



from Psychosomatics to Soma-Semiotics: Felt Sense and the Sensed Body in Medicine and Psychotherapy

Peter Wilberg

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Semiotics is the study of 'signs' or 'signifiers' such as words. Psychotherapists seek to understand or interpret the verbal and behavioural signs of an individual's emotional dis-ease. Medical physicians and psychiatrists seek to diagnose both bodily and behavioural symptoms as signs of some organic 'disease' or 'disorder'. In doing so however, they make no semiotic distinction between the medically signified sense of an individual's symptoms and their directly felt or sensed significance – comparable to the felt sense or meaning of a word. Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, Jakob von Uexküll, Viktor von Weizsäcker, Luis Chiozza, Arnold Mindell and others, Peter Wilberg brings out in an original way the profound medical as well as psychotherapeutic implications of Eugene Gendlin's method of Focusing with its key concept of 'felt sense' - the recognition that meaning or 'sense' is something that can itself be felt or sensed in an immediate bodily way, exploring in particular the relational dimension of 'bodily sensing'. Soma-semiotics is rooted in the principle that, as signs – and like dreams - somatic illnesses are an experience and expression of lived and felt meanings rather than simply a result of organic, biological, psychosocial, or psychosomatic 'causes'. A soma-semiotic understanding of illness can help both counsellors, therapists and medical professionals to used their own felt body to wordlessly sense and resonate a patient's felt dis-ease, thus coming to feel its meaning or sense directly rather than seeking only to signify that sense through medical terms or 'talking cures'. Consequently soma-semiotics also offers a new foundation for overcoming the on-going theoretical, institutional and professional separation between practitioners of 'psychotherapy' on the one hand and 'somatic' medicine on the other – a separation often maintained even in the personal lives of psychotherapists, and medical practitioners.

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