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Metaphysical Foundationalist versus Existentialist Ontologies: Applications for Research on Psychological Energy

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Theories of psychological energy have a rich history going back to the beginning of the field of psychology, employing concepts such as "libido," "psychic energy," "orgone energy," "bioenergetics," "psycho-energetics," "life energy," "organizing field," and "living-matrix." There has been a recent effort to find neural correlates with these concepts, but these data may not capture the fullness of the phenomenon. Because psychological energy is an elusive concept with many interpretations, research into this phenomenon faces the most basic questions regarding where and how to start. To address these questions, this paper explores several theories of ontology that could apply to psychological energy in the ways that major theorists have described it: the metaphysical foundationalist ontologies of Alfred North Whitehead, Ken Wilber, and Roy Bhaskar; the existentialist ontologies of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; and extensions of existentialist ontology from Eugene Gendlin and Jorge N. Ferrer. It is argued that epistemological approaches based on existentialist ontology offer a more fruitful starting point for developing research methods in the study of psychological energy than methods grounded in metaphysical foundationalist ontologies. Grounds for ontological and epistemological dialog between these perspectives are explored

Keywords: *psychological energy, libido, orgone, biofield, psycho-energetics, ontology, epistemology, Whitehead, Wilber, Bhaskar, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gendlin, Ferrer*

Since William James and Pierre Janet in the 19th century, psychologists have used variations of the term "energy" to describe the dynamic forces at work within the psyche and the soma and the psychotherapeutic processes of change (Wehowsky, 2015). Variations on these terms over time have included "libido" (e.g., Freud, 2012a/1920, 2012b/1899, 2012c/1922; Jung, 2014/1969), "psychic energy" (e.g., Jung, 2014/1969), "orgone energy" (e.g., Reich, 1968/1942), "bioenergetics" (e.g., Lowen, 1979/1958), "psycho-energetics" (Assagioli, 1973, as cited in Rosselli & Vanni, 2014), "life energy" (Levine & Frederick, 1997), "organizing field" (Feinstein, 2012b), and "living-matrix" (Wehowsky, 2015). A relatively sparse body of data supports the efficacy of using such concepts in a clinical setting (cf. Bloch-Atefi & Smith, 2014; Feinstein, 2012a; Röhrich, 2009; Ventling, 2002). Part of the reason

for the paucity of data in this field is the difficulty demonstrating both the ontological nature of such hypothesized energies, as well as measuring them (e.g., Hufford et al., 2015; Tiller, 2010). Given that measurement is elusive, and that the ontological nature of psychological energy is in question, this paper attempts to get at the root of the problem by starting with the basic question of ontology itself to evaluate what might be the most productive epistemological approaches for exploring the possible nature of psychological energy—a term which, in this paper, broadly refers to any energy-oriented concept used in the theory and practice of psychology, such as libido, orgone energy, life-matrix, and so on. It is argued that epistemological approaches based on existentialist ontology offer a more fruitful starting point for developing research methods for the study of psychological energy than

methods grounded in metaphysical foundationalist ontologies.

Psychological energy is far from the predominant explanatory framework for process and change in 21st-century psychology and psychotherapy. However, descriptions that employ the frame of psychological energy retain a connection to phenomenal experiences of both therapist and client in psychotherapy. A review of early 20th-century theorists of psychological energy (Da, in press) concluded that qualities of this energy were associated with emotional states, the ability to accomplish tasks, and experiences related to directionality or movement, such as inward, outward, upward, or downward. Jung (2014/1969), for example, saw depressed mood as an introverted energy and positive mood as an extraverted energy, which might be reflected in the eye position of a psychotherapy client: A depressed client may look down toward their feet or lap and feel a sense of impending doom whereas a client who has just experienced a personal success, such as a job promotion, might look out toward the sky as if seeing a world of possibilities. Linguistic, conceptual, and theoretical frames oriented toward psychological energy may point to underlying aspects of behaviors, cognitive events, or somatic experiences within both the client and therapist that other explanatory frames do not currently encompass. An richer, more comprehensive understanding of psychological phenomena may prove more accessible, meaningful, and satisfying to both the client and therapist, and it may help guide the application and interpretation of neuroscientific measurement.

A Brief Review of Psychological Energy

The history of theory and concepts related to energy in psychology can be viewed as a tree. Its roots are in the work of the groundbreaking contemporaries of Sigmund Freud—namely William James and Pierre Janet—whose theories of psychological energy had less direct impact than Freud's, but whose theories Freud reacted against. Freud's work provided the primary directionality for the trunk of the tree; this trunk comprises the work of major theorists from the psychoanalytic, or depth psychology, tradition. Subsequent analytical

theories of psychological energy included Carl Jung (e.g., 2014b/1969), Wilhelm Reich (e.g., 1968/1942), Alexander Lowen (e.g., 1979/1958), and Roberto Assagioli (1973, 1974). For the purposes of this paper, I have grouped these early theorists into a category referred to as the "analytical tradition." This term is somewhat imprecise because James and Janet were not analytical psychiatrists within the depth psychology tradition, but their work was influential for the analysts. The analytical theorists (including James and Janet) conceptualized psychological energy in ways that persist to this day. However, major differences in theoretical perspectives elucidated by these early theorists also persist in modern psychology.

Following Lowen's work in the mid-1970s, the tree forked into two main branches. One branch was led by John Pierrakos (1990), a colleague of Lowen's who felt that Lowen had abandoned the energetic essence of Reich's work. This branch eventually led to modern biofield-based theories and techniques in psychotherapy, such as emotional freedom technique (EFT; Church, 2017). I refer to this category of theories as "neo-Reichian," and two distinctions are relevant for this categorization. First, the term neo-Reichian is used in different ways by different authors. Some use this term to refer specifically to therapies derived from Reich's work, focusing either on its analytical or body-centered components (e.g., Geuter, 2015); others use this term to refer to body psychotherapy in general or any type of body psychotherapy that is not within the gestalt therapy tradition (e.g., Mindell, 1981). Herein, neo-Reichian refers to psychological theories and techniques that use "energy" and related concepts in ways that are specifically either spiritually-oriented or grounded in biofield theory. The reasons for this categorization are that (a) both these groups of theories have tended to reject the primacy of the Western anatomical model as a framework for psychological energy in a way that is similar to Reich; and (b) biofield theory includes some perspectives that are grounded in spirituality, rather than physics, but not all spiritually-oriented perspectives also self-identify as biofield-oriented. Second, it is worth noting that even though Assagioli is included in the analytic tradition in this paper,

his work was also influential for the neo-Reichians. However, this was due to later theorists recognizing the overlap between the work of Assagioli and Reich, rather than a linear relationship. Assagioli had a linear relationship with Freud, but developed his theories in parallel with Reich and Jung (Assagioli, 1974b).

The other branch influenced by Lowen was the somatic trauma therapies, which is referred to herein as the bio-somatic tradition. “Bio-somatic” is a practical neologism because there does not appear to be another term for this distinction in the literature. The bio-somatic lineage was initiated by Peter Levine (e.g., Levine, 2012; Levine & Frederick, 1997). Rather than focusing on so-called subtle energy, as the neo-Reichians did, bio-somatic therapists have emphasized energy as located within the biophysical body as conceptualized by Western allopathic medicine, primarily the nervous system.

Empiricism, Ontology, and Psychological Energy

The empirical study of psychology is grounded in a philosophy of science that Teo (2018) characterized as “naïve empiricism” (p. 158), which aims to set aside preconceived theories, concepts, and biases in order to draw conclusions based on empirical observation. This version of empiricism is derived, in short, through the philosophical lineage of David Hume (2000/1739), whose commitment to empirical observation rejected the necessity for ontological models, arguing that observation demonstrated the nature of the universe and that philosophical ontology basically amounted to speculation. The empiricist belief in the importance of observation, in turn, runs through the work of Descartes (1999) and Kant (2021/1781), who essentially argued, albeit in different ways, that a subjective observation is irrevocably separated from its object; descriptions of observations are the closest one can get to so-called true knowledge. While this is explicitly more of an epistemological rather than ontological position, Bhaskar (1997/1975) argued that an empiricist stance, such as the one typical in psychological research, merely obscures ontological assumptions about the nature of the universe that would enable empirical observation

to begin with, much less give these observations a place of epistemological primacy:

The sense in which every account of science presupposes an ontology is the sense in which it presupposes a schematic answer to the question of what the world must be like for science to be possible. (p. 59)

Bhaskar’s explication of these ontological assumptions is reviewed below; for now, some overall epistemological critiques of the naïve empiricist perspective are relevant to the study of psychological energy. As Hartelius (2019) noted, these biases are often informed—and perhaps blinded—by implicit Western cultural assumptions about reality. This means, for example, that visual information and visual modeling is generally preferred over other sensory information, such as information that comes from feelings within the human body (Hartelius, 2007, 2019; Levin, 1993). To extend the visual metaphor, much that occurs under empirical observation may be overlooked owing to the culture-bound limitations of the experimental design. These types of Western cultural biases tend to tightly couple naïve empiricism with what Morassaie and Hosseini (in press) have called “classical physicalism,” or what is more commonly referred to as “materialism,” which is grounded in Newtonian physics and considers metaphysics to be all those principles and phenomena that lie outside the scope of classical physics. The classical physicalist perspective is commonly—often implicitly—applied to quantum physics, as well as classical physics (Morassaie & Hosseini, in press). Many theorists of psychological energy, particularly in the last 25 years, have defaulted to classical physicalist explanations for psychological energy. For example, in his earlier work on the treatment of trauma, Peter Levine (Levine & Frederick, 1997) frequently referred to somewhat nebulous terms such as “energy” and “vitality.” However, in his later work, Levine (2012) relied almost exclusively on Western medical explanations for energetic experiences, largely grounded in Porges’s (2001) theory regarding the relationship between the polyvagal nerve complex and emotions.

A classical physicalist stance is likely the easiest path to cultural acceptance for a theory

or idea in the modern cultural climate. However, physicalism has been expanded beyond classical physicalism. Ney (2018) identified at least two variations on physicalism that could easily include psychological energy in a way that is not limited by the current constraints of physical measurement: “Futurism” holds that all phenomena can be hypothetically explained by physics, but current physics simply may not yet have discovered the mechanisms that would explain them; and theories that, a priori, reject both physicalism’s reliance on physics and the so-called mentality constraint, holding that all phenomena, including mental phenomena, are by definition physical, and thus no conflict exists between accepting as physical phenomena that are currently mathematically explained by physics and phenomena that are not. (For a further review of alternatives to classical physicalism, see Morassaie & Hosseini, in press.) These perspectives allow a physicalist point of view while recognizing that current techniques of observation, measurement, and calculation are not adequate to capture all phenomena. This could include such phenomena as psychological energy.

Two categories of ontological argument since the early 20th century that challenge the Cartesian and Kantian so-called philosophies of reflection might support concepts of psychological energy: metaphysical foundationalist ontologies, in which the essential nature of reality is understood as an object of induction, typified by the work of Alfred North Whitehead (2014/1948); and existentialist ontologies, typified by the work of Martin Heidegger (1999/1927). These theories are not incompatible with the range of conventional Western empiricist positions, including naïve empiricism. Metaphysical foundationalism is a subcategory of monistic philosophy that rests on the assumptions that (a) things within the world are dependent upon the existence of the world as a whole; and (b) the existence of the world as a whole is dependent upon a fundamental metaphysical principle (Schaffer, 2010). This metaphysical principle is necessarily outside the scope of empirical observation because it requires stepping outside the world to observe it; thus it lies within the domain of theory, and it is treated as an inductive theoretical object.

Metaphysical foundationalism goes back at least to Plato, but this paper is concerned with a few of its post-twentieth-century variations. Existentialist ontologies focus on human situatedness in, and relationship to, the world. The existentialists keep their inferences and inductions about the nature of reality close to that relationship as it occurs through direct or mediated human experience. At the same time, the existentialists take a broadly human, relational stance toward empirical epistemology that includes ways of knowing beyond merely the five human senses or sensory information enhanced through observational instruments.

Both metaphysical foundationalist and existentialist ontologies attempt to open up possibilities within the field of human understanding, which might in turn open avenues of understanding to the phenomenon of psychological energy. This paper presents a comparative survey of several ontological theories that have been influential in the theory and practice of psychological energy or have the potential to influence its study. The summary of each theory is necessarily brief in order to distill the aspects that may be most relevant to future research on psychological energy. This paper is an attempt to sift through these competing ontological frameworks in order to determine the most productive starting points for research into psychological energy.

Metaphysical Foundationalist Ontology

Until the 20th century, metaphysical foundationalism was effectively the default position in Western philosophy (cf. Bennett, 2011; Cameron, 2008). Within this philosophical tradition, three 20th- and 21st-century philosophers espoused ontologies that seem particularly congruent with theories of psychological energy: Alfred North Whitehead, Ken Wilber, and Roy Baskar. Owing to the respective hierarchies within these ontologies, they all allow that phenomena can exist within the world that are beyond the purview of ordinary human sense experience and instruments of scientific measurement. Indeed, most major theorists who have attempted to explain the nature of psychological energy have relied on some variation of metaphysical foundationalism—a point that is discussed further in relation to each ontologist. This

section reviews the metaphysical foundationalist ontologies of Whitehead, Wilber, and Baskar with an emphasis on their relevance for the study of psychological energy.

Whitehead: Eternal Objects, Concrecence, and Actual Occasions

An accomplished physicist and mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead (1967/1933, 2010/1929, 2014/1948) developed a process-oriented philosophy of physics and metaphysics to address axiological concerns, such as ethics and aesthetics. Whitehead's central question was twofold: Why do objects in the universe tend to relate to one another, rather than drifting apart into deadness; and given that physics does not explain axiological concerns, such as aesthetics and ethics, how can these be explained without violating the laws of physics? According to Whitehead (2010/1929), there must be a metaphysical force, which he referred to as "God," from which a diffusion of potentiality concreces into actual phenomena. Whitehead's theory can be seen as congruent with some theories of psychological energy, particularly those of James (2004/1902), Janet (cf. Craparo et al., 2019), Jung (2014/1969), and Reich (1968/1942).

Eternal objects are absolute potentials that do not change; "there are no novel eternal objects," according to Whitehead (2010/1929, p. 22). Statements or experiences of value, such as beauty or ethics, are evaluations of the closeness or alignment of an experience with one or more eternal objects. For example, saying that a natural setting, such as a mountain vista, is beautiful is to say that it reflects an eternal sense of order—order that is infused into the setting through the penetration of eternal objects. When observing the scene of a garbage dump, a haphazard mix of industrial and biological refuse, eternal objects are relatively obscured. This principle might be extrapolated in psychology to suggest that mentally and emotionally expansive experiences, such as those associated with love or contentment, are closely aligned with eternal objects; in mentally and emotionally contracted experiences, such as those associated with anxiety or shame, eternal objects are relatively obscured.

Eternal objects influence the concrecence of "actual occasions" or "actual entities," which are

the things that happen in the world: "[The] actual world is a process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities" (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 22). While eternal objects are unchanging, pure potential, actual entities are always specific, temporal, and bound to an environment. Actual entities are "drops of experience" (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 18) that are inherently and indivisibly experiential; their experiential quality is *felt*. This feeling includes "the Objective datum" (what is felt), as well as the "subjective form" (how it is felt) (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 221). The process of the becoming of actual entities is a constant concrecence, or recombination, of actual entities into novel experiences. According to Whitehead (2010/1929), this "advance into novelty" (p. 222) would not be possible without the influence of eternal objects, which are, in turn, the emanations of God:

Apart from the intervention of God, there could be nothing new in the world, and no order in the world. The course of creation would be a dead level of ineffectiveness, with all balance and intensity progressively excluded by the cross currents of incompatibility. The novel hybrid feelings derived from God, with the derivative sympathetic conceptual valuations, are the foundations of progress. (p. 247)

Whitehead took this argument further. The infusion of eternal objects does not merely rely on God, such that the world is created in God's image. Rather, all actual entities are infused with their own creative impulses owing to their entanglement with eternal objects. This continual concrecence creates novel entities that are distinct from one another, and from God:

The creativity [of actual entities] is not an external agency with its own ulterior purposes. All actual entities share with God this characteristic of self-causation. For this reason every actual entity also shares with God the characteristic of transcending all other actual entities, including God. The universe is thus a creative advance into novelty. (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 222, emphasis added)

This creative impulse moves toward the “satisfaction” of the concrescence, which results in a “complex unity of feeling” (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 220). There are two key points here: (a) The satisfaction of concrescence results in a complex feeling, and (b) concrescence is always in the process of advance into novelty. Even though an actual occasion is “fully determinant” in its feeling (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 25), it is not static and fixed. Further, the feeling is not necessarily measurable, even though the actual occasion does have an objective aspect.

Even though clear scientific evidence for psychological energy is lacking, it is not precluded as an actual occasion in Whitehead’s framework. Indeed, theories of psychological energy, such as Freud’s libido, attempt to describe feelings, categories of feelings, and processes related to these feelings. For Freud (2012a/1920, 2012b/1899, 2012c/1922), these feelings were largely related to sexual desire and satisfaction.

One possible explanation for the experience of psychological energy is that it is a type of actual occasion—a fully determinant feeling—that is outside the bounds of current physical measurement. James (2004/1902), Janet (cf. Craparo et al., 2019), Jung (2014/1969), and Reich (1968/1942) all proposed theories along these lines. Jung and Reich, for example, associated psychological energy with concepts in various Indigenous traditions that described energy as a medium of transfer between human will and physical matter. Janet believed that psychological energy was an entity that might be measurable with appropriate, hypothetical apparatus, but it was not energy or matter that was known to the physical sciences. James saw psychological energy as a medium between the divine will and physical form. Any of these explanations could hypothetically be mapped onto Whitehead’s ontology as one or more types of “contrasts.” Contrasts are “patterns of entities” (Whitehead, 2010/1929, p. 22) that can form an indefinite number of combinations. Defining psychological energy as a contrast, in Whitehead’s terms, does not clarify its nature. It simply allows it to exist within his ontological model as some combination, or pattern, of actual entities and eternal objects.

Other possible “categories of existence,” as Whitehead (2010/1929) called types of entities, for psychological energy are “subjective forms” (private experiences, or private matters of fact) and “propositions” (theories). Private, intrasubjective experiences are at least partially composed of neuronal events. If psychological energy is simply a subjective experience or an interpretation of an experience, it is still real, or “actual,” within Whitehead’s framework. A number of authors (e.g., Bieber, 1958; Hufford et al., 2015; Wallerstein, 1977) have suggested that psychological energy is merely a theory—and perhaps a misguided one at that. Even if this is true, Whitehead argued that theories are complex relationships between actual entities and a complex eternal object that represents the potentials that determine the tendencies of future actual occurrences.

Whitehead’s categories of subjective forms and propositions allow psychological energy to exist within his ontological framework, but the notion that subjective experiences and theories actually exist is not particularly revelatory. More apropos to many of the major theorists of psychological energy is Whitehead’s explanation regarding the entanglement of eternal objects—the qualities of God—and actual entities, which map more closely to what is traditionally regarded as the “material.” The scientific problem is self-evident: In order to understand it, such a conception relies on an appeal to God, or at least a creative, non-material, divine source with qualities that are specific, but not directly observable. Whitehead’s ontology is explicitly metaphysical, which makes it difficult to situate within psychological science. Whitehead’s theory of metaphysics and ontology dovetails with some psychological theorists’—particularly Jung’s, Reich’s, and James’s—explanations of psychological energy as a phenomenon that is not metaphysical, but is aligned with, or originating from, a metaphysical source. That is, when psychological energy is the most powerfully felt, the feeling is axiologically satisfying, which in Whitehead’s view, indicates an actual occasion in which eternal objects are relatively unobscured. Nonetheless, an explanation along these lines presents challenges to empirical validation that are

untenable unless one first agrees to Whitehead's metaphysical premises.

Wilber: Hierarchical Ontology with a Creative, Metaphysical Source

Ken Wilber (e.g., 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2011) was the predominant thinker in transpersonal psychology in the 1980s and 1990s, and he explicitly fitted psychological energy into an ontological scheme. Wilber (2000) alternately described psychological energy (using libido as an example) in two main ways: (a) as one of nine "sheaths" or "fulcrums" of self-development, generally related to emotion; and (b) part of the "subtle" realm of being, realms which also include "gross" and "causal." Gross is the physical realm; causal is the realm of the unmanifest; subtle is a spectrum between these two, which includes psychological phenomena, such as emotions and dreams, as well as a broad range of phenomena that are not easily explained within the natural sciences, such as telepathy and other transpersonal experiences, and so-called subtle energies, such as *prana* or *qi*.

Wilber (2006) later evolved his theories on some of these points, but the nuances are not important for this discussion. What is important about Wilber's overall theory is that reality is grounded in a nondual, undifferentiated source, and it becomes more differentiated as it concretes—or, in his words, moves up the great chain, or nest, of being—from causal to subtle to gross. Wilber (2000) made a direct association between his description of this process with the ways that entities concreate into complexity and novelty according to Whitehead (2010/1929). Wilber added that subtle phenomena, such as psychological energy, are those that are perceptible from the perspective of states of consciousness associated with the phenomena, but not by sensory awareness that is attuned to an ordinary, waking state of consciousness or the gross level of being. Wilber (2011) further argued that information received in such states can be confirmed or rejected by other people who have trained or otherwise achieved a similar state. He called such knowledge vetters a "community of the adequate" (p. 326). Wilber (2011) used the example of learning zazen meditation to illustrate that one must follow the steps of the process to gain access to each new insight to state-based

information from the perspective, or altitude, of the relevant state: "A person must be developmentally adequate to [the] disclosure or there is, in fact, no disclosure, just as if you never learn to read you will never grasp Macbeth" (p. 55).

Regarding psychological energy, as well as other phenomena within transpersonal psychology, it is tempting to adopt Wilber's theory because he explicitly plots such phenomena into a broad, cohesive framework. Because of the parallels with Whitehead's theory of concreation, Wilber's theory about the nature of psychological energy and similar phenomena tends to lend support for the theories of James (2004/1902), Janet (cf. Craparo et al., 2019), Jung (2014/1969), and Reich (1968/1942). However, the scientific problem is also similar to that of Whitehead's theory: In order to adopt it, one must accept Wilber's principle that there is a divine, nondual, creative source from which all other phenomena emanate. Wilber (2011) countered this critique by arguing that one must have a confirming, transcendent experience in order to see the truth of this pillar of his theoretical stance—his "community of the adequate." Nonetheless, two glaring problems remain with this position. First, one must grant that people who have had the experiences Wilber described are correct in their ultimate assessment of the nature of reality, and further that they all agree, which is far from clear (Ferrer, 2002, 2011; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). Second, people who have not had such experiences are required to take it on faith that these authority figures are correct (Ferrer, 2002; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013).

Whether Wilber's ontological theory is correct, it does potentially point toward a valuable avenue of research. Wilber (2006) argued that one must be in the proper state of consciousness in order to experience a phenomenon; and further, to achieve the proper state of consciousness often requires a developmental practice (Wilber, 2011). Along these lines, an experimenter effect has long been theorized that may influence research in parapsychology: Researchers who are advocates of psi phenomena and may believe themselves to have psi abilities are more likely to conduct experiments that yield positive results (Schlitz et al., 2006; Smith, 2003). While there are multiple interpretations of

this apparent experimenter effect, including mistake and fraud, pro-psi researchers tend to favor the idea that their positive attitudes and psi abilities create more favorable conditions for the observation of psi phenomena (Smith, 2003). A series of collaborative studies on the feeling of being watched (Wiseman & Schlitz, 1997, 1999) seem to support the latter hypothesis: Wiseman, a skeptic, obtained chance results, while Schlitz, who is pro-psi, obtained statistically positive results; both researchers used the same research design, equipment, and data analysis procedures. If such experimenter effects are due to the attitudes and abilities of the researchers, perhaps any observational studies on psychological energy might best be conducted by experts who are able to be in a state of consciousness in which these phenomena occur, in order that they may be observed; and the ability to achieve such a state of consciousness may require appropriate training. This point is further developed in the Discussion.

Bhaskar: Nested Ontological Domains in the Philosophy of Science

Roy Bhaskar (1997/1975) founded the philosophy of critical realism as a response to a debate in the mid-1970s between positivist and neo-Kantian philosophers of science on one side, and postmodernist views typified by the work of Rorty (1979). Bhaskar (2016) used a theory of ontology to explicate the philosophical assumptions across these opposing views in the philosophy of science in order to “philosophically underlabour for science and practices oriented to human well-being” (p. 1). Bhaskar (1997/1975) described three nested ontological domains in the natural sciences:

- The domain of the “empirical” represents what is observed, either through sense experience or instrumentation. In psychology, one example is the neuroimaging data from an fMRI machine.
- The domain of the “actual” represents all of the transitive processes or events that actually occur, or potentially actually occur, in time and space, regardless of whether they are empirically observed. An example would be all the things that happened *in the universe* at the same time that an fMRI image was taken, whether or not they were captured in the image.

- The domain of the “real” includes all of the processes or events that occur in the “actual” and “empirical” domains, plus the intransitive laws, causes, or underlying structures that enable the actual events to occur. In the fMRI example, the “real” represents the underlying, stable structures that enable the fMRI machine to operate. These could be laws of physics, such as Faraday’s law of induction, or possibly even metaphysical principles, such as the will of God.

The “empirical” is the domain of observation, and the “real” is the domain of theory. Between these two lies the truth of what the world is “actually” like.

Bhaskar’s critical realist ontology allows that psychological energy is a phenomenon that actually occurs in nature, but simply has not been empirically observed in science owing to the strictures of and assumptions regarding scientific observation. At a basic level, critical realism would prescribe expanding the scope and capacity of empirical observation, such as developing new observational instruments and techniques. However, critical realism offers a host of other tools and techniques for researching difficult to observe phenomena, such as psychological energy.

This nested ontological model applies first and foremost to the natural sciences (Bhaskar, 1997/1975). As such, it most obviously applies to the biological components of psychology, such as neurocognitive psychology and psychopharmacology. It posits that there is something “real” and “intransitive” underlying natural phenomena, and by extension, those aspects of psychology that emerge from biology. Thus, these phenomena cannot be reduced to logical or linguistic constructs. However, the tools of social constructionism can be used to critique the conclusions derived from empirical observation, especially their purportedly neutral and objective nature, and thus enrich scientists’ understanding of the world as it actually is. Knowledge is a “produced means of production” (Bhaskar, 2014/1979, p. 14), and it is valuable to critique the ways in which knowledge is produced. That is, in part, the purpose of this paper.

Further, Bhaskar (2014/1979; Bhaskar et al., 2017) advocated for multidisciplinary research in which research methods were conducted at the appropriate “ontological level.” In this approach, the definitions of causes (the “real”), events (the “actual”), and descriptive regularities (the “empirical”) are adjusted in scope, scale, and contextual emphasis, depending upon the phenomenon in which a researcher is interested (Bhaskar et al., 2017). This might mean, for example, applying phenomenological, hermeneutical, or other research methods, depending upon the best method to examine the particular phenomenon.

Of the three metaphysical foundationalist ontologies reviewed in this paper, Bhaskar’s offers two advantages for research in psychological energy: (a) It specifies that whatever psychological energy may be, it represents an actual occurrence within the natural world, and it can thus be studied through appropriate research methods; (b) it allows for multi-disciplinary research methods that map to a tiered, or “laminated” ontology. As an example of reality as a laminated system, observing a street scene in India, one could look through the lens of economics, linguistics, religion, epidemiology, or civil engineering (Bhaskar, 2016; Bhaskar et al., 2017; Collier, 1989). According to Bhaskar et al. (2017),

[Interdisciplinary researchers] should construct a laminated system consisting in a conjunctive multiplicity of levels or lamination of reality. This system should not be reductionist, neither should it be totally eclectic: it should provide a version of reality that is contoured and differentiating. (pp. 201–202)

A map for constructing such a “contoured and differentiating” understanding of psychological energy, again, speaks to the purpose of this paper, which is expanded in the Discussion. Bhaskar’s idea of a leveled ontology offers a similar path to allowing for the possibility of psychological energy as Whitehead’s and Wilber’s hierarchical ontologies. However, Bhaskar’s concept of a leveled, striated, or laminated system may offer a more direct and productive path toward understanding diversity among theories and evidence regarding psychological energy.

Existentialist Ontology

Existentialist ontologies stand in contrast to metaphysical foundationalism by focusing on a human, rather than cosmic, scope and scale. Existentialist ontologies aim to understand the nature of reality through human subjective, intersubjective, and relational engagement with the world. Martin Heidegger (1999/1927) is one of the few major theorists operating in this philosophical framework who approached his theory explicitly as a philosophy of ontology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1968, 2012/1945) ontology explores the human interface with the world from a body-centered perspective. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have been influential in the development of research methods—Heidegger in hermeneutics (Smythe et al., 2008) and phenomenology (Macann, 1993), and Merleau-Ponty in phenomenology (Macann, 1993).

This section reviews the ontological theories of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. It also briefly reviews the ways that Eugene Gendlin (1978, 2018) applied Heidegger’s ontological concepts to psychology. Finally, Jorge N. Ferrer’s (2002, 2017) participatory theory is discussed. Participatory theory draws on existentialist ontologies, but it constitutes an emergent category of ontological theory that emphasizes participatory, co-creative relationships. It is argued that participatory theory could provide a foundation for dialog between existentialist and metaphysical foundationalist ontologies in the study of psychological energy.

Heidegger: Existential Engagement in the Disclosure of Being

Heidegger (1999/1927) focused on the human relationship to the nature of things, which he referred to as *Dasein*, in order to understand how humans can both live within the world and their own bodies, and yet also understand the world and themselves as both subjects and objects. *Dasein* is “disclosed” through existential engagement, or lived experience. Heidegger (1999/1927) explained that by “disclose” he meant “‘to lay open’ and ‘the character of being laid open,’” and specifically not “‘to obtain indirectly by inference,’” or similar (p. 114). In other words, existential engagement is the path to understanding, but understanding, while an aspect of *Dasein*, is not the fullness of a phenomenon.

Existentiality in and of itself does not describe the essence of being in the absence of interpretation and analysis. In this way, humans rely on hermeneutical engagement to attempt to understand and communicate the Dasein, or is-ness of a phenomenon. The Dasein of entities (things in the world) exists in relationship. Thus, the existentiality of entities also occurs relationally. Heidegger (1999/1927) used the oft-cited example of a carpenter and their hammer. The hammer has a type of being that is called readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), which cannot be observed externally, or even theorized about. It must be existentially disclosed. The Dasein of the hammer in hand is disclosed existentially, but the description of the hammer in hand is hermeneutical.

Setting aside variation among theories of psychological energy, psychotherapists have a common lexicon of energetic phenomena. For example, “the energy in the room” refers to a range of experiences that might indicate a sadness, or weight, an excitement or readiness on the part of the client, or a “tension in the air.” Techniques for responding to the energy in the room are an essential part of the psychotherapist’s toolkit, similar to a carpenter’s hammer. Like the carpenter’s hammer, the energy in the room and the therapist’s response to it are disclosed existentially. Therapeutic skills and theories can be trained through hermeneutical methods of transmission, but the reality—the Dasein—of the moment *is* in a way that cannot be fully understood through theory or training. Heidegger (1999/1927) drew on Aristotle to argue that a discussion of the nature of phenomena leverages both the nature of a thing and the conversants’ understanding of it:

In discourse . . . , what is said . . . is drawn from what the talk is about, so that discursive communication, in what it says . . . , makes manifest what it is talking about, and thus makes this accessible to the other party. (p. 56)

Two therapists, or a therapist and a client, can have an experience that they call “libido” or “energy,” and exchange an understanding of the phenomenon based on its prior existential disclosure. The investigation and exchange of this understanding is hermeneutical, according to

Heidegger, even though the essence, or Dasein, lies beyond, or beneath, this hermeneutical exchange.

Heidegger argued that science assumes the nature of Dasein a priori, but cannot itself demonstrate Dasein. For example, biology is a “science of life,” but “Life, in its own right, is a kind of Being; but essentially it is accessible only in Dasein” (Heidegger, 1999/1927, p. 79). Likewise, psychological energy may be a “kind of Being” whose essence the natural sciences can only assume or, more to the point, dismiss a priori. Following Heidegger’s logic, this could be one of the reasons the natural sciences have failed to affirm the existence of psychological energy. This explanation would at least fit with major theorists such as James (2004/1902), Janet (cf. Craparo et al., 2019), Jung (2014/1969), and Reich (1968/1942), who all argued in various ways that psychological energy was of a more subtle nature than physical phenomena, and thus inaccessible to the tools of the natural sciences.

Trying to measure psychological energy may not be possible through established methodologies within the natural sciences. However, a therapist’s engagement of energetic phenomena might be said to be a way of engaging with the “concern” (*Besorgen*; Heidegger, 1999/1927, p. 89) of the therapeutic moment. The energetic experience is part of what is shared phenomenologically and hermeneutically between therapist and client. By engaging with this concern effectively (that is, from an authentically existential stance of therapeutic concern that is expressed through therapeutic skill), change can be effected. Even though the Dasein of psychological energy may not be fully understood, its Dasein is nonetheless disclosed in such a therapeutic encounter and may serve a therapeutic value. Further, if the Dasein of a phenomenon hermeneutically called psychological energy is present in the therapeutic encounter, it is available empirically if engaged through appropriate methods.

Heidegger employs a relational, existential orientation toward ontology that allows that things are in a way that humans encounter but cannot fully logically comprehend or verbally express. It is the attempt to understand, interpret, and communicate the nature of Dasein where meaning is gained and lost. When applied to psychological energy, Heidegger’s

approach suggests that to get closer to the Dasein of the phenomena to which a particular theorist is pointing, one might best start through existential engagement with the phenomena. Such engagement would best use all faculties available to the researcher—every sense, organ, sinew, intuition, skill, state, and mode of being. Following such engagement, hermeneutical understanding, communication, and interpretation might be improved.

Gendlin: A Psychological Application of Heidegger's Ontology

Eugene Gendlin (1978, 2018) is the only theorist reviewed here who does not offer a distinct theory of ontology; his work is included as an application of Heidegger's ontology to the field of psychology that might also have implications for psychological energy. Gendlin used the concept of the "felt sense" to describe the ways humans know something about their state of being or mood before it is cognitively understood. The felt sense is "one's feel for a wholistic texture" (Gendlin, 1978, p. 24) of one's state of being. Gendlin conceptually grounded the felt sense in Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit* to argue that humans have a state with its own kind of being, knowing, and feeling before they know what it is cognitively, or even emotionally. *Befindlichkeit* is a German neologism that translates closest to "being in a mood" (Gendlin, 1978, p. 1). However, Gendlin (1978) distilled several specific characteristics Heidegger ascribed to *Befindlichkeit*: It is interactional with the environment, rather than intrapsychic; it is how one finds oneself living in and living with the world; and it has its own, implicit understanding that occurs prior to cognition. Even though Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* is conceptually foundational to Gendlin's felt sense, they are not precisely the same concept. The felt sense might be described as a product of *Befindlichkeit* that occurs in the body and can be intrasubjectively and holistically experienced—that is, experienced both through the senses and through other feeling faculties, such as a hunch.

For Gendlin (1978), the mind discovers, or catches up, to *Befindlichkeit* and the felt sense. One senses that there is a true feeling or mood and searches to find what it is and the words to describe it. *Befindlichkeit*, the felt sense, mood,

and cognition occur in temporal sequence. According to Heidegger (1999/1927), *Befindlichkeit* "temporalizes itself primarily in having been" (p. 446). That is, human cognition and emotion always experience themselves to be catching up to the more fundamental, authentic, or truer condition of *Befindlichkeit*. Further, Gendlin's (2018) felt sense

comes, something like the way an emotion comes, in the body, of its own accord, but in a somewhat different space than the literal space in the body. . . The space is not distinct until the direct referent [felt sense] comes." ("The new kind of sequence" section).

That is, *Befindlichkeit* and the felt sense are always slightly out of phase in time and space with the physical body and the mind. They are experienced as objects of the recent past moving into, or being discovered in, the present, as experienced cognitively and emotionally. This explanatory framework, in which self-awareness is constructed hierarchically in a spatial and temporal progression bears some similarity to Wilber's (2000) perspective on the "subtle" realm of being—the realm of psychological energy, according to his theory—which is a phase of concrescence preceding ordinary cognitive awareness.

The notion that the felt sense precedes cognition and can be experienced as an object calls to mind Reich's (1968/1942) theory of psychological energy, which he called "orgone," "biological energy," or "vegetative sensations." Reich theorized that subjective perceptions—what humans see and feel—were the results of a process that included the "basic biological function," by which he meant the essential orgone life energy, the internal organs, and the environment. Reich saw the entire system of the human within the environment as a "functional unit" (p. 218)—that is, the human and the environment were not separate. Within Reich's thought, the character and quality of the orgone is loosely analogous to Gendlin's (2018) felt sense. Reich's subjective perceptions are loosely analogous to Gendlin's cognitive understanding. The mapping of these concepts between Reich and Gendlin is not exact, but the basic idea of a hierarchical process in space and time is similar.

Finally, evidence from neuropsychology supports (a) some variation on both an experience of the body in “a somewhat different space than the literal space in the body,” as Gendlin (2018, “The new kind of sequence” section) described it; and (b) the sense of self is constructed hierarchically from lower-order structures to higher-order structures (Hartelius et al., 2022). While the current evidence does not precisely align with Gendlin’s view of the felt sense, Hartelius et al. (2022) argued that current neuropsychological evidence demonstrates “self-location can be experienced as extending beyond the usual bounds of the physical body” (p. 4)—for example, during meditation. Further, Hartelius et al. found that changing the somatic location of participants’ seat of attention, or sense of self, demonstrated neural correlates with positive emotions. While these EEG readings measured neural wave patterns, this does seem to align with theories of a hierarchically constructed self-experience put forward by Gendlin, Heidegger, and Reich. Changing a variable within this hierarchy, such as the somatic location of the sense of self, appears to change the experiential outcome. Reich (1968/1942), in particular, associated orgone energy with such practices as “the basis of every kind of mysticism, be it Yoga, or the Fascist ‘surging of the blood,’ or the reaction of a spiritist medium, or the ecstasies of a dervish” (p. 217). Though current neuropsychological data does not support the broad span of Reich’s claims, it does seem to provide tentative support for Reich’s conception of the self-experience as hierarchical with a fluid or plastic quality that can be changed by altering variables within lower orders of the hierarchy, such as the somatic location of attention.

Merleau-Ponty: Ontology as the Intertwining of Subject and Object

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is primarily known for his theory of phenomenology (2012/1945), but he elucidated his mature theory of ontology in his posthumously published essay, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” (1968). Though unfinished and relatively brief, this essay lays out the essence of Merleau-Ponty’s later framing of ontology as a chiasm—a crossing over—between subject and object. Toadvine (2019) summarized:

Chiasm has two senses in French and English that are both relevant to Merleau-Ponty’s project: a physiological sense that refers to anatomical or genetic structures with a crossed arrangement (such as the optic nerves), and a literary sense referring to figures of speech that repeat structures in reverse order (AB:BA). (n.p.)

To illustrate both these senses of a chiasm, Merleau-Ponty (1968) used an example of seeing the “red under my eyes” (p. 131), presumably inside of the lower eyelid. First, to see this color to begin with, one would need to gaze into a mirror, thus becoming a reflexive object of their own subjective gaze. Here subject and object are already reciprocal, which is one meaning of the chiasm. This meaning further harkens back to Merleau-Ponty’s (2012/1945) earlier observation that when one touches their left hand with their right hand, either hand can be both subject or object, but this interchange is directional. One hand is not both subject and object at the same time. Rather, the experience of subject and object are bidirectionally reversible.

The second aspect of the chiasm, the color red under the eye, Merleau-Ponty (1968) pointed out, is not a distinct and isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is an identified quality that in fact bleeds into other colors, and upon focus, might be seen as pores, blood vessels, or other aspects of the flesh, in ever receding fashion. It is an identifiable phenomenon, but that phenomenon is part of an ongoing, branching continuum. Making a connection between flesh and vision, Merleau-Ponty argued it is similar when one gazes upon the world. The world is not contained within the seer, and the seer is not contained within the world. Rather, “There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 138). Further, like seeing the red beneath the eye, or the fading of the color, or the pores, or the blood vessels, the subject and object meet each other at different points. Merleau-Ponty eschewed the metaphors of levels and planes where these points meet, but instead referred to them as concentric circles, spheres, or vortexes. That is, subject and object meet in a sphere of being, from overlapping spheres of perspective. This sphere of being is the ontological moment.

A further exploration of these points in relation to the phenomenon of *de qi* in traditional Chinese medicine is explored in the Discussion.

While Merleau-Ponty's notion of ontology as chiasm offers some appeal for understanding psychological energy, as an ontological model, it suffers from an unsatisfying circularity. That is, one might accept that the essence of knowing, or the known moment of being is a reciprocal, branching meeting self and the world. However, it does not explain what makes this meeting possible. It simply says that any inquiry will take one along this meeting, branching path. This limitation is somewhat mitigated when one considers that Merleau-Ponty (1968) was building off his previous work (Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1945), in which he described in detail that the flesh is the process of being. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty (1968) extended the concept of flesh to both vision and the world. When vision encounters the world, the vision is flesh, and the flesh of vision (as well as the touch) meets the flesh of the world. In this sense, both the body and all its perceptive faculties, and the world that it meets and that meets it in return, are flesh in Merleau-Ponty's previously established sense of the term. Nonetheless, it is still tempting to inquire what ontological principles, if any, such as Whitehead's God or Bhaskar's intransitive dimension of nature, might make such a phenomenal world possible to begin with.

Ferrer: An Ontology of Participatory Events

Participatory thought—drawn from Romantic philosophers such as Goethe, developed by Tarnas (1991), with numerous parallels to Gendlin's (2018) process model, and influences from Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945)—has been applied to the domain of religious studies and transpersonal psychology by Jorge N. Ferrer (2002, 2017). Ferrer's participatory theory, with developments by Hartelius (2019; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013), offers a context in which an "open naturalism" (Ferrer, 2014; cf. Stroud, 2004) can be used flexibly with a plurality of ontologies for rigorous study of phenomena, such as psychological energy, that sit at the uneasy interface of psychology and spirituality—and it can do so without appeal to either metaphysics or classical physicalist assumptions common in Western empiricism (Ferrer, 2002; Hartelius, 2019).

For Ferrer (2002, 2017), people, objects, places, and any other locations within reality represent intersections of infinitely interrelating subjects. This web of interrelating subjects has some parity with Merleau-Ponty's chiasm, but it takes into account the branching intersection of all subjects at once. In Ferrer's conception, there is not one human subject who meets an outside "world," as Merleau-Ponty described, but rather the world is itself an intersubjective web, as is the human subject who meets it. Because there are no objects that are not also subjects or subjects that are not also objects, the notion of objectivity—a knowable world "out there"—is useful but fictive (Hartelius, 2019; cf. Rorty, 1979); subjects and objects become subject-objects.

From a participatory perspective, ontology is pluralistic in two respects. First, the primary ontological context of interest in participatory theory is the intersection between subject-objects and the creative generativity out of which these subject-objects and their relational intersections are continuously emerging; Ferrer (2017) called this creative potential "the Mystery." This account results not in one hierarchical ontological schema, but an infinitely diverse universe of events in which subject-object participants meet in relational engagement. Second, because all subject-objects in the universe are considered to be engaged in a participatory, co-creative process, metaphysical and spiritual ontologies—"spiritual ultimates," such as God or Brahman, or afterlives, such as heaven or the underworld—are considered to be "real" (at least functionally, if not actually or ontologically) within the context of the culture where they reside (Ferrer, 2002, 2017). In terms of ontologies of ultimate concern, participatory theory presents what might be termed an optimistic agnosticism: It sees the proliferation of cultures, philosophies, and spiritual traditions as evidence of a reality that is always creatively emerging, not from a singular, metaphysical ultimate, but out of relational engagements among and with its participants, as well as the Mystery—the unfathomable fecundity—of existence. Despite its unknown qualities, this ongoing process of relational engagement is regarded as irrepressible rather than indeterminate;

thus, it envelops encounters traditionally regarded as metaphysical—including transpersonal experiences and other difficult-to-explain phenomena—into its participatory framework. The variety of ultimate ontologies reflects actual differences in qualities of relationship and diversities in locatedness of being within the relational matrices of the world (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013).

Because locatedness is necessarily diverse and differentiated, like coordinates on an ever-evolving map, navigating multiple ontologies is a necessity of everyday life, not to mention the formal epistemological enterprise of research. A devout Muslim family may live in a Latin American Catholic culture with a daughter who works as a secular modernist scientist and who is married to a woman of Afro-Caribbean spirituality who practices Buddhist meditation. In daily life, these complexities are often navigated informally through compartmentalization, syncretism, construction of novel ontologies, or creative compromise. In the domain of scholarship, participatory thought calls for a direct, conscientious engagement among such diverse ontologies. While a participatory approach requires engagement and negotiation among ontologies, it does not prescribe how to conduct this negotiation; each situation is different. If there is to be research into psychological energy, participatory theory might suggest that various intersecting ontological frameworks require dialog among classical physicalism, existentialism, and metaphysical foundationalism. In particular, psychological science is challenged to engage in this active negotiation.

In a participatory approach, such a negotiation is not a valueless, postmodern morass; ontologies can be weighted and contextualized based on the context or sphere of interest, and they may not be mutually exclusive. In practice, this weighted contextualization bears some similarity to Merleau-Ponty's (1968) intertwining spheres of experience and Bhaskar's (Bhaskar et al., 2017) matching epistemologies to ontological contexts of interest. From a participatory perspective, the primary ontological context of interest in the study of psychological energy is a participatory event in which the phenomenon referred to as psychological energy occurs. This participatory event is a meeting

of a complex web of subject-objects in which are embedded a possible plurality of intersecting, overlapping, and enmeshed ontological frameworks. A researcher wanting to understand the rich moment of a psychological energy event must engage these intersecting ontological frameworks in dialog. Existentialists recognize the ineffability of the phenomenon and the experiential limits of their reality; classical physicalists recognize that a phenomenon must have qualities that are apparent to multiple observers; metaphysical foundationalists allow that the objective qualities of the phenomenon may not fall within the limits of the observational faculties of the natural sciences, including the human senses and scientific instrumentation. It would be ideal to adhere to the requirements of all of these intersecting ontologies simultaneously (Banerji, 2018; Hartelius et al., 2017), but it may be more pragmatic to negotiate the conflicting assumptions that are crucial to the integrity of their associated epistemologies for research purposes (Hartelius, 2019). Within scientific psychology, this might mean the empirical study of research questions that arise from experiential reports but do not conform a priori to the reality assumptions of the discipline of physics. Existential ontologies might need to engage in empirical inquiry as a sort of formal dialogue with the world that may lead to new and better knowledge, rather than as a violation of the sacredness of the phenomenon. Metaphysical foundationalist ontologies might be called to bracket metaphysical assumptions and hermeneutical interpretations with a humility characterized by an openness to new evidence and novel perspectives, perhaps in line with the classic Zen Buddhist adage, The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.

Participatory theory is influenced by existentialist ontologies, resting on the assumption that human experience is a grounding principle of reality. However, by extending existentialist ontology to all subjects at once rather than focusing on one intrasubjective experience at a time, participatory theory aspires to a more universal scope, attempting to include phenomena traditionally regarded as subjective, objective, and metaphysical as part of its web of intersubject-interobject locations. For metaphysical foundationalists, this does not resolve

the question of whether there is some essential entity that makes these intersubject-interobject locations possible in the first place—an ultimate categorical nature of reality that underlies the plurality and diversity emphasized by participatory theory. For existentialists, an argument grounded in intersubjectivity extends beyond the scope of what it is possible for an individual human to existentially know, and thus for the existentialists, participatory theory shares the speculativeness of metaphysical foundationalism that the existentialists attempt to avoid. Successfully or not, participatory theory attempts to embrace these conflicting perspectives by placing the relationships among them—including the relationship between these perspectives and its own—at the center of its ontology.

Discussion

This paper considers psychological energy in light of post-20th-century metaphysical foundationalist and existentialist ontologies that either challenge or expand upon the ontological assumptions that underly conventional Western empiricism. All of theories discussed herein ponder a point beyond which human knowing fails and wonders. Metaphysical foundationalism attempts to fill in the unknown with defined, but open-ended, characteristics; existentialist ontologies emphasize an ongoing process of relationship, curiosity, and even wonder at the essential aspects of being, arguing that the unknowable will remain so, but the way humans relate to it determines the knowledge that is gained from the investigation.

This difference is a matter of emphasis and degree. Metaphysical foundationalism generally views existentialist ontology as incomplete, rather than incorrect. With its nested ontology, critical realism might frame the difference as follows: Existentialist ontology gazes from the perspective of the “empirical” domain to understand the “actual,” and acknowledge the existence of the “real;” metaphysical foundationalism ultimately aims to understand the “real,” and in turn how that shapes the “actual” and “empirical.” The existentialists might counter that the metaphysical foundationalists attempt to ascribe characteristics to the nature of the universe that are too far outside of human experience

to ever be able to know; what can be known is how humans engage with the nature of the world and how that engagement is interpreted and described. Participatory theory, though weighted toward an existentialist perspective, attempts to place these perspectives into dialog.

De Qi: A Working Example

The phenomenon of *de qi* in traditional Chinese medicine is a useful example for comparing the fitness of the ontological approaches discussed in this paper to the understanding of psychological energy. Often translated as “the arrival of vital energy [*qi*],” “needling sensation,” or “needling response” (Yang et al., 2013, p. 1), *de qi* is a sensation at an acupuncture point that can be experienced by the acupuncture patient, the practitioner, or both. *De qi* can include a wide range of sensations, but common sensations among patients include aching, soreness, numbness, tingling, heaviness, distension, or pressure (Park et al., 2013). For clinicians, the experience of *de qi* is different, relating more to the resistance and grasp of the acupuncture needle; many practitioners regard their experiences of *de qi* to be as important as the patients’ (Yang et al., 2013). Some research has attempted to determine the biomechanisms of *de qi* from a Western anatomical perspective (Yang et al., 2013), but these results are regarded as emergent (Park et al., 2013). Whatever the mechanisms, *de qi* has been regarded as essential for positive outcomes in traditional Chinese medicine since the *Neijing*, earliest known historical text (Kong et al., 2007). Today a tension exists in the literature between traditional explanations of the mechanisms at work in traditional Chinese medicine and Western biophysical explanations that mirrors the scientific critiques of energy in psychology. In short, critics with a conventional (Humian), Western empiricist orientation argue that traditional explanations are metaphorical and naïve (e.g., Robinson, 2009), and traditionalists argue that clinically relevant information is lost by reducing the rich experiences of clinicians and patients to maps of neural pathways (cf., Park et al., 2013), which is typical of the occulocentrism in Western scientific culture (Levin, 1993; Hartelius, 2007).

These opposing positions on *de qi* reflect some of the modern tensions in the literature regarding

psychological energy: Should psychological energy be studied merely as a biological phenomenon according to the Western anatomical model? Should the experience be emphasized over anatomical mechanisms? Should the patient's or therapist's experience of psychological energy be given greater weight? Research on the phenomenon traditionally referred to as psychological energy from a Western anatomical perspective is already in progress and has yielded useful results (e.g., Levine, 2012; Porges, 2001), but it may leave out a richness or truth of the phenomenon. The question herein is how researchers might ontologically orient to psychological energy so it can be better understood on its own terms.

Merleau-Ponty's (1968) conception of the chiasm of flesh seems an excellent fit with the phenomenon of *de qi*. The practitioner's experience and the patient's experience both meet and differentiate along the length of the acupuncture needle, or at the flesh when the acupuncturist touches the patient with a finger or thumb. This meeting is reciprocal—both patient and practitioner have meeting and intertwining experiences—but the patient's and practitioner's experiences are not interchangeable. Further, one can zoom in and out on the experience from many perspectives, from both the patient's and the practitioner's point of view. These perspectives might include the somatic (felt sense), descriptive, metaphorical, mechanical, electromagnetic (skin conductivity), or various aspects of the biological, such as patterns of blood flow or activation within the nervous system. With the mediation of the needle, one can see that the practitioner's and patient's experiences do not meet and intertwine on a line or plane, but rather in a space that is shaped more like overlapping spherical zones or vortexes. Further, at each point of overlap where these spheres of experience meet—somatic, neurological, and so on—there is infinitely branching detail, and each branch extends into the next possible sphere of experience. There is not one correct answer regarding what sphere is the most relevant to observe the phenomenon because its observable qualities progress and recede in dendritic fashion. A participatory approach (Ferrer, 2002) to studying *de qi* would largely align with Merleau-Ponty's, except

that it might also add that phenomena occurring between practitioner and client are co-creative and relational, rather than individually subjective.

Bhaskar's critical realism would view *de qi* as a laminated phenomenon that could be viewed through many lenses, corresponding to a multiplicity of ontological layers (Bhaskar et al., 2017). As with Merleau-Ponty's chiasm, one could look at the phenomenon from the perspectives the felt sense, phenomenal descriptions, neurology, and so on. In alignment with critical realism, one could also examine the phenomenon using the tools of social constructionism in order to critique cultural biases embedded in the conclusions drawn from observation. Critical realism encourages the incorporation of formalized multidisciplinary research to understand such phenomena. However, following Bhaskar et al.'s multidisciplinary research method, researchers may suffer from foreclosing on understanding before full engagement can be reached because this method recommends researchers construct an ontological hierarchy before research begins. Herein it is argued that such a foreclosure in the early stages of research runs the risk of missing important information that may help to elucidate a poorly understood phenomenon of interest, such as *de qi* or psychological energy.

Existential engagement, and subsequent hermeneutical interpretation, is the focus of Heidegger's (1999/1927) ontology and epistemology. It is unknown, but one could imagine that leading up to the time of the *Neijing* (Ni, 1995), traditional Chinese medicine practitioners may have done exactly this: They may have allowed the phenomenon to be disclosed existentially and then hermeneutically described their experiences. With renewed questions regarding its nature, modern researchers might re-engage with a similar process and put any new hermeneutical descriptions that may emerge from that engagement in dialog with the existing ones. A similar process has been at work in the history of psychology with regards to psychological energy. Jung (2014/1969) and Reich (1968/1942) challenged Freud's (2012a/1920, 2012b/1899, 2012c/1922) theory of libido, Lowen (1979/1958) challenged Reich, and so on. Continued, renewed engagement with the phenomenon

of psychological energy yields progress in its understanding. Such an existential engagement with an eye toward developing better research methods might yield progress along those lines.

One could apply Wilber's (2000) model to the phenomenon of *de qi* by recognizing that understanding and engagement of the phenomenon are state-based in a way that aligns to the phenomenon's situation within an ontologically hierarchy. A trained acupuncturist can diagnostically attune to the qualities of *de qi*, but a novice practitioner cannot. Gendlin's (1978, 2018) contribution to research might be similar to Wilber's; Gendlin argued that the self is constructed hierarchically in space and time. This position might help researchers understand how to orient within themselves in order to observe psychological energy. For example, attending to the felt sense, in Gendlin's terms, might put researchers in a better position to recognize felt sense experiences in research participants.

Of all of these ontological models, Whitehead's (2010/1929) may have the least research value with regard to *de qi* or psychological energy. There is no inherent contradiction between the phenomenon of *de qi* and Whitehead's ontology. What Whitehead might add to the debate between the traditionalists and the conventional Western biophysical researchers is that *de qi* is an actual occasion that can be an infinitely complex combination of actual entities infused with eternal objects, and actual entities can include mental events. Therefore, it is best to take an inclusive stance when evaluating the actuality of a phenomenon. However, knowing (or believing) that *de qi* is a complex entity infused with eternal objects would seem to add little to the research.

Ontology and Research on Psychological Energy

Heidegger's (1999/1927), Merleau-Ponty's (1968, 2012/1945), and Bhaskar's (1997/1975; Bhaskar et al., 2017) ontological perspectives seem the most productive foundations for research on psychological energy, and Ferrer's (2002, 2017) participatory theory could help bridge differences among these approaches. A critical first step aligns with Heidegger's emphasis on being existentially

inside a phenomenon (readiness-to-hand, or *Zuhandenheit*) in order to best understand it. To achieve this, a researcher might undergo professional psychotherapeutic training that includes interventions that focus on psychological energy as a mechanism or explanatory framework. Hypothetically, this would give the researcher a chance to gain an insider's perspective into the phenomenon—or meet it in the “flesh,” in Merleau-Ponty's language. Such training might also address Wilber's (2000) argument that the ability to achieve a state of consciousness is necessary to understand an associated nonordinary or transpersonal experience. Because researchers who have had psi experiences themselves tend to find more positive results in psi research (Schlitz et al., 2006; Smith, 2003), it seems reasonable to infer that this might also hold true for psychological energy.

Neurophenomenology (Varela, 1996), which combining neuroimaging with phenomenological experiential reports, is an example of such a layered, or laminated research technique along the lines of Bhaskar et al. (2017). Merleau-Ponty (1968) would likely suggest a more fluid and bidirectional approach, with a focus on the phenomenological perspectives of both the client and therapist. If neuroimaging were conducted, it might best be conducted through EEG imaging performed on both the client and therapist simultaneously in a live psychotherapy session (cf. Kenreich et al., 2017; Kleinbub et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2018; Messina et al., 2012). The methodology of somatic phenomenology (Hartelius, 2020, 2022) might also be useful in capturing information about sensations that occur in and around the body, including descriptions of quality, size, location, shape, direction, and motion in relation to the body, from both the client's and the therapist's perspectives. Participatory theory (Ferrer, 2002) adds the caution that the phenomena of interest are not separate and passive; researchers are relationally engaged in a world in which they are also participants. For example, participatory theory might encourage greater attention to experimenter effects when attempting to replicate an experiment. There is, of course, a question of practicality. The bar for gaining psychotherapeutic training is high, the research requires mixed methods,

and funding for such an exploratory study on psychological energy would likely be difficult in the current environment. With this in mind, the best candidates for conducting such research are likely to be graduate students, particularly those with access to a clinical practice working on doctoral research. Graduate students are often in their early careers or in career transitions, and they may be open to or actively receiving clinical training. They are also generally required to conduct in-depth research projects without funding. If there is a path forward for researching psychological energy that goes beyond standalone neuroimaging studies or standalone phenomenological studies, doctoral students may be the most likely candidates to conduct it. It is hoped that this paper will serve as at least one possible trailhead for that path toward future research.

Conclusion

Theories of psychological energy have a rich history. Current trends in research focus primarily on neurological correlates to psychological energy. While this research is valuable, some richness of the phenomenon may be lost. This paper argued that the hierarchies elucidated within metaphysical foundationalist ontologies are useful for understanding that there are layers or levels within being, and that a specific research method might be selected to engage with a specific layer or level. In contrast, or complement, existentialist ontologies emphasize a stance that is open to the richness of human engagement with being. While the existentialist ontologies also recognize hierarchical levels of being, these ontologies emphasize textures, contours, and limitations for these levels that reflect human experience. Selecting methods that emphasize such an existential ontological stance might better allow researchers to remain open to the disclosure of psychological energy before moving forward with an experimental design that might miss important qualities. Doctoral students with training in interventions that emphasize psychological energy might be suitable candidates to conduct such research, and it is hoped that this paper might serve as a starting point for its theoretical foundations.

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