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## The body in Wellbeing Spirituality

### Self, spirit beings and the politics of difference

#### Introduction

New religious movements of the nineteenth century—notably the Theosophical Society and Spiritualism—endowed western culture with an energetic concept of the self: that is, with a model of the body that proposed the individual to be constituted by a ‘spiritual’ or subtle substance. This model of the body—the subtle body—was not new to western esoteric traditions, however, its presentation at this time melded with subtle body schemes from Hindu traditions (primarily Yoga traditions) and provided the groundwork for the popularisation of a concept of the body and self as being comprised of an energetic anatomy. This model of the self has continued unabated into contemporary consumer culture and underpins the vast majority of mind–body concepts in Complementary and Alternative Medical (CAM) practices. This article is concerned with the subtle body models currently found in Wellbeing Spirituality healing modalities. In particular, it considers their ontological and metaphysical propositions with regard to an ethics of difference: both energetic and cultural. Therefore, two distinct types of discourse will be examined and discussed: that of popular culture and that of Continental philosophy (especially feminist and post-structural). Both provide methods for understanding the enduring popularity of subtle body concepts of the self and the challenging ethical relations that the model presupposes.

‘Difference’ herein refers to the term’s use in the Continental philosophical tradition, in particular following the thought of Emmanuel Levinas in the proposition of a radical difference, or alterity. In broad strokes, Levinas argued that ethics was first philosophy (not ontology) and therefore that the relation between the One and the Other (between the subject and an other of radical difference) was generative of subjectivity itself. That is, the One and the Other were intimately related and mutually called each other into existence. Therefore, for Levinas, the responsibility to the Other (ethics) was primary. This relationship between the One and Other could not, in Levinas’

conception be described or understood via spatial analogies or description: it could not be measured in any linear sense. It was, what he termed a relation of 'proximity': a proximity that is intersubjective and erodes fixed boundaries between self and other:

The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, not to the simple 'representation' of a neighbour; it is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation —an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment (Levinas 1989: 90).

Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray further develops Levinas' concept of proximity. In her reading this proximity is embedded in a concept of subjective interiority that is both intersubjective (shared by the One and the Other) and implicit in the recognition and respect of/for radical difference. According to Irigaray, interiority functions to constitute individuality: it is a mode of becoming through which the relation to the Other (alterity) is established (2000: 75): this concept of the Other is analysed in relation to energetic anatomy in more detail later in this chapter. Significantly, however, this 'Other' is one of radical difference; an alterity, not a repeat or variation of the One (the singular subject of ontology). To consider the Other as a version of the One would be to continue to work within what Levinas termed the discourse of the Same. The Other conceptualised as alterity is wholly different; different in ways that cannot ever be entirely known. Irigaray proposes that the only manner through which such a subject of difference can be known or perceived—partially—is via bodily-based modes of knowledge (rather than via intellectual abstraction). The concept of the body she utilises in her more recent work, is one that includes a pneumatic, or energetic anatomy. Here is proposed a subject that forever slips beyond discourses of mastery.

As this subject—or self—of radical difference is explored in relation to subtle bodies in Wellbeing culture the negotiation of a range of other differences come to the fore, particularly epistemological ones, including science–spirituality and biomedicine and CAM. This chapter ranges across these differences—which are so often in popular discourse presented as binary dualisms—to consider the way in which subtle body models of the self call in philosophical discourse (at an ontological level) for the presentation of non-oppositional relations (via models of intersubjectivity); while in their presentation in popular culture (Wellbeing Spirituality), ontological difference (alterity) is either collapsed (in an ethically dubious manner) or

reinforced via the reapplication of a dualist form of logic. A recently published 'handbook' text, Cyndi Dale's *The Subtle Body* (2009) is examined to illustrate the conceptualisation of subtle bodies in popular culture.

## Wellbeing Spirituality and New Age culture

New Age spirituality scholar Paul Heelas discusses Wellbeing Spirituality as a specific cultural phenomenon in his relatively recent text *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (2008). In his figuring, Wellbeing Spirituality refers to a range of practices that emerge from a New Age 'spirituality of life' orientation that emphasises immanence: that is, spirituality found 'within the depths of life' (2008: 25). Heelas proposes this focus on 'life' to counter critical evaluations—especially Foucauldian ones—of the New Age that condemn it as a set of disciplinary techniques that simply reproduce dominant (neo-liberal) subject positions and which are self-focused, individual, and therefore 'selfish' in orientation. Although countering a different set of arguments, Ruth Barcan argues that something *more* is happening with concepts of the body in alternative health practices beyond—or as well as—the internalisation of normative discourses (2008: 14–27).

In addition to acknowledging the complexity of the concept of the self in New Age and Wellbeing practices, it should also be noted that what actually constitutes the New Age, when it started, whether it has finished or not as a spiritual movement and the appropriateness or otherwise of the very term 'New Age', have all been hotly disputed (for an overview of the debates, see Chrystides 2007). Without delving into the numerous debates, it is enough for this context to note that there is no consensus on the suitability of either the terminology, or its proposed constituents. Nevertheless, the New Age (including Wellbeing Spirituality practices) has generally attracted readings of it as spirituality for self-obsessed, white middle-class westerners devoid of ethical responsibility with regard to cultural difference and identity politics—manifested via the 'pick-n-mix' approach to indigenous and Asian traditions—and the politics of difference more generally (see, for example, Carette & King 2004). That is, the 'all is one' motto implicit in much New Age metaphysics is read as a universalising and totalising framework in which very real social and cultural differences are erased and/or simultaneously positioned in a neo-liberal perspective as entirely the responsibility of the individual. Louise L. Hay's 'mega-selling' books are a good example of that genre (Hay 1988,

Johnston & Barcan 2006). As will be illustrated herein, these propositions can be made, and are sustained, by the employment of an energetic ontology and metaphysics. Simultaneously however, this same metaphysical and ontological framework introduces a range of issues regarding the conceptualisation of difference and subjectivity that challenge the universalist interpretation common to popular discourse.

Against such universalist interpretation and its criticism, Paul Heelas seeks to identify an Other-orientated politics in New Age practices: that is, to interpret the practices as being framed by, and producing, broader social and environmental effects (albeit while also being focused on individual wellbeing). He does this by arguing that the New Ager's focus is on life (and its relations), not on the individual self. Heelas argues: 'For participants, spirituality is life-itself, the "life-force" or "energy" which flows through all human life (and much else besides), which sustains life. . .' (2008: 27) and further that this 'holistic thrust of subjective-life spirituality is intimately bound up with the importance widely attached to healing' (p. 34). Hence, Wellbeing Spirituality (as an aspect, or 'out-growth' of the New Age) has, at its core, a concern for the healing of self and other.

Emerging from this perspective is a world-view and practice that understands changes to the self (self-care and responsibility) as intimately bound up with, and influential upon, the broader world and others within it (a care for and responsibility to Other). The substance that enables this engagement, and forms the logic of relation, is a subtle substance: the expansive, energetic, subtle bodies of self.

### **Subtle bodies in a contemporary context: definitions and practice**

The models of the subtle body presented in this chapter as an example of a popular cultural framework are those presented by Cyndi Dale in *The Subtle Body: An Encyclopedia of Your Energetic Anatomy* (2009). Dale's concept of the subtle body has been built upon schemas devised by the Theosophical Society as well as other indigenous and esoteric traditions (Johnston 2008, Tansley 1977). Dale's presentation is a very contemporary version of the subtle body; one that is mobilised to 'fill' or 'bridge' the assumed gap between western and eastern culture in the popular imagination.

Dale has penned many books on chakras and healing for the metaphysical consumer market. She refers to herself as an 'intuitive coach' who practices healing modalities including shamanism, energy healing; intuitive healing;

therapeutic healing, faith healing and Reiki (www.cyndidale.com 2010). In her conceptualisation, all these modes of healing utilise an energetic form of the body, and further illness is itself caused by energetic disorder. She writes:

Everything is made of energy: molecules, pathogens, prescription medicines, and even emotions. Each cell pulses electrically, and the body itself emanates electromagnetic fields. The human body is a complex energetic system, composed of hundreds of energetic subsystems. Disease is caused by energetic imbalances; therefore, health can be restored or established by balancing one's energies. (Dale 2009: xxi.)

Energy in this conceptualisation is the 'substance' that constitutes and inter-relates all phenomena. Indeed, it is energy as an ontological substance—simultaneously spiritual and physical—that Dale employs to bridge biomedical and CAM health practices. Energy, according to Dale is a foundational building 'block', constitutive of all existence. Of course, subtle body models are themselves foundational to many CAM practices, but as has been discussed elsewhere, these propose a vastly different model of the body than the one understood, endorsed and proposed by biomedicine (Johnston & Barcan 2006). For Dale, energy itself erases the difference between the two medical models and provides a uniting logic for the spiritual and the somatic.

Indeed, there are many traditions (including Theosophical ones) that propose subtle bodies to be comprised of energy of the type described by Dale. Subtle bodies are commonly understood to interpenetrate the physical body and to exceed it: moving into the space beyond, or between self and Other (Johnston 2008, Tansley 1977). Yogic traditions, for example, propose an esoteric anatomy of subtle energy channels that criss-cross throughout the body (*nadi*) with major centres (*chakras*) typically identified as locations of intense exchange between the individual's subtle body system and the broader cosmic energetic system (Feuerstein 1990: 28). This is definitely not a body enclosed by skin and ontologically separated from the world and others. That is, this is not the type of body presupposed by biomedicine.

The relations between biomedicine and CAM are becoming increasingly important (financially, culturally, and ethically) with the development of multi-model medical centres and the slow integration of CAM practices into hospital contexts (meditation or Reiki in hospitals, for example). Much work in the negotiation of these various traditions both in terms of cultural analysis and practices is on the horizon. It is therefore of interest to consider the ways in which a popular author, like Dale, positions these relations between CAM

and biomedical practices in her text. A text, which is written for ‘healing professionals’ and ‘patients’ and is accompanied with a resounding endorsement from Christiane Northrup MD, a well-known (and best-selling with *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom*, 1994) gynaecologist who discusses multi-modal surgeries in the United States (Dale 2009: np).

Cyndi Dale is acutely aware of the difference in conceptualisations of the body in energetic and biomedical systems. Indeed, she sets up a sharp dualism between western medicine (as biomedical) and eastern medicine (as energetic). This is of course, a view tinged by New Age romanticism and Orientalism.

In Dale’s rendering, the cause of the energy–biomedical division is a cultural difference (of a particularly simplistic kind). Both types of medicine are built upon the same ontology (energy), with one, the ‘western’ designated allopathic and mechanistic, the other, the ‘eastern’ as ‘traditional’ and ‘holistic’ (2009: xx). In discussing this division Dale contends that the western approach must be honoured and revered but that, ultimately, ‘a new health care process’ needs to ‘be born, termed *integrative* care; the marriage between West and East’ (p. xx). The use of a marriage metaphor in this text is not surprising considering that the dualist terms—West and East—carry implicit stereotypical gender ascriptions in their deployment in dominant western discourse. These metaphors are mapped onto the health modalities; western medicine is proposed as stereotypically masculine: invasive, aggressive, goal orientated. CAM practices are presented as stereotypically feminine caring, gentle, low-impact, more ‘natural’.

To claim, as is implicit in Dale’s argument, that western cultural traditions have been devoid of subtle body schemas, energetic concepts of the body, and attendant healing traditions is simply incorrect. Dale, by and large, ignores subtle body schemas found in the western esoteric traditions (with the marked exception of the Jewish Kabbalah and a version of ‘occult’ Christianity) like those proposed by Renaissance physician and scholar Marsilio Ficino’s astro-physiology (1996, first published in 1489), or the ‘desire’ body presented by Jacob Boehme (Deghaye 1995: 224). These subtle body schemas were also part of the modern Theosophical Society’s mix upon which Dale’s system develops. Dale’s blindness regarding these esoteric traditions is also shared by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray. Irigaray presents subtle bodies within a romanticised east–west dichotomy; with energetic subjectivity firmly located as ‘eastern’ (Irigaray 1999).

In order to attain the ‘marriage’ between eastern and western medicine that Dale proposes, she must also bridge a proposed epistemological dualism:

between science and empirical observation and spiritual or mystical experience. Once again, common stereotypes accompany the presentation of these modes of knowledge: reason–western–masculine and the mystical–eastern–feminine. Their integration in Dale’s framework however relies, not on challenging definitions of subjectivity, knowledge, embodiment and perception (as is common to post-structural and feminist philosophy for example), but to the discoveries of contemporary science as legitimising discourses. There is for Dale a singular ‘truth’ to these spiritual energetic bodies that can be known by exceptional empirical means. For example, regarding the illustrations in the book she writes ‘Richard Wehrman, illustrator, provided the most amazing and true renderings of the energy anatomy ever created’ (2009: xvii).

One wonders exactly how this visual ‘truth’ can be attested. This is noted, not to diminish Wehrman’s art, or his claim to accuracy in representation, but to pose the question of how consensus for the ‘truth’ of images of energetic anatomy can be established. The issue of scientific legitimacy, especially via empirical means, has long accompanied CAM practices (and vitalist philosophies and practices of all types). So it is not surprising to find Dale doing her own version of H. P. Blavatsky’s melding of scientific and spiritual agendas to validate her point. The contents of the text evidences this clearly, with the first few chapters devoted to detailed accounts of physical anatomy, the functioning of all the major bodily systems (for example nervous, reproductive, digestive), before turning to various scientific conceptualisations of energy fields (example Unified Field theories), after which a discussion of energetic healing techniques is found (the discussion of these traditions is taken up in the closing section of this chapter).

However, it is not only the thorny issue of scientific legitimacy that is invoked in contemporary discussions of subtle bodies, but also the plurality of ways in which spirit, spirit body and spirit beings are defined and deployed.

### **Spirit beings: sources or ‘transmitters’/‘channels’ of energy**

Within the literature on energetic bodies and subtle body schemas there is a dual sense of a ‘spirit being’ to be found. Most easily identified are those practices that have been informed by Spiritualism or the Channelling movement, for example, practices described as spiritual healing. In these healing modalities an external agent (or agents: some healers work with more than one spiritual entity) is attributed with providing the healing energy, or directing the healing that ‘treats’ the patient’s body–mind–spirit. As such, these models

present the physical practitioner as a conduit, a bridge between the ephemeral spirit healer(s) and the physical patient. Often accompanying these practices are claims of extrasensory perception that render subtle bodies, or their afflictions, as visible or tactile, or, less commonly, audible to the practitioner (Barcan 2009: 209–31; Johnston 2010: 69–78). Indeed, as argued elsewhere, such healing modalities call for an individual to develop their perceptual literacy beyond the five senses in order to ‘keep track’ of their subtle bodies (Johnston 2008).

The second sense of ‘spirit being’ to be found amongst these practices is that which is implicit in the subtle body system itself. Each individual human is also simultaneously a being of spirit, because their very foundational substance—the energy—is conceptualised as both matter and spirit simultaneously. In many traditions (including Theosophical models) the cultivation of subtle bodies, and an individual’s capacity to see, recognise and adjust their subtle selves is directly linked to spiritual development. Indeed, subtle body systems are often presented as the bridge between this-worldly phenomena and other-worldly states: the ephemeral link between ‘gross’ matter and ‘pure’ spirit.

Dale proposes that her model of ‘integrative care’ (the ‘marriage’ of ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ medicine), is ‘a new level of medical excellence’ (2009: xxi). It takes part in an established spiritual hierarchy, linked directly to subtle bodies (for example in the Theosophical system there are seven subtle bodies linked to seven planes of existence: each with increasingly refined ‘energy’; the lowest and densest level being that of the physical world (Besant 1911)). The individual treated by Dale’s Integrative Care is a spiritual and a physical being: at one and the same time comprised of ‘spiritual energy’ while also—whether conscious of it or not—being a conduit for ‘spiritual energy’. The physical body, from this perspective, is spirit. Spirit beings are not ephemeral agents, but the embodied self.

## **Politics of energetic difference**

If one’s subjectivity is proposed as being comprised of a series of subtle bodies, or a plurality of energies that extend beyond the physical body, then the question of difference—and in particular radical difference or alterity—become acute. How and where does one posit the boundaries of self and other? In this section an overview of Luce Irigaray’s particular approach, and its limitations, is discussed.



From a philosophical perspective there are two core ontological issues regarding the concept of subtle bodies and radical difference. The first is the way in which the ‘substance’ or ‘energy’ of which subtle bodies are thought to be comprised disrupts the ontological difference often employed to distinguish between ‘mind’ and ‘body’ or ‘spirit’ and ‘body’ (in substance ontologies in particular) (Johnston 2008). Second is the issue of energetic relations as they are understood to ‘play out’ in the real world while at the same time embracing ethical relations with radical difference. That is: how do we have ethical energetic relations? It is this second issue that Irigaray most clearly tackles in *To be Two* (2000). In this text she proposes a gendering of ontological energy that she then links as essential to the maintenance of radical difference.

For Irigaray, there are two—energetic—subject positions (hence ‘to be two’); this can be considered as a dual subjectivity (thus challenging the idea of subjectivity as singular). Irigaray—following numerous eastern and esoteric traditions—proposes the lived realization of this ontological proposition is via the cultivation of energetic relations. Her work is of course, based on sexual dimorphism (for which she has in the past been critiqued); where each ‘sexed being’ has an altogether different energetic subjectivity, but that each subject is necessarily linked in a relation to cultivating each other energetically. In this sense, they are linked in a Levinasian relation of interdependence: calling one another forth. Irigaray writes:

To be two would allow us to remain in ourselves, and would permit gathering, and the type of safeguarding which does not restrain, the kind of presence which remained free of bonds: neither mine nor yours but each living and breathing with the other. It would refrain from possessing you in order to allow you to be—to be in me, as well. (Irigaray 2000: 16.)

Therefore, the relation to the Other is one of interiority, not exteriority: a radical proximity established by psychic and energetic interrelations rather than physical distance. The simultaneous acknowledgment of energetic interrelation and energetic difference results for Irigaray in an acknowledgement of relations of intimacy and alterity that cannot be reconciled. It is a model of intersubjectivity that attempts to incorporate an ethics of radical difference. However, one can question the employment of gender dimorphism and ask: Why only two? Why not to be multiple? Indeed Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s ‘body without organs’ could be employed usefully for such a purpose (Johnston 2008, Johnston & Barcan 2006: 25–44).

In fact, thinking of subtle bodies as a radical form of intersubjectivity enables useful propositions, not only about relations with radical difference, but also by proposing extensive concepts of materiality. There are, however, considerable issues to be considered with regards to an ethics of subtle bodies (especially regarding relations of alterity) in popular cultural and Wellbeing Spirituality presentations. Again, Cyndi Dale's text illustrates the perplexing issue of various models of the subtle body—drawn from different cultures—being presented together without a discussion or logic to explicate their differences and what these differences might mean for the practitioner and patient. Dale presents whole series of subtle body models in her text; she writes, 'There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of energetic systems functioning in the world, many of which include, or allude to, the chakras and other energy bodies. The following handful of systems represents some of the different ways of looking at the subtle energy cosmos within ourselves' (Dale 2009: 287). After which follows descriptions of the Himalayan Bonpo chakra model (advocated by modern teacher Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche); a Mayan energy system; the Tsalagi (Cherokee) energy system; an Incan energy model; an occult Christian energy system (based on Zachery Landsdown's work); Egyptian and African energy bodies; and finally the 'Jewish mystical energy system: the ancient Kabbalah'.

Obviously, there are several orders of difference being elided here. Firstly, cultural difference: each of these systems is validated by reference to its 'traditional' context; with relations to a first nation, ancient or Asian people, as a legitimating feature.

Secondly, there is no discussion of the relation, disjunction, difference (radical or otherwise) between these different schemas of energetic anatomy. The inference is that we can/do have any, or all, of them and therefore we have access to whatever system we may choose to work with. Like the worst of the New Age appropriation of indigenous traditions, the models employed in Wellbeing Spirituality—as illustrated by Dale—are not considered to be culturally located and specific. They are considered as universal. From such a perspective a white middle class Australian can chose to understand themselves as comprised of a Cherokee energetic system and perhaps a Yogic schema simultaneously.

Here then is the double edge of the energetic sword. On one hand, at the level of the individual practitioner in a wellbeing framework with its long histories of the single practitioner utilising a number of modalities as exemplified by Dale's book, energetic anatomy is deployed to elide difference. On the other hand, Heelas's contention regarding the way in which Wellbeing

Spirituality practices consider the self as implicitly bound up with the broader world (establishing an ethics of both self and other simultaneously) and my own previous work on subtle bodies as a form of radical intersubjectivity, do propose ways in which energetic anatomy can be formulated to take account of difference (cultural, sexual, socio-political and ontological). That is, there are frameworks available in philosophical discourse with which difference can be maintained: without collapsing into the New Age 'we are all one' soup. What is required is an ethics of energetic engagement: such an ethics is a lived, embodied, relation premised upon the cultivation of perception.

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