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Denise DeFelice
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Ontology of Personhood in Ayurveda from the Perspective of Patients and Physicians in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh: An Independent Study

Denise M. DeFelice
Academic Director: Azim Khan
ISP Advisor: Dr. Ashutosh Guleri
SIT Study Abroad
India: Public Health, Gender, and Community Action
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ABSTRACT

Scholars in western biomedicine describe the body as a physical entity distinct from mind and soul. However, the human body in Indian systems of medicine integrates the multiple natures of personhood and is both deeply physical and spiritual. This study demonstrates the unique view of personhood, being, health, and illness in Ayurveda through literature research and interviews with practitioners and patients. This study extends past a search for the ontology of personhood in Ayurveda and discusses the implications of this ontology on the way one views oneself and the world around him or her. Through this integrative approach, this study argues that the human body proposed in Ayurveda is fundamentally different from some other traditions of medicine, and because of this difference, the human body is treated differently and health is pursued in a unique manner.

Keywords: Ayurveda, AYUSH, ontology, semantics, philosophy, health, personhood

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

The Ayurveda, an ancient medical text and one of the oldest systems of medicine in the world, synthesizes knowledge from Indian philosophical traditions to create a system of health and well-being. This system distinguishes itself from other ways of thinking about the human body due to its holistic nature.¹ This unique view of humanity and personhood, or the ontology of being, affects not only the way one views oneself but also every interaction with the external reality.

¹ Richard A Shweder, "The Cultural Psychology of Suffering: The Meanings of Health in Orissa, India (And Elsewhere), *Ethos* 36, no. 1 (2008): 66.

The following study seeks to understand the ontology of personhood in the context of the Ayurveda. This study first introduces the idea of ontology and semantics, an important subcategory of ontology in the philosophy of health, and contextualizes the Ayurveda in the broader context of Indian philosophy. A brief background in Ayurveda is included as well, and naturopathy is also discussed to contextualize the blend of *panchkarma* and naturopathy treatment that patients at the location where the study took place received. Following this, a literature review was conducted to understand where the field of the philosophy of personhood in Ayurveda is today. Very few scholars directly study ontology of being, but rather discuss some important ideas in Ayurveda and apply them to everyday life. This literature review illuminates this significant gap in knowledge and explains the importance of this research. Following this, the findings of this interview-based study are presented and discussed.

Ontology is a central concept in philosophy when thinking about the meaning of personhood. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines ontology as “what there is, what exists...what the general features and relations of these things are”.² The discipline of ontology has four parts: the study of ontological commitment, the study of what there is, the study of general features about what there is, and the study of meta-ontology. To discuss the body, this paper focuses on the second and third aspects of this discipline. In order to answer these questions, the relation between things and what is involved in settling questions about these musings will also be discussed.³

² Thomas Hofwber, “Logic and Ontology”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition) ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab, 2016).

³ Ibid.

Semantics, or use of language, also plays a significant role in the ontology of the body. Word choice and diction, varying definitions of words, and cultural context of language in Ayurveda affect the view of the body. This will be discussed deeply from the point of view of Ayurvedic practitioners, or *Vaidyas*, and the implications of semantics in Ayurveda will be analyzed.⁴ Philosophers and linguists use many definitions of semantics; for the purpose of this research, the Oxford Dictionary definition is used: “[semantics is] the branch of linguistics and logic concerned with meaning. The two main areas are logical semantics, concerned with matters such as sense and reference and presupposition and implication, and lexical semantics, concerned with the analysis of word meanings and relations between them.”⁵ Lexical semantics, which focuses on the analysis of word meaning, is of particular interest.⁶

Although the Ayurveda existed for millennia, few scholars have focused on its philosophy that contributes to the meaning of personhood. This lack of focus, however, is not due to lack of importance. The manner in which one views the body not only affects that one person but also how one views everyone around him or her. This is the way in which philosophy is embodied, which changes how one falls ill, seeks treatment, and pursues a healthy life. The ontology of the self applies philosophy and thought to healing and care.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to gain an understanding of the ontology of personhood from the perspective of Ayurveda. This study took place at Kayakalp Himalayan

⁴ Shweder, “The Cultural Psychology of Suffering”, 68.

⁵ *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “Semantics”, accessed 15-5-2018.

⁶ Dirk Geeraerts, “Lexical Semantics”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Research Institute for Yoga and Naturopathy in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh. This health center located in the mountains of Palampur in Northern India, provides integrated treatment using various traditions of medicine, including Yoga, *Pranayam*, Meditation, Naturopathy, *Panchkarma*, Physiotherapy, Acupressure, Magnetotherapy, Diet therapy, and Colon Hydrotherapy.⁷ Patients at Kayakalp primarily receive an amalgamation of *panchkarma* and Naturopathy treatments. *Panchkarma*, meaning “five actions” or “five treatments”, is the Ayurvedic treatment used to detoxify and heal the body.⁸ This study includes literature research and interviews from both Ayurvedic and Naturopathic doctors and patients, also referred to as health-seekers, at Kayakalp. This study argues that Ayurveda posits a unique view of health, illness, life, death, and personhood that deeply affects the way a person views oneself and interacts with the world.

BACKGROUND

Preliminary research was done in Ayurveda, Naturopathy, and Yoga in preparation for this study. Because India embraces a plurality of medical practices, doctors and patients alike are rarely exposed to only one pathy of medicine.⁹ Kayakalp provides treatment through many traditions and systems of Indian medicine. *Panchkarma* and naturopathy were two main pathies practiced at Kayakalp.¹⁰ Although the Ayurveda is the main focus of this research, Ayurvedic *Vaidyas* and patients, also known as health-seekers at Kayakalp, include their experience of naturopathy as well.

⁷ “Welcome to Kayakalp”, *Kayakalp Himalayan Research Institute for Yoga and Naturopathy*, accessed 15-5-2018.

⁸ Ashutosh Guleri, “Introduction to Ayurveda” (lecture, Kayakalp – Palampur Workshop, Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, India, 20-March, 2018).

⁹ Shweder, “The Cultural Psychology of Suffering”, 68.

¹⁰ “About Us,” *Kayakalp Himalayan Research Institute for Yoga and Naturopathy*, accessed 15-5-2018.

The Body in Indian Philosophy

Because the Ayurveda originates from Indian philosophy, a background in the idea of the body in various Indian traditions of philosophy is important. Different schools of thought in Indian philosophy interpret personhood in a different manner. In many of these traditions, the body is both a physical entity and a space for the intersection of the spiritual and physical. Here, the soul is just as tangible as the physical body. From the earliest traditions, such as the Vedic tradition, the body is interpreted as a “vehicle of consciousness”, where the consciousness or the soul is the chief part of personhood.¹¹ The *Rg Veda*, the chief text of the Vedic tradition, presents the body as the “original sacrificial being” whose sacrifice resulted in the creation of reality. The dividing of the human body which contains all of reality is a ritual act. The hermeneutic phrase “as above, so below” describes this view of the body; what is found in the body reflects what is in the world. The only part of oneself that is truly individual and not a reflection of the outside reality is the “absolute” soul.¹² Contrary to conventional thought, the *Rg Veda* argues that the dividing of the body does not make one less human, but rather enhances one’s humanness and “makes the victim into a celestial being”.¹³ However, it must be done in the appropriate context of sacrifice; otherwise, it is crude butchery.

The tradition of the *Upanisads* which follows the Vedic tradition views the body as five different bodies tied into one self. The *Tattiriya Upanisad*, defines these bodies as *annamaya*, or the physical body, *pranamaya*, the body of breath or air, *manomaya*,

¹¹ Dominik Vujastyk, “Interpreting the Image of the Human Body in Premodern India”, *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 13, no. 2 (2009): 190.

¹² *Ibid*, 196.

¹³ *Ibid*, 194.

or the mind, *vijnanamaya*, or knowledge, and *anadamaya*, or the self from joy. One can use techniques of breath control and breathing to access these different *atmans*, or bodies. Each of these meditative states brings one to another physical state. One can gain or regain health through patterns of breathing to access a healthy meditative state.¹⁴ This is similar to the practice of Yoga today which seeks to activate the natural healing powers of the body through breathing and physical exercises.¹⁵

The Jain tradition embraces *karma* as a semi-physical part of the body and soul. Karmic debt weighs down the soul and binds it to physical existence. Liberation from karmic debt frees the soul which is the human body in its freest form. In the *Jaina* philosophy, illness is caused by anything that binds the soul to physical existence; anything that accumulates karmic debt can cause bodily illness and harm the soul.¹⁶

The Buddhist body is similar to the *Jaina* body in the sense that the soul is the most important part of personhood. The physical body is almost irrelevant, and those who are immune to pain or physical discomfort are praised. In this sense, illness should not affect a person, because the body is not a significant part of what makes one human. The physical body is a combination of processes or events, not necessarily an independent object which can be studied. Ideally, a person can cast aside the needs of his physical body and focus on reaching enlightenment.¹⁷

The Tantric and Yogic bodies, unlike the Vedic body, is non-anatomical. The body here is a locus of the Tantric *chakras*, or wheels which are epicenters of energy which all affect one another. These energies are far more important than the physical body.

¹⁴ Vujastyk, "Interpreting the Image of the Human Body in Premodern India", 196.

¹⁵ Henry Lindlahr, *Philosophy and Practice of Nature Cure* (Unknown: Sat Sahitya Shayogi Sangh, 1995): 150.

¹⁶ Vujastyk, 196-197.

¹⁷ Vujastyk, "Interpreting the Image of the Human Body in Premodern India", 197-198.

Practices in the Tantric tradition bring the physical body back in touch with the *chakras* to restore health and well-being. The Yogic body, similar to the Tantric body, is a spiritual center, and its physical nature can sometimes obstruct what makes one human: the soul. The practice of yoga is meant to subdue to body in order for the person to reach higher states of enlightenment.¹⁸ This same practice is utilized in modern Naturopathy and Yoga in India. Illness is thought to come from the mind, and the only way to achieve health and recover from a mind illness is through the empowerment of the awaken the consciousness.¹⁹

The *Samkhya* philosophy introduces some key concepts that are reflected in Ayurveda.²⁰ In this philosophy the universe has two main components: the *purusa*, or universal soul, and the *prakrti*, or cosmic substance. *Purusa* and *prakrti* meet in the human body, which is both body and soul.²¹ The *prakrti* is an important term used in Ayurveda and is the basis for personhood, disease, and health.²² In the *Samkhya* philosophy, *prakrti* is composed of three *gunas*, or strands of existence. These three strands are *sattva*, or lightness, *rajas*, or action, and *tamas*, or inaction. These three strands are eternally bound together and are the building blocks for all parts of the physical nature of the universe. These three qualities are in constant tension with one another: the brightness of *sattva* collides with the dullness of *tamas*, the lethargy of *tamas* contradicts the vitality of *rajas*; the blunt force of *rajas* intrudes on the lightness

¹⁸ Ibid, 199-200.

¹⁹ Nagendra Kumar Neeraj, *Miracles of Naturopathy and Yogic Sciences* (Jaipur: Popular Book Depot, 2015): 150.

²⁰ Joseph S. Alter, "Heaps of Health, Metaphysical Fitness: Ayurveda and the Ontology of Good Health in Medical Anthropology", *Current Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press on behalf of Wenner-Gren Foundation of Anthropological Research, 1999): s46.

²¹ Ibid, s47.

²² Ayurvedic *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 8, 19-4-2018, transcript.

and beauty of *sattva*. Despite this tension, all life is built from this. The concept of the *gunas* proposes an inherent competition and violence to life and existence, not just between things but within oneself. To live, then, is to fight.²³

Overview of Ayurveda

The Ayurveda builds from these ideas of personhood and applies them to health. The Ayurveda, meaning “knowledge of life” in Sanskrit, originates from the ancient Vedic texts, and is considered to be unchangeable.²⁴ The physical nature of the universe is constructed of five basic elements: space, air, fire, water, and earth. The body is divided into three parts, called *doshas*, which are blends of these five elements. The first, *vata* or air and wind, is the principle governing motion, movement, and space. The second, *pitta*, a combination of water and fire, is the digestive fire or bile, and controls the transforming processes of the body. The third, *kapha*, is water and earth. This is the solidity of the body or phlegm, and is where cohesion, growth, and liquefaction exists. Much like the *gunas* of the *Samkhya* philosophy, these three doshas are in tension with each other. The healthy body contains these three *doshas* in perfect equilibrium.^{25,26}

Similar to the Yogic tradition, the body in the Ayurveda is an undifferentiated, integrated space irrigated by *snayus*, or channels. These channels are substances through which life can flow. The body evolves and grows through changes, or *susrutas*, which are a fundamental aspect of life. The only way through which to end this cycle of

²³ Alter, “Heaps of Health, Metaphysical Fitness”, s47.

²⁴ Carlos J. Moreno Leguizamon, “Dichotomies in Western Medicine and Ayurveda: Health-Illness and Body-Mind” *Economic & Political Weekly* 40, no. 30 (2005): 3302.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 3308.

²⁶ Ashutosh Guleri, “Introduction to Ayurveda” (lecture, Kayakalp – Palampur Workshop, Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, India, 20-March, 2018).

changes is to be liberated from it.²⁷ The mind and the soul, the *atma*, is a critical concept in the body. The *jiva atma* is the individual soul which gives a person a sense of “I-ness”. The *param atma*, the other part of the soul, is universal, and gives consciousness to nature. This duality of the soul makes a person fully oneself and integrated with nature simultaneously, and has unique implications for health and wellness.²⁸

To stay healthy, the *snayus* of the body must stay open. Blockages in the *snayus* of the body can cause illness. The displacement of humors, or *doshas*, in the wrong parts of the body can also cause illness. Conventionally, scholars discuss illness in the Ayurveda as an imbalance of the *doshas*. However, Projit Mukharji, a professor in the History and Sociology of Science department at the University of Pennsylvania, challenges this idea as a misinterpretation of the Ayurveda in the Greek, western philosophical context. The view of imbalanced *doshas* also considers the body to be a closed anatomical space made up only of flows and energy. The displaced *doshas* must be relocated to their proper places within the body to regain health.²⁹

The Ayurveda posits a unique etiology of illness. Because the body is intimately tied to the soul, and the soul is both individual and universal, illness is also both individual and universal. For example, poor weather can cause ill health in the body, because the relationship between the body and the environment is a basic element of the whole system. Change, although a fundamental aspect of life, can also cause destruction with time.³⁰ When one faces too great of a challenge, whether physical, emotional, or

²⁷ Projit Mukharji, “Doctoring Traditions: Ayurveda and Small Technologies, 1860-1930” (presentation, Center for South Asia, UW-Madison).

“Doctoring Traditions”.

²⁸ Leguizamon, “Dichotomies in Western Medicine and Ayurveda”, 3309.

²⁹ Mukharji, “Doctoring Traditions”.

³⁰ Leguizamon, “Dichotomies in Western Medicine and Ayurveda”, 3308.

spiritual, the body may fall ill, due to the relationship between the physical body and the *atma*. Karmic debt, similar to the Jain body, can weigh down on the soul and cause illness.³¹

The concept of tension is a common theme in Ayurveda. Although the unchangeable text of the *Rg Veda* influences the texts of the Ayurveda, change seems to be the only constant.^{32,33} The Ayurvedic human body embodies the Vedic concept of *susruta*, which states that change is the only constant and is a fundamental condition of life.³⁴ In addition, the *tridosha* concept of the human body implies constant tension in the body. Each of the three *doshas* can aggravate or pacify one of the others, causing an imbalance.³⁵ In Mukharji's interpretation, they can also move throughout the body and displace each other.³⁶ Health is a balance, and balance in Ayurveda implies a perfect tension.

Yoga and Naturopathy

Naturopathy is a worldwide tradition of medicine, and originated in India during the Vedic period. Naturopathy and nature cure focus on the healing power of nature to cure disease. The body contains a natural healing energy which can only be compromised by going against the laws of nature, which causes disease.³⁷ There is no substitute for the laws of nature; neither drugs nor surgery can solve a problem created

³¹ Alex Hankey, "Ayurveda and the battle against chronic disease: An opportunity for Ayurveda to go mainstream?" *Journal of Ayurveda & Integrative Medicine* 1, no. 1 (2010): 9-12.

³² Leguizamon, 3302.

³³ Ayurvedic *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

³⁴ Leguizamon, 3308.

³⁵ Ayurvedic *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 8, 19-4-2018, transcript.

³⁶ Mukharji, "Doctoring Traditions".

³⁷ Memon Shakeel et al, "Alternative System of Medicine in India: A Review". *International Research Journal of Pharmacy* 2, no. 4 (2011): 29-37.

from violating these laws.³⁸ This view of disease shifts the responsibility of illness from the external to the internal; only oneself is to blame for one's illness, which occurs from one's own choice to violate nature's laws.³⁹

Medicines are not prescribed in naturopathy, but they are allowed insofar as they do not cause any harm to the body.⁴⁰ If one chronically takes a medication for an illness to control the symptoms, one may feel healthy or externally appear healthy; however, one cannot be healthy if the body is reliant on a medication. Medicine only creates the "illusion" of being healthy.⁴¹ Disease is defined as "lowered vitality, abnormal composition of blood and lymph, and accumulation of morbid matter."⁴² Health, then, is harmony with nature, or the normal vibrations of elements composing the human entity, in a physical, mental, and spiritual capacity.⁴³ In order to cure disease, one has to "return to nature" and purify the self to allow the natural healing powers of the body to do their work.⁴⁴

In Naturopathy, life is vibratory, like a miniature solar system. Patterns of movement and vibration sustain life, and similar to Ayurveda, all things must stay in balance to remain healthy.⁴⁵ The body in naturopathy is soul, mind, and body.⁴⁶ All are important parts of humanity, and if one falls ill, all three components of the body are simultaneously affected. Treatment is holistic and seeks to heal all three essences of the body, regardless of from where the disease originated. For example, if someone suffers

³⁸ Lindlahr, *Philosophy and Practice of Nature Cure*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 28.

⁴¹ Neeraj, *Miracles of Naturopathy and Yogic Sciences*, 38.

⁴² Lindlahr, 25.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ Lindlahr, *Philosophy and Practice of Nature Cure*, 29.

⁴⁵ Lindlahr, 33.

⁴⁶ Lindlahr, 374.

from depression and experience headaches and muscle pain from mental illness, the naturopath will treat the patient's mind as well as his or her physical aches and pains.⁴⁷

Yoga is a discipline of Indian medicine that is often practiced in tandem with Naturopathy. The body is viewed in a similar manner to that of Naturopathy; the mind is the main factor in health and disease. Disease comes from the mind and the violation of nature's laws. Therefore, one heals the body through the focus of the mind to strengthen the natural healing powers of the body. The aim of yoga is to awaken the consciousness and to commune with the Universal Soul. Health in yoga does not end with the health of the body, mind, and soul. Instead, health extends to a higher consciousness of being, and the pursuit of health is a driving factor of life.⁴⁸

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although a complex and obscure topic to pursue, many scholars have taken on the challenge of studying the idea of personhood in Ayurveda. Because the philosophy of health is an obscure subject, many scholars do not study it directly, but conclusions and interpretations can be drawn from their sociological and anthropological research. The following literature review contextualizes the following study on the ontology of personhood by discussing important trends in literature and demonstrating gaps in this body of knowledge.

Dr. Richard Shweder discusses this in "The Cultural Psychology of Suffering". In general, the Ayurveda does not attempt to be an "antiseptic science" with no interaction between it and social sciences. Instead, it freely incorporates these ideas. Also, like many traditions of medicine beside allopathy, the Ayurveda allows for a pluralistic thought

⁴⁷ Naturopath in discussion with the author, interview 7, 24-4-2018.

⁴⁸ Neeraj, *Miracles of Naturopathy and Yogic Sciences*, 151.

process about different systems of medicine. This enhances Ayurvedic knowledge of personhood by including many systems of thought. Healers from most traditions across India share many of the ideas about what it means to be human.⁴⁹ Humans are both physical and spiritual, and interaction with “the society of spirits...have the ability to trouble human beings; that demonic planets can influence the humors or *doshas* of the body...”⁵⁰ When one views the body in this way, the body becomes a spiritual being. Suffering does not affect only one’s physical body, but can also extend to one’s eternal existence. The body is eternal and spiritual; the body is God. To maintain health, one must stay close to one’s godliness and keep oneself pure. A friend of the author discusses this in Shweder’s article:

“There is nothing on the outside called God. God is within us. The human body is the only real sacred ground and it becomes de-sanctified after pollution. If your life-span is fifty years it will decrease if you allow your body to become polluted. But if you obey every duty and custom you will be free of pollution and you will be healthy.”⁵¹

This article deeply analyzes cultural differences between Indian traditions of medicine and western biomedicine. In this way, the author discusses many of the ways Indian traditions of medicine ontologize the body differently than in western biomedicine. However, this research was not confined to the experience of Ayurveda and Naturopathy, but rather includes religious healers, *kalis* or mediums of the goddess, and practitioners of other Indian systems of medicine. Research also was conducted in Orissa, a south Indian state where traditions and customs are different than states in

⁴⁹ Richard A. Shweder, “The Cultural Psychology of Suffering: The Many Meanings of Health in Orissa, India”, 67.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 68.

⁵¹ Interview conducted by Dr. Richard Shweder, Orissa, India, 1982-1983. Referenced in “The Cultural Psychology of Suffering: The Many Meanings of Health in Orissa, India”, 63.

North India.⁵² In addition, implications of the ontology of being are not discussed; rather, conclusions must be drawn from Shweder's research.

Dr. Projit Mukharji in his book, *Doctoring Traditions*, discusses how different small medical advancements have revealed specific ways the Ayurveda views the ontology of the body. His research also indirectly introduces semantics to the philosophy of personhood in Ayurveda. For example, with the increased popularity of the thermometer came a change in the meaning of the word "heat".⁵³ Before the introduction of the thermometer, heat was not a measurable commodity. Instead, heat was an embodiment of the *pitta dosha*, which is fire and water. Temperature and heat in the human body were not necessarily linked; for example, the digestive fire of the *pitta dosha* was not tangibly hotter than, say, the liquefaction of the *kapha dosha*. Fever was diagnosed not through observing an elevated body temperature but through observing the aggravation of *pitta* which caused babbling, headaches, and pain. The use of the thermometer made heat in the body into a measurable commodity. The use of the word *thatman* for heat, which was originally used only in the context of weather and meteorology, is now used in Ayurveda. Thermometers did not change *thatman*, but rather illuminated this unique view of heat and fever. Mukharji's research demonstrates how medical technologies can affect the language of health, and how semantic changes can then be embodied.⁵⁴ However, this research discusses the causal pathway through which semantics can affect personhood, but does not directly focus on the *meaning* of personhood and humanity.

⁵² Shweder, "The Cultural Psychology of Suffering", 60.

⁵³ Projit Mukharji, "Doctoring Traditions: Ayurveda and Small Technologies".

⁵⁴ Mukharji, "Doctoring Traditions".

Dr. Leguizamon's article on "Dichotomies in Western Medicine" compares the Ayurvedic body to the body in western biomedicine. Leguizamon introduces ideas of tension in Ayurveda; for example, an inherent tension exists between the importance of change as a "fundamental condition of life" and the results of change, which are disease and death.⁵⁵ Also, the body itself is in constant tension between the dueling forces of illness and health.⁵⁶ However, some tensions found in other traditions of medicine such as western biomedicine are not found in the Ayurvedic view of the body. For example, the theory of Ayurveda's physical body, or *sthula sharira*, and the subtle body, or *linga sharira*, essentially describes the dual nature of personhood as both physical and spiritual. This view of the body recognizes the importance of the subtle body, or the psyche, in personhood.⁵⁷ Leguizamon also discusses explains the interaction of the environment and the body. Because the Ayurveda views the body as constructed from the five basic elements, the body interacts closely with the environment. One falling ill can be due to imbalances in weather or the environment.⁵⁸ This article shows how the holistic view of the body and nature affects the etiology of illness and the meaning of health. This article also presents two significant concepts in the ontology of the body in Ayurveda: change and tension. Leguizamon does not discuss, however, how the Ayurveda's ontology of the body affects the way one views oneself or the world around them.

Joseph S. Alter discusses the meaning of health in Ayurveda in his article, "Heaps of Health, Metaphysical Fitness: Ayurveda and the Ontology of Good Health in Medical

⁵⁵ Carlos J. Moreno Leguizamon, "Dichotomies in Western Medicine and Ayurveda: Health-Illness and Body-Mind", 3308.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 3309.

⁵⁸ Leguizamon, "Dichotomies in Western biomedicine and Ayurveda", 3302.

Anthropology”. He views the Ayurveda not as a means of curing illness and restoring balance, but rather a way of life for “radical self-improvement”.⁵⁹ Good health is an ideal in Ayurveda, and the lack of disease does not necessarily equate with or restore health. The default of the human body when exposed to the environment is unhealthiness. Alter includes White’s interpretation of health in Ayurveda:

“...for so long as a human being is not exposed to the outside world (when in the womb, for example), it enjoys a perfect balance of *dos[h]as*. When, however, it becomes exposed to the outside world, the *dos[h]as* fall out of balance and the individual becomes subject to health disorders.”⁶⁰

The term *dosha* has no direct translation, although it is often translated as “humour”. It can also be translated as “corrupting agent” or “cause of disease”.⁶¹ This use of language signifies that the *doshas* which construct the human body and are necessary for personhood also cause the disease.⁶² Health is not passive; one must actively pursue health in all aspects of one’s life in order to be considered healthy.⁶³ This implies that if one is not constantly working to improve one’s health, he or she is chronically ill.⁶⁴ Alter’s research is unique in the field of medical anthropology and fills an important gap in scholarship by discussing the implications of semantics on the meaning of health in Ayurveda. However, Alter’s research stops at the ontology of health and does not directly investigate the ontology of being as a whole.

The following study attempts to bridge these gaps in knowledge of the ontology and meaning of personhood. Instead of drawing indirect conclusions from sociological

⁵⁹ Joseph S. Alter, “Heaps of Health, Metaphysical Fitness: Ayurveda and the Ontology of Good Health in medical Anthropology”, s44.

⁶⁰ David G. White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1996), 21. Referenced in Alter, s47.

⁶¹ Alter, s48.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Alter, “Heaps of Health, Metaphysical Fitness”, s46.

⁶⁴ Ibid, s51.

and historical research, this study directly examines the philosophy of life and health in Ayurveda. Furthermore, this study investigates how the views of life, health, and personhood in Ayurveda affect one's everyday life: how one views oneself, how one views others, and how one views the world around them.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This interview-based study will take place at Kayakalp, an Ayurvedic treatment center in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh. The organization's name, *kaya* meaning body, and *kalp* meaning power, emphasizes the importance of the human body and empowerment in healing.⁶⁵ Here, *Vaidyas* of the Ayurveda will be easily accessible, and patients from diverse backgrounds will be present as well. Because health-seekers often travel far distances to pursue health at Kayakalp, they often stay for a longer period of time than at other Ayurvedic centers throughout the country. This allows for building a rapport and having a series of significant conversations with health-seekers about the topic of personhood.

Because of the diversity of cultures and backgrounds among those who seek treatment at Kayakalp, many factors may contribute to differing ideas of personhood that are not related to the practice of Ayurveda. However, because this study is anthropological and philosophical in nature rather than sociological, these variables will not mar the results, but rather are facets to be explored. Variations in culture, gender, age, illness, or caste will undoubtedly affect the way that people understand what it means to be human. These variations will be studied thoroughly through in-depth interviews to see how the Ayurveda affects these people's individual opinions and

⁶⁵ "About us", *Kayakalp Himalayan Research Institute for Yoga and Naturopathy*, accessed 15-5-2018.

thoughts about personhood. Because of this, the subject group to be interviewed will be as diverse as possible. However, all interviewees are from North India and metropolitan regions in India. The practice of Ayurveda and common home remedies in South India are distinct from those of North India. Most interviewees are from Delhi, Mumbai, Punjab, and Chandigarh.

METHOD

This study is interview-based. The subject group of study includes Naturopathic and Ayurvedic health care practitioners and health-seekers at Kayakalp. The focus of these interviews will be to understand how those in the world of Ayurvedic medicine through the influence of Naturopathy view health and personhood. Nine interviews are included in this study: two *Vaidyas*, one naturopath, and six health-seekers.

LIMITATIONS

One challenge that may be faced is falling into the common pitfall of comparison. This study is not constructed to focus on a comparative model between Ayurvedic medicine and western biomedicine, which may be more distracting than helpful. Comparative studies across cultures often ends in overt or covert conclusions that one way of thinking is superior to the other, which is not the intent of this study. Instead, the goal of this project is to understand the experiences of people in the Ayurvedic system of medicine, and the philosophy behind these experiences. Comparisons between the efficacy of different systems of medicine do not play a role in these experiences.

Another anticipated challenge is understanding the experience of Ayurveda for the health-seekers. Because many traditions of medicine are practiced simultaneously in India, health-seekers at Kayakalp cannot confine their experience only to Ayurveda. Religion, worldview, life experience, and treatment through other pathies such as

Naturopathy deeply affect the way people view themselves. As a result, some of the input from health-seekers originates from these other attributes rather than their experience of Ayurveda. Unfortunately, there is no viable way for these factors to be ignored, so they will also be included in this study.

RESULTS

DISCUSSION OF CONCEPTS

Balance and Action

Equilibrium and balance are significant to the meaning of life and health. The original definition of health in the Ayurveda indicates the many different balancing acts occurring simultaneously to maintain health. The definition of health in Ayurveda from the *Acharya Susruta* is as follows: “*samma dosha, samma agnischa, samma dhatu malakriya, persanna atma indriya, mahana swastha iti aboideeyate*”. This roughly translates to “balanced *doshas*, balanced digestive fire, balanced excretion of the *dhatu*s (basic tissues of the body), happy soul and mind, served senses, such a person is called healthy”.^{66,67} *Samma*, or balance, is used three times in the *Acharya Susruta*, which signifies its utmost importance. One cannot have health without balance, and this balance can be difficult to strike. Too much of a good thing, or too little of a bad thing, can send the body spiraling downward to disease. For example, low amounts of the *rasa dhatu* or the digestive juice of the body can cause tiredness and muscle cramps through the whole body. If the *rasa dhatu* is high, it can cause over-vitality.⁶⁸ The goal of

⁶⁶ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 1, 19-4-2018, transcript.

⁶⁷ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

⁶⁸ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 1, 19-4-2018, transcript.

diagnosis is to understand the imbalances in the body and rejuvenate the body to counteract these imbalances.⁶⁹

Because this balance is so difficult to find, one might wonder if health is truly attainable at all. After explaining the meaning of health in Ayurveda, one *Vaidya* sat back and mused, “...so strangely...you put all those parameters into current standards, everybody would be found sick.”⁷⁰ If no one can reach the standard of health in Ayurveda, one could question whether the definition is important to heed. It is only useful to the person pursuing health if one changes the way one views health and their body. Instead of viewing the body as healthy by default, one must actively pursue balance and health in order to maintain it. Although it may never be fully achieved in every aspect, the driving force of life is toward health. This introduces action instead of passivity to health:

“Ayurveda[‘s]...mainstay is not to allow diseases to creep up in the human body...it is pro-health approach. It is not a pro-disease approach, so I am not waiting for disease to happen. From that perspective, treatment is secondary in Ayurveda. Maintaining health is primary.”⁷¹

The human body is inherently ill. Health is not assumed but must be pursued. One patient said, “...if we don’t fall sick or we don’t have a problem, we are not concerned with health.”⁷² The Ayurveda argues the opposite of this. Health should be a concern at all times, regardless of a person’s bodily state. In this way, the action of health is principle to the meaning of personhood.

Mind and Body

⁶⁹ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 8, 19-4-2018, transcript.

⁷⁰ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

⁷¹ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

⁷² Patient in discussion with the author, interview 3, 22-3-2018, transcript.

The Ayurveda recognizes two dual natures of a person: the body and the mind. The physical body guides the person toward health. Whatever the body requires, a person must give; in order to know what the body requires, a person must listen. One patient explained his learning experience of awareness during his pursuit of health at Kayakalp:

“It’s a must, a person should come here [Kayakalp]. At least once to have awareness...once we have to be here...I realized here that we drink 3 or 4 liters of water every day and the intake has to be there, but I was not having that. Generally, we do not think to have water...we never paid attention to it, whether you are thirsty or not thirsty...awareness.”⁷³

Whereas a person must submit to their physical body to achieve health, one must learn to control the mind. An important theme in Ayurveda is *sabka abija jakitsa*, meaning “to win over the mind”, to remain healthy, especially as it pertains to illnesses of the mind. One patient who had come to Kayakalp for treatment of his anxiety learned that through the control of his mind he could control his illness.⁷⁴ The passivity to the needs of the body and control of the needs of the mind subtly imply the underlying nature of these two essences of a person. The body’s underlying nature is toward goodness, toward nature, toward health. The mind’s underlying nature, however, is toward chaos, pain, and disease. The mind must be controlled to allow for the body to rescue the person from the mind’s destruction. Many interviewees discussed this subtle activity and passivity, which, although subtle, drastically affects how Ayurveda ontologizes personhood. The body is pure and good; the mind can be the source of evil. One can trust their body, but one may not always trust the whims of the mind.

⁷³ Patient in discussion with the author, interview 3, 22-3-2018, transcript.

⁷⁴ Patient in discussion with the author, interview 9, 22-4-2018, transcript.

Although the mind in this sense may not always be trusted, a person's analytical mind is essential to human life. Health-seekers and doctors alike, when discussing how humans are different from animals, discuss the super-analytical brain. However, *Vaidyas* unlike health-seekers, argue that humans are essentially no different from other animals. "We are all animals," one *Vaidya* mentioned with a musing smile.⁷⁵

Behavior

Each *Vaidya* explained that each and every one of the patients they see are unique due to their *prakrti*, or subtle nature. *Prakrti* is both the composition of a person in body, soul, and mind; the natural tendency and reaction toward things; one's natural habits.^{76,77,78} The *prakrti* of a person never changes; if one is born *pitta-vata*, one will be *pitta-vata* until the day one dies. This subtle nature affects everything about a person, from how one interacts with others, to what one eats, or how one's body reacts to illness.⁷⁹ One *Vaidya* described some differences she observes between those of different *prakrti*.

"I will say that *vata* is a curious type of person. He will gain each and everything but he will not retain 100%. And *pitta* type, yes, he will try to learn most of the things, but he will not go everywhere...he will...do his work with perfection. And the *kapha* person...he is a lazy person...he will not try to learn much things."⁸⁰

The composition of the physical body also affects the way that one thinks and interacts with the world. For example, the slow movement of the blood through the *kapha* person's veins is externally represented through lazy behavior.

⁷⁵ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 1, 19-4-2018, transcript.

⁷⁸ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 8, 19-4-2018, transcript.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 8, 19-4-2018, transcript.

Although one can demonstrate the illusion of change, but that person is still fully oneself. “[*Prakrti*] can be masked through different development processes, but it is a mask. The subtle reaction will always be the same...old age, you will be a different person, but not the subtle nature.”⁸¹ If one acts in a way against one’s subtle nature, one is not truly oneself. Behavior, then, is a key pathway through which one creates meaning and ontologizes personhood.

Change and Deterioration

As discussed in background research, change is one of the few constants throughout life. “Day changes into night and night changes into more day. Seasons, they completely change...no different perspective.”⁸² The *sharira* or the Ayurvedic body, translated roughly from Sanskrit means “undergo[ing] constant, continuous destruction”.⁸³ In this sense, at every moment one’s body is deteriorating further and further; from one moment to another the physical body changes. The aging timeline in Ayurveda is divided into ten year increments, and over each decade something in the body deteriorates.⁸⁴ Death follows when the rate of deterioration supercedes the rate of regeneration. It can also happen through the aggravation and pacification of the *doshas*. Cardiac arrest in Ayurveda is a result of the weakening or pacification of the *vata dosha*. For any cause of death, one of the three *doshas* is responsible.⁸⁵ One has to accept the degeneration of the body instead of fighting it. “The problem is that one does not accept,” one *Vaidya* reflected, “mostly we do not age graciously.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 1, 19-4-2018, transcript.

⁸⁵ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 8, 19-4-2018, transcript.

⁸⁶ *Vaidya* in discussion with the author, interview 6, 27-4-2018, transcript.

In this sense, as a person ages, one does not lose any part of one's original identity. The meaning of oneself, the essence of oneself, remains the same. The definition of human does not end with the physical body, but rather extends to the mind and the soul. Although the physical body may deteriorate, the mind and soul may stay sharp. One can lose the body and retain one's personhood through the retaining of the mind and soul.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study touches the surface of the ontology of personhood, and research on this topic is far from complete. In the future, scholars with a deep understanding of the Ayurvedic texts could find scriptures and quotes to correlate with each of the ideas proposed above.

Also, the concept of semantics in the ontology of personhood could be more sufficiently explained. The study above was conducted fully in English with a few translations from Sanskrit. However, a study done in Sanskrit that includes the many translations of words from the ancient language into English would improve this field of study greatly. The meanings of words in the original language of Sanskrit will carry much more weight than individual scholar's word choice when translating from Sanskrit to English, as the original meaning is slightly marred through translation. Not only would the original Sanskrit usage strengthen the argument, but it would also clarify the true meanings of philosophy in Ayurveda without the influence of another language. For example, Mukharji argues that illness is not caused by an *imbalance* of *doshas*, but rather a *displacement* of them. The idea of imbalance of *doshas* might originate from

Greek, western philosophy, according to Mukharji.⁸⁷ An understanding of cultural context and the original language would help clarify some of these semantic tensions that inevitably arise.

CONCLUSION

The concept of philosophy in health is not often studied, but the topic is of utmost important. The nuances in language, unique perspectives on life, and the implications of these ways of thought deeply affect how a person views oneself and how they embody health. This study pursued the elusive topic of ontology of personhood in Ayurveda, and discovered ideas that can have a significant impact on a person's daily life.

In general, life implies constant tension: between good and evil, change and stagnation, deterioration and rejuvenation. This tension creates balance, and that balance brings forth health in a person's life. Balance implies constant action; otherwise, the equilibrium will fall apart. Therefore, a healthy life is an active choice, and not a passive trait.

The Ayurveda posits a unique view of the body and health. This unique view is embodied through the practice and care of *panchkarma*. In this way, ancient philosophical traditions soar from the theoretical into the tangible body. This path of embodiment applies philosophy to health, biology, healing, and care.

⁸⁷ Mukharji, "Doctoring Traditions".

APPENDIX

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Doctors:

Panchkarma

1. What do you practice at Kayakalp?
2. How long have you been practicing?
3. What do you enjoy most about your work?
4. How does Ayurveda define health?
5. What does it mean to be healthy?
6. What does illness mean?
7. What are humans made of in the Ayurvedic context?
8. What makes a person unique, or different from anyone else?
9. What makes a person different from other living things?
10. How does the Ayurvedic view of the body differ from other pathies?
11. When does a human life begin?
12. When does life end? What defines death?
13. Does a person stay themselves as they go through the Ayurveda lifespan? Do they become a different person?
14. During the aging process, at which point is someone not themselves anymore, if any?
15. What would someone have to lose to lose their identity?
16. While aging, is a person losing a part of themselves?
17. How is aging viewed in Ayurveda? What is aging?

Yoga and Naturopathy

1. What do you practice at Kayakalp?

2. How long have you been practicing?
3. What do you enjoy most about your work?
4. How is health defined in Naturopathy and Yoga?
5. What does it mean to be healthy?
6. What is illness? Where does illness come from?
7. What is disease? Who or what is to blame for disease?
8. What is a human made of in the context of Naturopathy? What is the body made of?
9. What makes a person unique, or different from other people?
10. How does the Naturopathic view of the body differ from other pathies?
11. What defines life, or human life?
12. What defines death? How does life end?
13. Is there anything about a person that will never change over the course of their life? What are those things?
14. What do you hope your patients learn over the course of treatment?
15. What do you hope your patients learn about themselves?
16. How is aging defined and discussed in Naturopathy?
17. What is the role of the mind in curing disease? What does the mind do?
18. What is the most important part of a person?

Patients:

1. Is this your first time at Kayakalp or similar treatment center?
2. Has your experience this time been different? How so?
3. What has your treatment and overall experience been like?
4. What do you enjoy? What do you find difficult?

5. What has your biggest challenge been?
6. Have you learned anything new about yourself? What did you learn?
7. What have you learned about healthy living? What are some “rules” for healthy living?
8. What were/are you seeking from treatment?
9. What home remedies do you have, if any?
10. Where did you learn about these home remedies?
11. How do you define health?
12. What makes you feel healthy?
13. What makes you feel ill?
14. Where does illness come from?
15. What makes a human unique? What makes you, you?
16. How do you define a person?
17. What makes a human distinct from other living things?
18. When thinking about changes you’ve experienced during your life, have you become a different person? What, if anything, about a person never changes?

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