

The “Theosophic Glance”: Fluid Ontologies, Subtle Bodies and Intuitive Vision

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Considering the concept of Subtle Bodies necessitates thinking about vision and relation, and their interrelation. It requires examining the ‘between’ spaces figured in I-other, subject-object, matter-consciousness and spirit-matter relations. This essay seeks to step into this task by providing a general outline of the concept of subtle bodies, and to consider two ontological schemes that support the view of matter-consciousness inherent in its models. It will also consider the modalities of perception that are understood as necessary for the apprehension of subtle subjects and their dynamic relations. In particular, it will examine the ontological model proposed by Henri Bergson, that can be read as providing a foundation (albeit fluid) for subtle subjectivity. Drawn from the Western philosophical tradition, Bergson’s ontology will be considered in relation to the modern Theosophical Society’s rendering of subtle bodies (influenced by the tenets of the Western Esoteric Tradition). In considering these areas the paper aims to highlight conceptual interrelationships across the disciplines of Western philosophy and Esoteric spirituality and plot some of the divergent conceptual foundations through which the idea of subtle bodies has entered Western culture.

Subtle Bodies

The concept of Subtle Bodies is gaining increasing attention in contemporary culture, both within the bounds of what is termed New Age culture, and through the flourishing of alternative health practices, especially Traditional Chinese Medicine, Yoga disciplines, and divergent modes of ‘spiritual’ healing. Central to these healing modalities is the recognition that the human body is comprised of a myriad of ‘energy’ networks and that this subtle substance connects the subject intimately with their environment and with others. The concept of subtle bodies contains major implications for figuring subjectivity, identity, the Other and community.

Subtle Bodies is a concept that presents the subject as comprised of interpenetrating and extensive sheaths of matter-consciousness that extend beyond the physical flesh boundary. It presents the subject as inherently plural, comprised of a multiplicity of bodies. It is most clearly present in Eastern conceptualisations

of the body-mind, specifically Hindu and Buddhist traditions (prominent in Tantra and Tibetan Vajrayana) however the concept can also be found in many other cultures including the indigenous cultures of North America and Africa, Polynesian Kahunas, ancient Egyptians and Greeks, Incan and early Christian cultures. Across these various traditions the number of subtle bodies is debated and it varies according to specific traditions (Tansley, 1977:5). The concept of Subtle Bodies also has precedents in the foundations of Western philosophy as cited by contemporary theorist Elizabeth Grosz, who (amongst others) references Aristotle's *pneuma* — universe animated by a energetic source. Grosz also identifies the subtle body as a precursor to the psychoanalytic concept of the 'body image' (1994:5).¹

The concept of matter-consciousness embraced by subtle body schemes can be understood as being founded on a process perspective, as distinct from a substance perspective of matter consciousness. Substance perspectives view matter and consciousness as ontologically distinct. In contrast, a general given view of process philosophy is that matter and consciousness are not discrete substances, but are understood at their fundamental level of 'beingness' to be comprised of the same 'stuff,' often referred to as energy, or an energetic principle. It is variations of this degree of 'energy' that enables the variety of substance that comprises reality. The difference is in degree, not in kind. This is keenly reflected in the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson (*Matter and Memory*, 1908), who was himself interested in parapsychology and his sister Mina (or Moina) Bergson was a central member of one of the most notorious British Esoteric groups, The Golden Dawn. As will be evidenced in the later discussion of the Theosophical Society, the concept of subtle bodies is also found in the Western Esoteric Tradition.

Via his interest in parapsychology Bergson actively engaged in supporting and promoting investigations into the paranormal. Parapsychology, or psychical research is the study of experiences and their causes that cannot be explained in terms of direct causality by contemporary scientific discourse (Bulloch et al, 1988:627). Subtle bodies can be considered as an object of surveillance by Parapsychologists. Even during its heyday, Parapsychology was far from being an accepted area of study, and many scholars refrained from interaction with its societies and projects for fear of damage to their reputations (Grogin, 1988:44-45). However, Bergson championed the cause, joining the *Institute Psychologique Internationale* and the *Institute Général Psychologique* in 1900. In addition to these local associations, Bergson accepted an invitation to join the *Society for Psychical Research* (founded in Cambridge in 1882) in 1909, and was elected President in 1913.

Robert C. Grogin provides the following reading of Bergson's oeuvre within the context of occult and parapsychological investigations of the time:

Henri Bergson, a philosopher of mysticism and a theoretician of the occult, was something more substantial than an isolated academic writing learned articles for professional journals. From his highly influential chair at the Collège de France he was uniquely positioned to lead the attack against mechanistic science and to transmit occult ideas on mysticism and vitalism to the public at large. From this platform of respectability Bergson could transmit those ideas to the

public in terms that carried prestige, and in the process, enter into some of the major controversies of the period (1977:98).

Grogin's thesis considers telepathy and survival after death as the primary themes of Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, in which Bergson elucidated his theories concerning matter (image) and memory (spirit) and the role intuition plays in apprehending *durée* (duration) his ontological 'principle.' The overall argument was pitched against mechanistic models of mind-body interaction and the result was a psychophysical parallelism (the belief that each psychical process has a corresponding physical process). For Bergson, memory exists independently of the physical brain, and such a concept is useful to arguments supporting survival of consciousness after death (Grogin, 1977:57).

Grogin's text clearly illustrates the role that parapsychology played as a bridge between esoteric and religious concerns and science. Bergson can be understood as a figure whose work brought an approach towards the synthesis of science and religion to both popular and academic attention. Similarly, the modern Theosophical Society can be viewed as seeking to reconcile scientific and religious praxis (as will be noted later in the essay).

Bergson's philosophical and parapsychological interests reflect the interweaving of the Western philosophical and Esoteric traditions and although as Antoine Faivre has pointed out, Esotericism per se has been the victim of academic marginalisation,² (a point also made by Wouter Hanegraaff) (Faivre, 1994:ix; Hanegraaff, 1998:381-383), its concepts have in various forms tangentially flowed alongside and across the boundaries of the disciplines. In a general sense, many Western Esoteric traditions and certainly modern Theosophy also provide a process concept of matter-consciousness that proposes no ontological difference between matter and consciousness. The rigid dualism between mind and body, flesh and spirit, is not sustained within the process conception of matter-consciousness. Such a belief necessarily requires an examination of subject-object interaction, as to hold to its tenets, renders the borders separating and delineating subject-object as nebulous and fluid. In short, distinctions such as where a body ends and an object begins become unknown and unable to be apprehended by 'everyday' modes of visibility. At the heart of process philosophy is the understanding that the fundamental mode of being is not a complete absolute, but is a process, a becoming. Reality is understood as a network of interrelated processes (Rescher, 1996). For Henri Bergson, the network of processes that is Reality is constituted by Images: a term he employs to designate units of 'matter-consciousness' that have been isolated (or selected) from the fluid 'ground' of being (becoming) termed *durée* and it is these Images that are apprehended as 'reality.'

***Durée*: The Fluid Foundations of Subtle Subjects**

We are seeking only the precise meaning that our consciousness gives this word "exists," and we find that, for a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly. Should the same be said of existence in general? (Bergson, [1911] 1983:7)

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) strongly advocated that explorations into the nature of being should be undertaken with the consideration of concrete reality rather than through abstract philosophical speculation. This stems from his belief that *durée*, unlike materialists concepts of the absolute, has a “place in concrete time, in the time which we feel to be the very stuff of our life” ([1911] 1983:240). Bergson’s concept of *durée* presents an ontological model that supports the mode of subjectivity inherent in the concept of subtle bodies.

For Bergson the fundamental mode of being, of existence, is fluid, forever in a process of transformation and change. This reflects a general process philosophy belief that the foundation of being is mobile and processural. Bergson presents *durée* (or Reality) as a heterogeneous whole comprised of inherently fluid matter-consciousness in continual dynamic flux. In Bergson’s scheme *durée* is comprised of Images (matter-consciousness), these Images are fluid and interconnected, and exist not in a separate absolute space but within concrete time and space (whether they are perceived or not).

In a commentary on Bergson’s work, F.C.T. Moore writes that Bergson said of *durée* ““In it we live and move and have our being.””(1996:65,116). This phrase is of peculiar note as it is used by modern Theosophists (members of the Theosophical Society founded by H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel H. S. Alcott in New York, 1875) to describe their relationship to part of the absolute they term the Universal Oversoul —“One in whom we live move and have our being” (de Prucker, [1933] 1972:826) — as well as being found in the Christian Bible Acts 17:28 “For in him (God) we live and move and have our being”(International Bible Society, 1973:826). Given these associations and precedents, there can be no doubt that Bergson proposed *durée* as a type of dynamic absolute (or universal), but one which exists in an inherent and intimate relationship with concrete reality. Unlike Platonic concepts of the absolute, *durée* is not conceived of as abstract as removed and separate from concrete reality.

There does however, seem to be an ambiguity as to whether *durée* is inherent in matter or whether matter exists within, but is not inherently comprised of *durée*. In a commentary on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Michael Hardt supports the latter perspective:

The discussion of ontological movement relies on Bergson’s claim of a fundamental difference between time and space, between duration and matter (1993:14).

The mapping of *durée* and matter onto the time/space dualism may not be as clear cut as it initially appears. In *Bergsonism* Deleuze writes:

he does not retract any of the ambiguity of *Matter and Memory* which consisted in integrating something of space into duration, in order to find in duration a sufficient reason (*raison suffisante*) of extension ... there is always extensity in our duration, and always duration in matter ([1966] 1991:86-87).

Duration is only the most contracted degree of matter, matter the most expanded (*détendu*) degree of duration ([1966] 1991:93).

These quotes reflect an uncertainty in attributing a clear and complete distinction between *durée* and matter. Central to this confusion is Bergson's description of *durée* as a type of consciousness and his prescription that the difference between matter and consciousness is not in kind, but in degree.

No doubt also the material universe itself, defined as the totality of images, is a kind of consciousness ... ([1908] 1983:235).

In a commentary on the extension of Bergson's work undertaken by Gilles Deleuze, Constantin Boundas delineates that, for Bergson, presenting *durée* as ontology represents "the victory over the initial dualism of duration and space" (1996:96). Differences in degree are discussed by Deleuze as tensions: matter and duration represent different degrees of tension, of expansion and contraction and indeed *durée* and matter present two types of difference — *durée* being differences in nature and matter difference in degree.

Thus what differs is relaxation and contraction, matter and duration as the degrees or intensities of difference ... Because to do philosophy is *precisely to start with difference* (sic), and difference of nature is duration, of which matter is only its lowest degree (Deleuze, [1956] 1999: 61,62).

What is significant to note here, is that the fundamental difference signalled by Hardt may be between types of ontological difference and not between ontologically distinct types of substance as generally understood (although for Deleuze difference itself becomes akin to a substance, a substance constitutive of both matter and *durée*).

On a superficial level, one could read the proposed ontological nature of *durée* ("everything is duration" (Deleuze,[1966] 1991:76)) as suggesting an implicit interrelation and constitution of concrete reality. Certainly it seems that the aforementioned ambiguity leads to readings of matter and duration as mutually constitutive to varying degrees — a perspective different from what is implied in Hardt's terms — 'fundamental distinction.'

For Bergson matter, like mind, is comprised of rhythms of duration (Gunter, 1999:173).

Leaving aside this uncertainty as to whether matter is fundamentally distinct from *durée* or whether *durée* is implicit in matter, it is crucial to elucidate the role perception plays in selecting Images (matter-consciousness) from *durée*, as it is this selection which forms what in Bergson's reading is generally (mis)understood to be reality. That is, the "subjects" and "objects" of reality, are limited by the perceived potentiality of the object — perception is presented as within the object (rather than an aspect of consciousness projected onto an already delineated "object"). The Image is drawn out of the whole (*durée*) and in so doing its extensity and activity is limited.

But the separation between a thing and its environment cannot be absolutely definite and clear-cut; there is a passage by insensible gradations from one to the other: the close solidarity which binds all the objects of the material universe, the perpetuality of their reciprocal actions and reactions, is sufficient to prove that they have not the precise limits which we attribute to them. Our

perception outlines, so to speak, the form of their nucleus; it terminates them at the point where our possible action upon them ceases, where consequently, they cease to interest our needs (Bergson [1908] 1996: 209).

This involves a selection and limitation of the Whole (*durée*), and the resulting movement produces “sets” of Images (matter-consciousness) and it is these that we mistakenly perceive as distinct “objects,” rather than temporarily bounded Images (matter-consciousness) selected from an interrelated heterogeneous fluid *durée*. In short, with perception placed within the “object” and sensation within the “subject,” the dualism between consciousness and matter is no longer supported, and in keeping with such a move, neither is the distinction between subject and object.

This is to place ourselves in pure duration, of which the flow is continuous and in which we pass insensibly from one state to another: a continuity which is really lived, but artificially decomposed for the greater convenience of customary knowledge (Bergson [1908] 1996:186).

Bergson proposes that the body is place of passage, “a hyphen” that provides a link between Images which act upon it and Images upon which it acts ([1908] 1996:151). As matter-consciousness is understood to be an aggregate of Images in flux, the body is identified as a special type of Image, a centre of action. Other Images can only be known through this centre of activity and its potential action upon them. Perception is matter-consciousness (Image) “referred to the eventual action” of the body (Bergson [1908] 1996:17-24).

This special image — “my body” — exists not only in relation to Images selected and limited by the perception of their potential action upon it; it exists in relation to the whole of *durée* the interconnected, unified aggregate of Images. However, its interactions and interrelation with *durée* are not, Bergson proposes, in general, consciously realised and apprehended. “Inner vision”/intuition is required to perceive the rhythms or *durée* and for Bergson the creative and meditative processes generally understood to be utilised by artists and mystics have provided the most conscious examples of apprehending/representing *durée*.

Here then the body is presented as a hyphen, articulating two types of perception or sight. Firstly, a sight which selects, juxtaposes and disassociates Images, that encompasses an exteriority, placing perception in the object itself, viewing itself — the body — in relation to these defined Images. Secondly, the inner sight, that Bergson termed “intuition” through which *durée* is perceived, and within which the essential interrelationship and fluidity of Images (matter-consciousness) is comprehended.

The first type of vision maintains (creates) distinctions between subject and object, carves out boundaries, creates “betweens” assumed empty, void of matter-consciousness. This is the type of vision which supports the general contemporary concept of subjectivity in Western culture — that of the individual body bounded by skin, which demarcates and terminates the boundaries of the separate being. The

second type of sight however — inner vision — fractures this concept of subjectivity and opens onto models of interpenetration and coexistence positing a subtle, fluid, temporal subjectivity. A subject inherently interrelated and open to an ontological, creative, generative ‘becoming’ which Bergson terms *durée*. In short, a subject with a subtle body, and this extensive, fluid subject is understood to be apprehended by intuitive perceptual modalities. This belief is also found within the discourses of the Theosophical Society, their presentation of a dynamic, processural absolute has many parallels with Bergson’s *durée*. Similarly, modern Theosophical schemes also advocate that to perceive the subtle body requires an intuitive vision, a “Theosophic glance.”

Modern Theosophic Bodies

The Theosophical Society presents a concept of Subtle Bodies influenced by Neo-Platonic Western Esoteric traditions, scientific reasoning (18th-19th century rationalism/evolutionism) and specific beliefs adopted and adapted from Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, for example reincarnation (Goodwin, 1994:379).³

At its earliest presentation within modern Theosophical discourse, the subtle body was referred to as *linga-sarira*, Sanskrit for ‘model-form,’ signifying impermanence (Purucker, [1933],1972:8,88). The majority of the information outlined below comprises the basic understandings of what constitutes the different types of subtle body in Theosophical schemes as derived from texts by H.P. Blavatsky ([1877] 1972) and Alice A. Bailey ([1934]1974; [1951] 1989;[1953] 1989), the latter acting as an amanuensis or ‘channel’ for a Tibetan Master, Djwal Khul.⁴ Underlying their conceptualisation of mind-body is the following fundamental principle as outlined by Sellon and Weber (1995:311-329).

Central to all Theosophical discourse is the belief in an omnipresent and eternal ‘Principle’ (Parabrahman). This is the “One About Whom Naught Can Be Said” of the Alice Bailey (Djwal Khul) literature, an absolute that is presented as beyond conceptualisation by human beings. The solar system is conceived of as smaller part of this larger absolute. It embodies a universal Oversoul and is referred to as the “one in whom we live, move and have our being” (Purucker [1933] 1972:826). Infinite and eternal, the absolute source is manifested through (and is) the cyclic interplay of energies that give rise to differentiation. The contemplated interaction of pairs of opposites (subject-object, spirit-matter) leads to ‘unveiling’ a synthesising gnosis, and this re-unification is attributed by modern Theosophical cosmology an evolutionary development, thus creating an infinite teleological universe. For Theosophists, evolution is the realisation of unity within diversity, whilst involution is the movement from unity to diversity (Sellon & Weber, 1995:322).

This perspective necessarily implicates ‘knowing subjects’ as becoming aware of their position within this evolutionary framework and then consciously choosing to cultivate or assist their own development (and, considering the interdependence of all things, the entire ‘evolution’ of the greater ‘being’).

Knowledge and perception of subtle bodies is considered part of the desired development.

The Theosophical conception of *Nous* or the Divine Mind is crucial, in that it is this 'energy' that directs, creates and constitutes all forms of consciousness. In the Theosophical scheme this energy is manifested on the physical level of its septenary based cosmology as matter-consciousness (Sellon & Weber, 1995:323)⁵. The physical universe is activated by the *Logos* and is both intelligent and intelligible. Such a conceptualisation brings into harmonious play the metaphysical distinctions of being and its contra, becoming. Theosophists equate an ideal Reality with a timeless archetypal world whilst this 'idea' is activated and actualised within the physical world via dynamic processes. It is less a founding either/or but rather an inclusive both/and. Faivre discusses this refusal to pit being against becoming as indicative of Western Esotericism in a more collective sense.

It does not mean placing Being and Becoming back to back, the simple and the complex, the One and the multiple, nor giving in to the dialectics of dualising and reabsorbing ... but to think that everything, as Western esotericism has always known, takes place in an ensemble of forces opposed in a living tension (1994:45).

The concept of being reflects the macrocosm of the absolute, whilst becoming reflects the manifesting energies (of which everything is constituted) as symbolised by Hermes' Caduceus. Faivre's writes, noting Western Esotericism's concern with reconciling immanence and transcendence, the subject and the object:

And yet to perceive spirit even in inanimate matter or to strive to see, through innumerable "signatures" scattered throughout nature and discoverable in our soul, the rungs of Jacob's ladder uniting heaven and earth — this is what esotericism is concerned with, and the Greeks had already said much on the subject. In the end, it is a question of reconciling transcendence and immanence (1995:15).

The project of Theosophy and the revival/continuation of its program in contemporary 'New Age' thought can be viewed as indicative of its own original positioning between the exoteric scientific and the esoteric spiritual, with its recapitulation late this century suspended between technological globalisation and the proposed New Age. In one sense, the 'New Age' can be understood as embracing Theosophical ambitions. The contemporary social surface is, in many ways, a crude rendering of modern utopic visions spurred by millennial fervour, however on another level the 'New Age' offers sites where the dialectic of opposites, the esoteric and exoteric, the modern and the postmodern, the transcendent and immanent collide and interpenetrate in our everyday lives. Theosophy's foundations supported both ontological being and becoming, so to it can be understood to embrace modernist paradigms whilst at the same time annulling them from within through its recourse to processuality and esoteric interpretive methodologies.

Subtle bodies are reported to be invisible to physical sight, but are understood, however to be apprehended by clairvoyant perception or the more respected (in Western Esoteric traditions) intuitive consciousness. Similarly, Bergsonian intuition is a modality of consciousness understood to be best suited

to apprehending the ‘whole’ of *durée*, and not just the selected Images that comprise ‘reality.’ That is, intuition is able to register ‘phenomena’ not apprehended by ‘everyday’ visuality. It is understood to be the faculty most able to perceive different rhythms of duration, a function that parallels clairvoyant visions role in distinguishing the different ‘layers’ of the subtle body, as they too are distinguished by their density of matter-consciousness and vibratory dynamic.

Subtle bodies are described as interpenetrating sheaths of colour. I refer to them herein as ‘bodies’ but it must be stressed that this does not imply the traditional distinction from mind, since the concept of the subtle body is premised on the impossibility of matter and mind being ontologically distinct. Subtle bodies, as represented in the Theosophical model, are comparable to Process philosophy’s models. For example, in the physical body as generally experienced the mind is conceived of as an inherent constituent of gross ‘matter’ and, as such, is located in different intensities all over (and through) the physical body. The physical brain can be understood as a localisation of great intensity.

In Theosophical literature the physical or gross body is identified as the lowest, densest manifestation of matter-mind. This body is one of a series of bodies that interpenetrate and exceed the preceding one in what is conceived of as a development into ever finer vibrations of matter. Theosophists identify three bodies manifesting upon the physical plane — the Physical/Etheric body, the Astral body and the Mental body. Early Theosophical texts often referred to Physical/Etheric and Astral bodies collectively as the Astral body or *linga-sarira*. In the writings of Alice A. Bailey ([1934]1974; [1951] 1989; [1953] 1989) and A.E. Powell ([1925] 1972; [1927a] 1965; [1927b] 1956; [1928] 1978), which appeared in the early decades on this century, the distinctions as outlined above were clearly in place. These three bodies represent the ‘lower’ sections from a totality of seven, with the energies of the higher four ‘bodies’ being of such refined degree of subtlety that they are unable to inhabit the physical plane. These also correspond to seven Chakras or ‘wheels’ (Sanskrit) formed in Etheric substance and located up the spine, that operate as the transmitters of energy from the subtler planes to the physical body: Crown, Ajna, Throat, Heart, Solar Plexus, Sacral, and Base.⁶

What is remarkable about this conception of Subtle Bodies, with its modes of perception that extend into the ‘space’ beyond the physical flesh, is the comprehension that dynamic and kinetic rates of vibration are used to signify the different planes of perception, states of matter-consciousness. There is no fundamental ontological difference in the ‘type’ of matter-consciousness — only a difference in degree, in intensity, in motion or interaction. Theosophy adheres to a quality of density scale; that is, matter-consciousness is described in texture-orientated metaphors and similes — coarse, dense, gross, refined, ephemeral. The more subtle a type of matter-consciousness is understood to be on a physical scale, the more ‘sensitive’ it is on a perceptual scale. In his work on qualitative differences Bergson maintained a dualism between perception and memory, arguing that they are different in kind, whilst advocating that matter and spirit differ only in degree. This perspective would seem to be reflected in the Theosophical concept

of subtle bodies, each sheath being distinguished by its quality of vibration, its density of matter-consciousness. Spirit and matter are seen as ontologically the same, with only difference in degree between pure spirit and gross matter.

For Theosophists, the human being is already plural, comprised of multiple interpenetrating bodies, that lend no absolute solidity to the subject because they are always in a state of flux and interacting/reacting with 'external' stimuli. They are both extensive and intensive, lie in a transcendent and immanent relationship to a 'self-conscious' subject, and privilege intuitive over rational faculties of consciousness. Subtle bodies include mental/consciousness faculties all over and through the physical body and so-called 'space' whilst not denying the brain as the primary location for cognitive occurrence.

The "Theosophic Glance."

It seems that there would be more people today to take theosophy [author is referring to a form of gnosis not the Theosophical Society] seriously because our epoch considers ever more seriously the possibility of a connaturality of our spirit and the universe. In other words, we do not exclude the possibility that some of our images reflect hidden structures of this universe and that the great founding myths correspond to them. ... Thus it remains that the theosophic glance can be extraordinarily fecund, counter balancing dualisms and ideologies of all kinds.... Thanks to theosophy also, the fragmented, splintered "multi-verse" becomes the universe once more, a world bearing meaning and composed of living pluralities (Faivre, 1994:32).

Since the eighteenth century at least, the term theosophy (from *theos* — "God" and *sophia* — "wisdom") has been employed in a similar sense as the term Esotericism, to signify a hermeneutic — a method of interpreting the divine (Faivre, 1994:23-32). This hermeneutic encompasses not only the relationship of the individual to the divine, but also considers the ontological and cosmological underpinnings of such relationships.

Theosophy opens esotericism to the entire universe and by the same token renders possible a philosophy of nature (Faivre, 1994:24).

This philosophy views the universe, the individual and their interrelation as containing a form of gnosis which constitutes an intended purpose that is illuminated to the seeker via imagination and meditation.

Theosophy is also a term attributed to a tradition that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, centrally associated with the work of Jacob Böhme. It is considered a distinct field within Western Esotericism. In *Wisdom's Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition*, Arthur Versluis argues that theosophy "has nothing whatever to do with the society of Helena Blavatsky (1999:xii)." However it does share a foundational belief *philosophia perennis* — perennial wisdom — a belief in a developing tradition of teachers of a universal wisdom, representatives of which come from divergent religious faiths and cultures. This

term is attributed to Leibniz, although Faivre dates the concept to the sixteenth century with the work of Agostino Steuco (1995:97). It is the adoption of core conceptual elements that enables the Theosophical Society and its program of cross-cultural religious study to be considered within the parameters of an Esoteric tradition. However, it is also true that modern Theosophy in its presentation and quest for legitimacy appealed to the methods and procedures of modern science which are largely alien to the methodologies of theosophy per se.

Theosophical ontology and Esoteric hermeneutics both emphasise activity: the activity of acquiring gnosis, the activity of nature, the activity of the imagination in deciphering the multiplicity of symbols of divinity. In particular, attention needs to be drawn toward Faivre's highlighting of a particular style of imagination to achieve activation of these characteristics. Delineated by a leading authority on the religion and culture of Islam, Henry Corbin, *mundus imaginalis* is identified by Faivre as a faculty 'of the soul' that allows for perceptive relations to be established between the divine and the individual via the utilisation of intermediaries. In this "invisible" realm of *mundus imaginalis* Faivre argues that the "eye of flesh" can "not alone give access" to the intermediary realms (Faivre, 1995:xvii-xviii). It is this creative imagination that is understood as a visionary faculty that enables 'understanding' of multiple meanings to be comprehended. As a faculty of the mind, the creative imagination is distinguished by Faivre from the 'imaginary,' understood to refer to myths and symbols that permeate discourses, consciously or not (Faivre, [1988] 1995:64-65). Discussing modern Hermeticism Faivre notes:

The mediator Hermes-Mercurius plays here an essential role inasmuch as either with him or by him the complete break between subject and object disappears. Unification is brought about by the mediation of an energy principle that is seen to assure order in the cosmos and unification of the subject (1988: 433).

The 'unification' brought about by Hermes' action as mediator (the mythological governor of relations and crossroads, amongst other things) is not achieved via linear or reductive methodologies but, as Faivre outlines in his list of constituents required for identification of Western Esoteric thought per se, via an underlying premise to consider Esotericism as a frame of mind:

We should consider it a frame of mind, a style of imaginary, through which circulates a tincture permeating diverse materials to give a specific hue (1994:19).

This imaginary however, is no passive reverie, but a consciously engaged activity, the activity of acquiring gnosis, the activity of the imagination in deciphering the multiplicity of symbols of divinity. The emphasis on activity presents processuality — that the mode of being in the world is process oriented — as marked amongst the fundamental basis of Esoteric ontology and hermeneutics. Amongst core elements of Western Esotericism as defined by Faivre are 'Living nature' and 'Correspondences.' These are process-oriented relations which reflect the centrality of physical processes. Processes of increase and decrease and ecological networks of interdependence direct attention to the temporal nature of its individual 'symbols' and the repetitive (cyclic) nature of its types. It reflects

the influence on Western Esoteric philosophy of an influential philosophy of nature, especially popular in Germany during the Romantic Era — *Naturphilosophie* — that in turn influenced Theosophical and Bergsonian texts. As categories of the Esoteric, they emphasise the ephemeral condition of ‘living nature,’ and its presentation of life as transitory and time as infinite.

The Western Esoteric Tradition provides a conceptual and hermeneutic basis for modern Theosophy, and in particular, like Henri Bergson, privileges non-rational forms of perception for the apprehension of the interrelation between matter-consciousness, body-mind, subject-object and human-Divine.

The concept of subtle bodies supports the perception that the space between subject and object is alive with interaction, that the individual subject interrelates with ‘objects’ subtly via extensive, subtle sheaths of matter-consciousness of various densities. Modern Theosophists see this space as a highly sensitive matrix through which perception and communication occur; specifically, the Astral⁷ body acts as a processural unit between the Mental and Physical/Etheric. With only the extensive and intensive properties differing, the privileging of the physical brain as the site within the body where consciousness/spirit is located is collapsed. The body can be understood as not only a perceptive membrane on the physical level, but also on the emotional and mental levels. The interpenetrating levels of consciousness that constitute ‘matter’ dissolve the matter/mind division. Matter is perceived as the manifestation of different types (degrees) of consciousness, and as such, delivers sentience of some type to everything on the material plane. The environment becomes essentially a myriad of changing and interpenetrating borderlines between these vibratory sheaths. Individuation occurs as a result of developing degrees of consciousness to co-ordinate and form aggregational units, but the fundamental ground of being is constituted by the same processural element of energy, thus reflecting the maxim ‘All in One: One in All.’

To support the concept of subtle bodies is to challenge the privileging of the mind, abstraction and the absolute in the interaction between the Divine and the sinful flesh of transcendent orientated religious/philosophical traditions. It allows the physical body and its inherent extensity, temporality and materiality as much possibility for perception and representation of ethereal and sublime subjects as is traditionally ascribed to pure abstract thought. Subtle bodies propose an individual with many interpenetrating modes of perceptive activity through which multiplicities of interactions and pluralities of becoming could occur. As a permeable interface, the subtle body weaves the physical and psychical together.

The methodical practice of the cultivation of perception underpins the way in which esotericists interact with the phenomenal world. Such practices enable them to go ‘beyond’ the world of appearances into/onto the transcendent and immanent realms envisaged by their particular belief systems. These practices enable these realms to be inhabited simultaneously in the phenomenal world. Thus their practice also affects the ethics of the individual in relation to how they interact in the world, as it redefines their understanding of the subject-object relationship. These practices may be understood as embodied bridges with the individual’s body-mind intimately utilised for facilitating the interpenetration of the realms of

being/becoming. Like the distinction between subject-object, within these frameworks the distinction between transcendent and immanent also becomes blurred (fluid). If taken literally to represent a bridge, the body-mind invokes a transcendent reading of the relationship between the alternate realms, whilst the physical participation required by this body-mind to enact the perception of the alternate realm proffers an understanding of the relationship as immanent. It is perhaps appropriate to invoke both senses of relationship, by using the term 'interpenetrate' to discuss this practice in which transcendent realms are interacted with through physical practices within the phenomenal world, that can be understood therefore as constituting a physical, immanent experience.

Active imagination and intuition are the two faculties of the cognition that are understood as enabling the realisation of this embodiment to take place and, as mentioned previously, these faculties can be developed through meditation and initiation (training as outlined by the specific tenets of the tradition the practitioner is undertaking).

Although Bergsonian ontology and modern Theosophy have been selected as the point of departure for these considerations of the subtle body and the perceptive modalities required for its apprehension, ideas integral to twentieth century process philosophers, Romantic philosophers/German *Naturphilosophies*, and 19-20th century evolutionists were also influential to the development of subtle body schemes and their conceptual presentation within a western context. The similar hue of these theories, visible from tangential angles, tells no story of linear development. A typical history, premised upon staged influence from one to another, is undermined by debates about origins, diverse manifestations and a rampant cross-fertilisation and recapitulation of ideas that results in a truly transdisciplinary exploration. Processuality remains a common element and whether spiritual or physical origins are tied to this notion of flow, movement, change depends entirely on the thinker. It is, therefore, a conceptual link, a style of view shared by these bodies of thought. To translate this from a frame of mind into a frame of perception is to consider perceptive schemas other than the ocular. As influenced by Western Esoteric philosophy, modern Theosophy adapts the concept of subtle bodies from an Eastern framework and re-activates Eastern and Western Esoteric concepts of active imagination and intuition as modalities required for their perception. Whilst the work of Henri Bergson can be considered as presenting an ontology capable of supporting subtle forms of subjectivity from within a Western Philosophical framework. These diverse sites of research both proffer conceptualisation of matter and consciousness, mind and body as ontologically interrelated, thereby challenging modernist dualisms. Contemporary complimentary healing practices and New Age culture can be viewed as continuing the adaptation of these concepts (with an increased influence of Western psychology).⁸ As an interpretative and creative visage the Theosophical 'glance' certainly continues to be both a fecund and furtive one.

Endnotes

1. 'Body Image' includes both conscious thoughts about our body and the prereflective, unconscious 'map' of our body, it is understood as mediating between mind and body. See: Gail Weiss (1999).

2. Faivre notes:

"Since the Academy, by definition, is curious about everything, it could have long ago established both a curriculum and a research program devoted exclusively to esotericism. At least two obstacles stood in the way. First of all, the transdisciplinary character of esotericism is hardly compatible with the separation of the disciplines, which resemble well labelled jars lining a pharmacy shelf. In the past few years, it is true, the use of communicating vessels has somewhat modified the situation, although genuine transdisciplinarity is still often confused with casual pluri-or interdisciplinarity. The second reason relates to the first. Vast areas of our Western cultural history, obscured a priori by theological or epistemological positions, were deliberately omitted, abandoned to the curiosity of eccentrics or even cranks and to capricious handling, which only increased the distrust of serious, albeit somewhat prejudiced investigators and established thinkers vis-à-vis the peripheral domain. The distrust is so pervasive that many scholars are still wondering what esotericism is or whether it truly merits study. (1994:ix).

3. Joscelyn Goodwin provides the definitive history of the occult groups and ideological developments that preceded and influenced the formation of Blavatsky's society in *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. His concluding propositions include emphasising the role Theosophy played in introducing Eastern ideas to Western Esoteric ideas into an enlightenment framework, and the subsequent development of this synthesis into 'New Age' discourse. See Joscelyn Goodwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (1994:379)

4. The Tibetan, Dwal Khul is understood to be an Ascended Master, member of the Great White Lodge of Masters that oversee the evolution of this Solar System. Alice. A Bailey channelled the messages for the Tibetan— 'he' is therefore understood as the author of the texts.

5. "The manner in which the one becomes three (while remaining itself one) unfolds by natural progression into seven (a,b,c,ab,ac,bc,abc)." Emily B. Sellon & Renée Weber (1995:323).

6. Chakras and Esoteric Healing are a popular area of study in New Age Philosophy. Numerous references with conflicting information abound, for Theosophical concepts see the Bailey texts, in particular *Esoteric Healing* ([1953] 1989) and C.W. Leadbeater, *The Chakras* ([1927] 1990).

For a thorough popular psychology perspective see, Judith Anodea, *Eastern Body, Western Mind: Psychology and the Chakra System as a Path to the Self* (1996).

7. Blavatsky gives the following etymology for Astral:

"The designation *Astral* is ancient, and was used by some Neo-Platonists, although it is claimed by some that the word was coined by Martinists. Porphyry describes the celestial body which always joined with the soul as "immortal, luminous, and star-like." The root of this word may be found, perhaps, in the Scythic *Aist-aer* — which

means star, or the Assyrian *Istar*, which according to Bernout has about the same sense.”

Blavatsky, *Theosophical Glossary* ([1892] 1973: 38).

8. Although it could be argued that the instant satisfaction requisite for consumerism will limit the type of insights gleaned by the partaker — as the development of intuitional and imaginative capacities required for the interpretation of such discourses need a physical-mental discipline that requires time to develop. The type of meaning gleaned will be directly reflective of the perceptive sensitivity and accumulated depth of relationship that the investigator has established with the selected material. This is perhaps one way in which the Esoteric will continue to be veiled, by degree of interpretive skill.

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