

# Review Essay\*

## What is the Subtle Body?

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WANTED: Energetic madmen. Those who have  
Thought themselves a body large enough to  
Devour their dreams.<sup>1</sup>

These lines are from the libretto W. H. Auden composed for Benjamin Britten's operetta *John Bunyan*. And it is with these lines that Simon Cox begins his genealogy of the subtle body—if Auden is right, a body energetic madmen can somehow think into existence. Cox's book is a story of such madmen, mostly modern, and the subtle body, or indeed bodies, they think into existence, and why. His genealogy is not so much of these bodies themselves, but of the very concept “subtle body,” under which these bodies are grouped, and thought. But where does this phrase come from?

This learned and yet very readable genealogy is divided into two unequal halves: the first five and the last three chapters. Cox marshals Wouter Hanegraaff's distinction between platonic and alchemical cosmologies to make sense of the two halves.<sup>2</sup> In the first, we are introduced to a western discourse of the subtle body largely framed by a platonic cosmology—what Hanegraaff describes as a top-down, hierarchical emanationist scheme in which the principal question is how

\* Simon Cox, *The Subtle Body: A Genealogy* (Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism; foreword by Jeffrey J. Kripal; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 248 pp., \$99.00 hb; ISBN: 9780197581032. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: An Operetta in Two Acts and a Prologue* (Op. 17; set to music by Benjamin Britten; rev. ed.; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), “Bunyan's Greeting,” I, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), cited in Simon Cox, *The Subtle Body: A Genealogy* (Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 174.

an immaterial soul descends into fleshly embodiment, and how it might return to its immaterial origin. Here, the subtle body functions as a kind of intermediary, a vehicle for the soul's exile and return. This platonic cosmology casts a rather long shadow; it is only in the twentieth century that we are introduced to western theorists of the subtle body who really step out from it. These theorists, Cox suggests, are operating with an alchemical cosmology: an experimental, bottom-up approach, "upward-tending, based on metaphors of birth, gestation, and generation, using these to elucidate how our multiplicitous and conflicted reality 'could be the matrix of superior or even divine realities'" (210). Woven into both halves are four short *kudens* or oral transmissions, autobiographical interludes in which Cox situates this academic genealogy in a much longer personal quest for the subtle body. The two streams—the genealogical and the autobiographical—merge in the Conclusion.

Any genealogy must decide with which ancestor it will begin, and for good reason Cox chooses Aristotle. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle reports on the view of his own ancestors, the "pre-Socratics": "[There are] those who maintain that soul is a subtle kind of body (*sōma ti leptomerēs*)," indeed "the subtlest (*leptomerestaton*) and most nearly incorporeal (*asōmatōtaton*) of all kinds of body."<sup>3</sup> The Greek word *leptomerēs* is a compound: *leptos* means, literally, "small" or "fine," and, metaphorically, "subtle" or "refined"; *meros* means "part." Together, the compound means something like, "composed of small particles."<sup>4</sup> The Latin translation *subtilis* (and thereafter English "subtle") carries a slightly different connotation: it refers to a very finely woven thread, and comes to mean "fine," "thin," or "slender."<sup>5</sup> In *On the Soul*, Aristotle is reporting on a range of views with which he disagrees, namely those that regard the soul as a refined or subtle kind of body, paradoxically the body "most without body" (*to asōmatōtaton*). He might very well have had in mind someone like Heraclitus of Ephesus (fl. c. 500 BCE), who is reported to have believed that "the soul is vaporization out of which everything else is composed; moreover it is the least corporeal (*asōmatōtaton*) of things and is in ceaseless flux."<sup>6</sup> According to Aristotle, then, some of his predecessors, including Heraclitus, regarded body and soul as on a continuum, a spectrum from coarse to refined, from gross to subtle, from earth to air—or later, as we shall see, from flesh to fire. Aristotle's own view, often called "hylomorphism," is itself—forgive me—rather subtle. He seems to regard soul as distinct but not separable from body; and the

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (ed. Jonathan Barnes; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) 1429 (*De Anima* I.5 409a 34), cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed. with revised supplement; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 1039–40, 1104–5, 1039.

<sup>5</sup> Probably, originally, "woven fine," and from *sub* ("under") + *tēla* ("a web"), from *texere* ("to weave").

<sup>6</sup> Heraclitus, D. A15 (trans. William Harris), cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 7. Charles H. Kahn's translation reads, "The soul is an exhalation; it is different from the body, and always flowing." See *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (ed. and trans. Charles H. Kahn; Cambridge University Press, 1987) 79.

relationship of soul to body as a special case of the more general question of form's relationship to matter. He is evidently trying to steer a course between Scylla and Charybdis, to find a position between the substance monism of the pre-Socratics, and what he regarded as Plato's body-soul dualism, the notion that the soul is not only distinct from the body, but ontologically different: immaterial, incorporeal, eternal, separable, and the seat of our identity across successive incarnations.

Any substance dualism faces a critical challenge: how do the two substances interact? In the case of a body-soul dualism, one must ask: how does an immortal, immaterial soul interact with a mortal, material body? Plato introduced the idea of the *ochēma* or "vehicle" of the soul to help answer, or at least address, this question. The idea is that the immaterial soul requires a vehicle—or indeed several vehicles—to convey it through the various worlds it must traverse, including the celestial, terrestrial, and subterrestrial worlds. The *ochēma* is a rather undeveloped and mythological idea in Plato's own dialogues. But the subsequent platonic tradition watered this sapling, and eventually grafted onto it Aristotle's theory of the *pneuma* or "spirit," the warm, airy substance that was understood somehow to mediate between soul and body, and to serve as the organ of sense perception and imagination. Neoplatonists such as Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234–c. 305), Iamblichus of Chalcis (c. 245–c. 325), Proclus *diadochus* (412–485), and Damascius (c. 458–after 538) all developed slightly different theories of the *ochēma*.<sup>7</sup> Although they disagreed amongst themselves on many matters, they largely agreed that the *ochēma* somehow conveyed the soul as it descended from its heights in the noetic or intelligible realm, through the celestial spheres and zodiac, into the body (Plato); that it was the organ of sense perception and imagination (Aristotle); and that it could be purified through "theurgy"—literally the "work of the gods" (*Chaldean Oracles*)<sup>8</sup>—in preparation for the return to the noetic heights, and even beyond, to its ineffable source, the One (Plotinus).

It is with this ancient Greek lineage that Simon Cox begins to chart the genealogy of the modern western concept of the subtle body. He spends a considerable amount of time on the platonists' theory of the *ochēma* because, largely due to their early modern readers, the platonists emerged as powerful ancestors in this genealogy, whose framework overdetermines many questions and answers. But first the ancestors needed to be revived. In the year 529, the emperor Justinian closed the Platonic Academy in Athens, and, as legend has it, the last scholar

<sup>7</sup> See John F. Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (American Classical Studies 14; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985); more recently, Crystal Addey, "In the Light of the Sphere: The 'Vehicle of the Soul' and Subtle-Body Practices in Neoplatonism," in *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body* (ed. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston; London: Routledge, 2013) 149–67.

<sup>8</sup> The *Chaldean Oracles* are a set of poems whose origins are unknown, but which appeared in the 3rd cent., often attributed to a certain Julian "the Theurgist" and his father Julian "the Chaldean." The original poems are lost, but fragments have survived in quotations from neoplatonic commentators, who regarded them as inspired wisdom. See *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (trans. Ruth Majercik; Leiden: Brill, 1989).

Damascius and six of his disciples set off to find refuge in the court of the Persian King Khusrau I (501–579). This story has given birth to another: that as the sun of Neoplatonism began to set in the Christian west, it began to rise in the Zoroastrian (and later Islamic) east. And with the setting of this sun, night also fell on the theory of the *ochēma*. The Christian neoplatonist John Philoponus (c. 440–520), raised on a steady diet of neoplatonism, came eventually to repudiate its subtle body metaphysics, dismissing it as, in Cox’s words, “an incredible myth” (34). In this narrative, then, Christianity functions largely to suppress the theory and practice of the subtle body. It is only in the Italian Renaissance, with the reintroduction of key neoplatonic texts, and adjacent hermetic traditions, that the platonic ancestors are revived in the west, and the genealogy can continue.

The phrase “subtle body” appears in English for the first time in the heated correspondence between René Descartes (1596–1650) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Much like Plato with his *ochēma*, Descartes was looking for something that could mediate between immaterial mind and material body, something he would call “animal spirits,” or just “spirits,” or indeed a “subtle body” (*corpus subtile*). Hobbes was a substance monist, and a reductive materialist: for him, everything that exists is a body. What we call “mind,” “soul,” “imagination,” and even “reason” is, in Cox’s words, “simply the effects of bodies that are subtler than the coarse materiality of our daily experience” (38). But it was not the exchange between Descartes and Hobbes that popularized the notion of the “subtle body” in the early modern west. Rather, it was the so-called Cambridge Platonists, and specifically Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), whom Cox credits with making the subtle body “go viral” (a metaphor based on another kind of subtle body). Like Descartes, and the platonists of late antiquity, Cudworth was looking for something that could mediate between soul and body, between mind and matter, and he proposed, following an array of ancient authorities, a tripartite model of the body: the terrestrial human body, the pneumatic subtle body, and the luciform vehicle of the soul.

The question that haunts all substance dualism, however, is whether such intermediary terms actually solve the problem of the interaction between incommensurate realities. In other words, if soul and body are ontologically so different, what does the introduction of mediating realities, however subtle, actually solve? Doesn’t the problem of the interaction of incommensurate realities simply reappear elsewhere, such as where the soul makes contact with the subtlest form of body, in Aristotle’s words, the “most nearly incorporeal (*asōmatōtaton*) of all kinds of body”? Despite the fact that Cudworth himself acknowledges that this problem persists, his model went on to be widely influential in Renaissance England and, with the spread of the British Empire, across the globe.

Before we turn to that global influence, we would do well to linger over a fascinating outlier among the Cambridge Platonists: Anne Conway (1631–1679), and her posthumously published book, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and*

*Modern Philosophy*.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the other platonists, ancient and modern, Conway espoused what Cox calls a “spiritual monism,” the view that all creation is one substance, not divided between corporeal and incorporeal; rather, in her own words, “Every body can change into a spirit and every spirit into a body because the distinction between body and spirit is only one of mode, not essence.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the differences amongst beings are the differences amongst bodies more or less coarse and subtle, in which case, in Cox’s words, “corporeality and spirituality are simply two modes of a substance that can take on either state through processes of condensation and rarefaction.” The metaphor Conway uses to capture this process is of an iron heated in a fire:

Just as iron when it is tempered remains impenetrable, I concede that it remains impenetrable by any other equally coarse body. But it can be penetrated and is penetrated by a more subtle body, namely, by fire, which enters it and penetrates all its parts. It thus becomes soft, and if the fire is strong, it completely liquifies.<sup>11</sup>

Cox credits Conway’s spiritual monism to Kabbalah, or at least the version peddled by the Flemish alchemist Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1699), to whom she was introduced by Henry More (1614–1687). I think the more probable source for her spiritual monism is Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 253), the third-century Christian theologian who was condemned posthumously at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.

In recent years, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the “Origenian renaissance” among the Cambridge Platonists in general, and Conway in particular.<sup>12</sup> One of the questions is whether and how Conway had direct access to Origen’s own writings, or whether her knowledge of him was mediated through other works, such as the anonymous *Letter of Resolution Concerning Origen and the Chief of His Opinions*, published in 1661. This is not the place to mount an argument one way or another, but Conway’s appeal to the metaphor of iron and fire to explain her modal monism is rather telling. In his *On First Principles*, Origen famously argues that God first created minds (Greek *nous*; pl. *noes*) to contemplate their creator; an unfallen mind was like an iron in the fire of God, he says, “receiving the fire throughout all its pores and veins and becoming wholly fire, provided that the fire

<sup>9</sup> Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (trans. and ed. Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> See Christian Hengsternann, “Pre-existence and Universal Salvation: The Origenian Renaissance in Early Modern Cambridge,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25 (2017) 971–89; Sarah Hutton, “Origen and Anne Conway,” in *Autonomie und Menschenwürde: Origenes in der Philosophie der Neuzeit* (ed. Alfons Füst and Christian Hengsternann; Münster: Aschendorff, 2012) 221–34; E.S. Kempson, “Anne Conway’s Exemplary Engagement with Origenist Thought,” *Modern Theology* 38 (2022) 389–418.

is never removed from it and itself is not separated from the fire.”<sup>13</sup> In this divine forge, the iron mind was a deified body, “wholly fire.” But these iron minds were distracted from the contemplation of their creator, and they fell into souls and then bodies. Souls and bodies were not sheaths to house the fallen minds; rather, souls and bodies were cooler, coarser, and denser forms of mind. Origen offers an etymology of soul to help make his case: soul or *psychē* derives from the verb *psychō*, “to cool.”<sup>14</sup> Souls, and by extension fleshly bodies, are merely cooled forms of mind. There is then no ontological dualism of mind and body: they exist on a spectrum, one substance in different modes. According to Origen, we are all (including angels and demons), apart from Christ, fallen minds. Our slow rehabilitation and restoration will take place over successive lives and in successive worlds, and it will be a process not of shedding body or soul, but rather of transforming them both. The goal, then, is not escape from the body (or the soul), but transformation. In other words, all flesh must once again become fire.<sup>15</sup>

More work needs to be done, but Conway’s appeal to the specific metaphor of iron and fire suggests to me that Origen (or some rendition of his thought) might be a significant influence on her substance monism. On Cox’s telling, Conway is important because she, alone among the Cambridge Platonists, breaks with the substance dualism of her platonic forebears. The question of whether Conway’s spiritual monism was influenced by Origen is important not merely as a minor chapter in the history of ideas, but because it raises the question of whether and how there is another genealogy of the subtle body in the west, one that takes another road than Plato’s *ochēma*, and one that is more closely entangled with Christianity. I will return to this question below.

Cox’s larger point stands, however: it is not Conway’s minority report that steers the subsequent conversation, but rather the very substance dualism of her platonic peers. Cox explains how early European orientalists, many of them British, consistently brought Cudworth’s map of the subtle body—with all its platonic baggage—to bear on their studies of the subtle body traditions of India and China, beginning with the very category of “subtle body” itself. Chevalier de

<sup>13</sup> *De Principiis* 2.6.6, in *Origen: On First Principles* (ed. and trans. John Behr; 2 vols.; OECT; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 2:210–12 (text), 2:211–13 (trans): “omnibus suis poris omnibusque uenis ignem recipiens et tota ignis effecta, si neque ignis ab ea cesset aliquando neque ipsa ab igne separetur.”

<sup>14</sup> *Prin* 2.8.3, in *Origen: On First Principles* (ed. Behr) 2:228–32 (text), 2:229–33 (trans). For more on this etymology, see Charles M. Stang, “Origen’s Theology of Fire and the Early Monks of Egypt,” *Modern Theology* 38 (April 2022) 338–62, especially 343.

<sup>15</sup> I have explored Origen’s theology of fire and his substance monism in a couple of articles: Charles M. Stang, “Flesh and Fire: Incarnation and Deification in Origen of Alexandria,” *Adamantius: Annuario di Letteratura Cristiana Antica e di Studi Giudeoellenistici* 25 (2020) 123–32; the former also published in “*Suddenly, Christ*”: *Studies in Jewish and Christian Mysticism in Honor of Alexander Golitzin* (ed. Andrew Orlov; Vigiliae Christianae Supplements; Leiden: Brill, 2020) 128–43; Charles M. Stang, “All Flesh Must Once Again Become Fire: Origen’s Untamed Thinking,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Autumn/Winter 2017) 6–9.

Ramsay (1686–1743) offers “a precise replication” of Cudworth’s scheme, but sees it reflected in the ancient traditions of India and China, thereby universalizing the local, even provincial, platonic understanding of the subtle body. Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) takes it a step further by offering a diffusionist model, whereby, he argues, the notion of the subtle body originated in India, and thereafter spread across the globe, including to Greece. Cox credits Colebrooke with asking, if not satisfactorily answering, the fundamental question: “How similar, *really*, are the subtle bodies we see in the Platonic tradition and those we find in Indian philosophical systems?” (82, emphasis added). It is Max Müller, the alleged “father” of the study of religion, who opens wide the door that Colebrooke had only cracked. Müller dismisses the diffusionist model and suggests instead that “such a theory [of subtle bodies and reincarnation] was so natural that it might perfectly well have arisen independently among different races.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he insists that if we look closely, we see profound differences between the two schemes, Hindu and platonic. On Cox’s telling, Müller is the first to let the Indian sources begin to speak for themselves, and to speak back *against* the platonic parameters his predecessors had laid over them: “Subtle bodies East and West were parting ways” (85).

But did the ways in fact part, or rather more deeply merge? In the next two chapters, Cox introduces the Theosophists, in two generations: the first, led by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891); the second, by her heirs, Annie Besant (1847–1933), Charles Leadbetter (1854–1934), and G. R. S. Mead (1863–1933). In her early period, when Egypt was the imagined home of Theosophy, Blavatsky favored a tripartite model of the human and its subtle bodies—terrestrial, astral, and divine—with evident roots in Cudworth’s neoplatonism. In her later period, after she moved the Theosophical Society to India in 1879, the imagined home of Theosophy shifted east, to India and even more so to Tibet. Blavatsky then developed a septenary model of the human and its subtle bodies, articulated now in Sanskrit terms, borrowing from both Vedantic and Yogic schemes. Cox marks Blavatsky’s shift as a crucial moment in the development of what he calls an “Orientalist dialectic,” whereby, as with the case in Müller, eastern sources begin to speak back to the western (i.e. platonic) frameworks in which they had previously been contained. The result is not a more “objective” account of the eastern sources themselves (we will have to wait on that), but rather a creative creole. Strictly speaking, creolization refers to the merging of two or more languages: in the ideal case, the grammar of one language is overlaid with the lexicon of another. Cox borrows Robin Cohen’s extended definition of a creolization of cultures:

<sup>16</sup> Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919) 105, cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 84.

When creolization occurs, participants select particular elements from incoming or inherited cultures, endow these with meanings different from those they possessed in the original cultures, and then creatively merge these to create new varieties that supersede the prior forms.<sup>17</sup>

Cox regards Blavatsky's creole as a "fusion of a deep Neoplatonic grammar with an Orientalizing Indo-Tibetan syntax" (111). In other words, the "deep grammar" remains, even in her later period, decidedly western, but she borrows eastern nomenclature to give voice to that grammar. This does not yet seem like a parting of the ways.

Nor do the contributions of Annie Besant or Charles Leadbetter. In contrast to Blavatsky's scorn for Christianity, Besant and Leadbetter wished to recover and celebrate Christianity's esoteric and gnostic core. In their cases, however, it seems as if creolization runs in the other direction as well. Besant adopts Blavatsky's septenary model, and its Sanskrit nomenclature, but then uses that scheme to offer a novel interpretation of Jesus and the incarnation of the "mystic Christ" as the descent of "the super subtle Logos . . . into gross physical reality" (125). Leadbetter too rereads the history of Christianity through a creolized subtle body hermeneutics: the seven *cakras* in our bodies correspond to the seven subtle planes through which Christ's incarnation passes. As Cox puts it, for Leadbetter, "Christ is literally within you, and in a very specific location: curled up inside your root *cakra*" (131).

Perhaps it is only with G. R. S. Mead that we begin to see a proper parting of the ways. Mead was a trained classicist and preferred to excavate the subtle body from within the western tradition, where he could work capably with sources in their original languages. He widened the net of inquiry into the western tradition, beyond Plato's *ochēma* and its interpreters, to include early Greek notions of the afterlife as an "image" (*eidōlon*, *imago*, *simulacrum*) and "shade" (*skia*, *umbra*), the apostle Paul's speculations about the "spiritual body" (*sōma pneumatikos*) and other kinds of bodies, and the Hermetica. He also eschewed the schematics and systemization of his theosophical peers, preferring "an anthology of different historical views tied together by historical contextualization and intermittent speculation" (134). Mead's influence was largely felt in elite circles: Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and the Eranos seminars in Ascona, Switzerland. Besant's influence is harder to judge. Perhaps because she was a woman, or perhaps because of Krishnamurti's ultimate refusal to be her "World Teacher," Besant's fortunes seemed to have waned.<sup>18</sup> Leadbetter's 1927 book on *The Chakras* became a countercultural classic in the 1960s and 70s, and was an inspiration for what Cox calls the "Tantric Orientalism" of Esalen—more on that below.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Cohen, "Creolization and Cultural Globalization: The Soft Sounds of Fugitive Power," *Globlizations* 4:3 (1994) 369–84, cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> On Besant and Krishnamurti, see Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Oakville, CT: Equinox Press, 2012).



But before Esalen, there was Aleister Crowley, the first in a series of twentieth-century theorists who eschewed platonic cosmology in favor of an experimental, ground-up alchemy of the subtle body. Crowley sampled widely from different traditions but took poetic license and did not take any one of them too literally, or even seriously. His ontology of the subtle body is that of a skeptic: “Within the human body is another body of approximately the same size and shape, but made of a subtler and less illusory material. It is of course not ‘real’; but then no more is the other body!” (149). Crowley preached and practiced experimental astral travel in the service of developing the “Body of Light” (“until it is just as real as your other body”—but, then again, how real is that?), and also a kind of sex magic that helped install a persistent, popular misunderstanding of Tantra in the countercultural west. Crowley did not revere a mystical Orient (“nothing mysterious or Oriental about anything”), and so, Cox argues, offers not a creolized, but a hybridized, subtle body. In the words of Homi Bhabha, “[Hybridity is] the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, there is no one grammar, and no one lexicon (i.e. a creole); rather syntax and vocabulary are themselves disintegrated and reintegrated into a “magic system [that] was itself unsystematic and eminently empirical, a kind of probing in the darkness” (157).

Carl Jung was another modern alchemist who probed the darkness, another whose “subtle body is not delivered from on high, but manufactured from below out of the chaos of psychosomatic experience” (166). His lifelong fascination with the subtle body took him first to Daoism: he collaborated with sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), resulting in their 1929 translation of and commentary on the Chinese classic, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Thereafter he also ranged widely, sampling the subtle bodies of western alchemy, kundalini yoga, and the symbols in Nietzsche’s channeled, almost oracular text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Toward the end of his life, Jung suggested that we moderns were on the cusp of bringing that “golden flower” or “diamond body” into existence: “it is conceivable that the physical body of man could change into a more subtle body. It might not be necessary for him to die to be clothed afresh and be transformed” (187). Like Origen, Jung thought that, even now, flesh might once again become fire.

One of Jung’s friends and a regular at the Eranos seminars, a young theologian of Jewish background by the name of Frederic Spiegelberg (1897–1994), was forced to flee Nazi Germany, and eventually found his way to the faculty of Stanford University. He espoused what he called “the religion of no-religion,” which his friend Alan Watts (1915–1973) glossed as “the theory that the highest form of religion was to transcend religion” (194). Probably influenced by Jung, Spiegelberg thought this “no-religion” was best exemplified by the history of alchemy. A young Stanford undergraduate by the name of Michael Murphy mistakenly walked into

<sup>19</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 41, cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 157.

one of Spiegelberg's classes just as he was booming out, "Brahman is Ātman!"—this promptly changed the course of Murphy's life. Instead of pursuing a career in medicine, he spent six months at the Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) Ashram in Pondicherry, India, and then, upon his return, founded the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, CA, with the help of Dick Price (1930–1985). Explorations of the subtle body, and its relationship to the coarse body, have been at the center of Esalen's history, public and private.<sup>20</sup> Cox includes a transcript of a debate between Spiegelberg and Murphy about the subtle body: while the elder always sought to keep the subtle body in the realm of personal phenomenology, the younger was keen to know whether, at least in principle, it might appear as "an outward, empirically verifiable . . . event" (205). It is fair to say that this question, at Esalen and elsewhere, remains open.

As should be evident by now, Cox's book is a genealogy of the western theorization of the subtle body: even as this theorization turns its attention to eastern sources, it is still largely asking western questions of eastern sources. Naturally, one might like to know how such a genealogy of the subtle body would appear from the perspective of, say, Egypt, India, China or Tibet—just to name those traditions that have most exercised the modern western imagination. What are *those* traditions seeking when they ask after the so-called "subtle body"? And is the aristotelian "subtle body" even the right category with which to pursue such an inquiry? By subtitling his book "a" rather than "the" genealogy, Cox is inviting the reader to supplement his account.<sup>21</sup>

And although this is a western genealogy, the west here largely amounts to Plato and his readers—what Cox admits is an "arbitrary philological reduction" (209). There's a near total absence of the Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is because the genealogy begins with the premise that the discourse on the subtle body in the west is largely variations on Plato's *ochēma*, which reach their height in late antiquity and then disappear until the Cambridge Platonists in early modernity. Because the sixth-century Christian philosopher John Philoponus declared the whole business of the *ochēma* "an incredible myth," Christians fall out of the story. Jews were never really a part of the story; nor, it seems, were Muslims.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Jeffery J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 209: "call to mind the important first letter of this genealogy's subtitle, that is, the infinitely fertile indefinite article, 'a.' This is indeed one, singular, inevitably idiosyncratic rendering of the genealogy of this most magnetic and persistent of concepts." One place to look for other traditions' theorizations of the subtle body is *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body* (ed. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston; Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy; London: Routledge, 2013). See also Anya Foxen and Christa Kuberry, *Is This Yoga? Concepts, Histories, and the Complexities of Modern Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2021), esp. 39–70.

<sup>22</sup> Although Cox does mention in a footnote Henry Corbin's treatment of the subtle body in the Shi'ite tradition in his book, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite*

But I wonder how the subtle body might be rendered more visible in the history of Christianity. Cox tips his hat in that direction in his final pages, and points down some “roads not taken” through the history of Christianity: Augustine’s critique of the Manichaean notion of the *subtile corpus*, Tertullian’s “corporealistic ontology,” and even Origen of Alexandria all get a mention (210). What if we looked for the Christian subtle body, say, in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances; or the apostle Paul’s meditations on the varieties of flesh (humans, animals, birds, and fish) and of bodies—“earthly” and “heavenly,” “physical,” “psychic,” and “spiritual” (1 Cor 15); or the stories of the early monks and their super normal (or super natural) embodiment;<sup>23</sup> or the endless speculation about Christ’s incarnation and whether and how his body was fully human or (in)corruptible; or the archive of extraordinary embodied Christian miracles that Michael Murphy documents in *The Future of the Body*?<sup>24</sup> Would the Christian subtle body have come into better view with slightly different lenses? And similarly, what lenses might have rendered the subtle body visible in Judaism and Islam?

With respect to the subtle body in Christianity, let me suggest a few recent books that might help complement Cox’s genealogy. Dale C. Allison, Jr.’s 2021 book, *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History*, is a capacious investigation into the disparate accounts of Jesus’ resurrected embodiment, with Part III, “Thinking with Parallels,” including a section on the “Rainbow Body” in the Tibetan tradition.<sup>25</sup> Francis V. Tiso’s 2016 book, *Rainbow Body and Resurrection*, is also worth mentioning. Tiso goes beyond thinking with parallels and argues that the Syriac Christian mystical tradition—specifically the Church of the East’s transmission of the esoteric writings of Evagrius of Pontus (345–399) and those authors influenced by him—shaped the religions of the far east; and particularly that the Origenist interpretation of the resurrection of the body, mediated through texts and traditions across centuries, came to influence the Tibetan notion of the rainbow body. While I do not find this historical argument entirely convincing, Tiso’s book is a fascinating attempt to connect the Christian tradition of the subtle body to the Buddhist, by way of an ancient form of Christianity that lies between east and west.<sup>26</sup> Speaking of Origen and Evagrius, we might also investigate how

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*Iran* (trans. Nancy Pearson; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977) 90–105, cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, 210 n. 5.

<sup>23</sup> On the distinction between “supernatural” and “super natural,” see Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2016) 1–20. On early Egyptian monks’ super natural embodiment, see Charles M. Stang, “Origen’s Theology of Fire and the Early Monks of Egypt,” *Modern Theology* 38 (2022) 338–62, in a special issue of *Modern Theology* edited by Pui Him Ip on “Rethinking Origen of Alexandria.”

<sup>24</sup> Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History*, (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Francis V. Tiso, *Rainbow Body and Resurrection: Spiritual Attainment, the Dissolution of the Material Body, and the Case of Khenpo A Chö* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

Christians understood the subtle bodies of others—not of other humans, but of angels and demons. This was a lively topic in early monasticism, not least because monks were keen to guard against demons, and to welcome angels, and to do so required knowing how to discern them, and how their different, subtler bodies interacted with our coarser corporeality. David Brakke has explored the role combat with demons played in the formation of early Christian monks, especially how their subtle manipulation of our thoughts and passions raises questions about the porous nature of the self, both in mind and in body.<sup>27</sup> And art historian Glenn Peers has looked into the subtle bodies of angels, with an eye to understanding how Byzantine artists thought they might be represented in icons.<sup>28</sup>

As I mentioned, threaded into these eight chapters is Cox's own *kuden*, a term that in Japanese martial arts refers to oral transmission. These are autobiographical reflections on what led him to pursue the theory and practice of the subtle body as a child, adolescent, and adult—and where that pursuit took him, and why. Largely that was Batman cartoons and the world of martial arts, and then later libraries and monasteries in Japan, China, and Tibet, and finally graduate school at Rice University in his hometown of Houston. As the book nears its end, the scholarly, textual genealogy of the subtle body seems to recede in significance, and Cox's own voice and views come into clearer view.

The two of them, the scholarly and textual and the personal and oral, come together in the Conclusion of the book. Cox describes how he came to graduate school with basically alchemical assumptions about the subtle body—that it was, in his words, “a palpable, if invisible dimension of the lived body” (211). That approach met another reality in graduate school, where he encountered essentially a set of platonic assumptions about the subtle body—that it was, again in his words, “an autonomous system that might interface with our fleshly bodies, but could in principle live apart from them, a permutation of the Neoplatonic *ochēma*.” This amounted to what he calls “a parallax in discourses,” itself “a downstream effect of a parallax in ontologies” (211). Almost as if our two eyes did not yield a single visual field, but they delivered independent streams of content.

With one eye, we strain to see an alchemical subtle body, something we build up or bring into being through experimentation in practice; with the other eye, we strain to see a platonic subtle body, something that has always already been there, accompanying us, mediating between our soul and our fleshly body. Both eyes, however, run the risk of presuming that there is a single and stable object

<sup>27</sup> David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). See also, Gregory A. Smith, “How Thin is a Demon?” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008) 479–512.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage; Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001).

of vision, a single subtle body—whether it is to be made, or discovered. But it is this very idea—of the single and stable subtle body—that Cox gives up in the end. The genealogy of the subtle body does not deliver us a single ancestor, “one hypothetical ur-body” (163, 190).

Just as Cox discovers that the genealogy is not delivering what he hoped it would, at least at first, he begins to articulate his own creative and constructive ontology and epistemology of the subtle body. First, he insists that rather than a single, stable subtle body—what he calls “monosomatic myopia”—there are many, many subtle bodies, and that they are everywhere. He calls this “radical somatic mutability,” the idea that “different cultural conditions give rise to different embodied beings” (215). This conclusion contradicts both the widespread reduction of our embodiment to the single (material) biomedical body, *and* the New Age article of faith that there is a single subtle body and that all the world’s traditions are describing it from their own particular perspective—like those who are blindfolded trying to describe an elephant from the part of it they happen to touch. There are as many subtle bodies as we can imagine, because the subtle body is created by our imagination. And maybe not just the subtle body: perhaps all ontology is secondary to aesthetics and practice, i.e. how we cultivate our senses to see more, and thereby *become* more. In his preface to the book, Jeffrey J. Kripal remarks, “There is no permanent separation from subjectivity and objectivity here. The human mind somehow shapes the behavior of matter” (ix).<sup>29</sup>

That brings us to his second concluding point: that the body itself, subtle or otherwise, is not an object, not “a single, self-identical entity perceived in time” or “in a uniform Newtonian historical space” (217). Even if there are many subtle bodies, they aren’t exactly *objects* we either create or discover. In the end, Cox sheds an ontology and epistemology of objects in exchange for an ontology and epistemology of persons. Bodies (coarse or subtle) aren’t objects; they’re persons. What does that mean? It means that they are subjects, that they have their own aims and purposes, their own relations and responsibilities to other subjects, other bodies. This has a lot of resonances with neo-animist ontologies, which owe much to indigenous traditions.<sup>30</sup> Cox’s own constructive proposal, then, advanced in tentative steps near the end of the book, includes such tenets as “radical somatic

<sup>29</sup> Kripal continues, “We are close to what Henry Corbin called the imaginal realm, where spirit becomes body and body becomes spirit” (cited in Cox, *The Subtle Body*, ix). For Corbin’s theory of the imaginal, a realm and faculty between the sensory and the intellectual, see his “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or The Imaginary and the Imagenal,” in Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (trans. Leonard Fox; Swedenborg Studies; West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995) 1–33.

<sup>30</sup> See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005) xi: “animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship to others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons.” See also *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (ed. Graham Harvey; Durham: Acumen, 2013). Cox is also borrowing from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (ed. and trans Peter Skafish; Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014).

mutability” and “multinatural somatic pluralism.” This means that we can create subtle bodies, and different cultural conditions enable the creation of different subtle bodies. These subtle bodies are not neutral objects, but interested parties, *persons*.

Both Cox and I began with Auden. So too we will both end with him. “Were we so fortunate to have Auden as a theorist of the subtle body,” Cox writes, “he might put it this way: whatever dreams we dream will determine what body it is we *think ourselves*, but it takes Energy, and perhaps a bit of Madness, to get there” (215). The “there” is explicitly “other worlds,” “alternate realities.” Subtle bodies we think into existence are the “gateways” to these worlds and realities (191, 218). In other words, we can and should call other worlds into being, and other ways into those worlds. Wanted: energetic madmen—what Kripal calls “authors of the impossible.”<sup>31</sup> Step back and Cox’s conclusion reads like the Bat-Signal. I wonder who will answer his call, who might be ready to devour dreams.

<sup>31</sup> See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).