



Body Psychotherapy: History, Concepts, And Methods

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"Unquestionably the bible of body-oriented psychotherapy."

Peter Levine's quote captures the essence of Michael's latest text—this is indeed the gospel for early somatic life, the antecedents of our theoretical heritage and our evolving practice according to history, philosophy, science, religion, spirituality and more. As body psychotherapists readying to speak up and influence the larger world of psychotherapy, we can't afford to be provincial in anyway. Michael takes the plunge and brings our work into the limelight in all its complexity and being. The depth of detail including nuanced layers of his personal knowledge and belief are combined in a writing style that is both exacting and entertaining.

To be accurate, this is not a textbook about doing psychotherapy. This is a book about the complete intellectual history that informs psychotherapy practices—it is a well written critique with respect to all modalities housed under the term body psychotherapy. The contents can be accessed from any point within the text as enough information is provided to support understanding. Beyond the introduction, which might be easier to read as the epilogue, there are seven sections (23 chapters) along with detailed appendices, notes with more data to encourage exploration,

a glossary, and references and bibliography that one could spend a lifetime reading through and still not read it all. Each section covers an immense reach exploring the building blocks of our field fortified with such expansive detail presented in its minutia yet written with a relaxed knowing tone—just a note, the headings are worth reading as they offer a clear guide regarding the content of each paragraph or section (respectively speaking). The reading is atypical textbook prose. There's a sense of familiarity; a communal "We" is used throughout such that we are embodying this material together in this moment and from this place of knowing we will move the field forward to our next interchange.

Michael writes from a clear place of knowing and knowledge. His background experience as a therapist and thinker, researcher and writer radiates outward as he explores in depth the traditions pioneers forged such as Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Darwin, Freud, and beyond. He discusses how these thinkers influenced and were influenced by the context of their life. He offers windows into personal backgrounds of many founders in the field of body psychotherapy, placed contextually within a frame of what occurred in their surround that

impacted the decisions they made, the directions they took.

Starting with the foundation of yoga and breath, Taoism and spirituality, Heller offers a conclusive look at the role Soul and Spirit play in the body, and at the need to view the organism as a systemic process in its entirety and not within the linear formats of many methodologies that followed. He also includes challenges to status quo thinking and acceptance based on the lack of substantive data/research and offers differing viewpoints that make sense physiologically and psychologically. Knowing what others have done and what they have said brings clarity to conversations being held today.

The discussion on the ancient sources/definitions of the Soul, from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, from then to when science and inquiry dominated the field and the existence of the Soul became dogma, intrigued me. Understanding Idealism, the deeply phenomenological approaches/teachings that transformed into Relativism as Descartes and Galileo and the developing sciences erupted into wars over beliefs. Their scientific approach put into question all dogmas as they sought the truth

“Body psychotherapy is not a psychotherapy to which an approach to the body is attached. It is a development of psychotherapy that intervenes in the way the psyche inserts itself into its organism.”

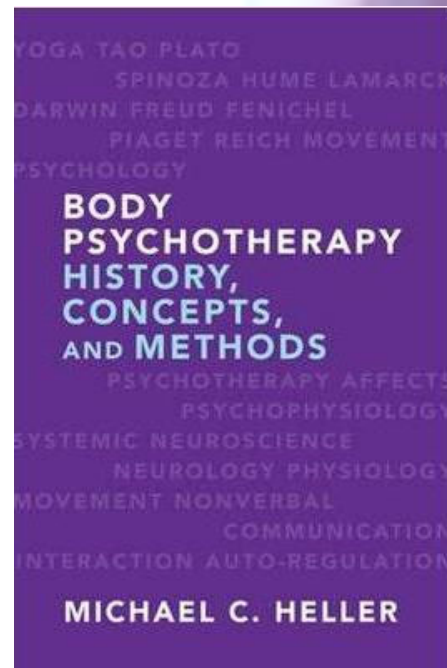
together, and not accept what is being handed down by prior authority. These bricks are glued together by observations that can be explicitly perceived by all.

Reading the original writings as well, Michael brings to point that translators often change the original intention. For example, Freud never used the term consciousness—there is no direct equivalent word in German. English and French yes, German, no. Freud, like Descartes and Lamarck, used the same terminology: when talking about what we call consciousness, they conversed about “that which we know of” (*bewusst*) and “that which we do not know of” (*unbewusst*). Another term that Michael clarified is Reich’s use of the word *vegetative*: what the English cultures call the autonomic nervous system is referred to in German (and sometimes in French) as the vegetative nervous system. Having studied in Vienna, Reich used the term *vegetative* to designate all the phenomena regulated by the nervous and hormonal vegetative systems. Small points, perhaps, but knowing that

many translators skewed the original meanings via their translations left a streak of doubt for me—I want to know what the author actually said and how the original intention might have influenced what happened in the moment and what has yet to come.

Michael has much to say and takes the time to say it well all the while giving readers breathing space to absorb the material. I was taken by the writing on mother infant dyadic communication, the inclusion of nonverbal communication supported via infant studies (Beebe, Stern, Tronick, to name but a few). I have heard terms such as contingency and affect attunement and had a sense of their meaning and impact on the relationship; Michael’s clarity, however, brought both terms home as he defined contingency via an action—when a person achieves direct coordination of his gestures with what happens around him. He quotes Daniel Stern to describe a particular form of interpersonal coordination: “affect attunement reflects the mother’s attempt to share the infant’s subjective experience, not his actions . . . She wants a matching of internal states” (Stern, 2012, p. 41, as cited in Heller, 2012, p. 611).

The ensuing conversation on therapists’ misunderstanding contingent responses and attunement as concrete behaviors, matching



patients’ movements, gestures, and tones that can in fact quite upset a client supported my wonderings. It’s about knowing your impact on the world as well as matching internal states—feeling into the other person as well as into yourself and finding the resonance, meeting in this consciousness that is not known. Yes, Michael has written a textbook that teaches as well as guides readers through a past so immense that our future needs its present day practitioners to know all of this in order to be present as well as envision a future.

To say I loved this book is an understatement. I was enthralled with the history and read the first 300 pages straight through. It is immense so it's not something you will finish in a day or even a week. But the time spent delving into this book is time well spent.

