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Standing on the shoulders of giants. A review of Body Psychotherapy, History, Concepts, Methods, by Michael C. Heller.

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BOOK REVIEW

STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Body psychotherapy, history, concepts, methods, by Michael C. Heller, New York, Norton, 2012, 842 pp, US$68.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-393-70669-7

Before commencing this review, I acknowledge that it was not easy for me to write it. As a relational body-psychotherapist, writing about the most comprehensive textbook about body-psychotherapy that did not mention relational body-psychotherapy at all really stretched my subjective capacity to engage. I have no doubt that this has tainted my review, but hope I was still able to do this book some justice.

Take a walk on the wild side

Less than 60 years ago, in August 1956, the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) burned 6 tons of Wilhelm Reich's books and journals. The philosophical, political and spiritual ideas of Reich, the father of body-psychotherapy, were considered dangerous, politically risky and esoteric. Reading Heller's recently published *Body Psychotherapy*, it is hard to imagine that body-psychotherapy was once such a threat to mainstream thinking. Heller has written a solid, serious and academic textbook that may evoke many thoughts and opinions, but can rest comfortably in contemporary – psychodynamic and systemic thinking.

Heller's important contribution to the field is also a sign of our zeitgeist, and of the evolutionary stage of body-psychotherapy. We have emerged from the margins of psychotherapy and stepped up to join the forefront of therapeutic thinking and practice. Whether psychoanalysts read this book or not – I do not know. I can say with certainty, although, that Heller's book will not be burned.

In his opening speech to the 13th conference of the European Association for Body-Psychotherapy (EABP), Samuels (2012) explored some of the immanent tensions in contemporary body-psychotherapy. Among these was the following: 'On the one hand, body-psychotherapy is respected, acceptable and recognised nowadays as part of the relational mainstream of psychotherapy. On the other hand, where is its particular edge gone'? Samuels pointed to the polarisation within the field between its radical, oftentimes politically active and humanistic position (possibly the 'wild side' of body-psychotherapy), and the need for recognition and acceptance by the larger milieu of psychotherapy (the 'safe' and scientific side of body-psychotherapy).

Samuels (2012) continued: 'You're doing really well. You have become mainstream … ' and here, without shame, Samuels named the danger of losing the edge: 'Just as you become secure in your status, watch out or they will audit you, legislate for you and regulate you'.

Totton (2003) similarly highlighted this paradoxical position: 'Body psychotherapy, as we have seen, has often been explicitly countercultural in tone and content; its theories, however, complex and subtle, are often not compatible with conventional academic wisdom' (p. 136).

Historically, some practitioners were attracted to body-psychotherapy exactly because of its countercultural tone and politically active stance. The 'wild side' of body-psychotherapy sustained the (admittedly) misconduct and danger but also contributed to advancing ideas about growth and development, spirituality, social responsibility and eco-responsibility, erotic and aggressive explorations and the centrality of shadow.

To summarise, as a field, body-psychotherapy is torn. On the one hand, we can find the desire to be accepted, scientifically-supported and recognised by society in large and particularly the psychotherapeutic milieu as a valid, mainstream and effective modality. On the other hand, historically, theoretically and clinically body-psychotherapy was often radical and challenging: our role involved remaining on the periphery.

Heller's book, hailed 'Unquestionably the bible of body-psychotherapy' by Peter Levine, is an excellent example of this tension. Heller's rigorous exploration clearly favours acceptance and recognition over wildness. It chooses philosophical groundedness over risky interventions, or poetic expressions; it seeks to contextualise the innate wildness of body-psychotherapeutic. And it does so extremely well. This is a textbook you can show to sceptics, scientists and psychologists to support the modality of body-psychotherapy. And we need such textbooks.

This is where the book's main advantages and disadvantages lay. The book is thorough, thought provoking and solid, and would benefit any trainee and body-psychotherapist seeking to learn about the philosophical roots of their practice. On the other hand, it lacks poetry, radical thinking or anarchic edge; it lacks relationality, wildness and sometimes – embodiment.

I had to let go of my desire to find wildness or passion in the text and agree to receive powerful lessons in history and philosophy. This review will therefore explore some of the themes covered in this book, which I have not fallen in love with, but have grown to truly appreciate.

What is on the menu

Heller's book is an ambitious archive of (some) of the main roots from which body-psychotherapy has developed. Many of these roots concern the philosophical basis of Western culture, especially in its relationship to body–mind dilemmas. Those contextual references gave birth to our profession and to the vicissitudes of its evolutionary stages. In many ways, this book should be a preliminary read before attempting to understand Reichian, post-Reichian and contemporary theories of body-psychotherapy.

Body-psychotherapy was not created in a void, it stands of the shoulders of giants, and Heller successfully provides us with the broad shoulders upon which we stand.

Heller's book is divided to seven parts, each covering a different angle relevant to body-psychotherapy. I shall review some of these parts below.

Part V focuses on early psychoanalytic conceptualising of psyche and body. Thinking of Freud, Fenichel and Reich are covered here. Part VI further explores Reichian's thinking and Fenichel's psychosomatics. Although these chapters are significant and relevant to body-psychotherapists, they also appear in other textbooks on body-psychotherapy. What makes Heller's book unique is its breadth of influences and interconnected disciplines. I have therefore chosen to skip these parts in this review, although reading them was very educating.

I have also chosen not to review Part VII for different reasons. In this section, Heller reviews some contemporary thinking in psychotherapy and body-psychotherapy. Although important contributors to modern psychoanalytic thinking are mentioned here, such as Stern, Beebe and Tronick, I found the lack of mentioning of relational body-psychotherapy as a contemporary development in body-psychotherapy hard to swallow.

For me, in its lack of regard to some of the most important contemporary contributions to our field – this is the weakest part of Heller's comprehensive book and it seriously tainted my capacity to fully engage with the book. Such new developments include (among many others) Appel-Opper's (2010) excellent consideration of body and culture, Carroll's (2005, 2009) conceptualisation of self and mutual regulation, Soth's (2005) work with somatic transference dynamics and the prolific writing of Totton (1998, 2002, 2003, 2005b), which is completely absent from this book.

Totton (1998) has been one of the most influential contemporaries in body-psychotherapy. Not only has he been advancing body-psychotherapy as a field, but also he has maintained and deepened connection with psychoanalytic theory, and with politics and ecopsychology (not the least by establishing and editing *Psychotherapy and Politics International*).

The development of relational body-psychotherapy over the last two decades has been, in my opinion (and I cannot but involve my subjectivity here), one of the deserving and rigorous branches in body-psychotherapy. Omitting such major contributions to our field seems incongruent with Heller's intention to offer 'what I think people should know about the field of body-psychotherapy, rather than an essay that publicises my personal thoughts on the matter' (p. xix).

The gaps between the book's proclamation and its clear philosophical and clinical choices should have either been ameliorated or properly and transparently declared. For these reasons, I could not relate to the last part of the book with the seriousness it probably deserves.

Influences from Eastern philosophies – Part I

Body-psychotherapy was influenced by both Western and Eastern thoughts and practices. Although Western cultures benefited from the industrial revolution, modern medicine, Western philosophy, evolution theory and physics, it has also resulted in a split between body, mind and spirit. The dualism, which began in the work of Rene Descartes and liberated scientific thinking from the inquisition, did not come without cost. The Cartesian–Newtonian paradigm opened the door to scientific research and at the same time, created splits between body and mind, man and god and one person from another (Cavell, 2006; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2010).

The chapters in Part I review the relationship between body and mind in Eastern philosophies, which have influenced body-psychotherapy. These ancient philosophies present real alternatives to dualistic thinking (and to the predominant Greek philosophy in the West).

Heller begins (chapter 1) by looking at Hindu philosophies, and exploring the philosophical and practical facets of Yoga. The immanent connection between body, mind and spirit is presented, as well as the inherent understanding that disturbances in body affect the mind and vice versa. Heller discusses the importance of postures and breathing to Yogi Philosophy, and elaborates on the concept of Energy in Yoga (Chakra system).[1]

Next, Heller examines Chinese philosophies – mainly Taoism, where notions of Chi, Yin and Yang are explained. These are relevant to body-psychotherapeutic conceptualisation of polarities, pulsation and energy. Chinese philosophy embeds a body–mind interconnectedness, which also manifest in the practice of Chinese medicine and the martial arts. All these are clearly discussed in chapter 2. Some body-psychotherapy modalities (such as Gestalt, Hakomi and Postural Integration) were directly influenced by Chinese philosophy. Jungian thinking, which is also relevant to the evolution of body-psychotherapy, was significantly impacted by Chinese philosophy (Jung, 1949, even wrote the preface to the English translation of the I-Ching). Heller's succinct descriptions and comparisons with modern psychotherapeutic thinking are intelligent and illuminating.

Interestingly, the book pays little attention to another very important non-dualistic source of influence on body-psychotherapy: Shamanism. Shamanic thinking (globally) also postulates body–mind connection and has influenced some body-psychotherapy modalities, like Mindell's (1982) Process work, Pulsing bodywork and Totton's (2005a) Embodied Relational Therapy.

Western philosophy – from Plato to Kant – Part II

Body-psychotherapy genuinely attempts to provide an alternative for a cultural bias towards the thinking mind, a mind that has become conceptualised and understood through philosophy. Any student of body-psychotherapy would benefit from a deeper reading of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Lock, Hume and Kant. Heller successfully summarises some of the key concepts in Western philosophy that have shaped modern thought, as well as points to their relevance to the development of body-psychotherapy. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of this section to body-psychotherapy training.

Chapter 3 reviews some of Plato's ideas, and their influence on contemporary thinking, including that of Wilhelm Reich and post-Reichian practitioners. Greek philosophy is at the heart of Western civilisation and it had set the ground for our understanding of body, mind and soul. Although the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (especially Pythagoras) held ideas that were more congruent with body-psychotherapy (Guthrie, 1978), Plato's extensive writing endeavoured to demystify the universe and systematically understand how we have come to be (ontology), and how we are able to understand (epistemology) (Guthrie, 1962, 1975) – an attempt, which was later shared by clinicians like Freud and Reich, and one that characterises this volume.

Freud's thinking, as that of most intellectuals of his era, was conditioned by Greek philosophy, and he extensively used the elements from Greek mythology in forming

his psychoanalytic thinking (Bowlby, 2007). The Oedipal complex, Cassandra, Eros and Psyche and thanatos – the death instinct, are merely few examples.

Plato's dialogic style strongly influenced psychoanalytic inquiry: genuinely thriving for the truth via questions and introspection. Heller explores these themes intelligently and clearly. Next, Heller looks at Plato's idealism and its relevance to the earlier, Neo-Reichian postulations (such as the absolute 'the body always knows' and 'the body never lies'). Heller boldly criticises simplistic idealisations of the body, making this chapter a challenging and stimulating read. Further explorations of Platonic concepts, including that of *eros* and the role of sexuality, are made.

Chapter 4 presents important concepts from the father of modern philosophy, 17th Century Rene Descartes. Of particular interest to body-psychotherapy is Descartes separating the body, which became subjected to scientific observation, from the psyche (or soul) – belonging to the church.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore three important philosophers, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Spinoza's work is specifically relevant for nature-based spirituality and Reich's concept of Orgone is in par with Spinoza's understanding of the divine. Spinoza also offered systemic thinking, which would later develop in psychotherapy and is inherent in some body-psychotherapy modalities. As a systemic thinker, Heller thrives when discussing Spinoza and Kant.

Heller writes: 'It is necessary to understand how thinking works to understand what the mind can do and the value of its products' (p. 136). He presents the epistemology of Hume and Kant as deep (if sometimes flawed) inquiries to the nature of mind. Heller's examination of these ideas is succinct and simple without becoming simplistic. Nonetheless, the work of these writers is so relevant to our clinical practice, that I would recommend reading the original works of Spinoza (Garrett, 1996; Spinoza, 1905) and Kant (Guyer, 1992; Kant, 1781).

The organism as biology – Part III

Part III is dedicated to examining evolution theory. Heller explains his rationale for including these theories here: 'Most of the models of psychotherapy situate their reflections within the framework of the theories of evolution, which were formulated during the past two centuries' (p. 155).

The development of biology set the ground to understanding human development, socio-cultural processes and body–mind interaction. Heller concentrates on three theorists: Lamarck, Darwin and Wallace. These thinkers were responsible for some of the greatest revolutions in human thinking, including the de-centring of the human species.[2] Here, Heller also discusses the central concepts of homeostasis and regulation.

Readers who enjoyed this part will appreciate Kuhn's (1962) seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Gould's (1982, 1996, 2002) writing also offers accessible and meaningful dialogues with evolution theory.

Hypnosis, relaxation and gymnastics – Part IV and conclusion

The histories of body-psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and modern hypnosis are intertwined and, while other writers (most notably Boadella, 1976) covered these connections before, Heller's presentation is thorough, systemic and enlightening.

Heller begins with Mesmer, who believed (not unlike Reich) there was a universal fluid flowing through everything, and that imbalances in this fluid resulted in illness and unhappiness, of body and mind. Heller presented a choice of developments of the hypnotic theory, which claimed to connect body, mind and spirit. Some of these means included relaxing the body. 'Relaxation,' wrote Heller, 'proposes to act as a junction between will and bodily sensations in such a way that the exercise influences the regulators of the organism' (p. 289).

The book continues to examine another entry point into the intricate connections between bodily functions and psychic ones – physical gymnastics and the work of Moshe Feldenkrais. Heller expresses his criticism of Reichian body-psychotherapy by writing: 'the work of Feldenkrais is often used by those body psychotherapists who are not particularly Reichians and who want to have models of body intervention at their disposal that are more precise and effective than those developed by orthodox Reichians' (p. 319).

In chapter 13, Heller enters one of his main specialisations – looking at the organism as physiology and exploring its architecture. This chapter is full with Heller's passion and aesthetic presentation and he artistically weaves philosophy, anatomy and art.

Throughout the book, Heller disseminated ideas helpfully and delivered illuminating historical and theoretical understandings. This book deserves its place on every body-psychotherapist's bookshelf as an invaluable reference book.

Yet, as a seeker of magic, I was disappointed by this part – and by many aspects of this book. For me, its lack of magic made it hard to read. At the heart of psychotherapy, so I believe, lays a real deep and human desire to connect with another to transcend the mundane and open to the numinous and the sacred that exists within us, and in the potential space between us. When I read a psychotherapy book, I ache to find heart and soul inside it, to be moved and touched, angered or provoked. Without this edge, I am left, just like this important book left me, appreciative – but disappointed.

Notes

1. For readers who found this chapter interesting, Anodea Judith's (1996) revolutionary book *Eastern Body, Western Mind* could nicely complement it. Informed by body-psychotherapy as well as Yoga, Judith presents an invaluable account of the psychology of the Chakra system.
2. Freud, 1916–1917, considered his sexual theory to be the 'third' blow to human anthropocentric thinking, following Copernicus and Darwin.

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