



This talk was given as part of a workshop sponsored by the Afterlife Research Centre and Paranthropology (<http://www.afterliferesearch.co.uk>) as part of the Wild or Domesticated Interdisciplinary conference at the University of Helsinki (<https://wildordomesticated.wordpress.com>), which was part of the Mind and the Other research project. The conference was also sponsored by the Finnish Anthropological Society. The idea of the Mind and Other research project and of this conference was to explore the concept of the 'uncanny' (*Unheimlichkeit*) in historical and contemporary perspectives in order to understand better the concept of 'mind'. The thrust of the conference was to move away from neurocentric ways of viewing the mind (as synonymous with brain), to a more holistic conception as mind as something connected to but not synonymous with the neurological workings of the brain.

The description of the our workshop was as follows:

Discernment: Recognising the Presence of Spirits

Discernment is a key skill in many traditions concerned with non-physical, non-ordinary beings, whether in the context of shamanism, spirit possession and mediumship, or spirit release therapies and ghost hunting in contemporary post-

industrial societies. How do practitioners know that spirits are present? How do practitioners distinguish between what they perceive to be an external, ontological other and the 'normal' self? What methods are employed to make this distinction? Inherent in such questions are issues relating to the nature of personhood and consciousness – what exactly constitutes a 'person,' and what is 'consciousness'? This workshop will explore the theme of discernment from a range of different cultural contexts, and will discuss the implications of traditions of discernment for wider questions about the nature of consciousness and self.

Conveners:

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Speakers:

Fiona Bowie, Irene Marjo Garigliano, Jack Hunter, Minna Opas, Terence Palmer, and Emily Pierini.

Abstracts of the papers presented in this workshop can be downloaded from:
<https://wildordomesticated.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/papers-8.pdf>

Alternative to what?

Western traditions

- Cartesian dualism – separation of reason and body/matter
- Non-dualistic philosophies that stress the material base of self or consciousness
- Medical and psychiatric models of healing that focus on physical, often chemical processes, whether externally or internally generated
- Theological traditions that stress the uniqueness of the individual soul and resist contact with other 'demonic' invisible beings

Non-Western traditions

- Multiple or 'dividual' selves, as opposed to the (supposed) Western individual – Strathern
- Plants, non-human animals and spirits that share intention, rationality and relationships with humans – Viveiros de Castro & Amazonian 'perspectivism'
- Animism as an alternative ontology, contrasted to Western naturalism – Descola
- Ancestors as actors in life, responsible for well-being and sickness
- Shamanic forms of healing – specialists in dealing with spirits/souls

If we are claiming that there is an alternative Western tradition of spirit release as therapy, it is legitimate to ask, alternative to what? There are two strands to the answer to that question. We can see it as alternative to normative Western traditions, whether from psychology and psychiatry, medicine and neurology or philosophy and theology. We can also contrast Western practices to those from non-Western cultures. In this workshop we aim to cover both these bases, focusing in particular in this first session on Western forms of Spirit release and theoretical reflections on consciousness, and in the second part on non-Western or cross-cultural perspectives. The points here are indicative rather than exhaustive.

Neurophenomenology and neuroepistemology

Winkelman (2016:50) – the cross-cultural and universal features of mystical experiences falsify traditional constructivist hypotheses and support a neurophenomenological view of mystical experiences as biologically structured.

Neuroepistemological approaches stress biology but also recognise the role of cultural learning – in shamanic or mystical experiences culture can facilitate or block experience through cultural ideologies and practices, which contribute to the interpretation and utilisation of these experiences.



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I want to spend a few minutes looking more closely at some of these Western paradigms of the Self, as they are both pertinent to and at odds with the presuppositions of Self and Other implicit in Western spirit release practices. There are Western scholars who are moving towards a non-materialist view of the Self that poses a challenge to many of the older paradigms, but they still struggle with the ontological view of spirits that underlies Western spirit release.

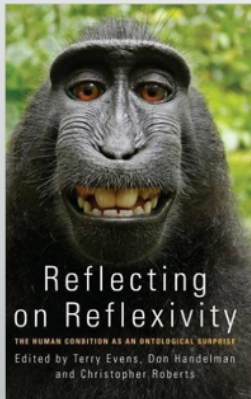
The so-called anthropology of ontology, for example, can be seen as an extension of the anti-imperialist stance of the Writing Culture school of the 1980s, with its attempt to allow at least a space for the mystery or alternative reality posited by an animistic view of the world. There are moves in theology, neuroscience, philosophy and religious studies to incorporate recent understandings of the brain, social cognition and niche construction into a holistic, and to some extent moralistic, view of what it means to be human (Davies 2016, Winkelman 2016, Radin, Greenfield 2008). Michael Winkelman is an anthropologist interested in shamanism and altered-states of consciousness who has argued consistently for non-dualistic, if largely material, ways of understanding religious experiences.

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experiences falsify traditional constructivist hypotheses and support a neurophenomenological view of mystical experiences as biologically structured.

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Reflexivity, Self and Other



Self – simultaneously internal and external, thought and action, individual and society. Two selves – one to ‘think with’ and one to ‘think about’.

Reflexivity – fundamental and defining attribute of humanness – humans cannot help but think – it is part of our experience of self-hood. It is a dual process, an inherent doubling of every cognition directed either within or without.

Ethics – Selfhood describes a reflexive relationship between self and other. To the extent to which humans conduct themselves, determining their own ends, they are answerable for their actions.

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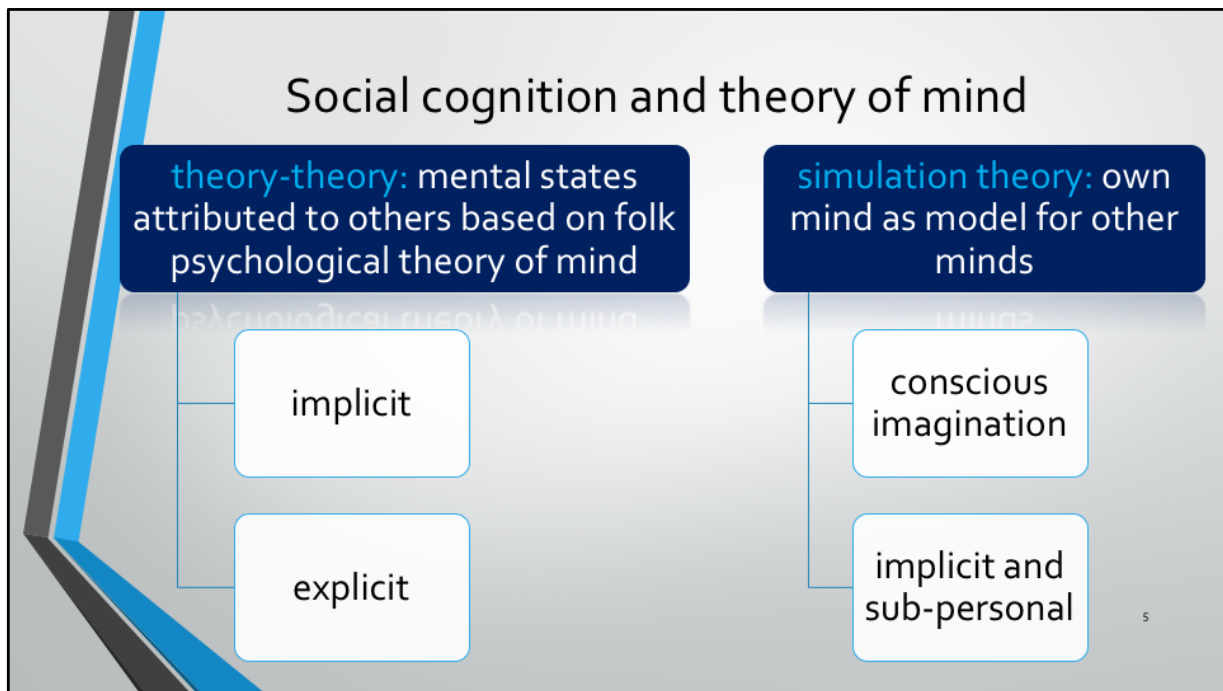
Other attempts to reset the idea of the Self and its relation to others have come from philosophically inclined anthropologists. In an essay on ‘Reflexivity and Selfhood’, the Introduction to their recent volume, *Reflecting on Reflexivity: The Human Condition as an Ontological Surprise* (2016), Terry Evens, Don Handelman and Christopher Roberts propose that ‘reflexivity is a fundamental and defining attribute of humanness itself’ following the philosophical anthropology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his ontology of the betwixt and between (p.1). They stress the importance of Mauss’s distinction of ‘person’ and ‘self’ and Dumont’s work on the ‘individual’, based on Durkheim’s asymmetrical distinction between society and the individual (pp.13-14). Durkheim is presented as moving towards a nondualistic perspective. He held that the transcendent collective ideals of the social order need to lodge themselves in the senses if they are to captivate individuals. Material reality is thus given transcendent power. This is part of a trajectory or tension between the absolute individual and the Other. As Evans, Handelman and Robert’s put it: ‘Selfhood entails self-consciousness, and, to reiterate, self-consciousness involves at least two selves, one to think with and one to think about-in which case, one is always other to oneself, a truth that characterizes the collective self-identity as well’ (15).

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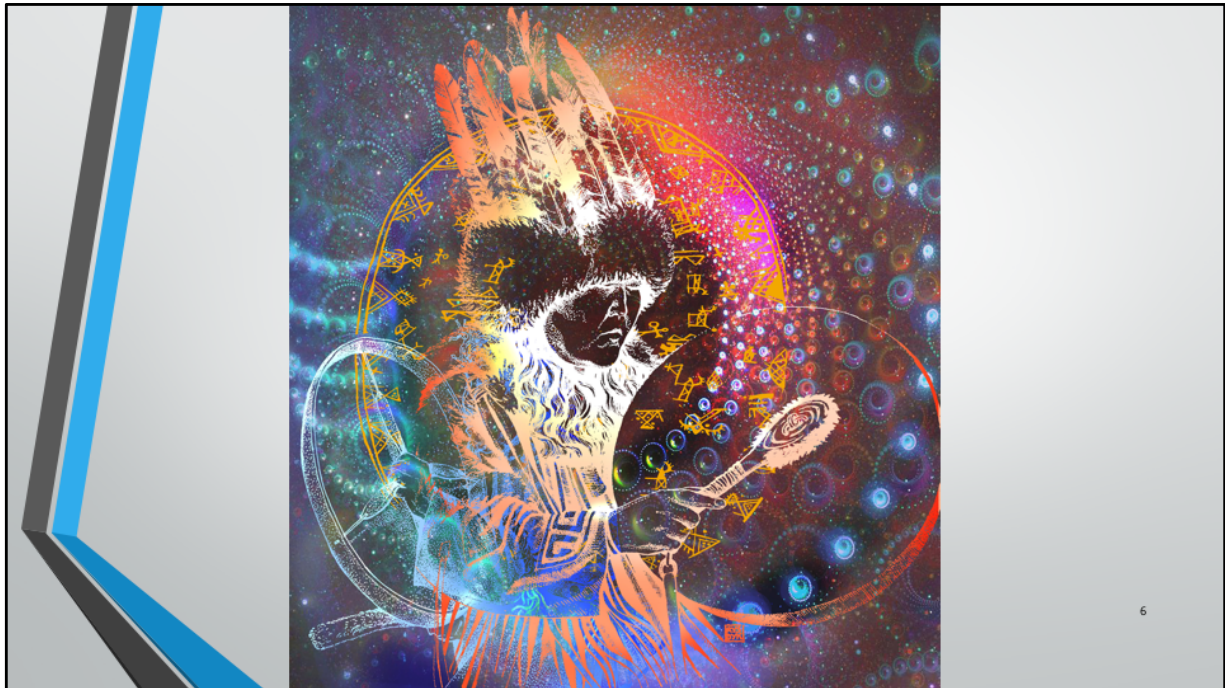
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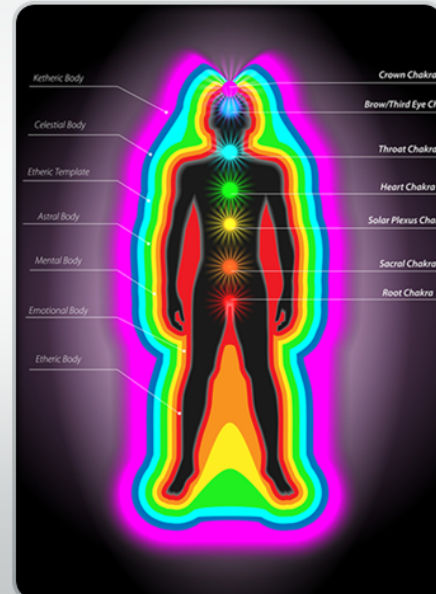
The question of how we know and understand others, our social cognition, is central to a debate on the Self, the nature of consciousness and personhood. Since Premack and Woodruff introduced the term 'theory of mind' in their paper on intentionality in primates in 1978, it has been within this framework that much of the discussion of social cognition has taken place. For a while the dichotomies between theory and experience, mind and matter, implicit and explicit forms of knowing dominated what seemed like irreconcilable positions, but as Pauline von Bonsdorff pointed out in her talk on Tuesday, there has latterly been a renewed understanding of the embodied nature of mental processes. If we can avoid the dangers of neurocentrism, the assumption that the mind and brain are synonymous and can account for all aspects of human behaviour and cognition, we can make way for hybrid systems that in different contexts draw on implicit and explicit, conscious and sub-personal ways of knowing simultaneously (Zahavi 2014: 100-101). Philosopher Dan Zahavi (2014) in his recent book *Self and Other* (OUP) fruitfully uses the concept of empathy to explore these forms of subjectivity, moving away from the classical subject/object divide to explore the space in-between, the liminal betwixt-and-between states of creative knowing and growth expounded by Victor Turner.



Useful and insightful as these recent developments are, they do not as yet address a world in which the Self and Other might become inextricably linked, sometimes in pathological ways, and in which the Other might be a discarnate spirit or non-human entity affecting the life of an individual. The question in spirit release circles is often who or what is the person who presents for treatment? Are they the physical being the therapist sees in front of them, or interacts with at a distance on the psychic plane, or is the client incorporating several forms of energy or beings? We exist simultaneously on several planes (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual). On each of these our defenses may be breached. How can the practitioner discern whether what they think they sense or see is not all a matter of imagination or misattribution? Can neurophenomenological and neuroepistemological approaches account not just for mystical states and shamanic consciousness, but also the personality changes, misfortunes and sickness attributed to attached spirits? The answer from spirit release therapists, where they engage with such questions, is tentatively or definitively 'No!' The body and its neurological system are intimately interconnected with the world of spirit but spirits are not reducible to biological processes. We are therefore left with the kind of incommensurate ontologies that the 'ontological turn' in anthropology seeks tentatively, perhaps rather timidly to date, to address.

Basic presuppositions in Western spirit release

- All matter, like everything else in the universe is composed of (intelligent) energy. Nothing dies, it is merely transformed.
- The physical body is one of several bodies that we all possess, which vibrate at different frequencies.
- Our health, physical, emotional and spiritual, depends on balancing our energy.
- Loving and selfless thoughts and actions raise our vibration and attract good energy, and vice-versa.
- Ill-health, depression, trauma, addictions and playing with a Ouija board are among the ways people can weaken their energy field or aura sufficiently for alien energies to attach themselves.



There remains an epistemological and hermeneutical gap between the methodological premises of many scholars and the excess of data that cannot be accounted for by a source hypothesis of mind. Dan Zahavi (2014) and others have pointed to Freedom as a problematic concept for materialist science. It is an equally problematic concept when looking at the phenomenology of spirit release, albeit for different reasons, as it presumes that some people might consciously or unconsciously choose, or allow, 'alien' energies to mingle with or take over their minds and bodies.

The features of spirit release ontologies I'm about to present don't come from a single source but from many books, articles, magazines and journals aimed at a popular as well as academic market. From interviews with British spirit release practitioners and clients, participation in workshops and events and as a client (but not practitioner) of spirit release therapy. Despite differences of emphasis, such as in the expected frequency of possession in the general population for example, there is a high degree of consistency within the data. While some of those involved consider themselves Christians, I am not here dealing with Christian exorcism or deliverance. There is a generally Spiritualist orientation, although not all spirit release therapists or mediums have any direct knowledge of Spiritualism as a religion. As I have published

and spoken elsewhere on spirit possession and methodologies for studying it (Bowie 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016) I will try to avoid too much repetition.

- All matter, like everything else in the universe is composed of (intelligent) energy. Nothing dies, it is merely transformed.
- The physical body is one of several bodies that we all possess, which vibrate at different frequencies.
- Our health, physical, emotional and spiritual, depends on balancing our energy.
- Loving and selfless thoughts and actions raise our vibration and attract good energy, and vice-versa.
- Ill-health, depression, trauma, addictions and playing with a Ouija board are among the ways people can weaken their energy field or aura sufficiently for alien energies to attach themselves.

What are these attachments?

- Attachments come in many forms – they may be earthbound spirits who are lost or afraid to move on (into the light).
- They may be negative spirits, once human or never incarnated, who wish evil and want to cause harm (demons, dark force entities).
- They may be playful devic (fairies, elves etc.) or other non-human energies.
- They may be thought-forms or curses, originating with the possessed person or someone else – usually envisaged as cords or hooks.



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They are not visiting spirits who have moved into the light, such as friends or family who come to pay a visit in a dream or to lend their support in times of trouble. These deceased loved ones are not physically attached or caught in the energy field of the living, but are linked through affection and concern.

Attachment might vary from what is often described as a thin cord that can be easily cut by a mental act or prayer or, at the other extreme, full possession by one or more spirits who dominate and control the thoughts, emotions and actions of the individual concerned. While such attachments may be accidental and random, they may also have been intentionally or unintentionally sought.

How do you know if you have an attachment?



- A sudden or gradual change of personality or tastes and habits without obvious explanation, such as developing an unexplained taste for vodka or interest in horse racing.
- Being drained of energy or depressed without obvious cause.
- Psychokinetic activity that seems to centre on a particular person, and feels aggressive.
- Hearing alien voices and perhaps developing unexpected suicidal urges or displaying uncharacteristic violent behaviour.

I attended a weekend workshop in London recently, run by the Spirit Release Forum. Of the twenty or so participants, mainly white professional people, men and women, the majority claimed that they were there to learn how to protect themselves, having unexpectedly and against all previous beliefs and expectations, found themselves under psychic attack. The majority wanted to understand what had happened to them, or someone close to them, and to develop techniques to prevent it happening again, and perhaps learn how to help others in similar circumstances. The stories varied but the sense of surprise and distress caused was common. In some cases the announcement of the alien spirit or spirits is sudden and very obvious – there may be psychokinetic activity in someone's home which seems to follow and be directed at an individual or individuals. Some people find they have a change of taste or personality, start hearing voices, lose periods of time that they can't account for, feel constantly drained of energy, have the sense of an alien energy looking back at them from the mirror or in the room with them. It is the lack of an obvious alternative natural cause for these changes that might give rise to the suspicion that one's energy boundaries have been breached, and that the Self is no longer the discrete entity that they had assumed it to be.

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Spirit release protocols

- Ask higher powers for protection for self and client.
- Clear as much surrounding negative energy as possible.
- Ask permission of the client's higher self to work with him or her.
- Identify the source of the problem.
- Engage any possessing or attached entities in dialogue (mentally) and ask for help from higher powers to move them to the Light so that they can continue their spiritual development.
- Check the client's aura for further problems or results.
- Perform some form of cleansing to ensure that there are no attached entities or energies transferred to the practitioner.



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When I lived in Cameroon with the Bangwa, there was a two-fold process of discerning and then dealing with witches, ancestors or spirits. The first is diagnosis of the source of the problem or misfortune and the second dealing with it appropriately. Different specialists deal with these different stages and the treatment depends on the cause. In Western spirit release there is a similar two-fold process. The first task of the spirit release practitioner is to diagnose the source of the problem. There are many techniques for doing this, as in Africa with its range of oracles and specialists. It is possible for some people to diagnose themselves, perhaps through dousing with a crystal and asking appropriate questions. You can approach a medium, or someone else can act on your behalf, who will attempt to contact their and your spirit guides to ask about the source of the problem. Some psychics and mediums can 'see' or intuit the cause, perhaps identifying by name and personality the possessing or attached entities. Others use hypnosis to speak to the entities through the client, or a practitioner might use a medium, who might or might not incorporate possessing spirits, to question any attached entities. The exact means and protocols seem to be almost as varied as the personalities and skills of those involved. Some practitioners work alone, many in pairs, particularly for dangerous or difficult cases, and others sit in 'rescue circles' in which people send their loving intention towards the client and any trapped or earthbound entities.

Most follow a similar protocol:

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- Clear as much surrounding negative energy as possible.
- Ask permission of the client's higher self to work with him or her.
- Identify the source of the problem or problems.
- Engage any possessing or attached entities in dialogue (mentally) and ask for help from higher powers to move them to the Light so that they can continue their spiritual development.
- Check the client's aura for further problems or results.
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Does spirit release work?

Some practitioners report sudden and almost miraculous healings from intractable problems. In other cases it might take many sessions or there is little or no obvious change in the client. Changes might be subtle, and require the consent of the client. A harmful lifestyle might incline the client to further problems – as in the biblical parable of the room swept clean, that simply allows new spirits to enter.



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Some practitioners report sudden and almost miraculous healings from intractable problems. In other cases it might take many sessions or there is little or no obvious change in the client. Changes might be subtle, and require the consent of the client. It is possible to be deceived by the spirits. For mischievous or malign reasons the spirits might not be who they claim – as explored by Joe Fisher in his autobiographical book, *The Siren Call of Hungry Ghosts*. A harmful lifestyle might incline the client to further problems – as in the biblical parable of the room swept clean, that simply allows new spirits to enter.

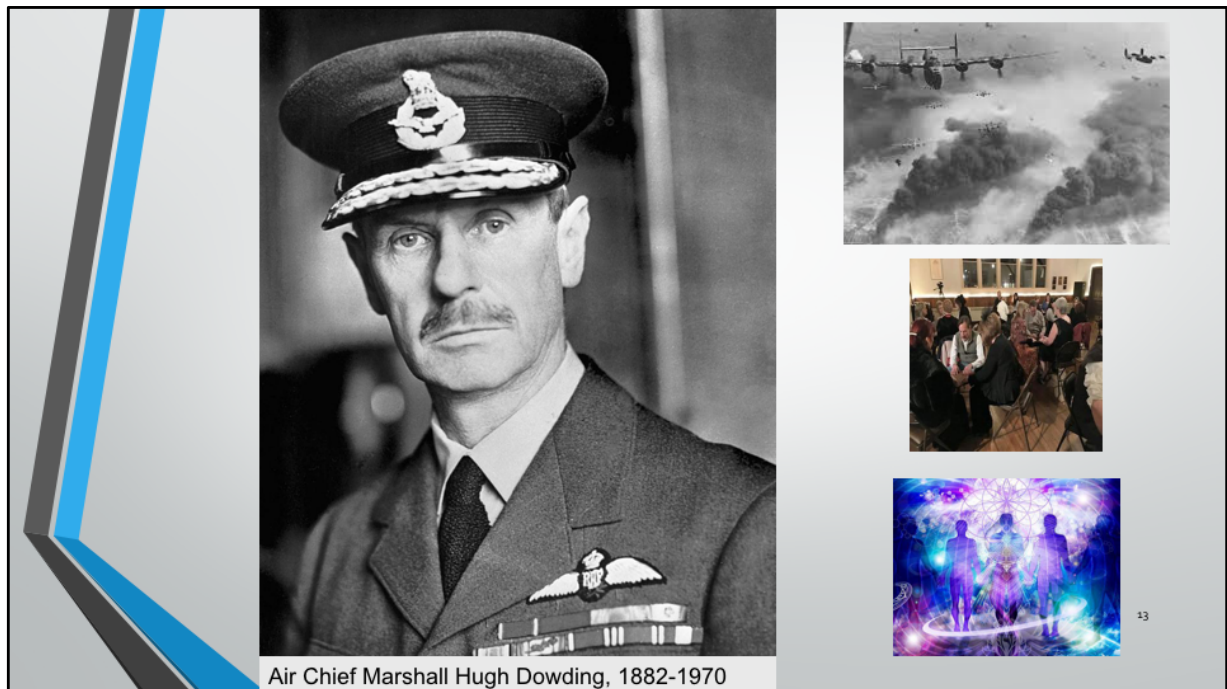


"When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

Matthew 12:43-45 (NIV)

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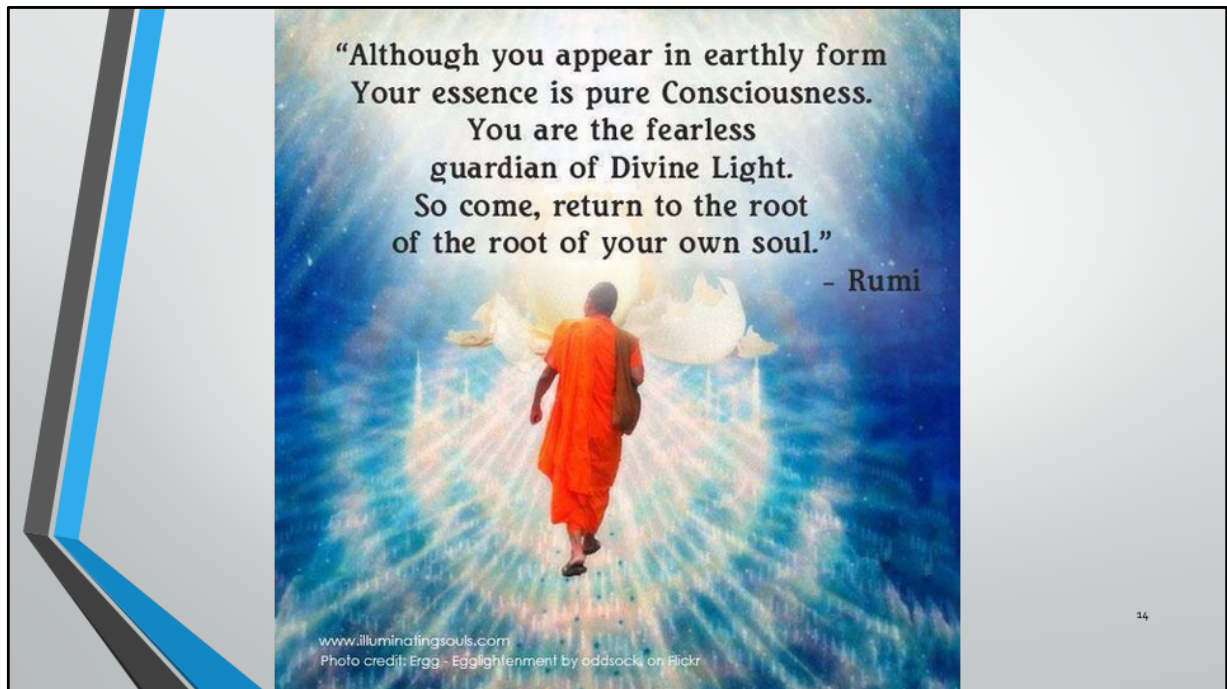
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Air Chief Marshall Hugh Dowding, 1882-1970

The difference between the sort of exorcism or casting out of demons described in many biblical passages, and practised in many churches still today, and spirit release, is that in the latter the possessing spirits are also considered to be clients in need of healing. Some rescue circles are set up solely to help distressed souls who have become earthbound, or become lost or trapped in or near the earth plane. Those who have died violently or suddenly are particularly prone to getting stuck (and becoming ghosts or troublesome possessing spirits). Identifying places or people where these spirits remain and sending them on their way, with the help of spirit guides, angelic forces and other positive energies from the spirit plane, and good will and loving thoughts from the earth plane, is seen as a work of charity.

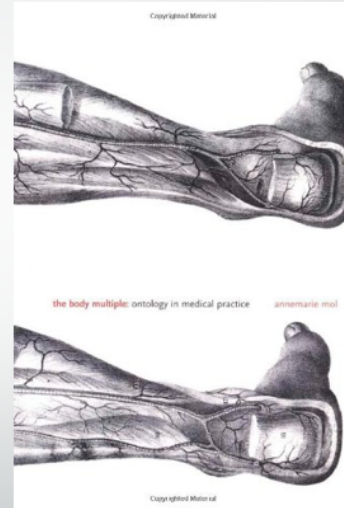
Air Chief Marshall Hugh Dowding, in charge of Bomber Command in the Battle of Britain during the Second World War, was one of many people who, distressed and feeling partly responsible for, the deaths of so many young men in battle, set up and participated in 'rescue circles' aimed at helping the recently deceased move to the next plane of existence.



A theme running through Western spirit release is that it is therapy both for the person afflicted by possessing or attached spirits and for the spirits themselves. For those spirits who were once human there is no clear separation between the living and the dead, and any of us could potentially find ourselves in the same situation, in need of compassion and help. The boundaries placed around the Self and the space between Self and Other are seen as more porous and the links more complex than most contemporary Western psychological or philosophical accounts allow.

Academic discernment

"Presenting the *body multiple* as the reality we live with is not a solution to a problem but a way of changing a host of intellectual reflexes. This study does not try to chase away doubt but seeks instead to raise it" (184).



Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Duke University Press (2002) 15

If spirit release therapists have to learn to discern the presence and nature of spirits, and learn how to treat them, as academic researchers we need to learn to discern the place of spirits in our studies. I started by looking at what I consider to be the shortcomings of some reductive approaches that fail to deal with either the world view of informants, or the ontological deficit, by which I mean data that doesn't fit the researcher's existing paradigms. The challenge remains to adjust our paradigms to accommodate new, or old, 'facts', even if this might lead to the view that invisible forces interact with and are part of our visible world.

In her wonderful ethnography of hospital treatment of atherosclerosis, the hardening of arteries in the legs, Annemarie Mol uses the concept of 'enactment' rather than 'knowledge' to describe the medical process. Atherosclerosis comes into view not as a single disease or condition seen from multiple perspectives, but as different conditions depending on whether one is a patient or clinician looking at symptoms, an epidemiologist or a pathologist looking at a plaque in a laboratory. The patient, doctor, and laboratory technician are not describing exactly the same thing. Each enacts the disease in different ways, seemingly unaware of the lack of coherence in the object they describe. When it comes to therapeutic intervention one might install a chair lift for someone who can't climb the stairs or undertake surgery, for example.

'If each therapeutic intervention achieves something different, what counts as improvement may similarly tend to become less obvious' (183). Rather than ask whether the intervention is effective one might ask 'what effects does it have?'. When it comes to people, it is not what their legs look like under a microscope or surgeon's knife that counts but the way their illness affects their daily life. By showing that there are not just multiple perspectives but a multiple object with partial, overlapping connections, Mol aims to decentre any single perspective, particularly in her case the dominance of the laboratory.

When an individual goes to a family doctor, a psychiatrist and a spirit release practitioner complaining that voices are urging them to kill themselves, we are similarly looking at a multiple condition. Rather than ask which treatments are scientifically respectable, we can look at the effects of different interventions in people's lives. This allows us to recognise and value different forms of enactment and to study what the effects of each are. Admitting the partial nature of knowledge and multiple nature of reality is a good starting point in any therapy.

Thank You!

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