suggested to me that they might be intimately related, because they were all separated by their wholly different methodologies. Still less had anyone thought of referring to my other interests as part of a unified educational experience; I simply was not allowed them, and had to operate on my own.

Having got away from all this to go to the university, I set about the study of philosophy. One of the fields of interest was formal logic – both the ancient Aristotelian kind, and the modern mathematical logic of Russell and company. I was well into these studies when I realised that logic, and what I had been calling mathematics, were also one and the same field of inquiry. All this started a conscious process whereby I began to resent the separation of disciplines, and it prepared me for a later career in inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary work. But it was not without its resentments on the part of my would be tutors. After all, my excited discoveries were quite offensive to the established order. Quite soon, I was being accused by each specialist block of fraternising with the enemy! These difficulties clouded my early professional life; now, at the age of 70, I am no longer on the defensive. I speak instead of the “Hardening” Faculties in universities, and preach an unmitigated holistic philosophy.



Long before the discoveries of Roger Sperry about left and right brain dominance, I had become aware in myself of different modes of operating. This is why I insisted on painting and writing poetry throughout my scientific career. On a spiritual level, much the same set of discoveries were made over large number of years.

I was launched as an Anglican an, by my teens, was considering a priestly vocation. But studies in Theology lead me into the Catholic Church – in which I stayed for 24 years. The experience was rich and rewarding; but I felt as many did that publication of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* under Paul VI squandered the opportunities that had been provided by John XXIII and the Vatican II Council, and I formally left the Church that I had formally joined. That was in 1968; but I had been studying eastern religions in parallel since 1946 when I was in India and been practising Yoga all those years. The transition that I now made seemed natural enough and, from the holistic point of view, I was no longer seeing dogmatic faiths as relevant to the spiritual experience itself.

The problem with holism as a way of looking at the world is that it is just too easy to talk about the “big system” and to claim that everything must be taken into account. The plain reality is that people may say this

but simply do not do it, with the result that all talk of holistic attitudes begins to sound glib – because it is glib. The true holistic experience beyond cognition; it is the experience of cognition itself. We do not prepare ourselves for communicating this kind of knowledge. Then the whole point of storing such a collection as this begins to emerge. It is far from being a museum. It is possible for students who have the time to discover processes that lie behind the exhibits. Particular concepts and ways of looking at the world may be manifest in books – also in a poem or a painting. The evolution of ideas may be traced back into early papers and even manuscripts, and there strange machines that were used to explore them. So the hope is that by following the threads through a many faceted life a deeper understanding will be developed.

In the collection, you can observe a letter dated June 1981 in which I state “I particularly dislike the archive...” It is not a museum; it is an invitation to enter a process. And why should we wish to engage in the process? Is it to obtain a deeper understanding of Stafford Beer the man? I have scoffed at the hubris of such an idea.

The hope is that by experiencing some element of such a process it might become metabolised into the future. There is a wonderful story about a student who thanked his professor profusely for what he had been taught. He said: “It has been a privilege to stand on the shoulders of giants.” The professor replied: “Tell us what you can see.”

Stafford Beer
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