

A Review of Michael C. Heller's *Body Psychotherapy: History, Concepts, Methods* W. W. Norton & Company (August 20, 2012)

David Boadella

Michael Heller's new book has been widely praised for its depth of scholarship. It is an expansive compendium of the philosophical, biological, psychological and sociological roots and contexts of body psychotherapy. The book contains seven main sections, as follows:

1. A detailed overview of Far Eastern approaches to the body and mind takes up the first 75 pages.
2. A fascinating philosophical chapter dealing with Socrates, Plato, Descartes, and Spinoza, follows, outlining Heller's view of these thinkers' relevance for the understanding of the links between body and mind. Here I personally missed Pythagoras, who was one of Plato's main inspirations, and whose work I have shown to be highly relevant to the understanding of the ancient roots of body psychotherapy.
3. A section on biology and neurology, 100 pages long, gives a great deal of valuable information on energy flow, tissues, respiration, pulsation and organismic vitality.
4. This is followed by a chapter of 84 pages on hypnosis, gymnastics and relaxation. Here, Heller gives clear information about Anton Mesmer and the early roots of body therapy as a complement to psychotherapy, as it developed in Scandinavia and Berlin. He also writes about energy and spirituality from his particular viewpoint.
5. Chapter 5, at 105 pages in length, details the history of psychoanalysis, libido, and the body. This explores many new aspects of Freud's complex and ambivalent relationship with the body and his interactions with Adler, Ferenczi and Groddeck. The last part of this chapter begins with a study of the interactions between Freud, Reich and Otto Fenichel, during the time when Reich was still living in Vienna and also later in Berlin.
6. Only in chapter 6, the longest chapter in the book at 118 pages, does Heller write the full story of Wilhelm Reich in his Scandinavian period, which is dealt with at length. He provides much valuable information surrounding the birth of vegetotherapy in Oslo and related Scandinavian body therapies as developed by Elsa Gindler and by Reich's second partner, Elsa Lindenberg. The last part of this chapter attempts to deal with the history of body psychotherapy after Reich left Oslo and moved to America. There were two main developments in neo-Reichian body psychotherapy; one was the legacy he left in Oslo, inspired by which, therapists such as Ola Raknes and Nic Waal continued to influence a whole generation of therapists. Here Heller concentrates on Aadel Bulow Hansen, Berit Bunkan, Trygve Braatoy, Lillemor Johnsen, Gerda Boyesen and Lisbeth Marcher. Heller's personal training with Gerda Boyesen gives him a strong interest in the Oslo period of Reichian vegetotherapy and of related schools from that period. This period is dealt with in great length with many fine historical details.

My own connections to Ola Raknes and the Scandinavian legacy of Reich are

also briefly mentioned. Unfortunately, Heller gives inaccurate information about Biosynthesis. Firstly, the embryological model of "life-streams" in Biosynthesis was not derived from William Sheldon, as Heller states, but from a detailed organismic study of the physiology of the three primary germ-layers in the developing organism. This model in turn inspired, in different ways, Gerda Boyesen, Malcolm Brown and Jerome Liss. The word "Biosynthesis" is based on the integration of the psychosomatic aspects of these three germ layers: motoric action, emotional affect and cognitive reflection. This method never was, as Heller states, a synthesis of other methods.

The second part of this chapter has something to say about the development of Reich's work in the American period, and major body-psychotherapeutic directions that developed from that time. Here Heller devotes most of his attention to Alexander Lowen, one of the three co-founders of bioenergetic analysis. He makes valid criticisms of Lowen's over-emphasis on catharsis, which has been shown may lead to re-traumatisation in patients with weak ego-structures. He does not point out that many second-generation therapists from this direction, such as Robert Lewis, moved forwards away from this tendency in valuable ways.

The life's work of one of the major body psychotherapists, Stanley Keleman, is mentioned, but only very briefly. Heller's remarks about other post-bioenergetic schools are very brief, even minimal, and also primarily see them as stepping backwards rather than moving forwards.

Important omissions from this chapter include the lack of reference to the therapeutic work of Donald Winnicott, in England, who first used the term "grounding" in relation to connecting the psyche to the body. There is also no reference whatsoever to the extremely important pioneering work of Pierre Janet in body psychotherapy, which was a foundation for Courtenay Young's book, *The History and Development of Body Psychotherapy*.

7. The final chapter of 84 pages is on non-verbal communication research in relation to psychotherapy. This is packed with valuable information about video research into body signalling between infants and babies, highlighting the work of Stern, Beebe and Tronick.

It was surprising to see almost no reference, anywhere in the book, to attachment theory, or to the monumental work of Allan Schore, who wrote so much about energetic processes in the body and in relational interactions.

Within this chapter there are 26 pages of strong validation for one particular body psychotherapy school—that of George Downing. It is good so see the excellent work of this therapist described in such detail. It also highlights the personal preference of Michael Heller as he singles out this school for high praise, in juxtaposition to his sometimes minimal or superficial treatment of other valuable directions of body psychotherapy.

It is said that detailed research can sometimes lead to the problem of too much focus on the trees making it difficult to see the wood. Heller gives incredible detail about some different leaves on the trees of body psychotherapy.

His historical research is fascinating when he follows themes that excite him or interest him. However, Heller is a man of strong personal opinions who does not hesitate at times to make controversial interpretations or dogmatic assertions that express his subjective

viewpoint. These may appear to be supported by his massive quotations and references but are not necessarily true.

Thus, Heller's approach to the forest of body psychotherapy leads him to overly focus on some of the trees in that forest, and to under-focus on others, which he can then dismiss as largely irrelevant. This means that when it comes to judgments about what is "scientific" and what is not, his view of the forest in the end is an intensely personal one. This makes his book stronger on history and concepts than on methods. Heller gives the impression, because of his finely detailed and immense research, that his opinions and conclusions are objective, even though in his final words he states: "I have taken clear options on each subject, so that the reader who reads this book from beginning to end will notice that some positions are clearly mine".

Heller writes at length about transpersonal aspects of body psychotherapy, as found in Reich's conceptions, Biodynamic Psychology, Biosynthesis and Core Energetics. He criticises these viewpoints as "idealistic" and therefore unscientific. A strong defence of the transpersonal aspects of psychotherapy was published in the International Journal of Psychotherapy (Vol 2, no 1) in 1998, in my article on Essence and Ground, where I showed that all schools of psychotherapy contain aspects which Heller would judge to be "idealistic".

According to Peter Levine, Heller's book is "the bible of body-oriented psychotherapy". This unfortunately gives it a fundamentalist flavour, which is the opposite of what Heller wants to achieve. Rather, his book is a massive encyclopaedia of his scientific knowledge, his overview of research, his philosophical interpretations and his personal opinions. Michael Heller concludes his encyclopaedia with the sentence: "I advise the reader to focus on the issues I raise and then look for personal answers."

BIOGRAPHY

David Boadella B.A., M.Ed., D.Sc.hon, psychotherapist SPV, UKCP and ECP, studied education, literature and psychology. He is trained in character-analytic vegetotherapy and is the founder of Biosynthesis. He has spent many years in psychotherapeutic practice. He holds lectures worldwide, and is the author of numerous books and articles. He has been publishing the journal *Energy & Character* since 1970. In 1995, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Open International University of Complementary Medicine. He is the author of *Befreite Lebensenergie* (translated as Lifestreams) and *Wilhelm Reich: The Evolution of his Work*, among other books.