

“Vitalism is a central concept of all traditional health systems.

Discuss the value and relevance of this concept to modern naturopathy”

Traditional health systems, such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine share common philosophical underpinnings with modern naturopathy. In all three health systems there is a belief that something beyond biochemical processes animates and gives life to the body. This idea contrasts, and indeed is in direct opposition to the philosophical foundations of biomedicine, which takes a mechanistic, reductionist approach to the body, health and healing (Bradley 1999, p.80). Under mechanistic medicine, the only thing that differentiates living matter from that of non-living is the system's level of complexity (Bradley 1999, p.80). Vitalist theory, in contrast, claims that living matter is complex and cannot be adequately explained by a set of chemical and physical processes (Bradley 1999, p.81). It is a theory that sits outside of the current mechanistic world view, and as such it may be argued that a discussion of its value and relevance in a modern health system such as naturopathy holds little merit. *why? & by whom?*

This essay will argue, however, that incorporating a vitalistic approach to health is crucial for the efficacy of modern naturopathy as a healing modality. It is a view of health that recognises complexity and the interplay of many different factors in the healing process. The aim of naturopathy is to assist the body in regaining balance by treating the root cause of the problem, rather than suppressing symptoms. This aim is difficult to be reconciled within the paradigm of biomedicine where an alleviation of symptoms is seen as having conquered the disease (Bradley 1999 p.84). Furthermore, vitalism offers an alternative view to mechanism and reductionism, and as such may help to understand and explain phenomena associated with health and disease that is currently ignored and left *ref* *rephrased* unanswered by biomedicine.

*If we could help
her but it was
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the 18th*

To understand the concept of vitalism in the framework of modern naturopathy, a brief explanation of where the term originated and the historical context in which it did so is useful. Vitalist philosophy dates back to the 17th Century (Gupta 2000, p.677) and was prominent in the 18th Century. It was (and remains) an opposing view to mechanism, which believed that life processes could be explained through biological and chemical processes alone. Biologists that adhered to a vitalistic view believed that animate objects, (for example, humans) possessed some kind of special force that separated them from non-living things (Gupta 2000, p.677). As a result, it was claimed that organic compounds could not be created from inorganic compounds, as a 'vital force' was missing.

This conviction was technically disproven in 1828 when the scientist Friedrich Wohler synthesised urea (an organic compound) from inorganic materials. Mechanism subsequently gained dominance and vitalism was pushed to the periphery (Peters 2002, p.30). The human body was increasingly viewed through a mechanistic lens, as a system that could be broken down, analysed and understood through examining its parts. Biological systems and processes were likened to machines, with simple cause and effect relationships.

Despite the rebuttal of vitalist theory, the language of vitalism is still alive today, and vitalist theory continues to be debated. The persistence of the vitalist phenomenon, that sits far outside the dominant mechanistic paradigm makes it worthy of further investigation. This phenomenon may be explained by what Gupta calls 'the need to celebrate human experience' (Gupta 2000, p.677). Although scientific materialism is the current dominant paradigm, it is not able to account for the entirety of the human experience. It does not delve past the physical realm. Gupta sees vitalism as an attempt to 'reconcile two

opposing needs – the need for analytical reasoning and the need to celebrate the mystery of human experience' (Gupta 2000, p.677). Whereas reductionism seeks to take out the mystery of life processes, it could be countered that 'celebrating mystery' is an essential component of the human psyche.

This 'language of vitalism' and the beliefs it embodies has also been suggested as contributing to the appeal of current complementary and alternative medicines in the western world (Eisenberg & Kaptchuk 1998, p.1061). It may be argued that the language of complementary medicine appeals to people in a way that biomedicine does not (Eisenberg & Kaptchuk 1998, p.1062). Whereas biomedicine is the language of logic and rationality, natural therapies (including naturopathy) use a vitalistic language when dealing with health and disease. This acts to re-connect people to 'life-supporting cosmic forces' and also empowers them by enabling them to take an active role in their own health and healing (Eisenberg & Kaptchuk 1998, p.1062). This language embraces that part of the human experience which is beyond the mechanistic and physical.

This idea of a vital force permeating and giving life to humans is neither foreign nor new in traditional health systems. The existence of something beyond what is a measurable biochemical process is readily accepted. In the philosophy of ayurvedic medicine it is believed that 'prana' gives life to the physical body, and connects the body with the mind and spirit (Pole 2006, p.23). Traditional Chinese Medicine also refer to a life force they call 'qi', that flows through the body in particular channels, or meridians, that serves to 'maintain the health and vitality of the individual' (Micozzi 2005, p.386).

The existence of a vitalist concept amongst health systems of different cultures points to the universality of this concept (Di Stefano 2006, p.130). This universality is not enough to

prove its existence however and it is precisely because of this inability to prove the existence of a 'vital force' that vitalism continues to be attacked and discredited (see DeGregori 2003). Within current biomedicine, ideas and concepts are required to be 'empirically validated' before they are accepted. Vitalism may not be able to be empirically validated but this is not reason enough to dismiss it. As Sade ^(2003, p 184) points out, the premises on which complementary and alternative medicines (which include modern naturopathy) are built are completely different to those of biomedicine (~~Sade 2003, p.184~~). Trying to validate naturopathic principles using methods from a completely different paradigm simply does not make sense. ✓

Moreover, looking beyond the narrow margins of scientific validation, and accepting that vitalism is currently immeasurable, it is also possible to view vitalism as an ethical system (Canguilhem 1994, cited in Greco 2005, p.18). By looking and examining the merits of vitalism from an ethical standpoint, it does not matter that the theory cannot be scientifically validated. (Canguilhem 1994, cited in Greco 2005, p.18). More importantly, vitalism may be viewed as 'a form of resistance to the recurrent possibility of reduction' (Canguilhem 1994, cited in Greco 2005, p.18). It offers an alternative view to the dominant reductionist way of thinking and stimulates debate. Ongoing debate in the area of health and healthcare forces a constant questioning and re-evaluation of the current medical model. This could potentially lead to an improvement and enhancement of biomedicine. Debate in this area is particularly relevant as it becomes more and more clear that biomedical science does not have all the answers for dealing with illness. In many ways, healing is a mysterious force, an issue the biomedical paradigm struggles to deal with. ✓

Within the context of modern naturopathy, along with providing an alternative viewpoint to mechanism, a vitalistic approach to practice acknowledges and highlights the complexity

of the systems that make up the human body. As well as being interested in the individual parts, it also recognises that there is more to a living system than simply the sum of its parts (Bradley 1999, p.81). Under mechanism, many biological processes are explained using the analogy of a machine. Countering this is the argument that even those biological processes that appear on the surface to operate in a 'machine-like' way are much more complex when examined in detail, thus rendering the machine analogy inadequate (Gerhart, J, Kirschner, M & Mitchison, T 2000, p.79). Vitalism is not interested in likening biological processes to the workings of machines, and as a result can look at these processes in a more holistic way, and attempt to understand the interconnectedness of body, mind and spirit.

The reductionist view of health also fails to adequately explain the 'ongoing issues of chronic degenerative disease' in today's society (Bradley 1999, p.81). Vitalism is much more equipped to deal with this issue. The vitalist perspective on disease is much more complex than identifying the pathogen and eradicating symptoms, as is the case in biomedicine. A person does not become ill simply because they have come into contact with a pathogen. Rather, disease results from an 'imbalance in the vital force' (Seely 2006, p.263). Naturopathy works at re-establishing this balance, and attempts to work with, rather than against the body's healing processes. Invasive medication, such as is used in biomedicine, is avoided as it is believed this can further interfere with the vital force (Seely 2006, p.263). A vitalistic approach uses less invasive therapies in the treatment of disease, preferring instead to facilitate the innate healing capacity of the body, the *vis medicatrix naturae* (Seely 2006, p.262). Also important to note is that taking a vitalist approach as a naturopath does not preclude from also being able to take a rational, practical approach where necessary.

A common argument in defence of biomedicine (and thus against vitalism) is that 'people are living longer lives than they were in centuries past. Degregori (2003) claims that today people are living longer and better lives. Living longer, however, does not necessarily mean quality of life has increased. In fact it could just as easily be argued that technology has also brought with it countless problems that in fact *decreases* quality of life.

✓ Hard to say

At the present time vitalism cannot be measured within the scientific paradigm. This essay accepts that fact but has shown that vitalism still holds a relevant place in today's society. The merit of the concept to modern naturopathy can be seen most clearly in its use as a metaphor that is connected and tied in with the complex healing process. The implications of taking a vitalistic approach in modern naturopathy extends beyond a more holistic and appropriate treatment for the patient. Although this is of utmost importance, vitalism also serves as a platform to question the status quo, and to continue to seek answers to the complexity of the human body and healing. ✓

By contrasting the philosophy of vitalism with that of current biomedicine, the inability of the current dominant scientific paradigm to take into account the entirety of the human experience has been highlighted. Furthermore, if those working within the modern naturopathic profession work purely on a physical level, ignoring the energetic and spiritual side of health and healing they risk becoming like allopathic practitioners, merely substituting pharmaceutical drugs for supplements and herbs (Bradley 1999, p.87). ✓ By ignoring vitalism, naturopaths risk relying too much on the mechanistic mode of thinking, and then little would separate them from western doctors (Bradley 1999, p.87). It is, as Gupta calls it, the need to 'celebrate the mystery of human experience' which makes vitalism's relevance to modern naturopathy all the more pertinent. In this context we may look at the term vitalism as being an essential component of modern naturopathy.

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Very Good

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