

Healing Perception

The Application of the Philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to
the Theoretical Structures of Gestalt Psychotherapy

A doctoral thesis presented at the University of Derby (2002)

by

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Dedication

I gcuimhne mo thuistí
a thug gearn dom I gcónaí
ainneoin chuile rud;
go h-áirithe m'atharsa
a mhúscail ionam gearn léinn.

In memory of my parents
who always loved me no-matter-what;
especially of my father
who woke in me a love of learning.

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Glossary of Terms

Glossary of Gestalt Therapy Terms

Creative Adjustment This is the expression used in PHG to designate what happens when there is 'contact'. It is at once the act of taking up and giving out. For instance, '..... the change of attitude of a patient, when he turns his aggression from himself towards his introjects in order to assimilate them or regurgitate them, is a change of reality.' (PHG, p.276).

Parlett (2000) takes up this rich notion and enlarges it: 'Creative adjustment must also encompass the reciprocal nature of self and field process' (p.20). He develops this to show how every event admits of 'five dimensions of adjustment: responding, interrelating, self-recognising, embodying and experimenting'. His concern is primarily with creative adjustment in the *global* field.

Experiments

These are strategies which the therapist may suggest to the client in order to assist her in coming to awareness of particular attitudes or behaviours. The prototypal experiment is to ask the subject to make up a series of sentences beginning with the words: "Here-and-now I am aware that". The therapist continually relates back to what the client is aware of (Yontef 1993, p.60). The aim of the experiments is not to foster a particular behaviour or attitude but to discover it and allow it to come into awareness.

Fixed Gestalt

This is used to describe a pseudo-resolution of a problem

For instance a child experiences difficulty in receiving loving attention from his mother. But he discovers that if he acts very young – baby-talk, lisping, regressed behaviour- he receives more

attention. So, his resolution of the problem is to become a baby again and sacrifice his growing-up and independence for the sake of more attention. He gets fixed in this pattern which will take different forms as he grows up. It may even enter into his choice of marriage partner.

Gestalt Experience Cycle Gestalt therapy views every event in human life as passing through phases towards completion (Clarkson 1989, p.27). When the cycle is 'an uninterrupted flow of experience' it leads to health. The healthy cycle characterised as 'action, contact, choice and authenticity' (loc. cit. P.41).(cf H.P.pp.16;17;30-34;255;263;275) The unhealthy cycle is characterised as 'stasis, resistance, rigidity and control, often with anxiety' (Clarkson, loc. cit. p.41).

The cycle stages can be envisaged as follows (I take this from Korb, Gorrell and Van de Riet (1989, p.25):

Rest (field undifferentiated) – need emergence, sensation or arousal – Scan: awareness or thought – Choice: mobilisation of energy – Contact: movement or action – Assimilation or Rejection: awareness or thought – Satisfaction: fulfilment – Withdrawal: energy inward – Rest.

An example of the Gestalt Experience Cycle could be this: You are writing an essay on a hot summer's afternoon. You hear the ice cream van (need emergence). You would love an ice-cream (sensation). You think – 'yes, the money is there' and you choose to buy one. So you leave your desk, take the money (mobilisation of energy) – (contact) buy the ice cream and start eating it (assimilation). You return to your desk. 'Ah, that was good!' (satisfaction). Now you let go of the ice-cream delight (withdrawal) and settle back to work. This cycle marks immediate

and long term needs – such as writing a PhD. thesis. Failure to complete leaves the person with unfinished business, which can sap his or her energy.

**Immediacy,
here-and-now**

Gestalt therapy is more interested in process than in content. So the therapist is interested to note how the client carries herself, what her voice is like (is it open or withholding?), - the sense he has of her presence, the feelings that arise in him as he meets her. He notes what use she makes of the facilities in the therapy room; does she use the cushions or just accept the chair as it is and so on? This kind of ‘observation’ might easily be mistaken for intrusive spectating. The therapist will not ‘note’ his observations at the time but only later, and reflect on them. And they will concern him as much as his client. The criterion of how successful he is in this kind of immediacy will be the effect on the client. Does she feel scrutinized or does she feel seen and accepted?

Immanent

This means ‘remaining within’. Its root is the Latin verb ‘maneo’, ‘I remain’. Used in this sense it especially refers to states of consciousness, which are not adequately articulated in dialogue with ‘the world’. We must be careful here of dualistic thinking – as if the world was separate from the perceiver. Distinguish ‘immanent’ from ‘imminent’ which means to threaten, e.g. disaster is imminent; and also from ‘eminent’ which means ‘outstanding’, e.g. an eminent physician.

**Interruptions to
Contact**

Gestalt therapy views a person’s unhealthy life as being maintained in that condition at least partly by that person himself. Therapy helps the person to become aware of how he is maintaining his dysfunction. This will frequently be in terms of the way he maintains his favourite interruption to contact.

Here is a brief list of some of those interruptions. I take the names from Clarkson (1989) and the brief explanation of them from Parlett (unpublished ms. 1993). The examples are mine:

Desensitization: the person tunes out unacceptable input. ‘I can’t be bothered’.

Confluence: avoidance of facing up to disagreements and differences. ‘The more we are together the happier we will be’ (provided I submerge my identity!).

Deflection: reframing. ‘Do you love me? It depends on what you mean by “love”’.

Introjection: taking on board wholesale and unaware. Swallowing down without discernment. ‘The Bible clearly states’.

Projection: creating constructions of external reality and acting as if they were ‘true’ – not my *constructions*. ‘You’re angry at me!’

Retroreflection: Holding in, holding back. ‘What’s wrong? You’ve been silent the whole evening?’ ‘Nothing!’

Egotism: Examining navel, self-spectatoring. Woody Allen: ‘My girl and I are making great progress in our sexual relationship: last night we only twice had to consult the manual’.

All of these have their polarities – which also interrupt contact. For instance confluence interrupts contact by blotting out one’s personal identity, but the polarity is inability to go along with anything – extreme individualism.

I-Thou

One of the signal developments in Gestalt therapy since its inception in the 1950's has been the development of a clear teaching relating to Martin Buber's philosophy of I-Thou as the goal of Gestalt therapy. A great impetus was given in this direction by the pioneering work of Lynn Jacobs whose doctoral dissertation was entitled *I-Thou Relation in Gestalt Therapy* (1978). Yontef in 1981, in an unpublished but widely circulated paper which he subsequently published in 1983 (in Germany) and then again in English 1993, makes extensive use of Jacobs' dissertation. This article of Yontef places the I-Thou relationship right at the centre of Gestalt therapy. He expressly identifies I-Thou dialogue with the older nomenclature 'existential encounter'. Jacobs (1995) says: 'The I-Thou relation or dialogue can be seen as a specific form of the contacting process between two people, through which each person realises most fully his or her distinct humanity' (p.53). Notice her allusion to the text of Martin Buber (1923/1996, pp.51-52). Yontef, Hycner (1995) and Jacobs all make the point that whereas the I-Thou moment, so beautifully described in Buber's work, may not feature as an on-going event in the therapy, it is essential to Gestalt therapy that *openness* to the development of such 'between' moments features as an on-going atmosphere.

Jacobs distinguishes I-Thou and I-It relationships. The first has no correlation of use; the second has. To make the achievement of an I-Thou moment a goal is self-defeating. I-Thou is 'given'. The I-It on the other hand is easily achieved: 'We only need to fill each moment with experiencing and using, and it ceases to burn' (Buber loc. cit. p.51).

Jacobs' allusion to Buber in the quote from her 1993 chapter, is to that memorable utterance at the end of Part I when Buber says: 'And in all seriousness of truth, hear this: without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man' (loc. cit. supra). (Jacobs using the Kaufman translation, says 'human' instead of 'man'.)

**Organismic
Self-regulation**

A person in his life can be driven by a collection of 'oughts' that have buried themselves in his thinking and supply him with a series of automatic responses to situations: 'You should not be happily enjoying yourself playing with the cat and the children; you ought to be mowing the grass for your mother, now that your Dad is dead'.

The opposite of this 'shouldism' is what PHG calls 'organismic self-regulation'. The principle here is that: 'If things are let be, they will spontaneously regulate themselves; and if they have been deranged, they will tend to right themselves' (PHG, 294-5).

Yontef (1993, p.214-6) develops this notion: 'Organismic self-regulation is based on acknowledging the complete array of sensory, mental and emotional data concerning both one's internal needs and the needs of the environment, and also, the internal and environmental resources'. This notion is basic to Gestalt therapy as a process that continually adjusts itself to the reality of the client as contrasted with the imposition of some programme of self-improvement.

Splitting

When we speak of personality disorders we are speaking of people whose process of splitting has taken them to an extreme. If the way in which a person organizes the basic components of his experience becomes so fixed and inflexible that his social and

professional functioning is affected and high levels of distress are experienced, then that person is said to have developed, over time, a personality disorder. So it can happen that someone can swing from telling you that they owe their life to you and that they will hold you in gratitude for the rest of their days, to denouncing you as trying to destroy them. So, you have become demonized overnight. Such a person cannot hold the good and bad in one person together; they split themselves.

Yontef: 'In Gestalt therapy dichotomizing is considered a basic aspect of all psychopathology' (1993, p.462).

The basis of splitting is a denial or disavowal of the body – because it is through our senses that the world, good or bad, pleasant and unpleasant, gentle and rough, that we are 'in contact' with the world – and that the world is in contact with us. Kepner devotes the whole of his Body Process (1987) to this problem of the denial of embodiment. He says: 'The self and contact functions are one and the same to the Gestalt (therapy) view' (loc. cit. p.11).

Zeigarnik Effect

(Clarkson, P. 1989, p.6). Zeigarnik (1900-1988) was one of Kurt Lewin's students in the Berlin Institute of Psychology in the 1920's (Mazure, 1996, p.18). She did a famous study on the effect of the 'unfinished' on a person's life. While there is incompleteness in my life I remain uneasy - always trying to complete. For instance, unless the divorced couple have properly processed their parting they may spend many years trying to complete it under different guises, - through lawyers, messages through the children- ostensibly trying to right an injustice. The incompleteness is in the person's body who cannot bring himself to say Good-Bye – *and mean it*. This can become totally devouring of

their lives (Alvarez, A.1981, pp.25f). Without the language of Good-bye and all that means, there can be no end to mourning, because I can never take possession of my being-in-the-world.

PART TWO

A Glossary of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy

Acquired world(s) An example of an acquired world would be that of a person who knows how to play the church-organ. The body of such a person has introjected, or made its own the world of organ-playing. She can go to any church-organ anywhere and after a few minutes of adjustment she feels at home with that world.

‘An acquired world confers upon my experience its secondary meaning’(PhP.p.130;F151).

So when I chat with a friend, whom I know well, each of his remarks and each of mine contains a host of references to his character and mine, without our needing to recall previous conversations with each other.

Anonymity

This is a recurring theme in Merleau-Ponty around the experience of perception: ‘Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously’ (PhP. p.215; F249).

Merleau-Ponty explains this by placing perception as an act of the lived body: ‘In perceptionwe are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world’ (PhP p.238; F275).

The anonymity in perception marks the ever-present ‘object side’ of the act. We find, sometimes, that things are more difficult and complicated than we thought; like DIY. In our every perception we are given ‘an inexhaustible object and we are sucked into it ...’ (loc cit).

‘So if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive’ (PhP p.215; F249).

Autochthonous

This is a principle which states that the Gestalt or phenomenon organizes itself and generates its own internal coherence; the perceptual meaning, the configuration of parts with the Gestalt contexture is intrinsic to the sensuous content. Just as my body can be said to have an autochthonous significance, in that all its parts cohere in a unity, so the things ‘in the world’ have such a significance. Think of a poem and how each word, line, stanza, their position, sound and selection creates that internal coherence.

A corollary of this is the irreducibility of the Gestalt or phenomenon. If you start to explain how it is *only* an appearance – under-written by a deeper or even inaccessible reality, then the phenomenon disintegrates. The principle of autochthonous organisation is basic to holism.

Being

I follow Mallin by using ‘Being’ when I speak of Being itself, apart from its specification. A specification of Being is an instance of it - like a person; ‘being’ is when I speak of it as realized in this or that – again like a person or an animal. So, I say a tree is a ‘being’. It is just *there*: ‘That which appears to us and consciousness as universal fact’ (PhP p.397; F455).

At the same time being is that which ‘runs through me without my being the author of it’ (PhP. p.216;F250). Here it is specified.

Merleau-Ponty sometimes uses ‘being-in-truth’ for that experience of belonging-in-the-world which we call ‘primordial contact’ and

which specifies itself in our every act. For instance, if I am seeing something, then, whereas my certainty about what I see may be open to question, the fact of my seeing it is not. 'Being-in-the-truth is not different from being-in-the-world' (PhP p.395; F452).

For Merleau-Ponty 'the Being of every being is to be found in its articulations rather than in its substance or matter' (Mallin 1979 p.65). This is the manifestation and totally necessary character of Being – that it moves to uttering itself. So speech is not just an added capacity to our human nature, it is constitutive of it.

Cogito

This is Latin for 'I think'. It has been made famous by Descartes utterance '*Cogito, ergo sum*'. In his search for what he could be absolutely certain about, his meditations brought him to this point, the only thing he could be *quite sure* about. He was mistaken: it was *not* the most primitive 'experience' but is and was, in fact, content-laden and presupposes a prior or primordial contact with the world.

If Descartes' '*Cogito*' stands as the originating source for all perception, then we are each possessed of a constituting consciousness, which occupies some god-like position with regard to the world – this source must possess *previously* all the structures in itself and there is no real place for the body in the act of perception.

'Critical Problem'

This is the term applied to the question: Is the world that I perceive real? And then it is possible to ring the changes on this formulation by distinguishing 'real' e.g. Real – like, I am real? Real – like an idea is real? Real- like a dream? And so forth.

The 'critical problem' does not feature as part of Existential Phenomenology because it can only be formulated with a philosophical system which does not take its notion of perception from the way perception actually happens. For existential phenomenology, knowledge happens as *intentionality*; that is, as my movement towards the world, which is already given to me; but there can be no intentionality without a real world. So existential phenomenology cannot raise the 'critical problem' – except as 'someone else's problem' (cf Luijpen 1972, p.102).

Dasein

This term is taken from Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927/1973) and is the subject of the analysis he makes in that work. It means 'there-being' and describes the human condition. We find ourselves 'there'. (Which is an implied reference to the body.) The characteristic of Dasein (every man) is the permanent relationship of instability which continually meets him with regard to himself. His existence is always 'in the making'. 'He is fundamentally a power-to-be' (de Waelhens 1946, p.26). According to Mallin, Merleau-Ponty was very profoundly influenced by Heidegger.

Determined World

This is an example of a 'natural attitude' which thinks of the world as already set and fixed in its identity before it falls under my gaze. In this view the world and its things are all displayed before me like goods in a supermarket. It is challenged by such a simple thing as a child entering a room and seeing an armchair as a toy. The world is neither entirely just my interpretation nor entirely alien to me. Merleau-Ponty sees the world as awaiting our designation, it is 'an incomplete work'.

Existential Regions

These 'regions' I take from Mallin's comprehensive sketch of how

Merleau-Ponty conceives of Existence. It is a way of thinking about the complex act that we call perception. Not *everything* we do or get caught-up-in is primarily perceptual; but it only comes to light as part of our world when it enters 'the perceptual region'. These regions are not separate nor distinct in reality; they flow into one another and overlap; *they are ways in which we think* of our engagement with the world. Each of these four regions has its own 'primordial contact with Being' (PhP. p 221;F255).

They are the (1) cognitive/linguistic; (2) motile (3) intersubjective and (4) perceptual regions. He calls these the 'thrown regions'; one can take this, as some Gestalt therapy writers do, in the sense of the cruelty or the fecklessness of fate; or one can take it in the sense that Mallin does – following Merleau-Ponty - that a particular world is *given* to me and is almost awaiting my coming. Mallin says: 'The core idea of thrownness is that there is meaning in the world before I initiate it, but at the same time this meaning discloses my "connaturality"' (1979, p.42).

To say that I have a visual field is to say:

'That I have access to and an opening upon a system of beings, visible beings In virtue of a kind of primordial contact and through a gift of nature, with no effort on my part That I am able, being connatural with the world to discover a sense in certain aspects of being without myself having endowed them with it through any constituting operation' (PhP. p.214-7;F248).

Facticity

This term is used a lot by Heidegger (1927/73, p.82). It indicates a condition of a person that has *actually taken place* in which he/she is 'given' a situation so that they have to respond in some way. I have been brought up speaking English; it just *happened* that way

– we can imagine that it need *not* have happened that way – but once it happens, it cannot unhappen – it becomes necessary. It almost corresponds to our expression: ‘The fact of the matter is’ (and we state an irreconcilable, undeniable event).

***Fundierung* or
‘founding term’**

Where does our knowledge get its validity from? What is the bottom line for all our theoretical constructs?

Merleau-Ponty makes use of this concept of *fundierung* or founding term. He calls it ‘a meeting of the human and non-human’ (PhP p.403; F462).

What is it that actually roots our dialogue in reality?

‘It is consciousness at the level of perception ...’, ‘the silence that is prior to expression and categorical (using concepts) thought’ (Dillon 1992, p.195). Note that this silence is not emptiness but fullness; it is an opening upon the world which is given me in my body (how else?). The silence is my presence to myself simultaneous with my presence to the world and the world’s presence to me. Dillon describes this as a relationship of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ (loc. cit.). It is similar to father and son. The father ‘founds’ the son; so the son is founded; but the father could not be a father without the son. Similarly, our knowledge gets its validity from the world; but the world would not be a world without us. Such is the closeness of our union with the world, which is given us in our bodies.

Given

Merleau-Ponty very frequently uses this term in conjunction with the ‘anonymity’, ‘opaqueness’ of perception. It really amounts to ‘thrownness’. It always involves a situation which implies a response to otherness. This expression articulates Merleau-Ponty’s teaching that even our most developed knowledge ultimately

derives from our senses-in-contact-with-the-world (Mallin 1978, p.41).

Hermeneutics

Hermes was the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology. He not only repeated their message *verbatim*, but took it on himself to interpret the message. This describes the twofold task of hermeneutics: accuracy of text and discovery of meaning (cf Bleicher 1980, p.11). This science of textual reading and interpretation grew up first of all, as a result of the Reformation in the 16th Century; thereafter it was very much focused on the reading of sacred texts, particularly the Bible. It has a bearing on Gestalt therapy through its importance in existential phenomenology (cf Brooke 1993, p.8). Every metaphor, every image, every poem, every phenomenon reveals and conceals at the same time. The tension between revelation and concealment is the business of existential phenomenology. So it is we get ‘the hermeneutic circle’; this is a method of carefully describing the phenomenon by returning repeatedly ‘to the phenomenon so that it may show itself in ever deeper, richer and more subtle ways’ (Brooke 1993, p.31). This involves constantly bracketing one’s own prejudices and theories, and allowing oneself to be constantly corrected and taught by the phenomenon.

Intentionality

In phenomenology this word designates *knowledge itself* – it signifies ‘reach-out-to-and-receiving-from’ the world. Knowledge in phenomenology is not viewed as a storing up of images, ‘but the *immediate* presence of the subject as a kind of “light” to a present reality’. The world resides in me through my movement towards it.

You buy yourself a new toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste; you unwrap them and bring them to the bathroom. As you mount the

stairs you picture the old toothbrush and the old squeezed-out tube of toothpaste and an intention forms itself in you: 'I'll put them both in the bin'. That *intention* informs your body as you go to the bathroom. Your body prepares itself for the action of binning the old toothbrush and tube. Intentionality makes this action possible.

So here is a way of conceiving of the lived body, a potentiality for a host of possible projects. This is why Merleau-Ponty says that I am given to myself as an 'I can' rather than as an 'I am' (PhP.p.137;F160).

Intentionality is almost indistinguishable from the existential region of motility:

'My body is a movement towards the world and the world my body's point of support' (PhP p.350; F402). As soon as I turn myself in a particular direction, for example, to speak to someone, then every cell in my body begins to make ready for that project.

A speech therapist working with someone who experiences swallowing difficulties, will coach the person how to form an intention of swallowing. The preparation of the swallowing mechanism *takes time*, and to surprise it could result in the person suffering a severe episode of choking.

Intersensory

This term we apply to the continual flow of information that goes on between the sense functions. Empirical studies have shown that there is continuous communication between the cells of our body. This is well documented in Rossi (1993).

Lived Body

This is the human body, carrying as it does all the adornments and limitations that characterize our bodies. The lived body carries the whole of our history and the inherited history of our family and friends and relations. It is not the mechanical body of the institute of physiology, nor the idealized body of Greek sculpture. Such conceptions of the body do not carry the intentions of a person around his projects. The institute body and the ideal sculpture body do not inhere in the world.

The lived body is at once reflection on its situations and spontaneously responsive. It is impossible to comprehend so long as 'mind' is in anyway distanced from flesh and 'so long as immanence and transcendence are regarded as mutually exclusive' (Dillon 1997, p.131 ft nt.). In other words the lived body is the resolution of the problem of dualism which has plagued psychotherapy since its beginning; one could say that to experience myself as a lived body is itself psychotherapy.

Natural Attitude

This is Merleau-Ponty's expression – taken from Husserl, to describe that collection of beliefs about the world which a person has before they engage with phenomenology. He references these at length (PhP p.70-71; F84-85). The natural attitude is expressed as "I and my surrounding world":

'My recent awareness of my gaze as a means of knowledge, I now repress, and treat my eyes as bits of matter. They then take their place in the same objective space in which I am trying to situate the external object. My duration (becomes) an abstract aspect of universal time, as my body is a mode of objective space'.(loc.cit. supra)

‘... Although it is presented to me from my own subjective first person singular point of view, I am myself a member of this world. The physical objects and other conscious beings within it exist whether I am conscious of them or not ...’ (Priest, 1998, p.18).

‘Noumena’

This is Kant’s term for the realities that are totally inaccessible to our experience. He contrasts them with the ‘phenomena’ that we do experience. This view of perception is not congenial to Gestalt therapy because it means our sense of immediacy around clients is an illusion.

Ontology

This is the study of entities under the aspect of their being or existing. This contrasts with the study of things under the aspect of their utility. An example of the first is Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in which the human being features as ‘Dasein’; an example of the second is the study of agriculture.

I go along with Mallin’s distinction (p40 ft.note 21) in that METAPHYSICS includes ontology ‘but ties this study to further investigation of being itself’.

Opaqueness

If you look at an orchid and hold your gaze and wonder at the flower then you may experience, after some time, that it is going away from you; that there is so much of it there, that you cannot take it in. This is an experience of the opaqueness that characterizes ‘otherness’. What happens when we perceive anything is that we are seeing in it an aspect of the world as a whole. The structures of your senses, your vision, smell, feel, are held enthralled by the structures in the orchid. They are both the self-same, and have obtained throughout the world and were laid down in you during your history.

**Phenomenal Field/
World**

This is a concept central to the thought of Merleau-Ponty. It is the world or field of real things and people – in contrast to the objective world, which is the object of scientific investigation. The phenomenal world is that in which ‘the light of a candle changes its appearance for a child when, after a burn, it stops attracting the child’s hand and becomes literally repulsive’ (PhP p.52; F64). This is in contrast to that world in which the light of the candle is explained in terms of chemical interaction at a high temperature; and in which the child’s response is explained in terms of psychological response.

In the phenomenal world: ‘Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (sense) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence’ (loc. cit). A mark of the phenomenal world is that the body features centrally in every event as the foundation, source and reference point of all meaning. The world is constantly viewed from the point of view of the lived body. A landscape, a body, a face is seen as ‘gay’, ‘lively’, ‘sad’, ‘dreary’, ‘coarse’ or ‘elegant’. In the phenomenal world, anger and pain is read in the face of the person, the essence of ‘religion’ is seized in some hesitation or reticence; the temper of a city is picked up and recognised ‘in the attitude of a policeman or the style of a public building’ (PhP p.23-24; F32-33).

Primordial

Merleau-Ponty attaches this adjective to ‘space’, ‘world’ and ‘contact’. It describes a state before the first act of perception. He says ‘we are already at work in a world’ and a sense of space has been ‘already acquired’ (PhP. p.254;F293). ‘It is necessary that my first perception and my first hold on the world appears to me as the

execution of a most ancient pact between X and the world in general' (loc.cit.).

This primordial contact is 'pure presence and contact with Being' (Mallin, 1979, p.57). 'I am here now' – how do I justify that or find something more sure or basic than that: I cannot. This is one of those certainties so simple that I cannot analyse it further to justify it. By saying this I am declaring my inherence in Being, my belonging in the world. I can neither doubt nor justify my 'given' facticity.

Reductionism

In an effort to simplify extremely complex material a person may seek to explain it all 'in terms of'. So, in an effort to explain the extremely complex condition known as 'schizophrenia' someone may wish to 'simplify' matters by explaining it in terms of 'chemical imbalance'. Another example of reductionism was the project of John Dewey, (who heavily influenced Paul Goodman), to explain perception in terms of biology (Dewey, 1920/1991, ch.4).

Self

This is the traditional name for an awareness of a world structure. It is that which Descartes 'contacted' in his famous meditation. It is what Goodman reaches in those opening words of Book 2 of *Gestalt Therapy*. This is the language of consciousness, of immanence. The tendency is to omit the body or leave it 'outside'.

When Merleau-Ponty says: 'The acts of the *I* are of such a nature that they outstrip themselves leaving no interiority of consciousness' (PhP 376;F431), he is at once denying and positing that immanence (Dillon, 1997, p.102). In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was still struggling with the problem of

how to talk about ‘consciousness’/awareness without slipping back into dualism. He acknowledges this in a later work: *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968, p.200). It was only gradually that he came to see that consciousness, the soul, the psyche, the thinking self, are abstract words describing modalities of the lived body (cf Dillon, 1997, p.102ff).

Tacit Cogito

Dillon (1997, p.104) calls this: ‘(The) reflexivity intrinsic to perception.’ It is the ‘founding term’ in the *Phenomenology*- that which gives rootedness to our perception and to our speech. It can be seen as the ‘connecting point’ with the world. And it is not a point at all. Dillon calls it: ‘the silence that is prior to expression and categorial thought. This silence receives the name “tacit cogito” ’(loc.cit. p.195).

In order that I perceive something there has to be a ‘not-me’. I do not coincide with the chair I am sitting on; it is at once resisting me and incorporated by me. Now, I notice that while I am perceiving the resistance of the chair I cannot be aware of myself; while I am feeling that resistance I cannot be aware of myself as the subject of that resistance. So there is here a hidden self-awareness – otherwise there could not be a me/not me experience which constitutes the resistance. This is what Merleau-Ponty is talking about when he says ‘every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously’ ‘Tacit cogito’ is therefore the silent presence of the me in every perception (PhP p.215; F249).

Thetic

This is the adjective of ‘thesis’. A ‘thetic utterance’ will mean: an utterance carrying a proposition or constituting the start of a position.

Transcendence

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, transcendence designates both the openness of the subject to the world – this is active transcendence; and the opaqueness of the world – which is inseparable from its reality (Dupond, 2001, p.59 ; PhP p.376; F431).

I go out into the garden and all the flowers and trees show themselves to me and I wonder. And I think of all the mysterious activity that is going on in that oak tree, that I know nothing about. This active transcendence means that it belongs to my very existence to enter situations and *transform* them. This happens, for instance, when lovers transform one another.

The World/The Earth

Merleau-Ponty conceives the world as the ever-present horizon of all our perceptual acts. It is like a vast individual, who stands there as a guarantor of our personal acts, the ‘ground’ of our existence. He also sees it as ‘an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication’ (PhP p.71;F85). In this awkward expression he is endeavouring to avoid making you the spectator, and the world the spectated. This is because he is concerned to emphasize our belongingness, our attachment to the world, as the only home we have. In one of his celebrated *Pensées*, Pascal shows that in one way I understand the world, and in another the world understands me. We must add that it is in the same way: ‘.....and this finally is because I am situated in the world and it understands me’ (PhP p.408; F467).

Dillon’s translation of ‘*comprendre*’ as ‘comprehend’ appeals to me more than Smith’s ‘understand’ because when I say the world ‘comprehends me’ it can have the nuance of ‘shared flesh’, the world shares its stuff with me. Fifteen years after the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception* (i.e. 1969), Merleau-Ponty returns

to the theme of grounding. He says that one of the effects of the opening up of the universe of Copernicus is to have made people forgetful of the earth. 'Through meditation we must again learn a mode of being whose conception (Copernicus man) has lost, the being of the 'ground' (Boden), and that of the Earth first of all – the earth where we live, that which is this side of rest and movement, being the ground from which all rest and movement are separated, which is not made out of *Körper*, being the 'source' from which they are drawn through division, which has no 'place', being that which surrounds all places, which lifts particular beings out of nothingness, as Noah's Ark preserved living creatures from the flood' (in Madison, 1981, p.213)

Preface

The study that follows is my own work. The central idea of the study – the application of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy – was conceived by me in 1996 and apart from one year ‘out’ I have worked at it steadily since that time. It is not a solo work, in that I was very ably assisted by my supervisors, and others; but the central idea, the structure, material and elaboration of the study is entirely mine. What I submit here has not been submitted previously by me for any award nor has any part of it been so submitted.

It is an unusual study in that it straddles two quite separate and specialized disciplines: psychotherapy (Gestalt) and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. So, to meet the difficulty of someone reading this who lacks a knowledge of either discipline, I have made two arrangements.

At the start of the thesis, the section immediately preceding this Preface, I have inserted a Glossary in two parts. This is of Terms covering approaches of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and Gestalt therapy. This is also intended to prevent too much fragmentation of the text by my having to break off to explain terms. The reader can use it as little or as much as he/she likes. It does not form part of the text of the Thesis.

The second arrangement is to insert a brief account of Gestalt Therapy and of Merleau-Ponty. This forms Appendix B. Or if one prefers it, there is an extended account of Gestalt therapy in the Chapter ‘Foundations’ (p.134ff).

Two texts feature a great deal in the Thesis and I have taken the liberty of referencing them by abbreviations.

'*Gestalt Therapy*' is commonly taken as the founding text of Gestalt therapy. It was first published in 1951 and authored by Fritz Perls, Ralph Heffertine and Paul Goodman. For this text I use the abbreviation PHG and a page number referencing to the 1973 edition.

I have confined my study of Merleau-Ponty almost exclusively to his major work '*Phenomenology of Perception*' (1945/1979). I abbreviate this (PhP.p.....;F....). 'F' gives the page in the French version by Gallimand: *Phénoménologie de la Perception* which has retained the same pagination since 1945. Whenever I write 'mt' outside a bracket; this indicates that I have preferred my own translation to that of Colin Smith, which I ordinarily use. The same holds for other texts available only in French.

Usually I shall write references by citing the author's surname, the year of publication and a page number. If the reference is to the *theme* of a book with recurrent references throughout the book, then I shall usually omit to specify a particular page, e.g. (Sartre, 1992).

Generally I shall give initials only when I need to distinguish between authors of the same name, e.g. Richardson, J.P. and Richardson, W.J.

Cross references within the study itself will generally take this form: (cf H.P. p...)

Further references to the same will be indicated in the usual way "et passim".

Wherever in the text I refer with detail to clients, this is not a breach of confidentiality. I have received written permission to do this from the clients involved who have seen and possess a copy of the text relevant to them. Their permission is expressly limited to this study.

Thesis Abstract

The Application of the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to the Theoretical Structures of Gestalt Psychotherapy.

This is the first time such an extensive application has been attempted. The thesis argues that Gestalt therapy as a modality of perception, can best come to a recognition of itself in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. That Gestalt therapy requires such a support is apparent right from its flawed foundation in the writings of Paul Goodman. Its weak philosophical foundation has diverted its development away from the *lived body*, impoverished its view of phenomenology, constrained its language so that the articulation of its theoretical structures lacks depth, left it vulnerable to the distortions of post-modern constructivism, rendered unclear the domain *proper* to it as a psychotherapy, and bequeathed to those who would work to construct a consistent, organic and cohesive theoretical structure, an impossible task.

The epistemological foundation of the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy is to be found in what Merleau-Ponty calls 'primordial contact' or belief. This is that timeless pre-conceptual 'moment', when, without theme or image, a world begins to form itself about me. In this 'moment' I experience myself as 'given' to me in my body. This primordial experience of givenness is henceforth the ever-present anchorage of all subsequent experience. It is this which authenticates the therapist's immediacy to his/her client which constitutes the dialogue between them as healing.

The argument in the thesis hinges upon the congeniality between Gestalt therapy and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: they are both experiential, radically holistic and centred upon the *lived body*. They both claim to transcend the subject/object, mind/body dualism and view the human being in his/her embodiment as *the Gestalt*, actualizing being-in-the-world. The thesis demonstrates how, with the application of four key concepts from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy –

intentionality, anonymity, transcendence and intersubjectivity – there emerge new horizons of understanding for such Gestalt therapy concepts as field theory, immediacy, holism, personal relationship and the body as a carrier of our history. Such an application also reveals to us the ‘phenomenal field’ as the domain of operation *proper* to a therapy of bodily presence, awareness and exploration.

The thesis concludes that the development of Gestalt therapy theory lies in a more profound development of its phenomenology along the lines of the analysis made by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Such a direction will at once correct its list towards scientism, and the penchant for involvement in distracting philosophical debates. The thesis also points up the need for development at the training level of *skills in reflection* upon the experiential learning of the Gestalt therapy concepts, the paramount importance of relationship between trainers and trainees based upon an exacting personal authenticity and transparency.

Key words: anonymity, authenticity, awareness, field perspective, Gestalt, givenness, holism, intentionality, lived body, phenomenal field, phenomenology, presence, reductionism, subjectivity, transcendence, truth,

Acknowledgements

I wish first of all to acknowledge the support of my dear wife Rosemary, who stood by me as a strong encourager and with whom I was able to discuss and share the problems and insights of this study. In her own right she is a speech therapist of consummate skill and international reputation and her influence will be manifest in my chapter on expressive speech. Together we carried some very difficult times.

To my excellent supervisors, Professor Gwen Wallace, Gordon Riches (my director of studies) and Professor Malcolm Parlett, my humble gratitude. They were generous and caring beyond my expectation. Sometimes because of my immersion (even submersion) in the material, it took me a while to appreciate the wisdom of their advice, guidance and support, but then, when I learned to come up for air, I could appreciate the value of their supervision and follow it.

I wish to acknowledge my trustworthy and enormously resourceful secretary, Marion Smith, who tirelessly laboured over my emendations and helped bring to birth this volume from a great deal of disorder.

And also, Phil. Storey, of Microtex, who taught me almost everything I know about computers and who kept vigil like some guardian angel over the production.

Thank you also to my clients who so generously allowed me to make use of confidential material in the course of this study. I have, of course, made some changes in that material to guard against chance identification.

My Gestalt colleagues of the Writers Workshop at Syracuse in Sicily in 2001, especially Georges Wollants (Belgium), Eva Titus (Belgium) and Gordon Wheeler (USA) for their welcome and encouragement when I presented my paper at the Workshop. An outstanding influence on me during all these years has been Malcolm Parlett. As Editor of

the British Gestalt Journal and himself an inspired Gestalt trainer and therapist. He moved me to write up my material and publish in the Journal.

To Professor Peter Figueroa of Southampton University my thanks. He shared with me his personal experience of the philosopher whose lectures he attended in Paris. Professor Figueroa was generous and wise in his advice at difficult times.

It was Dr Jim Morley of the American University in London, who first introduced me to Professor Mike Dillon and the Merleau-Ponty Circle. He opened the door on a new and exciting world for me. My thanks.

I wish to acknowledge my friend David Leech of Cambridge University, himself preparing his own doctoral thesis. He, my one-time pupil, has now become my colleague. We spent many hours discussing 'the philosopher'; and together we memorably went on the 'pilgrimage' to Merleau-Ponty's home-town of Rochfort-sur-Mere, where we enjoyed such a warm welcome.

I wish to acknowledge Fr Brendan Duddy, S.J. and the Librarian at the Milltown Park Institute of Theology and Philosophy who very kindly facilitated my use of the library.

As a part-time student living in the Wirral, I had occasion to do business at a distance with the staff in the research office at the University of Derby. I found them always most helpful and courteous. Thank you

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Healing Perception

**An Application of the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as set down in his
Phénoménologie de la Perception to the theoretical Structures of Gestalt
Psychotherapy.**

PART I

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter Preview

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Section One: What this Study is about

The Originality and Scope of the Thesis

The originality of the thesis consists in this: that it is a beginning and first attempt to support the theory of Gestalt therapy practice with an adequate and congenial philosophy. For this purpose I have chosen the phenomenological analysis of perception by a leading European philosopher: Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

I make no claim to be promoting standards of clinical practice. Nor do I think that my way is the *only* way to found Gestalt therapy in a philosophy. What I offer is a way to a more profound understanding of the theoretical structures which underlie the clinical practice of Gestalt therapy. I do this by elaborating the meaning of these constructs in the light of those elaborations made by Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenological analysis of perception (1945/1979). 'A more profound understanding' arises when we lead the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy back to derivation from that *primordial belief in the world*, where Merleau-Ponty places the ultimate rootedness or foundation of all meaning and rationality. *The locus of this is the lived body*. It is in such an analysis that we 'thicken' and substantiate the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy. (*l'épaisseur*: PhP.p.238;F275). Whereas, there have been many attempts to unpack the meaning carried by the Gestalt theoretical structures (and I shall refer to and acknowledge these works), there has not been - so far as I have been able to ascertain - any sustained application of the reflective philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to Gestalt therapy theory, especially at the level of pre-personal existence.

I say it is a 'beginning' because I am aware of how *incomplete* my study must be. I know, for instance, that in his later and posthumously published works Merleau-Ponty becomes critical of his earlier work and carries forward the insights of the *Phénoménologie de la Perception* in ways that are ever-so-promising for the Gestalt therapy theorist.

Merleau-Ponty - A Congenial Philosopher

My choice of Merleau-Ponty is something I have come to gradually, over the years. It arises from my practice as a Gestalt therapist, my study of Gestalt therapy literature and my ever-growing interest in Merleau-Ponty. As I came to discern a gap in the Gestalt therapy literature, I began to realize that this could be adequately met by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. This gap is the absence in the literature of any connection with that realm of preconceptual experience, which Merleau-Ponty demonstrates as the basis of all perception. That realm is present to me at every moment in my body and undergirds my whole perceptual life. As soon as I began to think of the Gestalt theoretical structures as deriving from and informed by my body in this way, I found that my appreciation of the meaning of what I was doing as a Gestalt therapist was *substantially enriched*. I would describe it as adding a dimension of depth to my understanding.

I found between the therapy and the philosophy a hugely promising *congeniality*: Gestalt therapy is a *body-centred therapy* and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is a *body-centred philosophy*. A salient characteristic of Gestalt therapy is its consistent refusal to go along with the traditional dualism of subject and object, to split the person into body and mind, to make a sharp division between client and therapist, to speak as if there was an interior and an exterior person. The Gestalt therapist invokes phenomenology as the agent of this holism. Merleau-Ponty, as is apparent even in the very lay-out of his *Phénoménologie*, never wavered in making the lived-body the centre of his work; his unrelenting polemic against Empiricism and especially against Idealism, from which emerges much of his own positive teaching, is, primarily, showing the inability of these systems to account for the *body's role in perception*. We shall see in the course of this study, that none of the main concepts of Gestalt therapy can be made meaningful except as *operative in a living person*. Part of my project in this study is to take those concepts and, by informing them with the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, unpack the rich layers of meaning that they carry. The primary insight, emerging over the years from the anguished process of my study, is *the over-riding centrality of the lived body* as the focus not only of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty but of the theoretical foundations of Gestalt therapy. My demonstration of this is, I believe, an original contribution.

The Thesis Title Explained

When commentators like Dillon (1997, p.51) say that the whole of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is built around the ontological principle of the primacy of the phenomenon and its epistemological correlate the primacy of perception, this means for Gestalt therapy theory that *the* phenomenon is the *lived bodies* of the client and of the therapist in their meeting; and the epistemological correlate of this primary phenomenon is what we call 'therapy', the dialogic world that constitutes 'the between' of these two people. To state this in another way: the reality for me, a Gestalt therapist, is this person before me. The correlate or response to this is not primarily my learning and knowledge, but my embodied presence with, to and for that person. Together we co-create an event. *It is in the certainty, in the authenticity, in the truth of this meeting that the healing happens.* It is this dialogic contact in their shared world, an *embodied* meeting, that heals not only the client but the therapist also. This meeting is primarily in the perceptual realm of our being. And this is why I title my thesis 'Healing Perception'.

The Ontological Dimension of Gestalt Therapy Theory

Some people are inclined to switch-off when they hear the word 'ontology'. But, in my study it is a very important word, because it is the ontological aspect that thickens and enriches our understanding of the theory. I take 'ontology' in the sense of a 'meaning-making' process; that is to say *an explanation of the living person/event in terms that transcend the singularity of that particular person/event.*¹ That which transcends the singularity of every event and person is Being, the act of existence itself, which 'runs through' us (PhP.p.216;F250), and maintains each of us as a cohesive entity yet inextricably binds us up with all the rest. Such a general aspect we call 'ontological'. The

¹ Here I speak of 'ontology' because I wish to draw attention to the Being that 'runs through' us. For Heidegger, as for Merleau-Ponty, 'Ontology is possible only as phenomenology' (in Richardson, W.J., 1963, p.46-7)

benefit of an ontological view is that it gathers everything into a Gestalt and enables us to see the astonishing connectedness of our world, where we belong and how we fit together in ourselves and with everything else. It is somewhat like viewing a tree in a field against the background of the bright blue sky of a Summer's morning and a clear horizon. In such a view, nothing of that tree is dismissed or 'factored out'; truly, there are many aspects of that tree that we do not focus on - its smell, the feel of its bark, the beautiful texture of the leaves and so on; but yet we carry these forward as part of the tree in its world-setting; we see its figure as it stands out against the horizon, how it reaches for the light and how it fits in with all the rest round about it and belongs in the world. An ontology of Gestalt therapy theory allows us to view it under the aspect of Being, the foundations in which it is rooted, the trajectory of its dynamic, its context in the world, its built-in contradictions and anomalies. Such an ontology is available in the analysis of Merleau-Ponty. He views the realization - the *becoming real* of these abstractions - as constituting the lived body of the person before me. It is *from* such a 'clotting' of Being that all our thought derives, and *to it* that all our thought returns for validation. And that *becoming real* applies every bit as much to me as it does to the person before me. My reality is invoked by him, just as his is invoked by me. And this *bodily* phenomenon is primary because everything else derives from this phenomenon which is *given* to me as my *only* access to reality.

Section Two: Overview

An Overview of the Three Parts

Part I: consists of an Introduction and four chapters. My concern here is twofold: I want to introduce the reader to the conjunction of these two different realms of discourse – Gestalt therapy and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. For readers who are unfamiliar with one or other of these two realms, it will be a little like learning a new language; so, I try to explain the terms, I use illustrations and repetitions. Secondly, I want in this section to enter the problem areas of Gestalt therapy so that the reader gets a sense of

purpose behind my study. I endeavour all the time to maintain focus on the centrality of the body in Gestalt therapy and in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

Part II: deals with the foundational literature of Gestalt therapy and the foundational concept of Field Theory. I do this in three chapters. I devote a long chapter to discussing the ‘originating text’ as Robine calls it. In this chapter, I draw attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the supporting philosophy in the classic text. Following this is a two-section chapter (7): In section one we look at the actual practice of body-centred work in Gestalt therapy. In section two I detail some recent good theoretical work by outstanding Gestalt writers; I allow the reader herself to judge how much the ‘lived body’ actually features in the work and then I take up some of what the writers have said and take it forward in the light of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis. The last chapter in this Part is particularly important; it deals with the meaning and importation of Field Theory into Gestalt therapy. At present, I notice that development and growth in Gestalt therapy theory, is centred upon this area. Field Perspective is the growing edge of Gestalt therapy at present.

Part III: The earlier material places us in a better position to explore those views of Merleau-Ponty which directly affect the theoretical structures underpinning Gestalt therapy. This Section is a formal application of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to Gestalt therapy theory. I do this in two chapters: Ch.9: The Body Situated and Ch.10 Action and Presence.

The first of these is a closer phenomenological view of the body as the vehicle of our being-in-the-world and the *locus* of operation of Gestalt therapy. It is here that I deal with ‘situatedness’ the special ontological status of every one and everything in the world. This leads us to the Phenomenal Field, which yields everything (and more) that the Gestalt therapists want to borrow from Lewin.

In the second of these chapters we return again to the flaw at the basis of Gestalt therapy philosophy: a failure to experience the givenness of the body. Such a lapse has got in the way of Gestalt therapy theory availing itself of a group of phenomenological ideas. There are four cardinal concepts from Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the perceptual region of

existence, and I explain each at greater length than previously, as applied to Gestalt therapy theory: Intentionality, Anonymity, Transcendence and Intersubjectivity (feeling). I call them ‘cardinal’ because they are the hinges upon which hangs the door to a richer understanding of Gestalt therapy theory. (I will already have given definitions/ descriptions of these so they will not come completely new to the reader).

Connected with these Chapters is Appendix A. There I propose an analysis and resolution of the problem of why sexual intrusion may wreak such unbounded havoc in a person’s life.

This Appendix profoundly challenges the ‘objective’ view of trauma and endeavours to demonstrate how the injury happens at the preconceptual level, a primordial body-level, and therefore calls for therapy to operate at such a level – the level of the lived body.

An Ontological Study

It is my experience as I read much of the standard writing on Gestalt therapy that they have very little to do with what I am about in this study. As I read Mackewn (1997) and notice the acuity of her observations, the practicality of her theorizing – how real and immediate she makes the process of psychotherapy – it seems to me as if I am, in my study, moving in a different universe of discourse. And then she will say something like : ‘A person is at all times a whole person, whose body, emotions, thoughts and perceptions function interrelatedly as one complex relation’ (loc.cit.p.43). Then I know that this is precisely related to what I am addressing in this study. In this opening sentence of her section on Holism, she is proposing a view of the world and of our relationship with the world, in fact, a ‘phenomenology of perception’, which calls for ontological validation – i.e. that what she says makes meaning, is of a piece with our general experience and enables us to make sense of our lives. People are speaking psychologically, when they speak of events in terms of events of similar kind, like explaining sight in terms of the retina and images imprinted thereon. They are speaking ontologically when they relate events to our being-in-the-world ; this is the level of my study.

The Use of Illustrations and Metaphors

The very nature of this study, which is aimed at a quite limited and specialized audience in the Gestalt therapy world, dictates that I speak very abstractly at times making use of terms unfamiliar to people unacquainted with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. These terms are important because they allow us entry to the domain of phenomenology and ontology. There are also other terms, which may seem to be familiar but which call for expanded exploration in the context of this study. In both of these situations I need to come from a place well-understood by my Gestalt therapy hearers; and therefore, I draw upon my experience as a practising Gestalt therapist to illustrate the enlargement of understanding. This may seem simple but, in fact, it can bring difficulties with it. Every example I cite, every metaphor I depict, will, of necessity, be an *interpretation* and every application a *further* interpretation of an event which admits of an *indefinite number* of interpretations. This is because we are here dealing with the indeterminate nature of the existence that is given to us. Like Adam and the animals, the world waits upon our word to *become* what we call it.

I am very aware that the philosophies of 'deconstruction' which critique the meaning of meaning, would leave very little of this thesis - so packed with interpretations, so presumptive of the possibility of what James Joyce in his Catholic way calls 'the epiphany of being' - undemolished. I am very aware that to approach this study with a too critical attitude will make the understanding of it even more difficult than it need be. There is no example that does not limp and every event admits of an indefinite number of interpretations.

It is time now for me to let the reader have a clear and brief formulation of the core of this thesis.

A Concise Formulation of the Problem I am Addressing

Gestalt therapy is a body-centred existentialist psychotherapy. It breaks new ground in that it is also radically holistic. That is to say, it treats a person not as a 'problem-case' but as totality, a Gestalt in herself and also as organically related to the world and other

people. As an existentialist therapy it shares with the other therapies those concepts and values well-rooted in the Existentialist philosophy tradition (cf Yalom, 1980, pp.18-19). As a holistic therapy, which in no way accepts the mind/body dualism and is based upon a vision or belief in the unity of people with one another and with the environment, its foundations are flawed. It is in the context of establishing the epistemological basis of Gestalt therapy in Ch.3 that I begin to explain this flaw in the analysis.

This flaw is to be seen in the formulation of its *point de départ*, its first principle, so often cited by Gestalt therapy writers and taken from the writings of Paul Goodman. This formulation is an *observer's point of view*, which omits a primordial, unspecified, preconceptual experience of the *body as given*. I shall elaborate more upon this in Ch.6: Foundations.

The consequences of this flaw show themselves directly or indirectly in five ways:

1. A forgetfulness of the centrality of the body. This I treat of in Ch. 7 Section Two: *The Body Eclipsed*. A limited use of phenomenology as an instrument of investigation. This is featured in Ch. 4. *Phenomenology* and also in Ch. 8 *The Field*
2. A tendency on the part of Gestalt writers to be blown about by philosophical trends and fashions. Some of these trends – like Constructivism, carry an important message but, as promulgated and promoted, Constructivism does not seem to me, congenial to the support of the Gestalt therapy project. This I deal with in Ch.3 *Epistemology for Gestalt Therapists*.
3. A lack of serious engagement with the problems and possibilities of language in therapy; and here again a tendency to be pulled into unhelpful philosophical debate. (By 'unhelpful' I mean what is not conducive to that 'between' which I spoke of earlier.) I treat of this in Ch. 5. *Language*.
4. Gestalt therapists sometimes experience difficulty in discerning their historical foundations – what they must keep and what they must discard of those principles and practices taught by the founders of Gestalt. This leads to difficulties between different 'schools' of Gestalt therapists. (Wheeler (1998A pp.v-xxi; Yontef, 1993, pp.343ff). I treat of this question in Ch. 6 *Foundations*.
5. Its flawed philosophical foundations gets in the way of the organic development of Gestalt therapy theory. In its own understanding of phenomenology it does not find

the wherewithal to develop and enlarge the rich notion of field. Therefore, its theoreticians have gone and borrowed notions from other disciplines whose approach may not be congruent with Gestalt therapy. An example of this is its borrowing the elaboration of the notion of intersubjectivity from Martin Buber. It seems to me, however, that Buber's philosophy is *congruent* with Gestalt therapy theory. However, the same cannot be said for the approach of Kurt Lewin. From Lewin, the founder of Social Psychology, Gestalt therapy theory has taken the notion of Field Theory. I have not dealt with the Buber borrowing – which I think, has enormously enriched Gestalt therapy. With regard to the borrowing of the notion of Field from Lewin, I explain at length how Field perspective - once we see it as *centered in the lived body* - is implicit in the holistic phenomenology of Gestalt therapy. This I deal with in Ch. 8: *Field Perspective*.

Why Merleau-Ponty?

The above schema may sound as if I am about to be very negative about Gestalt therapy theorists and what they say. The reader will not find it so at all. I have stated it in this negative way, in order to give point and direction to my study. What the reader will find is that I state what the theoreticians have said, and then, appreciating it, *I take it forward* in the light of the deeper analysis. This application is not with a view to showing up the weaknesses of Gestalt therapy theory but to showing how its great richness can be taken forward² to new hinterlands of insight and understanding.

This study proposes to address these difficulties by the application of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to the Gestalt therapy theory structures. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy brings to Gestalt therapy a thoroughly Existentialist background, which, unlike that of J.P. Sartre, is supportive of the Gestalt (cf Langer, 1989, p.152). These two philosophers, for obvious reasons, are sometimes bracketed together (eg Wheeler, 2002) whereas, from a Gestalt therapy point of view, they are poles apart (Stewart (ed.) 1998, *passim*).

² The reader will understand that whenever I use the expression 'taking forward' – which I do frequently – I am talking about the application of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy.

One of the things, which could most highly recommend Merleau-Ponty to Gestalt therapist, is the fact that the pivotal centre of his philosophy is the lived body. To open *Phenomenology of Perception* at random and read it, one finds almost inevitably that one is reading about the *lived body*. Even more impressive for a beginner, would be a cursory read through the *Table des Matières* at the back of the French edition, alas, not reproduced for English readers, even in the millennium edition of the translation.³

Merleau-Ponty has faced-up-to and resolved, in a way congenial to Gestalt therapy theory, the haunting problem of dualism, the split between mind and body. ‘The missing term that resolves the contradiction, for Merleau-Ponty at least, is the lived body.’ (Dillon, 1997, p.105). This problem is most important for resolution in some way by all psychotherapists; if a psychotherapist treats a patient/client from a philosophy which accepts this split then he will (unwittingly, I’m sure,) be reinforcing the very world-view that undergirds the patient’s psychopathology.

Merleau-Ponty’s epistemology is body-based and supportive of Gestalt therapy. It arises out of his on-going controversy with the Empiricists and the Idealists. Each of these he faults on the grounds that they cannot account for the body’s role in perception. His support for Gestalt therapy here is most striking in his emphasis upon the *immediacy* of perception, while allowing for interpretation.

Trust and Authenticity

The question of the foundation of trust and authenticity recurs throughout the study as it does throughout the work of Merleau-Ponty. It arises during the course of my exploring the perceptual aspects of Gestalt therapy as *body-centred*. When viewed phenomenologically, these body-centred concepts imply the kind of actuality/immediacy

³ An English version is available as an Appendix in Mallin (1979), together with a most helpful Integration into the English Text.

which we spoke of above. Immediacy is called for by these concepts and the language of Gestalt therapy *assumes* such immediacy.

Conclusion

Even in such an introduction as this, I do not expect everything to be clear. Were I to give the impression that my study is clear and straightforward, I would not be faithful to my own experience. My thesis does not progress in a straight line like a good syllogism. It is much more like a spiral that turns so that sometimes the edge is in the middle and the middle at the edge. I have tried, however, to make clear the central thrust of my thesis: the bringing together of the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy and the body-centred philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter 2 - Approach, Aim and Method

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Section One: Foreword

Situating the Study

One day a speculative philosopher challenged Diogenes the Cynic with the proposition that local motion was impossible. Diogenes, without saying a word, stood up and walked away. In this simple but powerful gesture, he was not merely launching a story that would run and run down the centuries, but was marking out a particular approach to philosophy. He was connecting philosophy with experience in such a way that *experience*, not philosophy, became the criterion of the real. He was equivalently saying: however subtle your system or impressive the reach of your thought, if it makes everyday life impossible then your system needs looking at again.

He was also saying that the kind of knowledge you have of walking from *actually doing it*, is quite different from that which you have from *talking about* walking. It is in this tradition that I want to situate my study. (I take the story from Hadot, 2001A, p.97).

My Point of Departure

My interest is not in constructing a system of philosophy or in showing that others are wrong, but like the people in those schools of ancient Greece, in promoting a *life choice*. It is a search for meaning: What is happening to me? To us? It is an exploration of the question that I am to myself. (Rahner, 1984, p.189). This is the tradition of Blaise Pascal, Edith Stein, Etty Hillesum, Nicolai Berdyaev, and Michael Polanyi.⁴ My interest is primarily in what *works*, in what enables therapists in their work of transformation. The works of these writers are marked by the intimate connection that they make between philosophy and life-style. They address the concerns of their hearts. I would count several of the writers publishing in the *British Gestalt Journal* as belonging in this tradition. This is the tradition also of Merleau-Ponty as is attested by people who actually knew him. I think of Professor Peter Figueroa or Jean-Toussaint Desanti: here is the way the latter speaks of his teaching:

⁴ cf Kennedy, D..J. on Nicolai Berdyaev (1994) and Etty Hillesum (1998).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical utterance did not float about in a condition of disembodiment, ...Nor did it dwell in a mass of texts, abandoning the solitary reader at a distance. His word was born of someone who addressed himself to me after the manner of his presence: it became my familiar (*voisine*) (Desanti, J-T. in Sechère, 1982, p.8).

Merleau-Ponty himself lived his philosophy intensely, with its heavy political consequences, and embraced the demands it imposed upon him:

We must not only adopt a reflective attitude, (secure) ourselves in an impregnable *Cogito*, but moreover, reflect upon this very reflection, in order to embrace the natural situation, which it is aware of succeeding and which therefore belongs to its definition, not only to practice the philosophy, but also to acknowledge to ourselves the transformation, which it brings in our way of viewing the world, and in our existence (PhP.p.62;F75) mt.

One needs very little contact with the tradition of Gestalt therapy to recognise that personal commitment is now, and was from the beginning, a characteristic of the movement: Fritz and Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, Joel Latner, Jim Simkin, Joseph Zinker were all people primarily interested in *how to be with others*, rather than in making their mark. In these days when the sacred word in the therapy world is 'professionalism' and when professionalism in the media is strongly linked to the medical '*profession*', some of the implications of what I argue may not be welcomed. As I see it, to be a Gestalt therapist is to take on a *life-style* that requires considerable self-discipline, a lot of knowledge humbly carried, and an openness of heart and mind that welcomes growth and is for ever asking searching questions. It is more of a 'vocation' - in the old sense of this term - one summoned to assume a special mission (like Socrates), than it is a way of paying the mortgage.

Gestalt therapy practice has come a long way since the 1950's. It has become far more reflective and developed in its theory and practice. Yet the tradition of searching for truth, the connection between philosophy and life-style has continued. I see this in the works especially of Lynn Jacobs and Richard Hycner (1995), of Malcolm Parlett (2000) and

Gordon Wheeler (1998B), of Lolita Sapriel (1998) and Arthur Roberts (1999), of Ken Evans (2000) and John Wheway (1999). All of these are writing from their hearts yet thinking hard and seriously connecting what they say with *how they live*. Their tradition is not just of thinking but of life-choice.

Another consequence of my standing in this tradition is this: I am not aiming to prove any philosopher right or any philosopher wrong; Merleau-Ponty does not need me to vindicate him. I do not have to show that he is right. He has made the analysis, I do not have to traverse that territory again. That is not my project. I take up what he has done and use it to elaborate the theory of Gestalt therapy. My interest is not primarily in philosophical debate; I am far more interested in what actually connects a person to his/her life. Therefore, when I take issue about the importation of Lewinian Field theory into Gestalt therapy theory, my interest is not primarily in the questionable methodology of this – although I point it out *at length* - but in the practical implications of it for the writers and practitioners of Gestalt therapy.

Like the early Gestalt therapists I am primarily interested in *doing*, in a life-style that works for people. 'In Gestalt therapy, we are working for something else (from the hedonism of American culture). We are here to promote growth process and develop human potential. We do not talk of instant joy, instant sensory awareness, instant cure. The growth process takes time' (Perls, F.,1971,16).

My Explicit Anthropology

Before going on to speak of those personal influences upon me, which have shaped my world, I need to speak of what Giorgi calls 'my approach'. This is (my) 'fundamental view point towards man and the world' (Giorgi,1975). It is something, prior even to those twin engines of enquiry: existential phenomenology and hermeneutics. Indeed it is out of this most primitive experience that existential phenomenology and hermeneutics arise.

My most basic experience is the *givenness of Being* and the summons, *not of my making* to respond. It is similar to Heidegger's analysis of Dasein which 'as being-in-the-world is the illuminating occurrence of Being' (Brooke, 1993, p.104).

A thorough phenomenological analysis of this is made by Heidegger (1927/1973) in his chapter: Dasein's Attestation of an Authentic Potentiality for Being (p.312).

'Conscience summons Dasein's self from its lostness in the 'they' (loc.cit. p.319).

'Conscience' here is not moral conscience but renders a moral conscience possible. For Heidegger 'the existential conscience is that which gives there-being (Dasein) to "understand" what it is (his status as being) and thus calls it to authenticity' (Richardson W. J., 1963, p.81). It will be noticed that whereas Heidegger says 'In conscience Dasein calls itself' (loc. cit. P.320), *I* say, the summons arises out of the 'givenness of Being'. There is really no discrepancy here – as is shown by what Heidegger says, further on, about the characteristics of this call:

Indeed the call is precisely something, which *we ourselves* have neither planned nor prepared for nor voluntarily performed, nor have we ever done so. 'It' calls against our expectations and even against our will. On the other hand, the call undoubtedly does not come from someone else who is with me in the world. The call comes *from* me and yet *from beyond me* (Heidegger, 1927/1973, p.320).

If we are to accept that the only being we have is our being-in-the-world, then it must be that every movement of being, so far as we are concerned, must involve that relatedness to the world. This is Merleau-Ponty's view, which he returns to repeatedly:

The central phenomenon at the root, both of my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world – I am given to myself, which means that this situation is never hidden from me... (PhP.p.360;F413)⁵.

⁵ The phrase 'I am given to myself' is one that will recur again and again throughout this study. It is, after all at the heart of my thesis. (Cf H.P.pp175,204,223,227,229 et passim.)

We shall see further on (Chapter 7) the pivotal importance I attach to Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's analysis as yielding *givenness* as the root of all our experience.⁶

Section Two: Methodology Explained

The subject of this study is the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy; the particular aspect under which I consider them is in the application to them of the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Not all of this study, by any means, is phenomenological reduction. A great deal of it is discursive and all of it is reflective. But the phenomenological aspects of it are the foundation upon which I build the discursive areas.

Application of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy to Theoretical Structures

What is Gestalt therapy theory? It is a body of knowledge, comprising a series of general coherent statements concerning *what it is to be a human being in the world*, with the specific difference of being concerned with what we call 'mental' health and personal development. This body of knowledge finds expression in a special terminology, which carries, in a coherent and connected way, this body of explanatory theory. For instance, Gestalt therapists may use the phrase 'an incomplete Gestalt' or 'unfinished business'. Such an expression of theory will then be expressed like this: 'What we really want and what we are looking for in our lives are complete experiences.' (Korb, et al. 1989, p.9). It is to such expressions of theoretical structure that I intend to apply the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

I need to explain further what I mean by the expression "Application to the Theoretical Structures".

⁶ Here I am anticipating what I shall return to several times during this study: the givenness of being is precisely what Goodman missed out on in the analysis which has become the basis of Gestalt therapy theory.

The *theoretical structures* of Gestalt therapy are expressed in concepts that occur frequently in the Gestalt literature some of these concepts feature in the Glossary at the beginning of this study. A sample list might go like this: authenticity, awareness, boundary, contact, creative adjustment, dialogue, embodiment, fixed Gestalt, field perspective, holism, immediacy, intersubjectivity, interruptions to contact, organismic self-regulation, polarities, responsibility, spontaneity, support. There are also special technical meanings attaching to such expressions as ‘interruption to contact’, ‘theory of change’, ‘therapeutic alliance’, ‘experiment’, ‘embodiment’ and ‘health’. Interruption can be broken down into: deflection, introjection and confluence and several others. (cf Clarkson, 1989, p.50).

To apply the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to these, I first of all need to *experience* for myself the area of discourse in which these structures operate. This is my experience during eleven years as a practising Gestalt therapist. I also need to have experienced in *my own body* what that concept means for me. This leads to reflection. I need to see how my experience squares or does not square with what the manual/trainer says. In Section Four of this chapter, I illustrate such reflection in great detail for the concept of ‘health’ in Gestalt therapy.

Because these concepts are all derived from experience of the *embodied person*, they support, balance, unify and explain one another in a cohesive system. They all describe modalities of the whole person, not just of thoughts. Together they form a Gestalt, just as the person from whom they derive is a Gestalt. Thus, if through a philosophic reflection, my understanding of awareness undergoes alteration, then my understanding of each of those other structures will undergo alteration, because awareness is implied in every one of them. Similarly if my understanding of holism changes, a corresponding alteration happens in all the others.

A Short Sample Application

So that a person can permit this kind of change - organic and dynamic – there are two pre-requisites: (i) a congenial experience, (ii) an ability to *name* that experience (we shall see in our Chapter on Language and Speech that, literally, I do not really know what I think until I speak it. Speech is thought. And thought/reflection is the integration of experience.) By ‘congenial’ here I mean an experience of a similar nature or in the same existential region as the one I am talking about. If, for instance I am talking about ‘unfinished business’, then it needs to be something like a too-hasty good-bye.

Let us take an example. Holism.

Mackewn (1997) says: (Gestalt therapy nowhere) ‘A person is at all times a whole person, whose body, emotions, thoughts and perceptions function interrelatedly as one complex relational whole’ (p.43). This is the way the therapist views himself, his family, his friends and everyone he meets; it is not just a special act for the therapy session. He will be able to view himself like that only if he has experienced others treating him similarly. His training and his reading will have taught him the *vocabulary* in which to articulate this experience or its absence. If he lacks the words how can he recognise the experience?

Reflection

Suppose the therapist reflects upon his experience of holism and begins to see it as applying not only to persons in his world, but to his every act of perception. He notices how his senses combine around food – he not only tastes but smells, sees, feels the texture. He notices how, although he has two eyes, he does not see double, and how disconcerted he is until both eyes give him a monocular vision, and this unifying drive in his body does not proceed from a thought. Now, if he acquires the existential

phenomenological word 'transcendence' he will be able to articulate more how his senses *surpass* themselves. He will experience that not only does he carry with him everywhere a power which he does not give himself, of unifying and integrating the world of his experience, but that he *is* that *power*. He will come to realize that 'holism' is the very *direction* of his existence.

Now it is not possible to maintain that consciousness *has* this power, it *is* this power itself (PhP.p.121;F141).

He comes to see holism as an event which affects him in his entire relationship with the world; it is no longer a thought or doctrine but the very existential of his own lived body, a facet of his sociality. When we relate Gestalt structures to terms such as 'intentionality', 'anonymity', 'transcendence', 'intersubjectivity', as they occur in Merleau-Ponty, we at once give the Gestalt therapists a vocabulary which allows them to have a broader experience of the world, and opens the way to their actually experiencing the structures in their own bodies.

Merleau-Ponty's Three-Step Application

Merleau-Ponty in his Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* has very well sketched out the application of his analysis, in three movements.

(1) Facticity:

This 'Gestalt therapy' is present in its facticity, is there as an 'inalienable presence' in the world. I set out to connect Gestalt therapy theory in its structures, with a direct and 'primitive contact with the world and endow that primitive contact with philosophical status' (loc. cit viii). So it is that I endeavour to link 'awareness' with that most primitive pre-conceptual experience of ourselves as *embodied* subjectivities in 'givenness'. To ensure that I am allowing the phenomenon to be and 'speak from itself', I return 'repeatedly to the phenomenon itself so that it may show itself, in ever deeper, richer and more subtle ways' (Brooke, 1993, p.31).

I want to connect Gestalt therapy theory organically with Merleau-Ponty's twofold teaching of the ontological principle of the primacy of phenomena and its epistemological correlate – the primacy of perception (Dillon, M., 1997, p.52 et passim). By 'phenomenon' I mean 'that wherein something can become manifest, visible in itself' (Heidegger, 1927/1973, p.51). By 'the primacy of phenomena' I mean the view in which being or reality is 'conceived as phenomena' (Dillon, 1997, p.156). By 'the primacy of perception' I mean that '*the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence*' (Merleau-Ponty, 1947/1964 p.13, my italics). In other words, *that our only path to reality is the phenomenon*, and my senses are the gates of meeting for the phenomena. The phenomenon *in reference to* which all other phenomena become meaningful *is my lived body*. So, it is my intention to re-instate *the body* unequivocally at the centre of all Gestalt therapy theory, as it is at the centre of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

(2) Description:

This application is descriptive. I do all I can to set aside my theoretical and philosophical beliefs. Phenomenological reduction is a difficult process. Indeed it is quite contrary to 'common sense'. One can find the value and effectiveness of it only by doing it and by experiencing it in oneself. (e.g. having a therapist who practices it.)

'We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else the unity and true meaning of phenomenology' (PhP.p.viii;Fii).

So it is, for instance, that I describe how our bodies hold time. The Gestalt therapy 'here-and-now' is a layered accumulation of history and culture being *realized*.

Practice

To put aside my beliefs, my theories, my prejudices, is what I have to do every time I meet a client. If I do *not* do that, then I will not only impose my own beliefs on the client, but stop listening to my client and hear instead the voices from my own history speaking to me from the client. This is called counter-transference – the aggregate of the projections which the therapist has about the client. The long training, my years of supervision and personal therapy have educated me in this regard. It is precisely because I am so trained that clients come to me and pay for my services.

There is no question here of there being a hidden reality beneath the appearances – the ‘noumenon’ of Kant. *The phenomenon, in Gestalt therapy, is the reality.*

(3) An Always Incomplete Reduction:

This study is a search, not for an *ideal Gestalt therapy*, but for that in the practice of Gestalt therapy, which unifies and realizes all the theory: *the lived body*. This takes the place of *the search for essences*. The theoretical structures that I explained earlier are unreal until they are embodied in the therapist and client. So, the question for the therapist is this: How can I be, in my feelings, sensations, understanding and articulation so that I most facilitate “the between” with this client? (Hycner and Jacobs, 1995, p.90). All the theories become real only in my *lived body* and that lived body is, in its most profound intentionality, reaching out towards the other.

In so far as this is a phenomenological study, it requires constant faithfulness to that demanding mistress which is my experience. I shall endeavour not to use quotations as arguments: I will not use quotes from Merleau-Ponty merely to ‘prove’ my point. If I quote him, or any other philosopher, it will be because they have articulated my thinking in a way better than I can. Furthermore, it may be useful to invoke the nuances of their teaching by citing their words. Phenomenology also means that the first person singular is going to appear a good deal in a strong autobiographical emphasis. This is also an effort to bring into awareness and bracket *as much as possible*, the prejudices that I carry from various other realms of discourse. As I am both a student of Merleau-Ponty and a practising Gestalt therapist, I am really asking what it is like *for me* to ‘face’ the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

Biographical Background

I return to the point made earlier, that my study is a *lived* dialectic between me - a practising Gestalt therapist, - and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. I should also say that I spent many years studying a philosophy (neo-Thomism) as a student in the Jesuit order. I took this as it was given me - a buttress and support for theological positions. The

legacy of my years with Scholasticism was three-fold. Firstly, it imbued me with a great respect for learning; secondly, learning became for me more a question of 'counting up quotations' (PhP.p.viii;Fvii) - of knowing what the 'masters' had said, rather than 'determining and expressing in concrete form this phenomenology for (myself).'(ibid.). A corollary of this was that authority rather than the phenomenon - *res se manifestans*, (the thing showing itself) - became my criterion of truth. A third and rather surprising legacy of these years passed so much in the study and practice of spirituality, is an abiding awe and wonder at human existence. We find the same attitude in Merleau-Ponty's Preface:

'The best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant, when he spoke of 'wonder' in the face of the world' (PhP.Preface xiii;Fvii).

The Scholastic world of solid certainties was thoroughly subverted by my exposure to Existentialism during a sabbatical year '68-'69. I took a course with the late Professor Donald Nicholl: *Jewish and Existential Influences on European Thinking*⁷. This 'conversion' was reinforced in me by the works of Karl Rahner. However, my departure from the Jesuits in 1972 had to do not so much with intellectual disenchantment but more with personal change in me. Philosophy had become less a system of knowledge and more of a life-choice.

Then for eighteen years I had charge of the teaching of Religious Education in a Grammar School in the Wirral. During those years I deepened my acquaintance with Existentialism by teaching a course in philosophy in the Lower and Upper Sixth Forms. It was when I retired early from teaching through illness and was training as a Gestalt psychotherapist, that I became acquainted with Merleau-Ponty. This acquaintance transformed me and my understanding and appreciation of Gestalt therapy. His

⁷This was the title of a course by the late Professor Donald Nicholl, which I attended as a student at Corpus Christi College in London in 1968-69. This college which trained teachers of Religious Education, was subsequently shut down by Cardinal Heenan in 1972 because it was widely alleged to be subverting the obedience of clergy.

resolution of subject/object split was out of tune with what I had lived by for thirty-five years. Yet, I had the impression, which slowly became a conviction and then a passion, that here was something I had been working towards and waiting for all my life. Paradoxically, far from its undermining my Christian faith I found it enormously supportive of that theological spirituality which emerged from the Second Vatican Council and which I found in the works of Rahner and in the Jesuit journal, *Theological Studies*. I discerned a passion and freshness in Merleau-Ponty which reminded me of another great philosopher from whom Merleau-Ponty expressly distanced himself in the very first pages of his *Phenomenology*, yet who bestraddled western thinking for fifteen centuries and whose beautiful cadences, ever ancient ever new, still echo in the prayers and sequences of the Roman liturgy: St Augustine of Hippo. As a young student of philosophy I had learned much from this great mystical thinker. Augustine, despite his fearsome reputation as a fanatic, carried much compassion and respect for those Platonist philosophers who had rescued him from Manichaeism.⁸

The legacy of Augustine was, to some extent, the enthronement of dualism as the ruling philosophy in western theology/philosophy. It was this same split between body and soul that Merleau-Ponty so untiringly wrestled with. It seemed to me, that what Merleau-Ponty was *writing* about was being *put into practice* in Gestalt therapy. They were both dealing with a world that had been ruptured, so that people were educated to be at a distance from their experience. This rupture is profoundly explored in R.D. Romanyshyn's remarkable work (1994): '.....in the space of linear perspective vision, the body is progressively abandoned. Indeed...as we approach the vanishing point, the body increasingly becomes a matter of the head...in other words the human body is taken up into the heady eye of mind' (p.48).

⁸I think of that wistful outburst of compassion for his teachers: '*...hoc illae litterae non habent.....et aliud est de silvestri cacumine videre patriam pacis, et iter ad eam non invenire, et frustra conari per invia...*' (*Confessiones VII.21.*).. this (the teaching of Jesus), those books do not possess, ...it is a different experience to view the peaceful homeland from a wooded hill and not find the way to it and to attempt vainly to find it along paths that lead nowhere.'

Audience

I have already declared in general the aim of this study and my on-going relationship with Gestalt therapy theory and practice. Now I need to explain what audience I am writing for; the peculiar style I am adopting.

I envisage my audience as a group of sophisticated and well-read Gestalt teachers/trainers, practitioners – very much the kind of people I had the honour of meeting at the International Conference for European Gestalt Writers in Syracuse (Sicily) in April 2001. They will be as familiar as I am with Gestalt therapy theory but most of them will be almost totally innocent of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. I say this because very few works reference him and those that do, mention him only *en passant*. I find him most referenced in Hycner and Jacobs (1995).

A Note about the Style of my Study

The style of my composition is analogous to my meeting with a client and a paradigm of all phenomenological perception. I allow certain aspects of my subject to become figure and then to fade into the background, bowing out in favour of further aspects.⁹ The image that most suits my work is that used by Merleau-Ponty himself in his introductory piece to Part I of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1979, p.67, F81). There he speaks about regarding a house from different viewpoints. Each perspective offers its own special view and each new aspect is carried forward into the following one, all enriching the ‘final’ view of the house. All the different perspectives overlap; they all imply one another. And that is the way with the concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology; for instance, it is impossible to speak of intentionality without implicating transcendence. The disadvantage of this style is that it may appear to be repetitious. That, I think, is

⁹This is an application of the figure-horizon structure accepted in Gestalt psychology and which Merleau-Ponty says is an essential condition for the possibility of perception. (eg.Ph.P.p.68ff, F 81)

unavoidable when my whole research is one long unfolding of the dialectic between aim, method and object of study. I must beg the indulgence of the reader who will find me returning to the same themes again and again. On the other hand some of the concepts are difficult and the reader may actually welcome the repetition; or the reader may quickly recognise repetition and just skip. I notice that repetition is a common trait amongst writers on Merleau-Ponty, eg. Mallin (1979).

To return to the house metaphor, we realise, that however many perspectives we take upon the house, there are still more remaining, so that we depend on ever-emerging perspectives to know the house and we can never know it in its 'objective' reality which is really an ideality. We know it only in its *phenomenology*, that is, in its 'advent to being in our awareness instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance' (PhP.p.61;F74).¹⁰ Our perception of the other is always and essentially partial and, therefore, inexhaustible. Phenomenologically, in the thrust of our transcendence we experience the other, as ultimately inaccessible.¹¹ This generates a humility, which inspires that empowering respect for the client so characteristic of the Gestalt approach.

Similar Studies

I can find no exactly similar studies. Wheeler in his *Gestalt Reconsidered* (1991/1998A) has endeavoured to re-direct Gestalt therapy away from the *individual* focus of Fritz Perls and more towards the *field* focus of Goodman and Lewin; he moves forward in this project with the publication of his *Beyond Individualism* (2000). This is a very serious and well-structured attempt to unhook Gestalt therapy from any model where the individual and therapist are isolated from the community and working to a goal where self reliance/self-support equals maturity. In Wheeler's view, therapy should enable a person to find his growth and maturity in accepting and giving support in the community. Wheeler's work is an extension of the Field Theory aspect of Gestalt therapy. This is a

¹⁰...the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in solution suddenly crystallises it' (Ph.P.p.71;F86).

¹¹We have to be careful here not to posit 'an objective being' (cf.Ph.P.p.333;F384).

philosophical work but it is not similar to my project; Wheeler is working things out from *within* the Goodman/Lewin framework, flawed as it is.

Another notable philosophical study is the work of Malcolm Parlett (1997 and 2000). He confirms for me that the growing edge of Gestalt therapy theory seems centred in Field Theory. He finds that the old dualisms, which have plagued psychotherapy, are most effectively met by elaborating the basic concepts of the field: 'Lives and collective systems intertwine and need to be considered together as a *unified field*' (1997 p.16). The great merit of Parlett's work is that he demonstrates how Field Theory is eminently practical and promotes a movement away from isolated individualist talk and thinking such as "the family", "the person" to linking and stating the connectedness of things: "family-in-society", "person-in-situatio". He does not reference Merleau-Ponty, yet his thinking is very congenial to that philosopher's way. It will be apparent, I hope, especially in my Chapter, *The Body Situated*, how much foundation and development are on offer in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty for these kinds of developments.

Recently (2001) three remarkable philosophical articles appeared in the (*American Gestalt Review* 5(3)). The leading article is by Vernon van de Riet: Gestalt and the Phenomenological Method. This is a comment on an article written three years earlier by Lolita Sapriel published in the *British Gestalt Journal* (1998, 7 pp.133 –144). She challenges the process of bracketing – which she attributes to Husserl – and says it negates the holistic nature of Gestalt therapy. I deal with this comprehensively in Ch 3 while discussing Epistemology. Kenneth Mayer's article is a commentary on the same and seems to agree with Sapriel. Mark McConville (2001) on the other hand takes issue with the interpretation they are placing on 'bracketing'. In this article, McConville, for the first time ever that I have come upon, calls into question the value for Gestalt therapy of drawing its central theoretical component (Field Theory) from Kurt Lewin – an empirical scientist. I shall discuss this further in Chapter 6. Furthermore, it is significant, that when McConville wishes to make the point that the observer is part of 'the field' he gives (a very difficult) quote from Merleau-Ponty's chapter on the Phenomenal Field

(PhP.p.59;F72).¹² All of these articles underline the difficulty that Gestalt therapy faces though the weakness of its underlying philosophy.

A Note about the Various Meanings of 'Phenomenology'

Here I wish to state briefly how I deal with the problem of the many meanings of 'phenomenology' How do I apply phenomenology - itself a term of many disputed meanings - to Gestalt therapy theory - itself inseparable from a whole spectrum of varying practices. (cf Yontef ,1993, p.48) I proceed by allowing myself to carry the many meanings of phenomenology evident in the literature PhP.(p.vii –ix); Spiegelberg (1972); Richardson, W. J. (1979 pp1-3); Blankenburg (1980, p.50ff). I shall enter into the question of the meanings attaching to 'Phenomenology' in Ch 4 Pt. I.

For the purposes of this study I favour one of Merleau-Ponty's own definitions:

‘...phenomenology is a study of the advent of being to consciousness, instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance.’ (PhP.p.61;F7)¹³

The challenge to me then is to study the advent of Gestalt therapy theory to my awareness - ‘manifesting itself from itself precisely in the way it does that when it speaks from itself’ (Richardson, J. P., 1986, p.56) without allowing my intent to bias what shows itself.

Section Three: Methodology Illustrated

In this Section I wish to describe an example of a phenomenological reduction applied to one of the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy. In the procedure I am influenced by the general outline of the research described by Giorgi (1975): An Application of Phenomenological Method in Psychology.

¹² I notice with interest that Mark McConville is scheduled to address an international Gestalt Conference in Paris in March 2003: Phenomenological Foundations of Gestalt Psychology: The Relevance of Merleau-Ponty.

¹³ The reader, I'm afraid, is going to grow weary of this expression:cf H.P.pp.55,75,146,209,et passim.

I shall first of all briefly list the 'steps', then I shall take the concept of 'psychological health' as it is described in the literature and use that to illustrate the application. Two preliminary notes are required:

In his article Giorgi says: '.... phenomenology is the study of the structure, and of the variations of structure, of the consciousness to which anything, event or person appears' (p.83). I am suggesting that we take 'this study of structures' to embrace, more explicitly, the bodily sensations, feelings, inclinations and hesitations that develop in the subject involved in the event. This is Merleau-Ponty's own style in the *Phenomenology* in his chapter on sexuality. Also, I wish to follow him in his aversion to any view that seems to centre perception *apart* from the body.

In the course of this study I shall not repeat such an analysis for every Gestalt therapy concept I mention. The phenomenological analysis of the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy formed part of the training I underwent for many years. The concept of 'confluence' for instance, which means a movement to *merge* with the environment - like a trainee wanting to please his trainer and therefore not daring to challenge the trainer on anything he says or does - was the subject of a 'workshop' lasting five days during which we explored this concept through experiential work and discussions. The analysis I describe below, is only a summary account of what could be a far more elaborate analysis. This procedure does not happen in linear mode. The 'steps' constantly overlap. Because I cannot be experiencing *while* I am describing, every 'step' is happening with every other step, back and forth.

An Application of Merleau-Ponty's Analysis to 'Psychological Health'

Firstly I formulate the concept as we find it in Gestalt therapy literature; I put it in context and explain it.

Secondly, I use a manner of meditation technique, a gaze on that concept and note the changes it brings about in me and allow these changes to 'lead' me. I do not assume that what I am coming to in the 'meditation' will be identical with what the literature says.

Thirdly, I bracket prejudicial/distracting material that this concept brings in its train. Fourthly, I continually check that what I am noting is, in fact, present in the phenomenon. This is called the hermeneutic circle; I have to be careful *not to compose* the experience - as much as possible, anyway. Fifthly, I generalize the 'enriched' concept so that it loses its definitive edges and connects more deeply with that power of reflection, which took it up in the first place. Now I can hold it in its ontological connection *as a modality of the perceptual region*.

Let us take the theoretical structure of **psychological health** as it is enunciated in Gestalt literature and see it as a phenomenon of actuality. Let us look at two places in the classic literature:

I am excerpting the description of psychological health from that part of *Gestalt Therapy* (PHG), which is dealing with the Structure of Growth. I take it from Section 11: The Self and its Identifications which, is the *final section* in this part. It has just been preceded by a section 9.: Excitement is Evidence of Reality and section 10: Contact is 'Finding and Making' the Coming Solution.

The description of psychological health and disease is a simple one. It is a matter of the identification and alienation of the self: If a man identifies with his forming self, does not inhibit his own creative excitement and reaching towards the coming solution; and conversely, if he alienates what is not organically his own and therefore cannot be vitally interesting, but rather disrupts the figure/background, then he is psychologically healthy,.....(PHG p.282)

I note here the emphasis on wholeness, on differentiation, on excitement, novelty, and creativity. Also it emphasises the vigour necessary to reject what does not belong. This is in accord with what has been said at the beginning of the book, in that part where they are preparing the readers for the experiential work which forms the body of Book I.

To the extent that your feeling of actuality has been split off from your workaday personality, the effort to experience actuality will rouse anxiety (masked, perhaps, as fatigue, boredom, impatience, annoyance) - and what specifically rouses your

anxiety will be the particular resistance by which you throttle and prevent full experience (PHG p. 67; emphasis in text.).

Let us take an example:

A child of four visits the seaside for the first time. He shrieks and runs and dances and rolls in uncontrollable delight and his Grandma joins in the fun. Another child in the same situation is told to 'control himself' and not to upset people by his screaming, so he goes quiet and behaves like a 'good little boy'. The first is identifying with this forming self; the second is alienating what is organically his own, turning instead to what is not vitally interesting for him. The first is on the road to health, the second to ill-health.

As I contemplate these examples the first thing that arises for me is a difficulty in separating 'psychological health' from the rest of me. That is not how I experience myself. This happens when I imagine myself in a state of health. I enter into this as much as I can, using all my faculties and allowing what comes to me *to affect my body*. So, in this exercise I can put my body in a posture of health – by, for instance, standing up facing my garden, opening the patio door and breathing deeply. Feeling the coolness of the air, becoming more and more aware of my embodied self. I notice how I am associating health with contact with the 'raw' earth. This has a sense of familiarity for me. I recognize also that health is by no means a 'new' idea. I can sense the energy in my body, the appetite for living, I want to do things. Images come tumbling in. To some extent it is 'talk about talk' that I have previously engaged in. It lacks the stuff of poetry; but I notice I become more alive when I breathe and move my body in the open air - uninhibited movement. I notice the cascade of stored memories of my own experience of health and illness. I am encouraged by the richness of the memories. I bring on my knowledge and experience with my clients over eleven years, my years of hospital work, my memory of work with that osteopath who helped me recover the use of my back from a painful illness. I am emotionally moved by some of these memories. I allow my body as it is affected by these memories and stored experience to 'speak'. These accumulated experiences may or may not emotionally affect me; but they serve to enrich the image

and the concept that are building in me. *The important thing, so far as Gestalt therapy is concerned, is the process.* I allow the massive accumulation of data to speak to me through my experience. I allow myself to feel an embodied connection with the totality that is myself in the world. I notice how fixed I am on the movement of my body as signifying my health. The more I focus on the changes that takes place in me, the more the phenomenon discloses itself. *The important thing is the process of disclosure.* Health is presence to my totality; not driving any part of me away, or dismissing anything about me. At the same time I am as careful as I can be, to bracket off those considerations, those experiences which I see are not coming from my body's experience but deriving from some other source. For instance, moral considerations around 'health' deriving from the prejudice I built up a long time ago at my father's poor health and his preoccupation with it. (The moral component intrudes in my saying to my father: 'It is your duty to be healthy'!)

The exercise is never complete, and the best we can hope for is an approximation to an unprejudiced experience. The whole procedure is called a 'phenomenological reduction'. It is an effort to allow the phenomenon to manifest itself to me *from itself* - as distinct from manifesting itself *from my interpretation*. We shall, in a little while, discuss the epistemological validity of this procedure. How does it get past the universal capacity for projection and interpretation? Does it bring us to 'the real' aspects of health?

Now I connect this reflection with a more primitive situation in which I have not yet reflected, in which, without the never-ceasing chatter of reflection, I am simply *becoming*. My previous attentive gaze at 'health' at my healthy living body, the practised and risky openness, the carefulness I exercise around my allowing the experience to impact me, have prepared me for this step into philosophy. As I go to that place of silence and return from it and go there again and return again, I enable myself to appreciate the process that we call *perception* in all its complexity, and I can see how 'health' emerges from this process of perception *laden with all manner of connections*, how straight-away the perceptive process loses itself in this plethora of 'objects' that it brings into being. In this back and forth exercise I am coming to appreciate *perception as unifying presence*: it

is that which holds all things together by keeping them apart. In entering the ontological dimension of 'health' I am not leaving it behind but allowing it to manifest itself to me in all its complexity, I am now seeing it *as a human phenomenon*, a modality of human being-in-the-world. I am no longer seeing it disconnected as an entity in itself in isolation; I am seeing it now as surrounded by the world that confers meaning upon it as a way of being human. In this last move, I am 'touching base' connecting myself to the foundations of my being.

How does such a 'reduction' facilitate the application of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy? It does so by allowing reality to manifest itself to me from itself and not just from my interpretation. The more I gaze at a thing, the more complexity I see in it. All orchids look more or less the same at a distance. Indeed you can easily mistake them for some other flower. It is only when viewed at 'an optimal distance' that the astonishing individuality of the orchid impacts you. It is only at an optimal distance (PhP.p.302;F348), when my gaze has opened up the inner horizon of it, that I can appreciate the inter-connectedness of its parts and its belonging with everything else. That way I allow the reality of a healthy person to manifest itself to me without composing it beforehand on the assumption that I know what health is '*a priori*'. As it unfolds itself in all its complexity, I see clearly how I cannot know all there is to know about the healthy person, without knowing all there is to know about the whole of the world. I am left with the image of health as that bracing energized feeling of facing the southwest wind blowing strongly along the promenade early on a Summer's morning.

In the analysis I have just made we see health as a modality of each of the four existential regions.

Section Four: Gestalt Therapy as a Modality of Perception

The word 'perception' is not a key word in the classic text PHG. It does not feature in the

index and it very little features in the text of that very long book¹⁴. We can only speculate on this omission because the book makes no mention of this anomaly. The authors were certainly familiar with the word, which was common parlance in the world of psychology. In fact, *Gestalttheorie* with its figure/horizon view of awareness was incorporated as *the* theory of perception in Gestalt therapy (Yontef 1979, p.182, 196 et passim); it was their admiration for the breakthrough of the Berlin psychologists who, contrary to the theories of the atomists, demonstrated that the *Gestalt* is the minimal *percept* (Kohler, W., 1930 Ch 6) which inspired the authors to call the therapy ‘Gestalt’ (Stoehr, 1994, p.104-5). There is no discussion in PHG of connection between contact-actuality-awareness and perception.

We think that they avoided the word¹⁵ for the very reason that it had already acquired a ‘psychologistic’ or ‘psychophysiological’ connotation and the pioneering early Gestalt therapists felt it needed to be superseded by some other words, more indicative of the engagement of the therapist with the situation. Their vision was holistic and what we would call ‘the phenomenon’ was for them a whole-field configuration. In order to express this they employed words like ‘awareness’, ‘contact’, creative adjustment’.¹⁶

If I am to apply the phenomenology of *perception* to the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy then it is necessary to demonstrate that Gestalt therapy is a perceptual activity. Let us consider whether the term ‘perception’ has a place in describing the operation that is Gestalt therapy. It is important to note, that seeing it through such a lens by no means diminishes its belonging also to the three other existential regions. It is simultaneously a cognitive/linguistic, a motor and an intersubjective activity. Like cognition, like language, like movement, like relating, perception is realized *only* in the lived body. My procedure here will be as follows:

¹⁴It is of course *mentioned* here and there: eg. pp.320, 321, 426, 428

¹⁵This omission has continued in Gestalt therapy writing: eg. In Yontef (1993) I count 172 references to ‘Contact’ and 154 to ‘Awareness’ but *none* to perception.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Professor Malcolm Parlett for sharing his ideas on this matter with me.

Firstly we shall see what Merleau-Ponty means by 'perception' and find if his use of this term is congenial to what happens in Gestalt therapy.

Secondly, I shall take six terms prominent in the literature of Gestalt therapy to describe its activity. We shall see if these terms meet the meaning of 'perception' as Merleau-Ponty uses the term and if such perception is rooted in the body.

Merleau-Ponty's Use of the Term 'Perception'

Merleau-Ponty sees 'the world' as delivering itself to us, without theme or structure, so that it comes to us in the most general of ways 'something and not nothing'. This 'revelation' is the foundation upon which the edifice of all subsequent knowledge will be built.

.... we are trying to describe the phenomenon of the world, that is its birth for us in that field into which each perception sets us back where we are as yet still alone, where other people will appear only at a later stage, in which knowledge and particularly science have not so far ironed out and levelled down the individual perspective. It is through this birth that we are destined to graduate to a world and we must therefore describe it (PhP.p.256;F296).

In this way he sees it as a coming to birth, like a waking-up-to and discovery of the world. He returns to this theme as he speaks of the task of phenomenology.

Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system 'self-others-things' as it comes into being (PhP.p.57;F69).

When we ask about the *locus* of this 'birth', it is not 'some transcendental subjectivity, to be found everywhere and nowhere;' (PhP.p62;F75) but '*the body* as a grouping of lived-through meanings (moving) towards its equilibrium.' (in Mallin 1979 p.153) Italics mine.

My act of perception, in its unsophisticated form does not bring about this synthesis (of the multiple data of experience); it takes advantage of work already

done, of a general synthesis constituted once and for all, and this is what I mean when I say that I perceive with my body.....(PhP.p.238;F275).

That Merleau-Ponty sees perception as *inseparable* from the body, as a life-long activity of the person ranging from pre-objective experience through intersubjectivity and motility right up to the cognitive/linguistic level, will become more and more abundantly obvious as the study progresses.

How the Modality Manifests itself in Eight Key Terms

Let us turn now to the terms in which Gestalt therapists describe their work. I have already listed the terms one finds very frequently in the literature: authenticity, awareness, boundary, dialogue, embodied, field perspective, holism, and so on. When we look to the meaning of these terms we see how each one finds its meaning adequately in the body as the *locus* of perception.

Term 1: Authenticity

Gestalt therapy is a work of *authenticity*. I pointed out earlier how the transformative power of Gestalt therapy is centred in the genuineness, the truth of *the between* of therapist and client (H.P p.4). Then the client feels supported and is empowered to enter the alienated parts of her personality. This presence of client to therapist, and therapist to client, has to be a bodily thing. How else can they be present to one another if not through their bodies? This meeting can happen only if each *perceives* in the other an extension of his own system. That is the basis of recognition. If someone is *totally* other than me then there is no basis for re-cognition. They *see* one another, they *hear* one another, they feel the presence (or absence) of one another. This is not a matter of inference or reasoning – but of bodily immediacy.

Term 2: Awareness

Awareness plainly belongs with perception. However, it might seem at first that *awareness* is a matter of ‘the mind’ an act that is apart from the body. For reasons of

clarity, I take awareness in Gestalt therapy to be the same as consciousness.¹⁷ Frequently it is taken in the sense of *self-consciousness* (Yontef, 1979, pp183-4;196). Yontef describes it as ‘a state of being in full and vigilant contact with what is the main figure in the field’ (1979 p.183). A woman on a date is aware that her partner does not look at her. This is not an inference but an immediate bodily experience – she feels disregarded perhaps, angry maybe, and emotions of various kinds are stirred up in her. This lack overshadows her meeting with her date. It is one step further when she notices *that* she notices it and it becomes *self-awareness* or *self-consciousness*.

Merleau-Ponty sees awareness as a kind of light that draws no attention to itself but points to the “things” it displays. It is that in me which ‘enables “things” to be constituted’; awareness ‘forgets its own phenomena in favour of things’ a bit like a mother forgets herself in favour of her children, ‘because (awareness) is the cradle of things’ (PhP.p.58;F71) and can recall its own phenomena. Merleau-Ponty does not separate awareness from the existence of the person: ‘Consciousness is being-towards-the thing’ (PhP.p.138;F161).

He identifies perception and awareness as the act of contact. Perception is the *realization* of my access to the world. No further proof is possible. It is its own guarantor.

Perception is inseparable from the consciousness it has or rather *is* of reaching the thing itself (PhP.p.374;F429) Italics mine.

¹⁷In order to contradistinguish the work of Gestalt therapy from that of the psychoanalysts, Goodman expressly avoids the use of the word ‘conscious’ or expressions such as ‘the heightening of consciousness’. As he sees it ‘consciousness’ for the Freudians is ‘the passive receiver of impressions, or the rationalizer, or the verbalizer. It is what is swayed, reflects and does nothing.’ (PHG.p.286-7). He seems to me to be inconsistent in his use of the term ‘consciousness’. He connects ‘increased complexity’ with ‘heightened consciousness’ (ibid.p.307-8). It seems to me he is here talking about ‘self-consciousness’ because he associates it with an interruption of contact; as soon as I become SELF-conscious, I withdraw myself from involvement with you.

In this view it is misleading to break up awareness into separate acts; just as it is misleading to think of the world as comprising separate things. The human person is one, lived unity; not a body and soul joined together, not the result of some overarching rational act which draws all the multiplicity into one, but an on-going embodied expression of existence 'like a word expresses thought' (PhP.p.58;F71). Awareness is the abiding source of cohesion in a person's life, indeed it is the life of the person:

I am not myself a succession of "psychic" acts, nor for that matter, a nuclear "I" who brings them together into a synthetic unity, but one single experience inseparable from itself, one single "living cohesion", one single temporality which is engaged, from birth in making itself progressively explicit, and I confirm that cohesion in each successive present. (PhP.p.407;F466)

Term 3: Dialogue

This is one of that trinity of characteristics (dialogue, phenomenology and field theory) which Yontef lays down as the hallmark of Gestalt therapy practice. It embraces 'I-Thou' and depends upon immediacy. Dialogue means two people talking with one another, so that each is responding to the other and engaging with the new perceptions generated by the conversation; primarily, this belongs in the intersubjective and cognitive/linguistic regions of existence. And because it involves a search for meaning it belongs in the perceptual region. Furthermore, as we shall see, it is a transcendent activity of the body. So it can happen that I begin to discuss with a colleague how a 'forgetfulness' of the events can get in the way of a person's coming to terms with a horrific event. As we talk I notice that things I had not considered – such as, a much increased frequency of therapy sessions by way of giving the client the support which may allow the banished memories to surface – begin to take shape in me and *I find myself in a new place*.

The meaning of the word is not contained in the word as a sound. But the human body is defined in terms of its property of appropriating in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, significant cores that transcend and transfigure its natural powers (PhP.p.193;F226).

Here we see 'dialogue' as meaning-making – which is always a perceptual exercise - through the medium of the body.

Term 4: Embodied

We have in the literature of Gestalt therapy a strong tradition of the body as the centre of therapy. I go over this question in greater detail in Chapter 7, Section One.

In his work (1987) *Body Process*, Kepner gives a very convincing account of the effectiveness of therapy centering on the body. He makes it clear at the same time that this must go hand in hand with dialogue. One without the other will not be sufficient. (I deal with this more fully further along. (cf H.P. pp.66;170-176). Sufficient here to notice that 'embodiment' in order to be understood as a therapeutic movement must be seen as an activity of the perceptual region.

Terms 5 and 6: Field Perspective and Holism

I take these two terms together because they are very closely related in their meaning: they each of them stress the belongingness of things with one another and in the totality. They mark the departure in Gestalt therapy, from the model of the world as it was handed down in the Cartesian tradition: 'Here, I am the thinking mind and over *there* are the things; to study them I isolate them and treat them as *things in themselves*'. Holism and field perspective are essentially epistemological terms - they express the way in which we know the world; these terms also express an ontological belief – that the being of 'things' is in their interconnectedness. Later we shall explore this belief and its origins under the heading of *situatedness* (Ch.9). It seems apparent to me that the adequate meaning of these terms is to be found in 'perception'. I shall, however, make an important point about their being body-based: if one reflects upon it, one sees that it is only from the experienced unity of my own body that I can constitute the object. In my perception of any object or person all my senses are employed and this inundation of disparate data is brought together only in the Gestalt of my own body. This enables me to hold the object in my perception as a unity, vis-à-vis my own unity and also as belonging in the world of things.

Terms 7 and 8: Response/Responsibility

Both of these related terms find their adequate explanation only in terms of perception by the embodied subject. They belong most properly in the region of intersubjectivity. They also embrace the region of motility and perception equally. I cannot respond to what has no meaning for me; for such I have literally no response-ability. Gestalt therapy helps people to appropriate their lives; in every act of awareness there is present an element of ownership of my life – I become responsible.¹⁸ Response involves bodily action – turning my body, looking, speaking, feeling, and moving. So, here again Gestalt therapy manifests itself as a function of perception in the sense in which Merleau-Ponty uses the term.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have done four things:

Firstly, I have situated my study in a particular genre of writing. It belongs with those thinkers who relate their thinking to the actual quality of life for people. I dissociated the study from partisanship in academic philosophic debate. Life choice is, for me, of primary importance. This means for me to re-locate Gestalt therapy as a therapy of the lived body.

Secondly, I demonstrate the use I make of existential phenomenology in my study – somewhat after the manner of Roger Brooke (1993) in his work on Carl Gustave Jung. Merleau-Ponty's analysis offers a new vocabulary to Gestalt therapy, which will enable it to develop and articulate itself in a whole new way and at a more profound level. My study will be of little value and lose all its originality unless my investigation moves at the *ontological* level; that is to say, it must pass through the 'natural attitudes', and go for that which is at once concealed and revealed by the phenomenon: Being. Phenomenology

¹⁸ J.P Sartre, in his *Truth and Existence* (1992B) makes this point most powerfully showing how knowledge brings in its train responsibility and opens the way to our inauthenticity by our hiding from it.

reveals the lived body as the confirmation of the theoretical – a realization of Being.

Thirdly, I demonstrate how the phenomenological method can operate with regard to the concept of ‘health’, much spoken about in Gestalt therapy literature.

Fourthly, I demonstrate the validity of my applying a phenomenology of perception to Gestalt therapy because the therapy is essentially a perceptual activity. In this chapter we began to glimpse something of the wealth of deeper understanding which the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty offers to Gestalt therapy theory.

Chapter 3 - Epistemology in Gestalt Therapy Theory

Chapter Preview

Introduction: Stating the Problem

Section One: The Relevance of this Concern to Gestalt Therapy Theory

Truth, Certainty and Belief

Present as Operational Intentionality

We Construct Our World

Support from Descartes

Proposition 1: Its Limitations

Proposition 1: Needs to be Challenged

What Proposition 1 Misses

My Given Existence Precedes my Thinking

The Obtuseness of the Other

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Introduction: Stating the Problem

The problem I am addressing in this chapter is this: What is the epistemological basis of Gestalt therapy theory? In other words: What does Gestalt therapy theory state as its basic certainty: What is the 'bottom line' for judging the validity of a theory in Gestalt therapy? From where does Gestalt therapy derive its reality? How does Gestalt therapy stand with regard to truth and certainty? We can formulate the problem in three interdependent propositions.

Proposition 1. If the world as I know it is a construction of my mind and if *it* is the only world I know, then how can I be sure that I am in contact with the *actual*? Rather, it would seem, am I in contact with *an idea of the actual*? In other words, *all I have is an interpreted world*.

Proposition 2. The realm of experience is limited to the realm of language. 'Being is forever imprisoned within the house of language. There is no access to either Being or beings that is not mediated by language' (Dillon 1997, p.178). I deal with this in Chapter 3 on Language.

Proposition 3. There is my truth and there is your truth. We each of us are separate people; we each of us take a different view of the same reality. We each of us can be right. So talk about 'truth' becomes problematic.

The 'critical question' for Gestalt theory and practice is this:

Am I, in fact, deluded in thinking that I am in contact with *actuality*? This person that sits here in front of me, how *sure* can I be that I am really meeting *that person* and not just *my idea* of that person? It seems to me extremely important that there be no chink of equivocation about the *possibility* of our immediate contact with reality. A question-mark against the reality of my world is a question-mark against my own reality, because it is only in terms of the world that I know myself.

In this chapter I shall deal at length with the position stated in proposition 1 above; less so about proposition 3; and I shall deal with the question of language in a separate chapter.

I attach such importance to proposition 1 precisely because it is - to my mind – a position being taken up by some very influential Gestalt writers of our time. Here are some examples:

Sapriel, L. (1998) says: ‘everything is interpreted and this interpretative process does not get us closer to ‘truth’. She approvingly cites Spinelli, E (1989) ‘whatever be the meaning arrived at, it cannot be concluded that it is a true or “correct” reflection of reality’. She does not modify or qualify this first statement (cf H.P.pp. 28,99,110,114,124,127.)

Wheeler, G. (2000) says: ‘...the world we are aware of seems to come to us *already packaged*’ (p.80).the world as it is (Kant) is ultimately unknowable to us... all we have are our interpretative pictures.... *All we have to work with are constructions of our bodymind*’ (pp86-87) (italics in text).¹⁹

Robine, A.: ‘.... with this (post-modern view) comes the conclusion that there is no other reality than that which we construct....’

I am not here citing the context of those quotations because I shall do so later. However, I need to make two very important points very briefly:

- (i) They are quite right to say that *we* shape everything we perceive according to our needs, desires, losses, hopes, ambitions etc.
- (ii) There is no question of our knowing the ‘thing as it is in itself’; to accord *actuality* to such a notion is to deny the primacy of phenomena; it is to assume some god-like stance upon the world so that I know something through and through – in its *ipseity*; because to know one thing is to know its relationships and its origins through all time and this must involve knowing the same about all connected with it.

¹⁹ cf My challenge to Wheeler on this view of perception in the British Gestalt Journal (2001). For his reply to me cf (Wheeler, 2002).

Section One: The Relevance of This Concern to Gestalt therapy Theory

Truth, Certainty and Belief

Firstly, I need to make some clarifications and distinctions. The point of these will become apparent later in the chapter – and, indeed, throughout the study.

Firstly, I must address the difficult question of **truth**: In Gestalt therapy truth is not to be found in a proposition. Rather is it a *process of dawning awareness* of the reality that is here present with me, that summons me and engages my awareness. Though they are very closely connected I am not wishing to make ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ interchangeable. Reality may not engage my judgement or make a demand upon my awareness the way truth does. It is more than just a ‘point-of-view’. A client said to me: ‘For years, I engaged my father in polite conversation just to be able to be comfortable with myself. I knew I was avoiding him but chose not to face up to it. I patronised him- and somewhere I knew it.’. To say to such a person: ‘That is just your viewpoint on what happened’, is to collapse his experience into a proposition. This is more than just a point of view: he is passing judgement on himself and coming from a place of illumination in his awareness.²⁰ It is part of embracing the truth to embrace also the opacity of the world. We are never fully sure; our weightiest decisions are made in semi-darkness.

I go along with Dillon’s distinction between the search for truth and the search for certainty:

The search for truth is an attempt to pierce the opacity of the world, an effort to make our conjectures about the world as accurate as possible. The quest for certainty, on the other hand, is an attempt to eliminate the opacity of the world altogether and make it entirely transparent; an essay to expel all conjecture or supposition from our knowledge (Dillon, 1997, p.10).

In *searching for the truth* one can be content that the opaqueness of the world *remain*, in questing certainty one is wanting to do away with that opaqueness. In Gestalt therapy

²⁰ In my views here I am very influenced by Michael J. Buckley (1978).

theory each of these positions is seen as a *movement* towards the world; each of these searches is charged with an emotional attitude they will affect the atmosphere of 'the field'. Furthermore, the therapist who has *given up* on 'truth' as a quest at all is moving towards the world in his own way and this will also manifest itself in his body-presence with his client. This will have relevance in our discussion of some aspects of post-modern de-constructivism.

Present as Operational Intentionality

And then there is 'belief' which is the way we cope with the great sea of our ignorance: '...believing (or cognitive "knowing") is the sublimation (translation or expression) of our noncognitive situations into the thematic and linguistic structures of our cognitive region.' (Mallin, S.B, 1979, p.221). People cope with the surd that is mortality by *belief* in a life after death. All these – the search for truth and certainty, acts of belief - are activities of our existential regions – cognitive/linguistic, motor, intersubjective and perceptual (Mallin loc.cit.p.41). As such, these activities are present to us in the operational intentionality of our bodies – our senses, our muscles, our brain, our skin and bones. And this operational intentionality is not available to me until I *actually jump* into the situation. How do I know I can see? By seeing! And how do I know I can walk? By walking! This is because I do not actually coincide with myself; there is a tension between what I am and what I *can* be or what I can aim at:

.... action is, by definition, the violent transition from what I have to what I aim to have, from what I am to what I intend to be. I can accomplish the *cogito* and have assurance of genuinely willing, loving or believing, provided that in the first place I actually do will, love or believe, and thus accomplish my own existence (PhP.p.282;F438).

When Merleau-Ponty here says: 'I can accomplish the *cogito*...' he is referring to my allowing and articulating awareness of that stream of life through me, which *is given to* me, is not deriving from me but which I acknowledge when I utter '*Cogito*' 'I think.' It

is an acknowledgement of that ‘upsurge of existence’, of what already IS, independently of me and which ‘runs through me’ without my being its origin.

I experience the sensation as a modality of a general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which *runs through me* without my being the cause of it. (PhP.p.216;F250)(italics are mine)

Merleau-Ponty is speaking here about sensation. However, because for Merleau-Ponty being is univocal, that is to say there are not ‘kinds of being’ like ‘sensation and ‘intellection’ or ‘spiritual’ and ‘corporeal’ being, but only *one* Being with different articulations, what he says of sensation will apply to cognition and all its modalities.

Let us now return to re-consider Proposition 1.

If the world as I know it is a construction of my mind and if *it* is the only world I know, then how can I be sure that I am in contact with the *actual*? Rather, it would seem, am I in contact with *an idea of the actual*? In other words, *all I have is an interpreted world*.

Procedure

First of all I wish to illustrate the *strengths* of this position and to make clear that I am in no way disputing the fact that we construct our world. (I am aware how in that last sentence I am falling into *presupposing* that there is ‘a-world-in-itself’ which beckons to be ‘constructed’ by us!).

Secondly I shall dwell upon the *limitations* of this position: how it omits that dimension of perception which I have discussed above and which is the *body dimension* of perception. It is my contention that the bottom line for Gestalt therapy theory must be the *givenness of the lived body*.

Thirdly I shall elaborate further upon this bodily dimension by explaining the concept of ‘primordial faith’ or ‘contact’ as Merleau-Ponty calls it.

We Construct our World

The strength of this position is twofold. (i) The manifest truth which we all experience is that we shape or construct our world; *everything* that comes within the ambit of our perception. (ii) It is supported by the same unquestioned presupposition allowed by Descartes when he originally uttered his famous '*Cogito, ergo sum*'. It is following Descartes.

Gestalt therapy theory does not deny that we shape and construe our perceptions after the manner of our own familiar world. It is precisely our acknowledgement of this that leads us to bracket and to apply rigorously the hermeneutic circle. Technically it is explained as projection (PHG pp.254 –262). Projection is a matter of common observation and there is nothing particularly new about it. The medieval Scholastics recognised this and had a phrase for it: *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* ('Whatever is received is received in accordance with the disposition of the receiver. ') However, this notion which, long after the Scholastics, became known in psychology as 'projection', came into its own mainly in the 19th century under the pen of Ludwig Fuerbach who applied it to explain (away) religious belief (Buckley, M.J, 1979, p.682ff). The notion that we constantly project ourselves into the world and find there what really belongs to *us*, became a mainstay of Freud's work particularly in its application to the interpretation of dreams and the phenomena of transference and counter-transference. The concept of 'projection' was philosophically enthroned by Heidegger in his *Being and Time* (1927). *Dasein* stands in the world in a familiar setting precisely because *he sees his own destiny* in what lies around him. (cf Richardson, J.P. 1986, p.21ff).

To construct our world is to project ourselves and the world we know ahead of us and 'find' it in new situations. Such construction of our world goes on all the time in our in every-day life. The meaning we give to events varies with our loves, hates, desires, etc. So, if someone I love 'borrows' my stereo player I will say: 'That's alright, she'll give it back when she's finished with it': whereas, if someone else does the same thing, his label

is 'thief'. This construction of reality is acknowledged generally in Gestalt therapy writing. Yontef (1993, p.286ff) deals with it in connection with Field Therapy. In the practice of therapy we do our best with phenomenological reduction to counteract projection to some extent by filtering out the grosser distortions. Everything we touch, imagine, perceive, talk about, use, and associate with is imbued with humanity. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the truth in this position when he speaks of the way in which the person and the thing are joined

The thing is inseparable from the person perceiving and can never be actually in itself because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity (PhP.p.320;F370).

Support from Descartes

The second strength of this position is the support it gets from René Descartes. Descartes' position: the only meaning we can really claim to know is what is beyond the vicissitudes of the body and time. Meaning, if it is to be really *meaning* must be eternal, it cannot be the plaything of moods and weather and wear and tear. So, this underlies 'the adoption of a methodology of reduction which further separates essence from fact and meaning from existence'. (Dillon 1997, p.77)

As Descartes struggled to know something with certainty, he bracketed off all his everyday certainties – like that he was a mathematician etc. - even to the extent of 'doubting' his actual being in the world – his existence. This meant he 'factored-out' his bodily existence. This is also what Paul Goodman did in formulating the basis of his philosophy for Gestalt therapy. He may not have 'missed out' on the body, I'm sure he had it in mind; but in missing out on the *givenness of the body* as the primordial 'experience', he missed out on our most basic contact with the world. Thus Goodman, like Descartes, falls into that ancient reversal where thought about the world replaces experience of the world.

Proposition 1: It's Limitations

Challenging Proposition 1.

To directly challenge the position stated in Proposition 1, would involve demonstrating that there is a world apart *from my thinking* and I do not think that is possible – from this position: as soon as I take the first step I am, in that step, back where I started out from – my thinking.

Proposition 1: Needs to be Challenged

If this Proposition 1 stands as it is, then, in my view, the whole basis of the practice of Gestalt therapy is undermined. Gestalt therapy theory and practice depend on a naive belief in the *immediacy* of our contact/presence with *people and things*. So it is necessary for us to know what is missing from this formulation of perception. Dillon (1997, p.88) calls this formulation the 'Thesis of subjectivity'. ' This,' he says, 'is the thesis on which all forms of intellectualism rest, and it states that the only world we can ever perceive/conceive is a world constituted on the basis of the *subjective structures* of perception and conception; the only reality to which we have access is an immanent reality' (loc.cit supra). From within the stance of this subjectivist formulation there is no way out and the only reality to which I have access is an ideality.

Because the consequences of accepting this position as it stands, can be so dire for Gestalt therapy we need to look carefully at its limitations: It may be helpful if I repeat here the text of Proposition 1:

Proposition 1. If the world as I know it is a construction of my mind and if *it* is the only world I know, then how can I be sure that I am in contact with the *actual*? Rather, it would seem, am I in contact with *an idea of the actual*? In other words, *all I have is an interpreted world*.

What Proposition 1 Misses

What is missing here is what was missing in Descartes 'Cogito'. (Let us take 'Cogito' as representing *the act* whereby I know the world). What he was not taking into account was the fact that his 'Cogito' was not as primitive as he thought. He was leaving out all that coursing of Existence through him, which we spoke about earlier under the heading of 'belief'.

If you take time to do the Descartes meditation for yourself, you will find that it is 'preceded' by a thrust for self-articulation; this thrust which is present in every movement at all levels, *defies further reduction*, and is my existence itself (cf. Mallin, p.65). I have placed 'preceded' in inverted commas to indicate that this is just a manner of speaking: the 'thrust' is *not separate* from the utterance; it is built into it as part of it, and its priority is not temporal but logical – not with the logic of reason but with the logic or inevitability of *situation*.²¹ (We need to be on our guard not to predicate of perception what we 'know' to be in the thing.)

My Given Existence Precedes My Thinking

I do not call myself into existence by my 'I think', my existence in all its richness and promise precedes my 'I think'. Rather is my 'I think' gathered up in the current of my existence and made part of my history.

"It is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being" (Merleau-Ponty V1.194)

It is not the "I am" which is pre-eminently contained in the "I think", not my existence which is brought down to consciousness which I have of it, but conversely the "I think" which is re-integrated into the transcending process of the 'I am', and consciousness into existence (PhP.p.383;F439) (cf Mallin, p.178).

²¹ An example of the logic of situation: if you are sitting on the branch of a tree and saw that branch at a place between your body and the trunk, you will fall to the ground when you have sawed the branch through.

People who hold Proposition 1 as it stands, follow Descartes in collapsing perception into cognition; this is similar to those who collapse Existence into sexuality.

The Obtuseness of the Other

Proposition 1 speaks as if my thinking, my understanding, was the only factor in my perception. It makes no mention of the life going on in my body – in no way separate from that self-same thinking but intimately related to it and substantially affecting my perception. All the time in my every perception I am having to wrestle with the obtuseness of that ‘other’ which, if I disregard it, is as unforgiving as a road accident. Disregarding that ‘other’ which is my body and its needs can lead to pain and illness. Similarly, if I put off contacting a friend, *the time passes*, the opportunity drifts away and my relationship comes to a pass I would never have wished. I am aware of noticing only a tiny segment of the great mass of experience that is pouring over me from my senses. Merleau-Ponty never tires of reminding us of the gratuity of our existence.

Such is the lot of a being who is born, that is, who once and for all has been given to himself as something to be understood.....

He returns to this enterprise of the world in which each of us ‘finds’ ourselves caught up.

Because I am born into present existence by a time I do not constitute, all my perceptions stand out against a background of nature. While I perceive, and even without having any knowledge of the organic conditions of my perception, I am aware of drawing together somewhat absentminded and dispersed “consciousness”; sight, hearing and touch, with their fields, which are anterior and remain alien to my personal life (PhP.p.347;F399).

The Body Given in Primordial Contact

In order that I may say ‘I know the world’ I must be already constituted in existence. I am already ‘recognising’ a world, I already possess a language, I am already thinking and familiar with process. The question then arises – “How did I come to this pass?” Just as I

sit at this table and write I have come to the place from an earlier position, I can write because of a previous education; one thing leads to another. Now, in order to forestall an infinite regress Merleau-Ponty offers us the idea of *Primordial Contact*: this is a basic, totally general, altogether non-specific, ‘meeting with the world’. He calls it variously ‘primordial comprehension of the world’ (PhP.p.327;F377 –*cette compréhension originnaire du monde*) the ‘tacit cogito’ (ibid.), ‘the original perception’ (PhP.p.241;F278 – *valeur originnaire*), faith or opinion (ibid. *foi originnaire*). All four major regions of existence – cognitive/linguistic, motor, intersubjective and perceptual – are articulations of this primordial contact with being. He would say that the very move to such articulation is my Existence itself.

The ‘Cogito’ is a ‘*specification*’ of this primordial contact with being.

This contact is my body – precisely these structures which are my senses; these senses have a ‘pre-personal status’ (Mallin 1979, p.41).

By means of sensation I am able to grasp, on the fringe of my own personal life and acts, a life of given consciousness from which these latter emerge, the life of my eyes, hands and ears, which are so many natural selves. Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some *primal acquisition* which prevents my experience from being clear to itself (PhP.p.216;F250).

This ‘primal acquisition’ is that ‘marriage’ of myself (my body) with the world, my thrownness which disclosed to me, albeit without self-awareness, my connaturality with the world. My experience is not clear to itself because this connaturality is the great reservoir from which all subsequent contacts with the world draw their foundation. This is why we discern an ineluctable ‘givenness’ about my experience – *it does not originate with me*.

Another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronised with them I experience the sensation as a modality of a general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the author of it (PhP.p.216;F256).

'I am given to myself as something to be understood'. This *givenness of myself to myself* is my contact with the world because it is only in terms of the world that I can experience myself. This givenness is pre-personal and is the *foundation* of every 'realisation' by me of my selfhood - such as Descartes' 'Cogito'. Primordial contact constitutes the foundation for all subsequent specifications of perception - even for Proposition 1 above which is a view of perception in terms of the subjective structures of perception. It is the epistemological basis of Gestalt therapy theory and this cannot be different from that which centres Gestalt therapy in the body. In the Chapter on Foundations we shall come to discuss the formulation by Paul Goodman that has come to be taken as a basic philosophic stance in Gestalt therapy, we shall see then how he missed out on this *givenness* as foundational to all perception.

If we speak about primordial contact as 'an experience' we have inserted some kind of 'content' or 'intentionality' into it. It has no content, no intention but is that timeless 'moment' when my belonging in the world discloses itself; the world is my home and is the ever-present horizon of every perception and therefore the ultimate validation of whatever I hold to be true. The world is the source of such certainty as I must have to carry on my life, because *the world in general* is the only absolute certainty I possess (PhP.p.297;F244). It is this most general presence of being in primordial contact, which will, for the rest of my life, adhere to every single movement of my perceptual region of existence.

My first perception, along with the horizons that surrounded it, is an every-present event, an unforgettable tradition; even as a thinking subject, I still am that first perception, the continuation of that same life inaugurated by it (PhP.p.407;F466).

Primordial faith therefore undergirds the 'Cogito' as it undergirds every perceptual act: We could well call it the 'Kiss of the World'.²²

²² Primordial Contact is similar to what the Existentialists call "thrownness". This is realized especially, though not exclusively, in what Jaspers calls 'limit situations' such as bereavement (Macquarie 1973, p.194).

In summary we can say about Primordial Faith/Primordial Contact:

- (i) It founds the certainty that *I belong* in the world; I am of the same stuff as the world.
- (ii) It informs every subsequent perception and generates the affirmation in us that all our experiences are compatible and deliver to us a unified 'world'.
- (iii) It makes possible the experience of self as a single 'cohesion of life', a single temporality that progressively explicates itself from birth and confirms it in each present (PhP p.407;F466).

For Merleau-Ponty, 'primordial faith' is the beginning place for philosophical reflection. Just as Descartes discovered his '*Cogito*' in the upsurge of Existence from primordial contact which he missed and so inaugurated his '*method*' (1637) so, it is in the upsurge of Existence that we find phenomenology: we

..... re-discover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system "self-others-things" as it comes into being for us (PhP.p.57;F69).

The Phenomenon and the Thing-in-itself

The practitioners of Gestalt therapy act on the assumption that 'contact' is with the *real* world as distinct from an *ideal* world. This is apparent from reading almost any part of PHG or indeed of any text commonly in use at present.

I count twenty-seven direct references to 'contact' in PHG and all of them are based upon the assumption of the validity of our sense of immediacy. The same holds for the one-hundred-and- twenty-seven references to 'contact' in Yontef (1993). Indeed, trainees are taught to assess the suitability of a person presenting himself for therapy from the way he uses his senses to 'contact the environment' (Delisle, 1991, p44).

'Truth' does not mean in Gestalt therapy theory, contact with the thing-in-itself or its '*ipseity*'. By *ipseity* I mean the sum total of all its possible manifestations. That, as Merleau-Ponty has shown is an *ideality*, an *ens rationis* and is not reached by us in

perception²³ (PhP.p.67;F81 and p.233;F269). What we immediately ‘touch’ is the phenomenon - the partial epiphany of the ‘thing’. Yet this is not separate from the thing, as I have explained already. It is the only way the thing *can be* in the world as it is. Of course it is only *one aspect* of the thing - and it is important to remember that ‘aspect’ does not belong to the thing-in-itself *as such* but to the thing-in-relation-to-the-world. The thing in isolation from the world is as meaningless as a private language. We can *imagine* the thing in isolation - like spinning interminably through deep-space-nine, but in order to do that, we have to ‘forget’ about all those relationships, which *make it intelligible to us* in such an imagination. So closely is every thing bound up with every other thing, that to comprehend one thing *absolutely* would mean knowing everything *absolutely*. In other words, to grasp the *ipseity* of the thing here and now would mean an end to perception.

And yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystalizes it (PhP.p.71;F85).

Section Two: Problems for Gestalt Therapy in Meeting Post-Modernism

Epistemology and the Post-Modern Influences in Gestalt Therapy Theory

How then can it happen that the very foundations of the therapy are called into question? Jean-Marie Robine, in a brilliant lecture, which he delivered at a conference in Paris in 1997 and subsequently published in *Cahiers de Gestalt Thérapie* (5.1999), answers this question. That was not the purpose of his paper. Yet, ironically, it is the title of his paper that directs us in the way of an answer. His paper is entitled: *Will Gestalt Therapy Dare travel the Road of Post-Modernism.*²⁴

²³ Note how difficult it is to talk of the problem without falling back into a dualist conception. Our thinking separates what in actuality is ONE.

²⁴ *La Gestalt-thérapie va t'elle oser s'engager dans la voie post-moderne?*

The burden of the paper is to bring to our attention how Gestalt therapy, as we have ‘inherited ‘ it from the founders and early writers, is not quite adequate to the demands of the post-modern era. He points out how the post-modern paradigm embraces chaos and doubt; how it brings into many areas of human life a movement of ‘deconstruction, decomposition, decentralisation, deregulation, desacralisation,’ how it questions the value of information, and challenges people to let go of their cherished illusions (of progress, of science, of truth, of world mastery, of cultural dominance). He delineates areas where Gestalt therapy is especially challenged. The notion of ‘self’ - more dynamic, and embracing a temporal dimension; language - must become the measure of our ontological reach; the relation between client and therapist -more equal; the paradigm of the field must replace the paradigm of the individual. It is noteworthy that he makes no suggestion of the *central role of the body* in perception

So, as I see it, Gestalt therapy is under great pressure to ‘post-modernise’ itself. With its philosophical foundation none too robust, as I have earlier demonstrated, Gestalt therapy writers are at a loss where to turn for a framework within which to up-date. So, they turn to that version of post-modernism which most affects psychology and which is presently *à la mode*, and this called ‘constructivism’. This is a view which says that what we perceive is, in fact, an *interpretation or construing* of the data that is given to us. What that ‘data’ *is*, remains totally hidden from us. So, we are back again to something resembling Kant’s *numenon*. The conviction I carry that I am *immediately* in touch with *the cat* as I stroke him is, according to the constructivists, an illusion. Robine (loc.cit.) gives a useful summary contrasting the paradigms of modernism and post-modernism: Whereas ‘modernism supported itself on the premise which can be found in the saying: “I believe only in what I can see”, constructivism would rather say, “I only see what I believe”’.

So, the question arises, what is it about constructivism that I find so threatening? The issue here is the ontological status of the phenomenon. If the phenomenon is generated purely by my perceptual powers and is not in itself *actuality*, the underlying foundation of immediacy and reality is gone. If the phenomenon is simply a product of the mind, *then*

the process of bracketing and the hermeneutic circle as we employ them in Gestalt therapy become meaningless. Both those processes have to do with letting the thing show itself to us precisely as it shows itself, when it does so *from itself* - in contrast to the way it shows itself when it does so *through my interpretation*.

It is not the notion of projection that threatens Gestalt therapy theory but the *sweeping away of the underlying foundation of immediacy* against which we can say: 'Yes, such and such is a projection, the reality is different.'

In Gestalt therapy theory today, the epistemological problem takes the form of a move away from the body as the most basic factor in our perception. (Even such writing as that last sentence carries shades of dualism). Once we waver at all in seeing experience as that 'reciprocal relationship of expression which presents the human body as the manifestation of a certain manner of being-in-the-world.....' (PhP.p.5;F67) then Gestalt therapy theory is in epistemological trouble. Such hesitation results in some by-passing of the 'lived body' as the only access we have to being and we are back again to the old dualism of body and soul in some way.

The Importation of Constructivism

This by-passing of the lived body is, as I see it, the difficulty about the excessive importation of constructivism into Gestalt therapy theory.

Robine's paper comes to us in the context of a discussion of Field Theory in Gestalt therapy, although he begins by announcing that he is going to explore 'the rather mysterious theme of post-modernist possibilities for Gestalt therapy'. He also warns that he is exposing himself to the Perlsian charge of 'mind-fucking' by speaking about epistemology. (This is an allusion to Fritz Perls during that phase of his life when he was in reaction against academia.) In my remarks below I shall confine myself closely to our question: Is it an illusion that I am in immediate and real touch with the world as specified in this person or that thing?

He states his position – without qualification – three-quarters way through the paper in associating himself completely with the ‘thesis’ of Wheeler on the deplorable consequences of individualism, and calling for a new paradigm of field connectedness. *except* on one point:

‘Wheeler co-ranks the paradigm of the field with the advance of constructivism. For sure, it is the use of the logic put forward by constructivism, which allows us or has allowed us easy entry into this (Wheeler’s) new paradigm. This has happened with very much more clarity than phenomenology or Gestalt therapy could offer up to now. Despite this, in my view, at least, constructivism remains locked into the individualist paradigm there by saying: “There is no other reality besides that which each subject constitutes”(it) remains a solipsist affirmation. Drawing on social constructivism we can modify this into: “There is no other reality besides that which each subject constructs *in relationship*”. This, in my view, truly marks a change of paradigm. (Robine, 1999, p. 74)

In order to contextualize what Robine is saying we need to understand something of the kind of constructivism he is speaking about. He sees constructivism as that branch of the post-modern movement which applies to psychology and brackets it with ‘Gestalt theory, the work of Piaget and the work of L’*école de Palo Alto*’, it also includes the dialogue work inaugurated by Martin Buber and these movements which give primacy to ‘relationship ‘in the definition of the human’. I also note that he takes up and applies to post-modern philosophy that ‘*bon mot*’ of Max Weber: ‘The desire to re-enchant the world’ (*Le désir de re-enchantement du monde* ’)(loc.cit.p.67). This brings to mind what Merleau-Ponty says about perception:

Expression is everywhere creative we have the same miracle of an immediately apprehended clarity, which vanishes as soon as we try to break it down to what we believe to be its component elements’ (PhP.p.391;F449)

So here we have the phenomenon of a somewhat different application of post-modern thinking than we meet with in the work of Professor Heath (2000)(cf. H.P.p.67)

Let us remind ourselves that I am confining myself to the epistemological aspects of Robine's long paper. We get a key to his thinking when we notice that the first third of this paper is taken up with a very moving and interesting narrative of his own journey in the world of Gestalt therapy theory and practice. He is saying everything develops, changes and *takes time*. He narrates how he changed, during fifteen years, from being a convinced 'Perlsian' therapist to discovering the field as taught by Goodman and Isador From. His own personal journey led him to the conviction that every theory is a fiction amongst other fictions; but that it is thanks to theory and by means of it that we endeavour to construct the meaning of our experience. (And no mention of the body at all as a source of knowledge).

He says theories derive from our thinking and lead back to thinking and it is upon these that the meaning we give to our lives depends. In this viewpoint everything is relative; there is no reliable foundation. It is all in the mind. At this point I ask: but where do the theories come from? From reason presumably; and *in what* is reason founded? In reflection upon experience, and what is the *foundation* of this experience if not the lived body? And this brings us back to primordial contact ²⁵ and the role of the body in perception. Is there any point of reference here? Is there any 'founding' term which has a priority over the founded term (the theory)? Otherwise we are not in any position to say whether one theory is any better than any other; and then it would follow that the Perlsian theory that human growth as a function of self-reliance is just as 'good' as the theory that human growth is a function of relationship to others.

Every theory, however long-lasting and prestigious, 'retains its coefficient of facticity' (PhP.p.394;F451). Therefore, it will eventually be superseded by another theory, just as Euclidean geometry has been overtaken by other geometries as an account of space. However, the relationship of a theory to reason from which it derives is reciprocal but not

²⁵ We have already met this concept. It is very important for understanding Merleau-Ponty. cf.H.P.Gloss.p..XV;pp52-55;60;66;87;97;106;116;161;220;225;237;262;Appendix A.IX;

symmetrical; it is like the relationship of father and son. Similarly reflection is related to the unreflective in a reciprocal but not symmetrical way. That is to say, their place in the process of experience is not neatly balanced equality. They are in the relationship of originator and originated. The originated is a specified instance of the originator and therefore distinct and different in function, though *utterly dependent* upon one another and meaningless apart.

‘The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship, that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*’ (PhP.p.394;F451).

Meaning and Personal Acts

If Robine is saying that the meaning of my personal acts depends upon a theory then that reduces them to the status of specifications of general principle. The ‘meaning’ that I attach to my own life or to my personal acts is not the same as theory. To say that I abide by my word not because of fear of punishment, nor because of some parental introject, but because that is what I chose to do, is not a theory. If it is just a theory then there is the presumption in all cases that there is an unconscious life determining me, about which I know nothing but which takes away the possibility of free choice and therefore of my capacity for responsibility and love (which by definition requires freedom – lack of determination – to be what they say they are). Again we return as always to the lived body; the meaning of my *personal acts* is in a different relationship to my lived body than is ‘the paradoxical theory of change’. My personal acts have to do with a chosen focus of my perception articulated in a positive posture of my body and a chosen *closing up* of a general view and the allowing of a specific view to become figure in my perception. In order to assign meaning with seriousness to my personal acts – such as interventions in therapy – I draw close to my immediate experience repeatedly, as the validation source of that meaning.

For theory on the other hand, I draw back and yield. Theory is a hypothesis awaiting validation on the basis of evidence, especially the accuracy of prediction. The hypothesis

is a construction of my thought, and while our pre-reflective body-experience ultimately founds all theories, the link with my lived body is less close than it is with the meaning of my personal acts. And of course, theory and personal acts overlap – as in this study, for instance.

The Attack on Meaning

At the same time that Robine hails post-modern thought as bringing enchantment back to the world, he says it ‘signals the death of illusions (of progress, of science, of truth, of supremacy and cultural dominance)’ (loc. cit. p.67). Deconstruction is the process of dismantling such myths and illusions so that their meaning drains away. He does this by ‘holding up for demolition the epistemological assumptions, implicit or explicit, in judgements of aesthetic value and in interpretations of sense’ (Steiner G. 1989, p.116). Deconstruction searches out and destroys delusions. ‘The ultimate basis of such delusion’, says Steiner, ‘innocence or cunning, its final validation is theological. Where it is consequent, deconstruction rules that the very concept of meaningfulness, of a consequence, even problematic, between the signifier and the signified, is theological or onto-theological (loc.cit. p.119).

Talk about truth is one of the casualties of this movement against meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is another name for real. If we agree that the therapeutic component in Gestalt therapy essentially consists in the genuineness, the authenticity of the relationship between client and therapist, then Gestalt therapy will be a casualty.²⁶ The real, the actual, the true is of great importance to Gestalt therapy. Such genuineness has as its characteristic immediacy, bodily presence one to the other. Is this illusion? It is one thing to question the genuineness of my relationship with a client; I may be pretending to feel what I don’t, or withholding, or covering up in some way; it is quite another thing to question whether a real and immediate contact or presence is possible at all. Such a

²⁶ ‘authenticity’ is a key idea in Gestalt therapy and this is reflected in this study: cfH.P. pp4;11;37;62;99;107;122;192;195;305.

question wipes out the possibility of genuineness, which was concerning me in the first question – it is sawing off the branch I sit on. Such a position is equivalent to calling into question the reality of the world; and such a position is supported only by a total misconception of the world. I would apply what Merleau-Ponty says about the truth of the world to the truth of the relationship between client and therapist:

To ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called in question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn (PhP.p.344;F396).

The world as a connected integral totality is the horizon from which things and events emerge and find meaning. If, however, I view the world as a collection of disconnected items, and time as a series of discontinuous events, then I have taken away that agent which holds things and events together.

Concerns arising: From Gestalt Therapy Theory Writers

In regard to Gestalt therapy theory, when it comes to projection we must make a distinction. Projection as a psychological phenomenon is widely spoken of from the start in Gestalt literature (e.g. PHG p.531ff). For the most part projection is regarded as constituting an obstacle to contact. If when I meet you I ‘see’ my Uncle Henry who used bully me, then my projection of him on to you will stop me contacting *you*. Projection as ‘constructivism’ is where reality is ‘basically nothing but what each individual perceives as the representation and interpretation of his own feeling about existence’.²⁷

Constructivism raises serious epistemological questions for the Gestalt therapy theorist.

Yontef does not use the word ‘constructivism’ but speaks about the importance of knowing the implicit presuppositions in our ‘individual functioning’. He invokes a thoroughgoing field perspective, taking into account the manifold influences seen and

²⁷ Rahner, K. (1984, p.344) uses this description in a related but different context.

unseen, which cluster round the simplest situations (1993,p.86ff). In no way does he call into doubt the validity of our conviction of immediacy.

Sapriel (1998, p.38) raises the issue in this form: she invites us to accept that ‘ultimate reality’ is unknowable to us, and all we have anyway is an interpreted world. This position seems to me to assume that there is a thing called ‘ultimate reality’ – as if underneath the phenomenon there is a hidden, unknowable ‘*res*’. I go along with Merleau-Ponty who says that such a notion is an ideality necessary for the sciences but which has its foundation in the phenomenon.

‘The house seen from everywhere is really the house seen from nowhere’.
(Because ‘everywhere’ is not a vantage point at all). (PhP.p.69;F83)

Sapriel is correct in saying we project and interpret all the time. I disagree if she says we cannot do that *more or less*. Phenomenologically, bracketing is an effort to do it *less*. That way we allow the thing (phenomenon) to speak from itself through our bodies conjoined with it (cf H.P.p.80-81). If we once attribute our knowledge of the world to some immanent structures of the human mind this makes for considerable difficulties in regard to the role of experience in perception.

When the organisation of perceptual experience is attributed entirely to the activity of some supervenient immanent agency, experience can no longer be regarded as the origin of knowledge (Dillon,1997, p.65).

If one argues that there is no need for ‘primacy’ if there is convergence, then we are still at a loss to know what the *founding term* is: I have got to where I am now by being somewhere else previously. Where I was then is the ‘founding term’ of where I am just now. Without *ontological primacy* there remains the problem of how the ‘mind and body’ can be united. And the way out of this old, old problem is to accept that our only access to reality is the phenomenon which is given us through our senses. That *given* is the founding term.

My body has a massive knowledge of the world. The knowledge, which my eyes have of protecting themselves from tiny flying objects by shutting the eyelid even before I know

anything about it, is not interpreted knowledge. If we do not learn from the world (through our bodies) then how do we recognise things? Is it perhaps that we are endowed with a primordial knowledge of *all things*, a power of knowing that is co-extensive with the world, which is 'triggered' by my meeting a thing? (PhP.p.370;F424). The body is the problem. If you once grant - as even the medieval Scholastics did - that *all* knowledge ultimately comes to us through our body, then we are back to the ontological primacy of the phenomenon and its epistemological correlate the primacy of the perception. You cannot have one without the other.

In my challenge to Wheeler (2001), I asked him six questions about his generalization that 'perception is an interpretative, constructive act The world as it is (Kant) is ultimately unknowable to us ... all we have are our interpretative pictures. All we have to work with are constructions of our bodymind' (loc. cit. pp. 86-87, italics mine). I pointed out how his position seems to collapse perception into thought; leave no place for body in perception, makes no account of preconceptual awareness.

In his reply to me he attributes my questions as a reaction to the 'deeply unsettling' predicament that we 'no longer have any god-given direct apprehension of the "real" world or even some final picture of our own "authentic" experience'. He attributes this unsettling position to phenomenology; it (follows) directly from the premise and implications of phenomenology (Wheeler 2002, p.46).

In this reply he says of Merleau-Ponty that he 'made enormous contributions to our understanding of self-process and the embodiment of the world' (*ibid. loc. cit.*), which he concedes 'is experience in a very real sense'. (I'm not sure what he means by this – is our experience in any sense an experience of otherness or just an experience of a construction of our minds?)

He cites Merleau-Ponty's definition of phenomenology 'the study of the advent of being to perception' but omits the second part of this quote: 'instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance' (PhP.p.61;F71). He says that 'Merleau-Ponty reduces and

effectively obscures much of what is interesting and crucial (and central to Gestalt therapy) behind that tiny word 'to'. And what is hidden there is the whole world of social process, the presence of other beings' (loc. cit. p.46).

I do not think that Merleau-Ponty's analysis misses out on the social dimension. In his notion of primordial contact – the preconceptual gift of the world – all the rest is given. Wheeler is stuck with the epistemological problem of the body's contribution to perception, or rather, one could say, of explaining how my body perceives the world.

In a later part of the reply – where he is dealing with my question to him about 'truth' – that if there is no such thing as 'truth' then the theory that therapeutic change is dependent upon the constellation of the *heavens*, is as equally valid as any other theory. Here he does admit of 'some direct experience', like sense experience. He does not go on to deal with the question of how this concession undermines his general embrace of an exclusively interpreted world.

I notice that in his discourse on the *social* dimension of our experience he is inclined to see it as apart from our experience of the world. I would agree with him that 'truth' expressed in a proposition is highly problematic.

Roberts (1999) wrote an article in which he dares to blame the application of constructiveness to Gestalt therapy for the standstill in its theoretical development. His daring earned him a long excoriating review article from Professor Heath: *A Constructivist Attempts to Talk to the Field* (2000). The burden of this ferocious review is that Roberts is attributing a reality to the notion of 'field', which Heath thinks unwarranted.

That the inroads of 'constructivism' are not confined to Gestalt therapy but are also taking root in the wider community of psychotherapists is shown by the editor's Note at the end of this twenty-three-page review by Professor Heath. The Note praises Professor Heath's review and condemns Roberts article as 'representative of certain kinds of

objectivising, concretistic, and fideistic stances in psychotherapy.' This is from the editor of the *International Journal of Psychotherapy*.

Truth becomes a problem

So the question arises: Is the only world that I know, one that is formed by the programmes and prejudices that inhabit me? Is the world as I know it purely a product of my construction. If so, then truth becomes a problem. (cf Dillon, 1997, p.178). By 'truth' I mean here 'actuality, or state of being the case, precisely as it illumines recognition' (Buckley, 1978 p.647), and makes a demand on me. If the world as I know it is only an idea, then 'what is' for me is only an idea of *what is*. So, it becomes problematic whether we can ever know the real and know that we know it.

If the only world I know is the world-as-I-understand-it and if this is the product of my immanent programs and prejudices then I may not claim to be in touch with the *real* showing itself, with *what is*, but only with a *viewpoint* upon the world. The mistake in their argument is to separate the phenomenon from the thing. When I look out the window and see a bird I am seeing the thing itself. Truly, no one manifestation expresses the whole bird. And I may be mistaken; if I view the lamp at the end of a high stanchion on the motorway from a distance against a grey background, I can easily mistake it for a seagull - but I shall know that, only when I come to an optimal distance for seeing it. The problem is to find the *foundation* upon which the validity of this perception rests. This, Merleau-Ponty finds in the notion of *Fundierung* or 'foundation'.²⁸ For our purposes here we can say that the thrust inherent in expression is towards intersubjectivity and this intersubjective communication is achieved in the bodily experience of the people. There is always a bodily exchange in intersubjective communication.

²⁸This notion he himself later criticises as 'flawed by its dependence on consciousness' (Dillon, 1997, p.194). In his later work *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty returns to the problem and elaborates a more refined resolution of the problem.

There is an autochthonous significance of the world, which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it, and which provides the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung* (PhP.p.441;F503) (cf. Dillon 1997, p.96).

Such autochthonous significance is constituted at every level of perception. It is constituted in the hermeneutic circle where we constantly look to the phenomena to purify our listening. At the sensible level;

The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. (PhP.p.441;F503)

Gestalt therapy writers will find that the problems of truth, of certainty and ambiguity, of belonging and personal uniqueness have been addressed by the phenomenologists, particularly by Merleau-Ponty, whom very few reference. While we make use of and admire the work of the Berlin school of psychologists, we keep in mind, that despite their insight about the Gestalt as the minimal unit of perception, they adhered to the myth of the determined world.

My Position with regard to what is called 'the Critical Problem'

By 'critical problem' I mean: Am I in immediate contact with reality as I experience myself to be, or is this an illusion so that 'because I have no direct, unmediated access to things as they are, I have to create beliefs about them.' (Prof. G. Heath in private correspondence). Yes, I believe I am in immediate contact with the world of things and people. I do not think all my contact is by any means *immediate* - a great deal of it is mediated to me by my own projections and by the mores of the society I carry around with me and which informs a great deal of what I do. *That being said,* I am convinced that the acquired worlds and habits out of which I act are all *founded upon the immediacy* of my contact with the world. To have a body is to have a world, and the only way I can have a world is through my body, which is in union with the world. This position is elaborated upon by Luijpen (1960/1972, p.102) and W.J.Richardson (1963 ,pp102-3). Luijpen and Richardson both reference Heidegger when they say (in very similar ways):

‘ The “scandal of philosophy” is not, as Kant still thought, the fact that no one has ever managed to offer a valid proof for the reality of the world, but the fact, as Heidegger has shown, people continue to look for such a proof.’ (Luijpen, loc.cit. p103).

This summarises my position, which I take because it makes sense of my experience. It seems to me also that the very formulation of the problem requires two presuppositions, which contradict my experience and make Gestalt therapy impossible.

Presuppositions which generate the ‘Critical Problem’

Presupposition 1: In order to formulate the critical problem I must presuppose that the perceiving subject is *isolated from the world* ‘out there’ and must find a way of ‘contacting’ it. To place an ontological disjunction between me and my world is to enter the realm of the ‘determined world’ where the function of the perceiving subject is problematic. To have body is to have a world. And neither makes any sense without the other.

Presupposition 2: That the experienced movement of my *body in attunement to its world is mistaken*. In other words, in order to have the problem we have got to *disregard the experience of knowledge* as we have it. I feel the warmth of the sunshine. There is no way I can proceed to verify this perception. If I try, I can only do so by first of all verifying a similar perception like that I am sitting here in the first place and before that another similar perception; and so on in an infinite series. How do I know that I feel the warmth of the sunshine? *By feeling the warmth of the sunshine*. This is the argument of Diogenes the Cynic (Hadot, 2001, p.170).

Any definition of perception, which locks the perceiving subject into an *immanent* world, must dispense with our description of human being as *being-in-the-world*. It cannot accommodate such a human phenomenon as reflexes; cannot explain how the reflex opens itself to the meaning of a situation - like when a fly is about to enter my eye. The fly is not in the immanent world nor is there any reason to think that my eye shuts down

to protect itself because of some all-knowing immanent centre of synthesis. The eye shuts down because of my body's intimate belonging in the world.

Nor can a locked-in immanent world accommodate *any intention of our whole being* - such as a thirsty person reaching for a glass of water. Each of these examples, the reflex and the thirst, is a 'modality of a pre-objective view which is *being-in-the-world*' (PhP.p.79;F95). The Gestalt therapy view of perception needs me to be able to say that my body *incorporates* the space of this keyboard I am using into my bodily space and so enables me to find my way round it *without thinking* where my fingers should touch. Otherwise, I think, Gestalt therapy, as we know it, becomes impossible. This is because it is a therapy/way of life; *founded upon the belief* that health is to be found in living out the *intimacy* of our life with the world.

Merleau-Ponty's View

If we take up Merleau-Ponty's description of awareness as he treats of it in the chapter on *The Spatiality of one's Own body and Motility* (Ph.P.p.98; F114) we get a view of perception congenial to Gestalt therapy. He describes awareness as 'being-towards the thing through the intermediary of the body.' (loc.cit.p138). This straightaway places the body to the forefront of perception. He sees the body, the movement, the sensation and perception as of one piece. 'Movement and background are, in fact, only artificially separated stages of a unique totality' (p.138). He places perception in the order of *existence, a constituent of our being*, -not as a state people get into or not. Therefore, we can consider awareness as primarily 'presence of oneself to oneself' which makes all perception *of the world* possible - without such self-presence there could be no *object* - nothing that is 'not-me', just pure subjectivity - which is meaningless. The phenomenon is the primary and only source of reality and it is through my body that I am in touch with the phenomenon. It follows that the *only* way in which the world can be immediately present to me is through my body. And this presence is, primarily, *of a different order* to the presence of the world to me as a result of my reasoning and symbolic representation. If I wave my hand to greet a friend on the other side of the street, that very gesture contains a reference to my friend 'not as an object represented, but as that highly specific

thing towards which I project myself and near which I am in anticipation’
(PhP.p.138;F161).

For Wheeler to explain the role of the body in perception by saying that ‘all we have to work with are constructions of our bodymind’, does not resolve the difficulties. His point of departure is to state that the world comes to us ‘already organised’.

‘My Truth ‘and ‘Your Truth’: A Crypto-Constructivism

The question of truth carries with it considerable ethical implication (Buckley, M.J.1978). Gestalt therapy writers take truth for granted as the *sine qua non* of the therapeutic alliance with the client. It is simply not discussed in the manuals. In practice the tendency to tell lies is regarded as a serious ‘interruption to contact’. ‘Transparency’ is expressly prescribed in the code of ethics and practice of trainers and it is at the heart of the ‘therapeutic alliance’ between therapist and client – without which it is neither safe nor wise to proceed with therapy. Even to work with such a client as Bollas (1987, p.173ff) describes, the minimum necessary must be his acknowledgement that his lying constitutes a life problem.

Of ten main Gestalt therapy books that I consulted only two indexed ‘truth’²⁹. Even Yontef, who uses exhaustive referencing, carries not a single mention of ‘truth’. The absence of discussion indicates to me that ‘truth’ is not considered as a ‘problem’ in Gestalt therapy. It is not raised at all as a question meriting serious consideration. To avoid the question altogether tells us that the writers either do not see ‘truth’ as relevant, or are unsure about its importance.

²⁹ These are Kepner, J. (1995) and Zinker, J. (1994/98). The fact that each of these books is especially concerned with issues of intersubjectivity serves to demonstrate how critical the question of truth can be at the cutting-edge of psychotherapy.

However, an attitude that I have found amongst Gestalt therapists is to take refuge in a kind of solipsistic personal truth: 'My truth is *my truth* and your truth is *your truth*; I don't impose my truth on you and I will not have you imposing your truth on me.'³⁰

If by such utterance the person means that no one can deprive him of his viewpoint, his own special, unique experience, of the '*ipseitas*' of his experience, of that inalienable and irreducible sense of '*me*' with which every person is gifted, (deWaelhens 1942/1946, p131), then, of course, such an utterance is unexceptionable. This sense of self is present in every perception and it is invoked rather than perceived (PhP.p.406;F465). If however, they intend that there is something incommunicable and even infallible about their view, which at the same time compels their assent, then we are into a different realm of discourse.

Such a realm of discourse believes that truth is a *purely personal thing* and since truth can only be experienced in language it makes language a private thing. It is a kind of crypto-constructivism. Two things I would like to say about this position:

1. It is naive in that it fails to reflect upon the way in which I have arrived at my view of any event. My view is always *intentional*: something that is not-me is specifying the movement in my body that is perception; the world is having a large say in what I think. It is *derivative*: my view is built around *what has been given to me*. My view is *dialectical*; if I look at what I perceive then I shall immediately see that as well as my subjective contribution there is an inexhaustible otherness about it. I will see that perception resides in neither pole, but *between* the poles of subjectivity and otherness. So it is simply to mistake the situation, to wrap it round with my personal ownership and immure myself in some impregnable '*cogito*'. (cf Schner, 1992).

2. Dialogue, a central component of Gestalt therapy, becomes impossible. Perception finds its '*telos*', its ordained goal in language and speech. (PhP.p.177;F206). Whoever holds the 'my truth' view is burdened with the task of showing that perception and language are *not* bound together in that way.

³⁰Schner, G.P. (1992) Deals with this in the context of the appeal to (personal) experience as an argument favoured by the devotees of some religious sects.

Dialogue means exactly the opposite of the locked-in, isolated, individual viewpoint. Dialogue *means* that we utter a *logos* articulating the same world; that, independent of each of us, is created a new being that was not there previously, a shared world in which each of us discovers that we are not alone but that the *other* is a continuation of my world. If dialogue does not yield such *communion* then it is difficult to understand how it differs from monologue. In speaking of language Merleau-Ponty puts it this way:

In the experience of dialogue there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocuter are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators in consummate reciprocity.

Our perspectives merge into each other and we co-exist through a common world.
(Ph.P. p.354; F406)

One more argument in the face of 'private' truth is this: anyone who either comes to Gestalt therapy for help or comes to be trained in Gestalt therapy, is, in that very act making an act of faith in the process. He *believes* that this is somehow worth while. So, he associates himself with others who share this insight - he chooses to *belong*. In this very act he is not only accepting something on the word of others but is letting go of his 'private truth'. This is the existential choice. Such a choice is impossible if one remains locked into the immanence of one's own world. Just as there is no such thing as a private language, so neither is there such a thing as a 'private Gestalt therapist'.

Conclusion

It has been my aim in this Chapter to found the authenticity of Gestalt therapy and its basic beliefs, in the lived body.

I have sketched out the difficulties that arise as therapy theorists are drawn into contemporary philosophical debates, which call into question the validity of those meanings, which are essential to Gestalt therapy practice. Here I refer especially to the conviction of the immediacy of our contact with the world and with people. I found this conviction in the immediacy of our bodily presence in the world.

Chapter 4 - Phenomenology for Gestalt Therapy

Chapter Preview

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L. Sapriel's Critique

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Conclusion

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to clarify the place and function of phenomenology in the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy. It has three sections:

1. Merleau-Ponty's working definition and the world-view that accommodates it. I use the work of L. Sapriel to illustrate the difficulties that follow in regard to bracketing for therapists who carry 'the prejudice of the objective world'. I bring forward an example of bracketing from my clinical experience.
2. Gestalt therapy literature: unanimity about phenomenology and bracketing being essential to Gestalt therapy. I note the lack of a reflection in the literature about the bodily nature of bracketing.
3. The philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Why Husserl's reduction is not a helpful model for Gestalt therapy theory. I focus on the body-centred nature of the approach of Merleau-Ponty.

Section One: A Working Definition and Its Explanation

Introduction

Phenomenology is an instrument of investigation. It is the patient and painstaking process of reflection upon the way in which the world gives itself to us and we give ourselves to the world. This is our dialogue with the world. Merleau-Ponty, in the context of explaining the Phenomenal Field, offers what I have found to be a very useful definition of phenomenology:

A study of the *advent (l'apparition)* of being to consciousness, instead of presuming its possibility in advance. (PhP.p.61;F74)(Italics in text.)

We are 'presuming its possibility' if we *compose* the reality instead of describing it.

We compose or shape the reality when we do not permit it *to speak from itself* but speak for it from our projection or prejudice. 'Bracketing' is the process of filtering out those prejudices that distort the emergence of being in our awareness. Bracketing – the epoché³¹ in phenomenology - is an essential process in Gestalt therapy; otherwise, I interrupt my contact with the other by the fog of my preconceptions and assumptions. For instance, if a clergyman comes to me and I immediately place upon him the popular stereotype of 'the parson', then we never genuinely meet, and dialogue becomes impossible. We shall see later that there are Gestalt therapy theorists who do not agree with bracketing as part of the process.

A more precise context for the definition above is Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the introspective psychologists and his approbation for the phenomenological psychologists. The former have made the mistake of 'trying to describe the givens of consciousness without putting into question the absolute existence of the world surrounding it' (PhP.p.59;F72). Pronouns are important here. The 'it' in this quote about the mistake of the introspective psychologists refers to 'consciousness'. So, these psychologists have made a split between consciousness and 'the world surrounding it.'

Merleau-Ponty and the Hidden Subject

Let us turn now to Merleau-Ponty's definition: Notice that the possessive pronoun, 'its' in the definition refers to 'being' that is, to the being of the world and the things 'in' the world. So, here we have a problem for the Gestalt therapy theorist: As well as engaging in careful bracketing of the usual prejudices of our education, we need to call into question the 'absolute existence (*l'existence absolue*) of the world.' By this he does not mean adopting an attitude of universal scepticism but avoiding the 'determinate world view' or 'the prejudice of the objective world' of the scientist. He gives the same

³¹ 'epoché' is a Greek word introduced by Husserl and it means a 'suspension of belief'.
(in Priest, S.1998, p.19)

warning elsewhere speaking dramatically of the ‘death of consciousness’ and using the same adjective ‘*absolue*’

The whole life of consciousness is characterised by the tendency to posit objects since it is consciousness, (*puisqu'elle n'est conscience ,qu'en tant qu'elle...*) that is to say self-knowledge, only in so far as it takes hold of itself and draws itself together in an identifiable object. And yet the absolute positing (*la position absolue*) of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystallizes it. (PhP.p.71;F86)

The “prejudice of the determinate world” arises, says Mallin, ‘because the ideal of a determinate world is taken to be actual, and this is done by understanding the world, strictly from a cognitive point of view, as implicitly containing a subject at every possible spatial and temporal point within the world’ (Mallin, 1979, p.258).

Let me explain this a little.

We are encouraged every day by scientific reports about space travel, gene investigation and the like, to conceive of the world as *already constructed* and waiting *out there* to be ‘discovered’ by us. What is not said is that ‘a million years’ or ‘a micro-organism forty-times smaller than your average full stop’ becomes meaningful for us (i.e. becomes real) *only* if we include some *subject* observing the passage of those years or engaging with the micro-organism. There has to be some embodied subjectivity around *against whose age and size* such things make sense. The drawback in accepting a determinate view of the world, is that thereby I detach myself from my bodily involvement with the world and fail ‘to return to the things themselves’ and

... to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks and in relationship to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is (PhP.p.ix;Fiii)

As I assume some god-like spectator position towards the world, I re-introduce all the old dualisms again. If I am just a spectator, then I am doing the spectating by my consciousness. Descartes recognised a long time ago that in this process my body is very likely to lead me astray (Descartes, 1637/1949, p.111; Med.IV). So, in order to be a good spectator I must leave my body aside with its feelings and imagination and capacity for error. The prejudice of the objective world is very widespread. Merleau-Ponty recognised such a view as most useful for scientific investigation but irreconcilable with phenomenological an analysis as he conceived it.

Difficulties with Bracketing:

L.Sapriel's Critique

Presently there are some very influential writers and trainers in Gestalt therapy who call into question the process of bracketing as part of the therapeutic process. Lolita Sapriel is a writer and trainer from California. She is a past president of the Gestalt therapy Institute of Los Angeles and currently trains in the US, Canada and the UK, being a faculty member at Metanoia Institute in West London. In a remarkable and long article in the *British Gestalt Journal* (1998,7. 1.) she makes the case that ‘ “bracketing” contradicts some basic tenets of Gestalt therapy’s field theory’ (p.38). We shall see later that ‘Field theory’ is one of the three essentials for Gestalt therapy; so, if Sapriel is right then the whole of Gestalt therapy theory becomes very questionable. The context in which she is writing is to meet the question: *Can Gestalt Therapy, Self-Psychology and Intersubjectivity Theory be Integrated?* Her resolution of the question is that whereas Gestalt theory and Intersubjectivity theory can come together, there is a difficulty with the theory of Self-Psychology because of the way it *reifies* the self ‘as if it were an “objective” ‘thing’’. (p.33) On the way, she favours Intersubjectivity theory over Gestalt therapy theory – *on account of her difficulties with bracketing.*

Sapriel attributes the Gestalt practice of bracketing to a borrowing from Husserl:

The origins of Gestalt therapy's phenomenological method derive from the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) ... Perls wanted to provide an alternative to previously hierarchical attitude prevalent in psychoanalysis where the therapist was privy to a 'truer' version of reality than his or her client's. In trying to avoid the pitfalls of prior psychoanalytic reliance on 'objective interpretation', Gestalt therapy adopted Husserl's notion of 'transcendental perception' and thereby paradoxically fell into the very same objectifying trap. It was thought that interpretations just brought into awareness are something already within the patient. Gestalt therapy has believed that 'pure observation' will allow the client to arrive at his/her own experience. 'Bracketing' one's biases in order to see 'pure' or 'virgin' experience leads to what Stolorow refers to as the 'myth of immaculate perception' To think that we can ever leave the field and return to a version of 'scientific objectivity' ... (pp38-39)

I view her critique of bracketing as a great service to Gestalt theorists because it causes us to pause and ask ourselves: What is our point of departure in the process of bracketing: from what view of the world am I working? These questions bring into relief two presuppositions about my act of perception:

- (i) That my act of perception is far more than just a noting of different projections.
- (ii) That my act of perception presupposes my capacity to get to a different reality than that which my projection offers.

The consciousness I have of seeing or feeling is no passive noting of some psychic event hermetically sealed upon itself, an event leaving me in doubt (*uncertain*) as to the reality of the thing seen or felt it is the actual effecting of vision (PhP.p.376;F431).

Reflections and further Critique

(For reasons that will appear later in this chapter I do not think that *in practice* – as distinct from what is written – Gestalt therapy derives from the model set down by

Husserl. Even if unwittingly, Gestalt therapy is far more indebted to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty)

Her use of the expression 'virgin experience', taken from the work of Robert Resnick (1995), and her talk of 'pure observation', make me think, not of a Gestalt therapist but of a scientist working in the old traditional way. Sapriel's reservations about the validity of bracketing seem to me to have validity in certain circumstances i) If the practitioners are imagining they can prescind from the very structures of their perceptual process. If I am doing mathematics, there is no way I can suspend belief in the axioms that support my procedures. ii) If they are thinking that there is some 'in-itself' out there which will disclose its '*ipseity*'. That would be to deny the partiality of our perception. iii) If they come from a view of the world as already 'determined', where consciousness is also a 'psychic fact' meriting investigation like anything else in the world and where my thoughts – '*cogitationes*'- can be viewed as 'the contents' of that consciousness. In such a view if I try to bracket or empty my consciousness of its 'prejudices', then there is not much left to work with. In these three circumstances I do not recognise the theory of bracketing as I understand it in Gestalt therapy. In other words I think she is right to back away from bracketing of the kind she implicitly describes.

Let us hear some more of her difficulty:

Bracketing (even embedded in dialogue) contradicts some basic tenets of Gestalt therapy's field theory. Thinking that we can, *in any way*, observe behaviour with 'presuppositionless' eyes assumes we can actually transcend our own organising principles and unique life experience (which filter and colour every perception) and objectively observe behaviour without an inherent bias being attached to our observation (loc.cit.).

'Bracketing' represents an attempt to neutralise the therapist's biases. If we adhere to field theory, where the observer and the observed are understood to be inextricably intertwined in a field of mutual co-regulation, then we cannot subscribe to the premise that one can ever leave one's position for a mythical Martian one. We cannot neutralise our biases. Resnick's assertion that one "is not assuming, interpreting or ascribing background meanings to what is figural to the

client” implies a one-person psychology view of experience, which holds that intrapsychic meaning arises solely out of experiences ‘figural to the client’. This fails to recognise that the therapist’s very presence, as well as any subtle or overt signs from him/her are influencing what is figural to the client, as well as what is figural to the client influencing how the therapist organises meaning (p.39).

Bracketing is never complete and is always selective; the nature of perception implies projection; but this is not the whole of perception; phenomenologically ‘perception is inseparable from the consciousness it has or rather is of reaching the thing itself’ (PhP.p.374;F429). Both Sapriel and Resnick are reaching for too much certainty. There is a lurking “causality” in the way they talk about ‘influencing one another’.

In order to deal with Sapriel’s difficulties we need to ask ourselves: Why does a Gestalt therapist need to use the *epoché*? What is he after? What does he want to happen which prejudices will block? He wants to meet the client: that means he must remove those things which stop that happening. To meet a person is to allow myself to perceive them just like they present themselves to me. What will stop me is a mind-set which is fixed-up with theories of what is ‘wrong with them’, of how ‘they should be’ of what is going to be a ‘good outcome’. *These are the things I need to bracket*. If I think of myself as an investigator I ‘... should bracket out presuppositions..... based on theories or earlier research findings, those drawn from the investigator’s personal knowledge and belief, and those which dictate specific research methods’ (Ashworth,1996, p.3).

Here we need to distinguish three ‘worlds’: a) our every-day common-sense world b): our lived-world. c) the world of ‘Field Theory’. This last comprises both a) and b) worlds and is realised in my body.

The everyday world is the world of our culture and our news media and our scientific investigations. It is peopled by all manner of distorting prejudices. The lived world is the pre-objective world. It is world without ‘knowledge’; it is the world on which the common-sense world is based, as a map is based on the *actual landscape*.

Philosophical access to the pre-reflective world is by reflection only, and this can be quite difficult even after long and arduous preparation. (What else are all our years of training for, if not for that?) Bracketing has to do with the common-sense world, not with the pre-reflective world. If you remove the pre-reflective world then we disappear altogether as body-subjects and end up in an impregnable fortress of immanence where 'the world becomes a correlative of thought about the world' (PhP p.208;F241).

Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'lived world' (*le monde vécu*) to designate that world which is 'ontologically and epistemologically prior to the worlds of subjectivity and objectivity which dualist thought posits as primary reality.' (Dillon 1997, p88). He also calls it 'the phenomenal world'. This is the world of the body.

Bracketing has the function of 'opening up a reality' (Ashworth, loc.cit.p.4)

The reality that it opens up is the *world of the body*; because to have a body is to have a world. The categories of cause and effect have no place in the world of the body or the 'phenomenal field', as Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls it.

The Epoché In Gestalt Therapy Practice

Let us look at an example of bracketing.

Suppose a woman client comes to me who is married with a young family of three children and a husband who is 'devoted' but 'very busy'. She tells me she is having an affair with a man who is married and has a grown-up family. She can't ever imagine how life could be happy without her lover and wants to abandon her family and run away with this man, if he is willing to do that. Suppose I listen to her story with compassion and respect and without interrupting; I enter the world of her fascination, allow myself to feel in my body the dread she feels, to respond to the sparkle in her eyes as she speaks of her lover, allow tears to brim in my own eyes as she reads the poems she has written about him, while all the time another side of me wants to warn her and protect her from this man who has already betrayed her previously; but I say none of those things to her because they are not of the phenomenon. I would call this an exercise in bracketing. I am not denying any reality, I am not imagining that I can achieve contact with any 'pure' and 'virgin' reality. Of course she is influenced by my posture of listening and by the way I

look at her. And I am allowing myself to be influenced by her. I am facilitating the opening up of a *clearing* between us and allowing the reality of *this-woman-in-love* to emerge in that clearing. Our time together ‘discloses subject and object as two abstract “moments” of a unique structure which is presence’ (PhP.p.430;F492). In this presence of one to the other something new is co-created. The alternative – to allow my fears and my moral and religious convictions to enter the field, to assume that I am possessed of a superior view of reality than she has access to - would be to allow my cultural learnings to come between me and her. I am neither encouraging nor discouraging her from abandoning her family; I am simply allowing her to show herself as she shows herself when she is speaking from herself. Of course those prejudices are part of my Field but that does not mean that I am unable to bracket them.

Bracketing is a bodily thing. I turn my body, move my body in such a way as will most help our meeting. (I recall how this meant, with a different client, my suggesting that we experiment with sitting *further away* from one another – in our search for optimal distance.) Such movement will be in my face, eyes, mouth, head, shoulders, breathing and so on. This is a meeting of bodies. A totally impassive ‘blank’ face will be as eloquent as one that is fixed in a perpetual smile. The operative intention expressed in my body is not the attainment of some knowledge or the achievement of some favourable outcome, but the *meeting* with this woman.

Stepping Down from the Professional Pedestal into the ‘Between’

There are some other considerations in relation to bracketing. In Gestalt therapy this does not mean becoming an Empty Head or adopting an impassive stance. It *does* mean that the therapist ‘.... steps forth out of his protected professional superiority into this elementary situation between one who asks and one who is asked...’ (Jacobs,L. 1989, p.44). I do not know what to expect; but I do know that,

In the phenomenological approach therapist and patients bracket off or put aside, their preconceptions about what experiences are relevant, and allow their sensory processes to discover whatever is revealed by the self and the situation.

(Jacobs,L.loc. cit. p.37)

I can formulate the process as my respectfully witnessing the phenomenon of this woman and of her respectfully witnessing my phenomenon. The NOW is the only access to this person, allowing myself to be moved by my participation, doing my best not to distort this epiphany by my analysis and reflections, but staying as open as I can dare to be to our co-creation.

I am aware that my perception is inevitably partial and time-limited. So, I am seeing only part of the person and I respond to that part that I am seeing in the NOW. I am aware that I can never reach this woman in her uniqueness, in her 'aseity'; that what I see now will be gathered up into that opaqueness in which every 'other' permanently resides. It is of my very nature that I do not know even my own 'aseity' but know myself only in terms of what I am not. So, however hard I try, I can never know this woman any other way than in her phenomenology. I am operating in what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the Phenomenal Field'. This is not a *place* but a level of perception where

Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (sens) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence. (PhP.p.52;F64)

Not only is my vision inhabited by a meaning but all my other senses are also, and my body is in touch with the world at first hand without the interposition of 'thinking about'. In this I move into

that layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, and the system 'self-others-things' as it comes into being.
(PhP.p.57;F69)

Here it is not a question of feeling with my body and *then* thinking. *My lived world is all around me.* At this level, the woman is no longer an object in the world nor am I an object in her world, but together we live in 'the between'. I do not think this is possible unless we put aside the myth of the determined world.

It would seem then that in the process of phenomenology, at the very front of this process - so far as Gestalt therapy is concerned - is that question which Merleau-Ponty says was

never posed in Kantian philosophy: *Who is thinking?* (PhP.p.62;F75). Unless I see myself, an embodied subjectivity, *as part of the process* then it is not hard to create two kinds of being: my consciousness and my body. From the start Gestalt therapy theory has inserted the subject into the process (PHG p.32) and called into question our inclination to stand apart from the process of therapy and become ‘an outside spectator’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1983, p162; and 1942/1990 p175).³² If I want to participate in what is going on for my client then I must be aware of what is going on for myself. As Giorgi says: ‘The minimum requirement for the study of anything is that I am aware of it.’ (1975. p.84) The problem is not just in the thing that is coming into our awareness, but in the very process of reflection by which we are making the investigation. There is general agreement amongst Gestalt theorists that phenomenology is the method of investigation especially suited to Gestalt therapy; there is less agreement about the way in which it operates in the process of therapy.

Heidegger chooses to depart from Husserl’s approach because he did not see how it could avoid imprisoning the subject in a solipsistic mode. We shall see more of Heidegger’s approach further on in this chapter.

Section Two: Gestalt Therapy Literature

Introduction

I shall outline briefly how the term ‘phenomenology’ is used in Gestalt therapy literature. This outline does not claim to be exhaustive or to include all the possible exceptions. In my selection of literature I am guided by two factors: (a) What I know to be the state of teaching in the Gestalt institutes at the time of my writing. (b) By trends I notice in Gestalt therapy writing. Gestalt therapy claims not only to be phenomenological but existential. I shall discuss, briefly again, how Husserl, Heidegger understand the term. I

³² This was the position taken by Merleau-Ponty in his earlier study *La structure du comportement* 1942, cf. Geraets (1971, p.38).

choose these philosophers because they were leading phenomenologists and are cited (and at the same time disregarded) in some of the Gestalt therapy literature and seem to me to speak to Gestalt therapy. I shall summarise Merleau-Ponty's own position on phenomenology and thereby come to formulate some viable definition of my use of the term.

The Gestalt therapist emphasises the importance of carefully observing the client - not in the way a scientist, as a detached spectator would observe - but in a way that most facilitates the person's *becoming* in his presence. Phenomenology is *universally* accepted in the literature of Gestalt therapy as one of the *essentials* of that therapy. Yontef 1993, for instance, makes it one of the three *essentials* of Gestalt therapy and has sixty-four references to it in his text; the term is used frequently in all the standard authors. Most often it is used in the *descriptive* sense - applied to the way the client presents - in such expressions as 'the Phenomenology of Shame', 'the client's phenomenology'. Implicit in this is the need for bracketing and the belief that by returning repeatedly to the phenomenon the therapist can be more profoundly present with the client.

We are trying to be clear about the kind of phenomenology which best serves the nature and purpose of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt Therapy Writers

PHG (1973 p.432) describes phenomenology as 'a classification, description and analysis of possible structures of the self' and identifies it with phenomenological psychology. This work contains many descriptions (e.g. p.273 and p.377) which are commonly pointed out as examples of his 'phenomenological approach'. Description is a very important aspect of phenomenology (cf Stoehr, 1994, p.93). In PHG we notice the emphasis on the individual which is something of an inheritance from psychoanalysis. It is also important to note that Goodman makes the point strongly that awareness of the self - the 'I' - is a social construct. It is important because in phenomenological reduction as I have described in Section One above, the 'I' is not the ego of Freud and is a social construct *only* in the sense that I know myself in terms of the world; the world tells me who I am. 'A social construct' is not the equivalent of what I say in invoking 'I'.

PHG misses out on my transcendence in regard to the world. When I invoke 'I', my invocation brings along far more than people will predicate of me.

Zinker, J. (1978, p.77) marks phenomenology as 'that process which one experiences as uniquely one's own.' The context of his definition is his exploration of the phenomenon of insight into one's personal responsibility for one's life. Phenomenology sites a person in his own 'here and now' which he cannot deny without leaving himself. He also stresses it as a process of description and bracketing.

Mackewn J. (1997) follows Yontef's phrase about phenomenology 'concentrating on describing the obvious' (p.215) and puts the emphasis on phenomenology as subjectivity as the way towards a bringing to awareness of one's uniqueness. She also invokes it to show the partiality of all perception.

'Gestalt therapy is a form of phenomenological field theory. Gestalt (therapy) shares the concerns of phenomenology, which are to study the multiple possibilities of a given situation as it is experienced subjectively by the people co-creating it at any moment in time.there is no objective truth - only a multitude of subjective perceptions.' (p.58-9).

She also speaks of 'setting aside your own limited perspective and opening to a wide range of possibilities' which we can take as her placing those possibilities in what we have called 'bodily intentionality'. She places much emphasis on embodied subjectivity throughout the whole of her book (e.g. p177).

Hycner and Jacobs (1995) who, amongst all the Gestalt therapy writers most reference Merleau -Ponty, work to a comprehensive view of phenomenology.

It is a rigorous investigation of *what is*. ...that can include not only the individual subjective experience of the patient and that of therapist, but also the experience of the between, which 'transcends individual' experiences. In effect, they (phenomenologists) are discussing the psychological world preceding or

underlying the meeting of person with person, though not yet the actual meeting.
(p.209).

We here see the authors touching on the big themes, which go along with phenomenology: transcendence, pre-objective perception and primordial contact. Hycner and Jacobs focus almost exclusively on intersubjectivity and do not explore what it means to contact the world of *things*. Truly, our being is given to us as relational and many Gestalt therapy theorists by-pass an exploration of the I-It world and move straight on to that of I-Thou. This jump has its inconveniences: engagement with another person is integral with engagement with the world of things. The parallel of the scientific stance of isolating things from the world is that of isolating a person from things. In engaging with a person we engage with his world which is a world of things. We are wedded to the things in our world because 'the thing is inseparable from the person perceiving it'. 'Being-in-the-world' means that. 'all perceptions stand out against a background of nature' (PhP.p.347;F399).

Resnick R. (1995 p.4) clearly states essential elements of phenomenology - bracketing of 'personal beliefs so as to be touched anew by the numena (sic), the virgin experience, so as to be able to describe rather than explain.' Here we have, interestingly, an *implicit* reference to that *preconceptual experience of the world* which is the basis of all subsequent experience of reality and which *founds* all our interpretations. (It is to Resnick that Sapriel mainly speaks in her critique described in Section One above.)

Yontef (1993). Lastly, I shall speak of Yontef, whom I find to be one of the clearest and most insightful of Gestalt therapy theoreticians. He has written extensively about many aspects of Gestalt therapy and always with erudition and insight.

Yontef so heavily emphasises the role of phenomenology in Gestalt therapy that he calls Gestalt therapy 'clinical phenomenology' (1993, p.186). In his essay under that title he sets himself to define phenomenology as it is used in Gestalt.

A search for understanding based on what is obvious or revealed by the situation rather than the interpretation of the observer. Phenomenologists refer to this as

‘given’. Phenomenology works by entering into the situation experientially and allowing sensory Awareness to discover what is obvious, given. This necessitates discipline, especially sensing what is present, what IS, excluding no data in advance (Yontef 1993, p.86).

He links phenomenology with the quality of contact. Contact – and therefore relationship - is encumbered until it can be purified by the phenomenological process. The purpose of description - which he emphasises a lot – is, for him, this process of *purifying* perception so as to be able to move towards relationship.

His use of the word ‘obvious’ I find puzzling and somewhat misleading in that it makes the process sound too easy. Therapists may come to think they are making a phenomenological reduction when they are not. Merleau-Ponty’s saying that ‘Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely what we see’ (PhP.p.58;F71), comes to mind here. In practice it is fatally easy to mistake what is ‘obvious’ for what is thoroughly informed by a host of unconscious natural attitudes.

My Comment

Whereas the Gestalt writers view of Phenomenology is in line with the Merleau-Ponty definition with which I opened the Chapter none of them explains or emphasizes the correlation of phenomenology and the body.

Section Three: The Philosophers

Husserl and the Phenomenological reduction in Gestalt Therapy

Husserl is frequently referred to in the Gestalt therapy texts, and was the only phenomenologist whom Paul Goodman acknowledges as having influenced him in the writing of Part II of the classic *Gestalt Therapy* (1951). Merleau-Ponty was always very

respectful of Husserl and hated to challenge him – which he did, covertly at first, and later openly. (Dillon, 1997, p.87)

In the light of the fact that any phenomenological reduction in Gestalt therapy needs to involve the lived body as an integral part of the process, I think we need to exercise caution in invoking Husserl's reduction as the model for Gestalt therapy. Crudely stated, the difficulty is this: Husserl, it would seem, thought he could separate consciousness from the body. In his wish to find true knowledge, Husserl engaged in what is called 'transcendental reduction'. That is to say, he bracketed every knowledge he possessed including his own personal existence, and the existence of the everyday world. It is called 'transcendental' because this process surpasses the individual subject with all his human characteristics. The subject of transcendental reduction is no longer a participant in the world. (cf Dillon 1997 p.29)

'Husserl's transcendental reduction is essentially a "universal depriving of acceptance" of "all existential positions". "What is" ' says Mallin, 'has been reduced to "what is meant"'. The meditating philosopher by the rule of *epoché* brackets everything and considers all the objects of his experience as his thoughts or '*cogitationes*'. This means that the everyday world exists for him only in the tension between his thoughts and possible actions. We call this 'intentional presence'. So the palpable world within which our actions take place has been bracketed out, and the world now exists for us only in our thinking. For Gestalt therapy, the kind of presence that Husserl describes, allows no place for the body in perception; such a view rules out that tension I experience in my body as the presence of the 'other', beckoning me to a *new possibility* of existence for him and for myself. Such a presence is not adequately met in the intentionality of Husserl where the world is locked into immanence. We need now to look closer.

Intentional Presence

Let us take an example: Suppose I am sitting in my armchair reading and someone knocks on my door. As soon as I make to stand up and open the door every moment of

that action is already 'known' in my body ever before I move intending to open the door. As I move to open the door all the movements are available to me in virtue of their common meaning conferred on them by the task. This dynamic presence of the end throughout the movement is called 'intentionality'. (PhP.p.149;173-4). The pertinent question is this: how can we explain this intentional presence? It is explained if we take it that my existence is given me not as an 'I am' but as an 'I can' (PhP.p.136;F160).The logic of this means that I am *actually constituted in being* by the world present to me as possibility of action. This possibility is present to me and experienced by me *in my body*. It does *not come from my thoughts*, from my '*cogitationes*'. This is different from Husserl's transcendental intentionality.

What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a body of power whose place is defined through its task and through its situation. My body is there where there is something to be done (PhP p.250; F289) mt.

In this study I am in agreement with Dillon who says that Husserl's intentionality remains locked into an imminent world, a transcendental idealism, which constitutes the interpretative horizon (Dillon 1997 pp27-34 and p.87). Richardson ,W.J.(1979, p.2) makes the same point. Others - like Luijpen (op.cit. p.101) see Husserl as not isolating the subject from the world and view his intentionality as 'openness-to-the-world'. Brooke (1993 p.36-37) draws attention to the dispute but remarks that it 'need not concern us'. It is, however, of importance in this study. Two foremost Gestalt theorists, (McConville, M. 2001 and Van De Riet, 2001) both look to Husserl's reduction as the lead model of phenomenology for Gestalt therapy. McConville goes further and finds in it a foundation for the Gestalt theory of Field Perspective (McConville, M. 2001).

Husserl centred phenomenology in *the intentionality of consciousness*, that is to say, in *his* transcendental reduction, the world for Husserl was the world of the interaction of thoughts rather than the world of our lived experience.

The world is for me absolutely nothing else but the world existing for and accepted by me in such a conscious *cogito* (quoted in Dillon 1997 p.28).

Dillon adds that Husserl never abandoned this viewpoint even in works as late as the *Crisis*. Priest (1998 p.22) offers a useful distinction here. He classifies two kinds of phenomenologists. He would label Husserl an 'internalist' phenomenologist and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger as 'externalist'. This last means that there is no way you can predicate events until the events happen. So, any assumption that my consciousness contains my relation to the world is problematic.

Priest says it more accurately:

The subject's relations with the world are not wholly intrinsic to the subject or the world, and it is not possible to specify what the subject is in abstraction from the world and it is not possible to specify what the world is in abstraction from the subject. (Priest, 1998, p.24)

The important point for us to note here is that the internalist phenomenologists must consider the human being *isolated*, the human being *apart from his lived-world*, as making sense. To the externalists such a concept is nonsense and empties of its essential meaning the expression 'being-in-the-world'. This is why I said above that phenomenology in Gestalt looks more to Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger than to Husserl. I note this as important because it features in Sapriel's difficulties with bracketing; I note that it is the Husserlian view that is propounded in Spinelli's '*Interpreted World*' (1989, p.16ff) where he is explaining 'The Phenomenological Method'; also when he is talking about the 'I' in experience (loc.cit.p.25), and shrinking its importance, he does not ask that question which Merleau-Ponty put to the Kantians: '*Who is doing the thinking?*' Spinelli's book is commonly used in teaching Gestalt trainees.³³

Heidegger

Heidegger saw phenomenology 'as expressing nothing else than the maxim formulated above; "To the things themselves".' (Heidegger 1927/1973 p.58)

³³ Husserl was the only phenomenologist named by Goodman as having influenced him (Stoehr.1994, pp. 111-112).

Although he shows great respect for Husserl, and quotes his famous maxim, Heidegger departed radically from his former teacher. Heidegger never departs from the historical order in his approach to phenomenology.

So, for Heidegger,

phenomenology formally means a branch of research, which seeks to let that which shows itself, be seen from itself, in the very way in which it shows itself, from itself (1927/1973, p.58).

This is very important for Gestalt therapy theory so I shall take space to explain it.

When a client presents herself to me for therapy I am faced with a series of choices: I can regard her as someone who needs to be talked at, spoken down to, needing my 'helping hands' or my gems of wisdom; that way she becomes for me in Buber's language an 'It', an object. By this I place her in a different order of reality to me who am myself a *subject*. On the other hand I can decide before she speaks that I know what is 'wrong' with her and construe her answers to my questions so that they confirm me in my 'diagnosis'. I can also proceed to ask her leading questions, which lead the way I want her to go. In none of the above eventualities is the woman identified as a carrier of her own meaning. Instead, *I* am doing the speaking and *I* am the source of meaning. It will be altogether different if I decide to allow her to *become* with me, in the way that she *be-*comes and accommodates my *be-*coming to hers. Because I am with her and alive in my senses towards her, I am in a position to constantly check what is happening in me about *her*, and whether or not I am permitting my bodily presence to be impacted by her or not. That way she shows herself, 'in the way in which she shows herself, from herself.'

Brooke explains this very clearly:

Subjects are identified as carriers of meaning which can therefore answer questions. As soon as the other is perceived as an object, a determined product of physical contingencies, ontologically different from the perceiver-subject, then the other can no longer 'speak for himself'. Meaning is then 'spoken' only in terms pre-determined by the perceiver-subject. Historically fixed and denotatively circumscribed, meaning is not really meaning at all; dialogue and the hermeneutic circle of question and answer breaks down. (Brooke, 1993, p.29)

Let us look again at Heidegger's definition of phenomenology

Phenomenology formally means a branch of research, which seeks to let that which shows itself, be seen from itself, in the very way in which it shows itself, from itself (1927/1973, p.58).

For the purposes of Gestalt therapy, there are five things to notice about this definition.

1. It goes without saying - but it needs to be said – that this method is possible *only* for an incarnate subjectivity. The body is given its 'place' in perception.
2. It assumes the possibility of dialogue - so that as party to such a dialogue I listen as well as speak. And my speech is a *response* to the other self-manifesting.
3. This self-manifestation is unique to each individual.
4. In such a dialogue it is necessary to check constantly that it is the other who speaks, and not some projection of the subject.

'That which does not show itself at all'

One more remaining point of great importance is this: Heidegger uses the word *phenomenon* to designate not only what easily 'shows itself' but for that also which 'proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all.' (Richardson, J. 1986, p.57) But this *hidden* belongs to that which shows itself 'and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground.' (Heidegger 1927/1973, p.59). Heidegger identified this as the Being of entities. (Richardson, J.P. 1986, loc.cit.) So, for Heidegger, a phenomenology is in fact also an ontology – it allows space for the manifestation of Being. This means that in the very process of bracketing my prejudices, of allowing the other to become, Being discloses itself. Here is a point relevant to Gestalt therapy, which so emphasises the importance of allowing 'a clearing' – a space of silence – to emerge in the therapy in which what needs to show itself comes to pass – even in a hidden way. Being authenticates the meeting.

This science of phenomena does not designate any object 'but the *how* with which *what* is to be handled'. Phenomenology, therefore, is not the study of appearances *as such*, but

the articulation of what manifests itself - to supply a *logos* for the *phenomena* where *logos* means an utterance that makes present what it utters. At this point we need to take up this last expression 'Appearances *as such*'. It has relevance to the phenomenology of Gestalt therapy.

Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology

Why his phenomenology is so congenial to Gestalt therapy?

For three reasons: (i) body-based (ii) it emphasizes phenomenological reduction (iii) it promises 'access to the truth', I have already developed this last point quite a bit in this Chapter so we can be brief.

(i) Body-based

Merleau-Ponty carries forward all the points I made earlier in regard to Heidegger and Phenomenology - and develops the historical rootedness by making his whole theory of perception also a theory of the body (PhP.p.203;F235). For Merleau-Ponty, to speak of perception is to speak of the body.

External perception and the perception of one's own body varies in conjunction because they are two facets of one and the same act (PhP.p.205;F237).

It is the intentionality, which *resides in our body* that achieves the unity of our perception:

perceptual life - is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. And this it is which goes limp in illness (PhP.p.136;F158).

The relations between things or aspects of things having always our body as their vehicle, the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue (PhP.p.320;F369,370).

For the purpose of this study, this rootedness in the body and therefore in history, is of great importance. It is what distinguishes Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. It is what lies behind his departure from Husserl's internalist form of phenomenology. It was the basis of his criticism of the Berlin *Gestalttheorie* psychologists who were under the spell of Husserl and who were not following the logic of their own position.³⁴

(ii) Emphasizes Phenomenological Reduction

The second characteristic which recommends Merleau-Ponty to Gestalt therapy is that his phenomenology is concerned with 'phenomenological reduction'. This is a process of by-passing the certainties of common sense and the learned natural attitudes which go unnoticed and undergird our everyday involvement with the world (cf Priest, 1998, p.18). Merleau-Ponty's aim is to bring into relief that primordial experience of reality, which he calls 'primordial contact'. This is 'the birth of the world for us where each perception puts us back' (PhP.p.296;F296. cf Mallin 1979 p.57). This process Merleau-Ponty calls 'reflection'. It does not withdraw us from the world into a self-sufficient realm of immanent consciousness. Rather does it 'slacken the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice.' (PhP.p.xiii;Fvii) This reveals to us the world as 'strange and paradoxical', and ourselves as 'filled with wonder' (PhP.p.xiv;Fviii). The focus of this reflection is my body which is *given* me as 'a certain hold upon the world' (PhP.p.354;F406). This 'hold' which is our relationship with the world is so intimate that Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of sexual union to describe it.:

³⁴ In an unusual 'aside' - a long footnote at the end ch 3 of the *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Perception* - Merleau-Ponty talks about the cosy relationship which Gestalt Psychology endeavoured to establish with phenomenology. (cf PhP.p.50-51;F62-63)

To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak of our body with things (PhP.p.320;F370).

In order to proceed with the phenomenological reduction we need to describe what we see, feel, hear, etc. and he gives us many examples of this throughout *The Phenomenology* e.g. (p.324;F375) where he details such an exercise in regard to a die. His description comprises several elements: It details what he actually sees, it retains a dialogue between him and some 'natural attitudes' which are intruding; it details what happens when he 'experiments' by moving as he looks at the die.

The die is there, lying in the world. When the subject moves round it, there appear, not signs, but sides of the die. He does not perceive projections or even profiles of the die but he sees the die itself at one time from this side, at another from that, and those appearances which are not yet firmly fixed intercommunicate, run into each other, and all radiate from a central *Wurfelhaftigkeit* which is the mystical link between them. (p.324;F375)

Let us ask ourselves: How is it that all this can 'hang together', what is the integrating dynamic in this array of facticities? We come up with the reply that such a dynamic is a modality of a preobjective view of the world and we call it 'being-in-the-world' (PhP.p.78;F93). This *dictates* that Merleau-Ponty take up a here-and-now situation not some *cogitatio* for his analysis. 'The world is not what I think but what I live through' (PhP.p.xvii;Fxii). He does not question how sure he is of the *truth* of the situation. His undertaking makes no sense if such a question can arise. 'To seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to the truth.' (xvi)

(iii) Promises 'Access to the Truth'

The third characteristic which recommends Merleau-Ponty to Gestalt therapy is that his phenomenology promises access to the truth. This access to the truth that informs the

thrust of each and every act of perception is not just an idea but a constituent of our existence and *it is only in the living of it that we can realise it*. This is most important in Gestalt therapy, which places such emphasis on immediacy. This is behind Merleau-Ponty's insistence that there is no way any of us can understand phenomenology unless we do it for ourselves, in one way or another. It is as vital an activity as eating which no one else, however high their standing, can do for us. If we cannot/will not do it then we cannot proceed with the study.

We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology. It is less a question of counting up quotations than of determining and expressing in concrete form this phenomenology for ourselves (PhP p.viii;Fii)

If it is such an inalienable activity then why does Merleau-Ponty here speak in the third person singular? People could object: 'But how do you know that the subject sees those things?' He knows this and proceeds with his description on the basis of the reality of his description because *he* is the subject. And, like every perception it carries the burden of some ambiguity. This is the way it is whenever we speak about our clients' perception. . So closely bound up with us is what we perceive that it

can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, (PhP p.320;F370).

If its articulations were not enmeshed with the articulations of my own existence then there would be no possibility of our meeting. The dog, the flower, the other would be what the scholastics used to say of God - *totaliter aliter* - 'totally other' and therefore unknowable.

Phenomenology and Phenomenalism

Phenomena - not Mere Appearances

For Merleau-Ponty the foundation of all perception is the phenomenon, it is our only access to reality and the perceived world is 'the foundation of all claims to truth and

validity' (Dillon 1997, p.51). This is the polar opposite of phenomenism. To stop at appearances and separate them from the being manifesting itself is called Phenomenalism. People who cling to the idea of a ready-made world and who reflect on their experience, can quite easily begin to imagine that *underneath* 'the phenomenology' there resides some core of reality which is really what therapy is about.³⁵

'Phenomenalism' is characterised by instituting a *separation* between the appearances and the thing (Mallin, 1979, p.118). It has its most famous elaboration in the philosophy of Plato who made a clear distinction between the shadows of the puppets which the slaves mistook for reality and Reality itself to which only the chosen few (people like Plato) had access (*Republic*, Bk7). Merleau-Ponty is quite clear that there is a categorical difference, but not a separation, between appearances and objects with their constant properties. Appearance is the object manifesting itself. Appearances are the contingent presentation of the constant.³⁶ The colour manifests the object - I go *through* it (PhP.p.261;F302) and arrive at the object. Mallin (1979, p.118) remarks how heavily Merleau-Ponty relies on this 'through' (*à travers*). It means: 'I pass by without stopping to perform a possible act of attention'. In Merleau-Ponty's thinking there is no such thing as a sensation *in its own right*; its being is to refer beyond itself to the object. Like light. So, phenomenology will not *stop* at appearances but follows the intentionality of the body manifested in those appearances and manifesting *the thing*.

The idea that we have of a 'core object' is just that – an idea. The only way the thing can *be for me* is as phenomenon. Merleau-Ponty applies this to viewing the next-door house

³⁵ It is this notion which, it seems to me, lies behind the Stephen Tobin article in the *Gestalt Journal* in 1983 and which was so ably responded to by Gary Yontef. (1993 pp. 326-342). Indeed, the idea of a 'core self' of a profound reality behind appearances can arise in the thinking of therapists who work in a psychoanalytic way.

³⁶ A difficulty arises here in that the possible profiles of the thing are infinite and, whereas we touch the profiles, we never touch the thing in its *ipseity* (PhP. p.233;F269). Luijpen (1972 p.128) says that Merleau-Ponty never managed to deal adequately with this difficulty. He is content in *The Phenomenology* to say that the thing in its *ipseity* is an ideality.

at the very start of his chapter: Experience and Objective thought. The Problem of the Body.

Conclusion

Clearly the definition of phenomenology which best suits Gestalt therapy implies a bodily mode of handling what manifests itself to us. It is not phenomenalist i.e. does not separate appearances from the thing. It regards phenomena as our only path to being or reality. The phenomenon unites us so closely to the world that we can be said to live what we perceive. Whatever the manifestation, it happens in the historical context of the world of our lived experience. This lived experience is the foundation from which any 'internal' event derives its ontological validity.

Chapter 5 – Language and Speech in Gestalt Therapy

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Introduction

In a work first published in 1960 and translated in 1964, Merleau-Ponty says of language – that it is ‘our element as water is the element of fishes’(1987B). To change the metaphor somewhat, we can say that the oxygen of psychotherapy is Language and Speech. ‘Language’ embraces the whole area of communication while ‘speech’ indicates the verbal, auditory, coherent specification of language. I shall throughout this chapter – for reasons of space – refer all the time to speech - expressive speech.

It not infrequently happens that people think of speech as an activity of ‘the mind’ in contradistinction to ‘feeling’, which is regarded as ‘more earthy’, more ‘real’. There was even attributed to Gestalt, in its early days, a slogan ‘lose your head (speech) and return to your senses’; the situation was not helped by Fritz Perls himself who, in his last (and rather sad) years, divided speech into very derogatory categories (Perls, F. 1969/71, ch.7). Aware that this derogation is still lurking about in some pockets of Gestalt therapy practice, I have made point in each section of this chapter of showing speech as ‘the surplus of our existence over natural being’ (PhP.p.197;F229). This means, that far from speech being apart from our bodily existence, it takes up our bodily existence, our breathing, our feeling, our muscular movements, and brings them to a wonderful completion in speech as communication.

Section One: Experience in Search of Articulation

The Tension Between Perception and Cognition

What we perceive is far and away bigger than what we know (Stern, 1985 p.170ff). In fact, to identify *cognition* with perception is to isolate the objects of knowledge from the world that gives them meaning. It is like mistaking the painting for the actual countryside which the painting depicts. Similarly to identify someone as a ‘a depressive’ is to forget that there is far more to any human being than their depressed condition. Yet, if my

perception were shorn of its abilities to articulate the details, my global perception would be of no use to me in my life. We carry the structures of our cognition in our bodies – especially in ‘the linguistic motor capacities’ (Mallin S.B. 1979 p.184), that enable us to speak. It is precisely the precision of our language abilities that enable us to grasp definite things. Through speech I can know your name and where you live and what your work is. This is cognition and a basis for communicating with you. Yet this does not coincide with my perception of you. But what good is my perception of you unless I can speak to you in the detail carried in my cognitive structures. We see here an interdependence. The thrust of my perception is towards speaking with you; yet this can be done only in details which no way coincide with you and whose meaning resides only in the fuller perception of you. That fuller perception of you is only in the context of your belonging in the world; and you are and remain as mysterious to me – however many details I may know about you – as that world in which we both meet. It is as if our meeting is taken over into a mysterious and incomprehensible setting, because that whole world that is you, is given to me through my senses in such a way that it would be more true to say that ‘*one perceives in me*’ rather than that ‘I perceive’ (PhP.p.240;F277). This world that evades articulation is the pre-reflective world of perception and remains always rooted in this area for its operation.

Language and Speech: The High Point of Gestalt Therapy

The ‘healing of the soul’ happens when that ‘soul’ or person finds the desires of his heart addressed by another, ‘who knows also the darkness of his heart, but with a knowledge that is also a loving’.³⁷

Psychotherapy of every school seems to me to depend intimately upon language and speech. Each of us ‘is living out a deep story’ (Moore 1994, p.224) and it is the desire of our hearts to utter that story, hear it understood and loved and bask in the sunshine of

³⁷ I take this thought from John S.Dunne, (1985, p.130): Professor of Theology in the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

belonging. We seem destined to act out those things in our stories that we dare not utter; the "nefanda" of our lives become the demons that drive us. In therapy we permit those things which we do not know, *dare* not to know about ourselves to come into our awareness in the presence of a loving other who is skilled and knowledgeable; *that* coming into awareness means that they 'take flesh' in us which is their *finding words*, and we speak.

We present our thoughts to ourselves through internal or external speech...but then we are left to lay hands on it, and it is through expression that we make it our own (PhP.p.177;F207).

Van den Berg tells of a man patient of his, an assistant manager in a big business, who in travelling from Leiden to the Hague, kept driving off motorway journeys on the wrong slip road; 'he found himself "just like that" and much to his own surprise, in a village, some ten miles off the road ' He returned to the motorway and 'to his even greater amazement the same thing happened to him all over again' (Van den Berg, 1980 p.35).

As it emerged in therapy with Van den Berg, this man did not even want to go to work. He had attained his present position by marrying the Managing Director's daughter, so that he held a post, which was too much for him, and worked everyday in the shadow of a man (his boss) who knew that. When he was enabled to tell his story in therapy his panics and depression left him and he was able to leave his post in the firm and work at a job he actually liked (ibid.).

It may seem that in making Language and Speech the 'high point' of therapy I am abandoning my project of reinstating the body as central in Gestalt therapy. Not so. I intend to show how speech is an action of the body.

Speech as a Bodily Act

Speech is a special way in which a person uses her body to go beyond the limitations that hedge about everything else in the whole world. In speech the body transcends itself.

'Thought tends towards expression as towards its completion' (PhP.p.177;F206). This

way the subject appreciates his world and establishes communication with the 'other'. Once I speak a situation, then that situation is transformed for me; whereas, *before* I addressed the situation, it was confusing and I was unsure what I thought – having put words on it, I now stand in a transformed relationship to it.

We witness this in almost every therapy session. For example, a couple came to me in great distress. The man whom we can call Peter had become angry all the time. From being pleasant, affable and funny, he seemed to have become silent, grumpy and sulky. It emerged that for the past seven years Peter had stayed at home and looked after the children while his wife Fiona went out to work. Now she wanted him to take up a job opportunity that had come his way and allow her to stay with the children. In the course of the sessions he was able to talk to his wife about his pain at 'leaving' the children, his fear of the exposed life of business; and she was enabled to listen to him, and speak her own misgivings and fears to him. Over time this free flow of feeling and communication transformed their life together. During one of the sessions Peter said; 'I never realized how afraid I was of taking my chance in the world of business'.

'We present our thoughts to ourselves through internal or external speech. It does indeed move forward with the instant and, as it were in flashes, but we are then left to lay hands on it, and it is through expression that we make it our own'
(PhP.p.177;F206).

That 'laying hands on it' can be very difficult. There is nothing inevitable about the process. That couple could have come to therapy, talked, rowed, but never engaged with their situation; instead, because of their love, fortitude, and *belief in their future* they laid hold of their situation and transformed it.

Speech is not just a process of matching a thing with a word. It must be more than just a cognitive operation because of the thirst to find words to express our condition. Until I can name a thing it seems altogether distant from me and in an anonymous relationship with me. When I began this study so many years ago, I did not know what I was going to

put into it. Until I actually set down my thoughts about the bearing of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy upon Gestalt therapy theory, I had only a set of vague notions, and then the more I set them down the more I had to revise and change my earlier thoughts. It was in the process of explaining my thinking to myself and to colleagues that I came to realize how little I understood of what I was about.

..... the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them from himself, or even spoken and written them as is shown by the example of so many writers who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to say (PhP p.177;F207).

Every word I utter is 'one of the possible uses of my body' (PhP.p.180;F210). These words – this language is present to me like any of my limbs are. I do not have to worry that I may reach for it and find it gone or that I will not know how to organize the words into sentences that carry meaning. My language – in the form of my expressive speech, is as close to me as my skin. It works hand-in-hand with my memory but they are not the same; because people struck down by a stroke can lose their memory but not their speech and vice versa. A woman deprived of all speech by a stroke was able to find her way home and go straight to where she kept the account books which she had been accustomed to keep most carefully, and handed them over to her husband for him to take over.³⁸

When Descartes shut himself up in his room and wrestled to find what was most basic to him of which he could have no doubt he found his 'Cogito', that is, he found speech.

Even speech which is often treated as being essentially an operation of thought and spirit, must be viewed in the context of the power the lived body has of reflecting on and expressing itself (that is, of turning back on itself, doubling up, and taking itself for an object) (Madison 1981, p.49).

This power that the body *is* of expressing itself, is shown in the way the urge to speak and

³⁸ I have this from a personal communication with a very experienced speech therapist.

be understood can take possession of the whole body. Take stammering for instance: in the huge effort to produce fluent speech the stammerer may develop involuntary movements in the larynx and mouth, these can be extended into foot tapping, head movements and hand clenching, which all become part of the effort to produce speech (which the stammerer experiences as being 'stuck' or 'locked') (Stewart and Rowley, 1996, p.3).

A further example of this power of the body to transcend itself through speech is the amazing inventiveness of very young children who have had a tracheostomy to find ways of getting air to their speech organs so as to be able to make verbal gestures. (Sell and MacCurtain, 1984, p.37)

The operational intentionality to communicate which possesses the lived body of the person and which shows itself in speech will go on being operational even when that person has been rendered incapable of speech. Children with a cleft of the palate or adults with acquired damage – for instance, a head injury or removal of palate in an operation for cancer - will quickly develop movements of muscles in the throat to compensate for the palatal dysfunction. Palate dysfunction makes clear articulation of speech sounds in the mouth very difficult and also leads to the articulation being transferred from the mouth and throat to other muscular structures, so that the person can produce equivalent sounds.

When voice becomes impossible – as, for instance, in the case of a baby of 2 years old who has had a tracheostomy so that the larynx muscle makes no sound, the baby then develops an amazing variety of gestures to communicate his needs (Sell and MacCurtain, 1987), (cf Grumwell and Russell, 1987).

So my emphasizing language and speech is in no way an abandonment of my project of centering Gestalt therapy in the body, it serves to emphasize how speech *in its every phase* is ultimately rooted in the body. This also means that primordial contact, which makes all subsequent dialogue with the world possible, is the foundation and guarantor of

my speech as uttering what is authentic.

Authentic Speech – Healing Speech

You may recall how I said in the Introduction that the healing component in Gestalt therapy is the quality of the dialogue between client and therapist. The quality of this dialogue requires, amongst other things, *authenticity*. This means that each party is speaking from the heart. Each of them is engaged in the utterance ; their experience in the NOW between them. This requires that what I say involves the whole of me, not just my very well-educated ‘mind’ and my practised tongue. Just as an organ becomes an extension of the organists body, so that all he has to do is sit down, adjust his seat and allow his hands to play the keys and his feet the pedals and music fills the church; so also a skilled therapist will have embodied his life and its bank of experiences and be so connected with it that her words will carry her love and experience to her client; this, of course, may be blocked off from the client by the intensity of transference – his projections upon the therapist, or the therapist’s projections upon him or counter-transference, the therapists projections upon the client.

In order that the therapist be connected with her experience she must be connected with her body. Only that way can she be an integrated person. It is only if she is alive in her own body that she will be able to respond to the body of the client and thereby co-create an environment in which the client can tell his story. Speech of itself is not the therapy, but speech as *embodying experience*. PHG has a term for empty speech – ‘verbalizing’.

Speaking, Speech and Spoken Speech

Merleau-Ponty acknowledged a distinction between ‘conventional speech’ and ‘originating’ or ‘transcendental’ speech. The first is what Heidegger calls ‘idle chatter’ (Gerede) and this comprises a great deal of our everyday talk (Dillon 1993, p.190). The second he calls ‘speaking speech’ (*la parole parlante*) and this

..... is the one in which the significant intention is at the stage of coming into being. Here existence is polarised into a certain 'significance' which cannot be defined in terms of any natural object..... the spoken word, which enjoys available significance as one might enjoy an acquired fortune. From these acquisitions other acts of authentic expression – the writers, artists or philosophers are made possible (PhP.p.197;F229).

Merleau-Ponty, who was brought up by the sea, uses a marine metaphor to describe this speech: it comes to birth from where, no one knows, it rises in tension, it allows to fall back into being whatever cannot keep up with it (*il fait retomber à l'être ce qui tendait au delà*).

Such is the function which one discerns throughout language; it retakes itself, makes itself its own foundation, and then like a wave gathers and poises itself to slam itself in beyond its limits (PhP.p.197;F229-230) mt.

The important point about 'speaking speech' is that the speech is charged with its meaning and conveys this in a (sometimes) totally compelling way. I'm thinking of the ritual I have followed with a woman who twenty years previously, had a hasty abortion and now comes to regret her loss and mourn her baby. It was a very healing and moving 'experiment' when she asked the baby's forgiveness.³⁹ Such 'speech' I would think of as 'originating'.

This we can call 'authentic speech' so important in Gestalt therapy. At the same time Merleau-Ponty is 'close to the distinction between authentic and inauthentic speech'. Merleau-Ponty readily acknowledges that our discourse is not always 'singing the world' (PhP. p.187;F218) but predominantly inauthentic and is conducted within the parameters of convention where the ritualized exchange of familiar clichés involves neither creative effort of expression nor the struggle to understand a novel thought.

³⁹ Isolated from the context of the whole course of therapy sessions, the procedure I talk about here may be judged macabre. This is an ever-present risk, which we all take when we report on our experience out of context.

Phenomenology Reconnects Speech to its Roots

The theory of psychotherapy that I have put forward above is not original – except in so far as I radicate it expressly in the lived body. Van den Berg ends his article (1980) with a definition of psychotherapy:

In a world of an all but omnipotent convergent⁴⁰ thinking, phenomenology is cosmotherapy. Or else if we strip the word psyche of its one-sided Cartesian meaning, there is this last, more modest, but equally daring and shortest possible definition, Phenomenology is psychotherapy (loc. cit. p.48).

I like the suggestion that we strip away the dualism implicit in the word ‘psychotherapy’. The healing takes place in the whole person (client *and* therapist), through their ‘allowing that to show itself which shows itself, precisely in the way it does so *from itself*’. By ‘from itself’ we mean from the totality of the other – not from some façade or ‘wanting-to-please’ or conceit or ‘*persona*’.

Brooke R (1993 p.41) makes the same point very powerfully, I think. The context is his discussing the language of C.G. Jung and its ‘congeniality with the primordial structures of psychological lives; it does not tear the experience in two’. Jung’s language is the opposite of what is called ‘psychobabble’. For instance, ‘To speak of a “complex” instead of a god is of doubtful accuracy, not in a positive, nominated sense, but in the sense that the experience is taken from its vital roots’. He means by this, I think, that a person’s worship, or sense of awe in his rituals, is rooted and experienced in the lived body; whereas ‘complex’ is much more distant from the flesh in its derivation and atmosphere. Jung, he says, uses a language that speaks out of and to that primordial world (ibid).

⁴⁰ The terms ‘convergent’ and ‘divergent’ are used by Schumacher R. (1975 p.79) to distinguish problems, which can be solved by logic and those which cannot. The world of Descartes is ruled by convergent thinking.

‘Such a language perpetuates our modern alienation.if experience is ruptured, cut off from its own foundations, then a phenomenology of experience is intrinsically a psychotherapy’ (ibid).

In the paper which invites Gestalt therapy to engage itself with post-modern philosophy as it comes in constructivism, Jean-Marie Robine points to a development in the same direction; narrative therapy. He refers to Polster, E., who has already led the way with his *‘Every Person’s Life is Worth a Novel’* (1987). He further looks to Goodman (PHG, 1951, Ch.5): *Maturing, and the Recollection of Childhood*. Goodman draws attention to narratives from which the narration is absent and leaves the person ‘empty and exhausted’. Robine says that a ‘chronicle’ rather than a ‘topical’ narrative suits Gestalt therapy in that such an ‘unfolding’ is more suited to a SELF which is so variously experienced.

When I decided to entitle this study ‘Healing Perception’ my thinking was in the same direction as Robine. Healing, I thought, is essentially a reciprocal activity in which a person opens her heart to the gaze of another without any feeling of shame, but of affirmation and acceptance in one’s full humanity. To allow oneself to be perceived in one’s totality is already a healing act.

Recognising Disconnected Speech

In this section I propose to explore what it is we mean when we say that not all narratives are therapeutic. I’m taking up and bringing forward what Goodman said about empty and lifeless speech; and what Robine urged when he said there was a promising place in Gestalt therapy for narrative as a life chronicle (Robine, 1999, p.74).

It was my experience on an occasion that a client who had been sexually abused by her father as a little girl during some ten years of her life, spoke very openly with me about her sexual experiences. This surprised me and I asked her how it felt for her that I was a man and she, who had such great difficulties, could speak like that with me. As it

emerged she said she felt absent from me during her narrative and from herself. It was as if she was speaking about a third party, for whom she felt very little; as if her words and her story were distant from her. Certainly, there was a level at which she knew what she was doing, at which she experienced herself speaking, at which she even knew I was there but there was a lack of connection. Stern (1985, p.226) discusses this phenomenon in his section on Clinical Implications under Verbal Relatedness.

Paradoxically while language vastly extends our grasp on reality, it can also provide the mechanism for the distortion of reality as experienced. As we have seen, language can force apart interpersonal self-experience as lived and as verbally represented. It is for this reason that so much of what is clinically important when language emerges is invisible and silent.

He cites Basch (1983) as offering us a useful distinction about this process.

In repression the path from the lived experience to its articulation in language is simply blocked off. *In disavowal* the path from language representation to the feelings associated with these is blocked. *In denial* there is a distortion in the perception itself – ‘I was never abused’.

My client’s disavowal was a learned and well-practised strategy deriving, I would say (with Stern), from her powerful existential desire to be with her father all those years ago. By splitting herself in this way she was able *to drain of meaning the words* she was using so that there was no affect or sensation accompanying them. In other words she had abandoned her body.

When Merleau-Ponty says: ‘The word has a meaning’ he is connecting words, our expressive speech with the body which is sustained and made meaningful by the word. He is rooting the meaning of words in the world. His saying, ‘The word has meaning’ is similar to his saying that in the phenomenal world:

Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (*sens*) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence (PhP.p.52;F69).

He goes on to explain how the meaning is never just a quality ('*quale*') but that what we see (colour for instance) is 'invested with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that *it always involves a reference to the body*'. (ibid)

What he says here of our perceptual region of existence, applies equally to our cognitive/linguistic region because none of these regions function in isolation from the others and Existence for Merleau-Ponty is *univocal* - it is the one Existence in every area, just manifesting itself in different modalities.

The key to the word having meaning then, is its lived connection with the body. Therapeutic narrative then as Robine, Polster or Goodman would have it in Gestalt therapy will move towards a poetry where the body of the person is behind every word and informs the grammar and syntax and style of the utterance.

A Cautionary Note: Be Careful about Questioning Meaning-making

Robine safely advises us to be on the alert around the question of meaning-making (*sens*). In the same place that Robine suggests narrative as genuine dialogue, he calls meaning-making into question (1999, p.74). He has been influenced by the saying of the intellectual Paul Ricoeur that 'the hermeneutic field itself has been broken', blown apart by contradiction and different strategies (Ricoeur, 1992). This is one of those questions between philosophers that I think we had best *not* get into, unless we know how to get out without damage. Sometimes the Diogenes strategy is best. I think we need to be very careful about questioning the possibility of meaning. After all it is what Robine himself and Ricoeur are about when they write for us. Not only that, but they must also carry the intention of being 'believed' by us and therefore that they are in the business of truth.

Section Two: Speech and Language in Gestalt Therapy Literature and Practice

Early Writings

Early on, Gestalt therapy recognised the importance of language. It features in Perls' early work, in *Gestalt Therapy* (PHG) and in the verbatim accounts of Perls' work with clients. In the context of discussing the basic Gestalt therapy principle that each person is responsible for his/her own life, Perls sees the *use of impersonal language* as a flight from owning their experience:

I'd like to point out one of the most difficult problems to handle in therapy, and this problem is characterised by the word *it*, or the noun. "My memory is bad." "The thought slipped out" "the matches are needed for lighting cigarettes."I mentioned before, the death layer, this petrification does often occur in the way of becoming something dead: a living organism becoming a thing, a process becoming a noun, a freezing of a high potential, a predictability, an easy use of words rather than experiencing living processes. This is one way that we are dead without knowing it. (Perls, 1971, p106)

So, instead of someone saying 'My back is hurting to-day', he would urge the client to experiment with: 'I am hurting in my back to-day.' (cf Clarkson and Mackewn, 1996 p.109). I see this as an invitation to clients to be *immediate* to their world. It is the opposite of spectating the world through a window. (Romanyshyn, 1994, Ch 2, p.32 ff) Similarly Perls asked clients to make statements instead of asking questions; to ask 'how' instead of 'why': '*why*' assumes that the trouble was 'caused' by something in the past - and leads us into the world of science. But, in the phenomenal field which is the realm of Gestalt therapy, cause-and-effect categories are not helpful. Implicit here is Perls' view that a person is not in the world as a thing is in the world. This is a point made powerfully by Merleau-Ponty. (PhP. p.98ff; F114 ff)

One could say that the main part – the whole of Part One - of the *Phenomenology* of

Merleau-Ponty is devoted to the way the body is in the world. The human body is not a thing amongst things and the rule of cause and effect runs only in a world where there is extension - *partes extra partes* - because only in such a world does it make sense to talk about 'efficient causality' where the contiguity of entities is the event. And then there is the ambiguity that the body is subject to all the laws that operate for other material things. Nothing is ever clear-cut. This ambiguity is constantly reflected in our speech. Even when we speak about 'the phenomenology of the client' we are, to some extent, lapsing back into dualism.

Early writings stress that a requirement for Gestalt therapists is to use language in such a way that it articulates their *experience* of being-in-the-world.

We don't look to the world any more in terms of cause and effect. We look upon the world as continuous on-going process.... ..If you ask *how*, you look at the structure, you see what is going on now, a deeper understanding of the process.*Why* and *because* are dirty words in Gestalt Therapy. They lead only to rationalisation.... (Perls, 1971, p.47)

The attitudes in this writing about speech express well the basic theory of speech and language, which obtain in Gestalt therapy. Speech is meant to bring people into relationship but it can be used to keep them apart. A person can *seem* to be expressing *himself* while he is simply making sounds that are close to meaningless. Perls' view of the close correlation between awareness, speech and language is here apparent. He is pragmatic in his interest: the thrust of his admonition is to help the person to own her life through her speech and language.

His use of the metaphor 'petrification' is interesting. His view of language is that it is meant to *give life*. Uttering a person's name summons that person to life. This is the opposite of cursing a person - uttering a death wish towards her. The videotapes of Perls with client Gloria have attracted great criticism of him. They also show however, how *powerfully present* they were with one another - which enabled him to be very robust in his exchanges with her. There is nothing boring or lifeless about the meeting. The same is apparent in the videotapes of Lynne Jacobs - who very beautifully uses the client's *name*

(Jacobs, Video 1998).

The authors of *Gestalt Therapy* devote two sections of the book to the question of speech and language (PHG.pp138ff and 372ff). Implicitly they recognise the 'situatedness' of the person and the interdependency of thought and expression. (They tend to polarize cognition and feeling). I find these chapters amongst the best written in the book. Goodman, who was also a poet, would have written most of it. (Stoehr, 1994 and Goodman, 1973). Beginning from the premise that 'social relations...are original in any human field; long prior to recognising oneself as an idiosyncratic person' they point out that 'personality'⁴¹ is a 'structure of speech habits, a creative act of the 2nd and 3rd years' of life (PHG p. 372). So, the child begins off happy and free but then society takes him over. Here we see that difficulty which still persists in Gestalt writing about acknowledging the ambiguity that accompanies all 'spontaneous' and 'personal' articulations. Gestalt therapy heralded itself as liberating the individual from the chains of customised, deadening society. And it did indeed do that; yet, as we shall see, it had difficulty acknowledging the *ambiguity* that is ever present in human existence.

The authors take it that all beliefs and evaluations come from speech - unless they spring from 'organic appetites'. People mirror society in their speech and they lose their spontaneous selves. They contrast *verbalising* with *poetry*. "Verbalising" is speech that has lost its soul. It is monotonous, insensitive, affectless and stereotyped. It becomes a ready-made means by which an introjected alien personality, with its beliefs and attitudes, can live instead of oneself.' (PHG. p.376)

Poetry on the other hand is expression just for itself. It is ' an organic problem-solving activity.' By this they mean that the whole of the person is involved in contact with the

⁴¹ It seems to me that Goodman is using 'personality' here in the sense of 'persona' – an assumed role as in a play. This is quite different from the meaning given it in some Existentialist writings; Berdyaev E, for example, who uses it in the sense of the unique epiphany of a human being. (1944, p.23) Goodman is contrasting 'personality' with the 'underlying powers', the innate, unspoiled purity of the individual.

environment without the interference of ‘manipulating’⁴² factors. ‘Poetry is not instrumental in a further social situation as to persuade the listener...’ (PHG p.375)
This works, it helps people to health.

There is no attempt in PHG to ‘found’ language, to see it as articulating that primordial ‘givenness’ of which Merleau Ponty speaks; the question is not even raised. When we look at what they contrast with *genuine* speech i.e. ‘verbalizing’ - it comes not from the lived body of the person but from some ‘alien’ presence, which has invaded and plundered that pristine world. It is difficult not to discern a belief amongst some Gestalt therapists in a kind of primitive condition of spontaneity and health that has been taken away by ‘society’. People would be healthy if they were not ‘meddled-with’ by ‘society’. So, the thrust of therapy is to reconnect a person with her organismic self, let her become aware of the ‘shoulds’ that drive her and by means of ‘self-regulation’ she will be restored to health and become contactful. The experiments in PHG have all to do with this restoration of a lost integrity.

I’m sure that the view of ‘primordial innocence’ would qualify as a ‘metanarrative’ about which we have been thoroughly warned by Jean-François Lyotard (1984. p.xxiii). It seems to me that such a paradisaic picture is as valid as any other to express *in metaphor* our relationship to Being. It is not so distant from Heidegger’s notion of ‘fallen’.

Later Writings

Yontef (1993 *passim*) and Korb et al. (1989). make the same points as Perls and PHG. Yontef readily recognises that experience is moulded by language and, in turn, has the effect of determining what experiences a person may allow herself to become aware of. ‘Semantic clarification can be used as a vehicle for improving observation and for conveying new outlooks or attitudes.’ (Yontef, 1993, p.76). He draws attention to the fact

⁴²Perls uses this term to describe the indirect and pseudo-resolution of a difficult situation in which a person is afraid to ‘self-regulate’ (1969/1971 pp.17-18).

that people need to be taught the difference between 'feel' as affective and 'feel' as cognitive. It may be useful also to experiment with substituting 'I won't' for 'I can't', and so drawing the client's attention to how *inaccurate language* leads to distorted view of oneself. The authors have a sense that speech is most effective when it comes from the heart – when it articulates the full experience of the person. We can remark that here again we see the phenomenal field as the realm of discourse proper to Gestalt therapy. Such speech is characterised by *épaisure* or 'thickness' (PhP.p.238;F275) - that 'substantiality', which marks the grounding in primordial contact, that profound belonging to the world, that unreflected-upon presence of the world which recedes from awareness in every act of knowledge and yet which gives foundation and meaning to what we know. Such articulation is especially important with clients who have been profoundly shamed (Yontef loc.cit. p.501ff).

Implicit in this is acknowledging the essential element as the ever present 'primordial contact' enlightening our every act of perception. This is the *level of operation proper to Gestalt therapy*. Underwriting their position is the presupposition that the client and the therapist are in *dialogue* with one another and are in immediate contact with reality. The ideal for Yontef (loc. cit p.76ff) is a cultivation of Buber's I-Thou language in therapy. The attitude to speech and language in Gestalt therapy theory is, as ever, pragmatic.

Section Three: Awareness, Expression and Poetry

Firstly, I shall discuss the relationship of awareness and expression. I choose this because Gestalt therapy is a therapy of awareness. It is also fundamental to the thinking of Merleau-Ponty: he maintains an indissoluble bond between language, expression and thought. 'It is through expression that we make it (our thoughts) our own.' (PhP.p.177;F207).

Secondly, I shall explore further the function of poetic utterance in therapy. I do not mean that a therapist needs to be a poet - but almost! It is a question of *how* he is present in his own expression.

Thirdly, there is the question of the 'inner life', which Merleau-Ponty dismisses.

The Body a Power of Natural Expression

Awareness in Gestalt therapy is not a silent condition. It is never separate from expression. Nor is awareness always healing: a traumatised client may drift off into a regressive condition. It seems to me that at that point therapy stops until the two are present in the room again. 'Awareness is the process of being in vigilant contact with the most important event in the individual environmental field.Awareness is always accompanied by Gestalt formation ... (it) is *in itself* an integration of a problem.' (Yontef G. 1993, p.183 italics mine) '...the work unifies sensing and thinking into a continuum of awareness in the NOW' (loc.cit. p.189). Yontef stresses the transcendental element in awareness: 'Awareness is always Here and Now and always changing, evolving and transcending itself (Yontef loc. cit. p.185). Yontef does not explicitly connect awareness with articulation, but he does so implicitly when he says 'awareness – real awareness is always an appropriation of a problem'. However, I am not sure that is sufficient to forestall a lapse back into a split between speech and awareness. According to Merleau-Ponty, articulation is always an integral part of awareness. Otherwise we are back to a separation between awareness and speech. A disconnection between awareness and speech makes it very difficult to view thinking as a bodily activity and we are faced with awareness as an *immanent* process.

In this view speech becomes 'the envelope and clothing of thought'. This is to introduce again the split between mind and body, so that thought is somehow independent of the body, and grief, anger, sadness, joy tend to be regarded as 'inner states'. Such a view discounts the fact that not only has my body a gigantic power of expression but that *it is*, in its ontological constitution, such a power of expression.

Let us consider this. When I reflect upon it, if the grief I feel for a lost loved one, happens to me in my body it can only be because the world of the beloved-and-me still persists around me. It is important for the holism of Gestalt therapy that this concept of *total unity* should not be compromised when it comes to speech. I can conjure up a pseudo-

presence of the lost one. This is just *one possibility* of my being-in-the-world, *one* of the many possible modalities of my cognitive/linguistic region. These possibilities remain only possibilities unless and until I allow them to become actual in my body.

‘To say I imagine Peter is to say that I bring about the pseudo-presence of Peter. Just as Peter in imagination is only one of the modalities of my being-in-the-world, so the verbal image is only one of the modalities of my phonetic gesticulations, presented with many others in the all-embracing consciousness of my body’ (PhP.p.181;F210-211).

The world that so pains me is painful precisely because it carries the bodily presence (now become an absence) of the loved one. Such a process is possible because of my body’s relationship with the past. My body carries my past, as my scars and my wrinkles testify. And just as I can, by my body, walk to the other side of the road and see my house from there, so also, by my body, can I bring the past into the present and allow it to glow with a transforming light. My body has this reach in space and time because it *is* ‘a power of natural expression’ (PhP.p.181;F211). The response I make to every event is essentially a bodily response. There is no ‘cause and effect’ here, no before and after. It is all of one piece.

‘The body converts a certain motor essence into vocal form, spreads out the articulatory style of a word into audible phenomena, and arrays the former attitude, which is resumed, into actual movement, because the body is a power of natural expression’. (ibid)

Expression Brings Meaning into Existence

This power of natural expression enshrined itself in the thinking of Wilhelm Reich, a disciple of Freud and one time analyst to Fritz Perls, and the pioneer of what has come to be called Bioenergetic therapy. It is reported of him that he said he never bothered to listen to what people were saying - because it was all lies anyway! All that interested him was *the body profile of the client* which told his expertise how this client supported his psychopathology by inhibiting body movement. Gestalt therapy has learned a lot from

Reich but would not take up his deafness to what people say.⁴³ What *Gestalt Therapy* owes to Reich is its emphasis on *the body* and its focus on *process* of speech rather than on content of speech. The tone, the style, the cadence, the juxta position of the words, the brevity or profusion of the speech and the flow, are of interest to the Gestalt therapist. What interests the Gestalt therapist is the meaning in all these modalities of speech/articulation. Merleau-Ponty sees a parallel with an artistic performance.

The process of expression, when it is successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words,opening a new field on a new dimension to our experience..... The meaning swallows up the signs (PhP.p.182;F212).

The meaning for the therapist must come from his own body; from his images, sensations, feelings, inclinations; and these move towards speech as towards their completion. This constitutes dialogue. (Of course he will be careful to use the hermeneutic circle in his discernment).

Recently, Yontef (1991, p.8) and Hellinger (1998, p.224) have both written pieces, which call into question the meaning-making power and genuineness of the more dramatic forms of expression such as shouting, screaming and loud mourning as part of therapy. Yontef contrasts the 'theatrical, cathartic approach in which technique is accentuated more than person to person involvement' with 'the hard working person-to-person approach' and he memorably calls the first the 'boom-boom-boom therapy'. I agree broadly with Yontef. Gestalt therapy is not a therapy of catharsis. It relies on slow reparative work between therapist and client with the holding situation called a 'working alliance'.

⁴³ Fritz Perls was profoundly influenced by Reich. Following upon his hugely demoralizing experience with Harnick who 'broke' the analysis because Fritz wanted to marry, he turned to Karen Horney (Perls, 1977, p.48). She referred him to Reich with whom he was in therapy from 1931-1933. This therapy came to an end by Reich's having to flee from the Nazis. Perls later told a friend that Reich was the only man he had ever been able to trust (Clarkson and Mackewn 1996 p.12).

Kovel's criticism of Gestalt therapy comes from a misunderstanding. It was primarily aimed at Perls himself and some practitioners who were imitating Perls' style without the background of his knowledge and experience. There is a very good account of his criticism in Clarkson and Mackewn (1996, p.128ff).

The question of non-verbal therapy with the emphasis on spontaneity is a tricky one. Modern Gestalt practice moves towards dialogue, but there must be a place for preverbal material also. To endeavour to regulate spontaneity can be a mistake, and it is a mistake to think that the spontaneous expression of all emotions is always therapeutic. Emotions that emerge 'according to the book' and at 'an acceptable level' of disturbance may very easily fail to be the person showing himself phenomenologically. 'Composure' is not a Gestalt therapy word if only because Merleau-Ponty said that, in phenomenology, events must be *described* rather than *composed*. We need to acknowledge that upsetting human expressions can be part of the phenomenology of terror and pain, which many of our clients have suffered. This is amply documented in the chronicles of those who have been tortured (Lomax, 1995, pp.94, 95).

In these times when emotional sophistication is so highly prized, it is also worth reminding ourselves that Gestalt therapy owes a great deal in its genesis and development to the annealing fires of war and the trauma of the Nazi prison camps (Zinker.J.1998, pxxvff). Despite what some Gestalt writers may imply (Harris,C.O. 1992, p.239) it is precisely because the level of operation proper to Gestalt therapy is the phenomenal field, there is no emotion or human disturbance that it cannot meet in a human way. It is not just a therapy for the well-adjusted middle-classes.

Such primitive weeping and crying as we find in that inscription set to music by Henryk Gorecki is by no means foreign to Gestalt therapy. This is an example of what Merleau-Ponty would call 'originating speech'.⁴⁴ It comes right out of the deeply felt body-

⁴⁴It is part of his 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs': 'No, Mother, do not weep, / Most chaste Queen of Heaven / Support me always. "Zdrowas Mario". Prayer inscribed on the wall of cell number 3 in the

awareness of the subject. 'Spoken' or 'secondary speech' is already formed, templated speech applied by custom to various situations. Every 'sedimented' world (PhP.p.130;F152) that we acquire endows us with a new possibility of speech. This enables us to move with ease and elegance in a particular realm of discourse. The speech of the acquired world can carry in its train the authenticity that adheres to its origins. The inauthenticity derives from this: that whereas such speech purports to be transparent in its meaning it may not be so. Its meaning is concealed from us in such a way that unless we are content to go along with its inauthenticity it says nothing to us. An example of this would be the loudspeaker apology at the station for the cancellation of a train service. The difference between such a message and the wall-poem of the girl in the prison cell is a difference of awareness of *meaning*. Like an atmosphere, which wraps us about like a cloak, each carries a different world along with it. The girl prisoner is present to us in the atmosphere of words informed by feeling and maintaining a whole world of shame and suffering. Looking a little closer we see that in the first case there is a built-in link between the words; they acquire their place in the piece *from* one another. (Field theory is as operative here as in the 'larger' field.) As we hear it we enter a particular realm of feeling and thought where the utterance makes sense. Just as in a painting, the colours depend on one another for the atmosphere of the picture, so in this expression the words do not stand alone but are 'leaning' on one another in their connection with the person.

We find here beneath the conceptual meaning of the words, an existential meaning which is not only rendered by them, but also which inhabits them and is inseparable from them. (PhP.p.182;F212)

Merleau-Ponty says it is like the notes in a piece of music. The individual notes become dead sounds except in the context of the piece. At the same time, the poem, the music, the painting, are almost nothing without that 'otherness' which is the 'intentional tissue' of my body in its connection with the world (PhP.235;F271). This is precisely what is lacking in the railway apology - it is without connection and foundation in my body and

basement of the Gestapo's headquarters' in Zakopane, southern Poland. Beneath is a woman's signature and the words '18 years old, imprisoned since 26 September 1944'.

therefore is almost totally meaningless; it barely merits classification as communication at all. We experience this lack of connection in our bodies when we listen to a soulless narrative.

Gestalt therapy is very sensitive to such meaningless talk, what Heidegger calls 'Gerede'. Perls was merciless in his castigation of it in psychoanalysis. In dismissing the process of psychoanalysis that he underwent with an analyst called Harnick, he describes how it reduced him to 'a state of stupidity and moral cowardice' (Perls 1977, p.48). If as Polster says, every human life contains a novel, certainly every human meeting is potentially a poem. Once uttered from the heart it becomes an illuminated human event. The illumination is the awareness, which is always a meaningful expression. The meaning is inseparable from its expression.

Language and Sounds in Therapy Practice

Gestalt therapists believe that there is an intrinsic correlation between the retroflected trauma in the musculature of the person's body and the movements of that person. The therapy moves in the direction of bringing into awareness the presence of that retroflection. Before I narrate an example I need to say this: the example I am bringing forward, I am assured, is very rare in Gestalt therapy practice. Before I do work of this kind with clients I make an agreement with them that while we work in this way they will keep their eyes open and remain in contact with me; and, if ever I say during the experiment, 'Stop now', they agree beforehand to stop. What I describe and what seemingly helped my client might be censured by colleagues, whom I greatly respect. The reason why I bring it forward at all is to return therapy to the body. I wish to make the point that Gestalt therapy has room for all human emotions (not 'acting-out'), however harrowing. We could say of Gestalt therapy what the poet Terence said of himself a long time ago

Nihil humanum a me alienum esse, puto.

(Nothing that is human is foreign to me, I think.)

Let me narrate the example. It is important to note that in such a narration I shall attribute or connect phenomena (sensations in the body with events). I am quite aware that this is an interpretation which is open to question; The point I am making is *not* dependent upon moral, never mind *apodictic* certainty of the connection, which, of course is an interpretation.

A woman, who for many years carried, unuttered, an *uncertainty* about her mother's love for her was able to experience something of that retroflected secret in her body.⁴⁵ She felt it (as she thought) as a pain in her lower abdomen that moves down her right leg. With support she was able to connect some sound to that pain. From being totally silent she moved into loud screaming. Following this session – which of course took place in a context of a long course of psychotherapy - the client felt changed. She was able to abandon that hope which had dogged her for years of finally winning her mother's approval. She herself interprets it - in terms of her experience of being 'heard'. Such screaming is not conventional communication between people.

But conventions are a late form of relationship between men; they presuppose an earlier means of communication, and language must be put back into this current of intercourse. (PhP.p.187;F218)

Is this part of a healing dialogue? Many Gestalt therapists would dispute it fiercely! This 'conversation' is not entirely a 'cognitive operation'; yet the therapist may experience the energy of the client or the intensity of her pain *in his own body*. The client may feel: 'I am no longer alone'; 'There is someone who knows'. And the therapist may feel very moved and apprehensive and joyful and strong. Here we have what Merleau-Ponty calls 'reciprocity of intentions'.

The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others; of my gestures and the intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's

⁴⁵ This is, of course, an interpretation, which is made according to the 'meta-narratives' of Gestalt therapy. Some therapists would require a greater degree of certainty in order to avoid the danger of disrespecting the client. A Gestalt therapist, such as I am, will be content to go along with what seems to empower and help the client in her life-choice.

intention inhabited my body and mine his (PhP.p.183;F213).

This is not language but 'linguistic gesture' - it is the sound of the body as it moves in the area of its trauma. Here we are not in the objective world - where the application of the dimensions of the thing to the surroundings define what we call 'space'; we are in the phenomenal field, a realm where the body's movement in its presence to itself creates its own space - which it inhabits - as the heart inhabits the body (PhP.p.203;F235).

There is another aspect to the articulation of retroflected trauma by the client. As you will see if you opt to read the Appendix on the phenomenology of sexual violation, one of the effects of trauma - especially violent trauma - is to rob the person of her sense of identity; that of her capacity to be present to herself in terms of the world.⁴⁶ So the victim emerges split - not able to recognise or own herself in her body. This can lead to a sense of not being present - 'not being oneself'. Now, when that woman screams from the place of her pain *and in communication with her therapist* it means that she is allowing herself to enter that forbidden zone of herself, allowing herself to become aware of herself *there* and - as Yontef well points out - she appropriates that part of her world. (I would say 're-appropriates' because it was taken from her at the time of the trauma).

This is an integration that happens in the phenomenal field (PhP.p.232-3;F269). When my perception, in the modality of my gaze, is allowed to take in a particular person/event, it delivers itself to me in such a way that my own wholeness becomes bound up in the wholeness of the event or person. They become for me an extension of my own life. It comes to me through the prism of my personal history; by 'it' I do not mean the person or event on its own, but the *experience* of the person or event. This delivery of the person or event to me does not mean that my being and the being of the event or person *coincide*, otherwise they could never again assume their own separate history without my ceasing to exist. 'In order to perceive things we need to live them' (PhP.p.325;F375). Merleau-Ponty explains this in the context of talking about sense experience. He is discussing the nature of the dialogue between myself and the 'sensible' thing:

⁴⁶This is thoroughly documented as one of the symptoms in post-traumatic stress disorder. Herman, J. (1998) p.121; Horowitz, M. et al. (1999, p.22ff).

‘As I contemplate the blue sky I am not *set over against it* as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it thinks itself within me’ (PhP.p.214;F248).

The identity of the thing through perceptual experience is only another aspect of the identity of one’s own body throughout exploratory movements; thus they are *in the same kind as each other*. (PhP.p.185;F216) (emphasis added).

Unless it is articulated by the subject the event is not complete - and therefore cannot be perceived as a Gestalt. In that articulation the movement of the subject’s body in the act of screaming is at once a movement towards integration and appropriation. And this is all one movement - irreducible to anything else without loss of itself

Section Four: The Debate about Language

I shall now outline the controversy amongst philosophers at present over the nature of language and its reach. The relevance of this to Gestalt therapy theory is twofold: a) It can constitute a distraction and b) Some theorists become drawn into it and unwittingly take a position that undermines the very therapy they are practising.

A Distraction for Gestalt Therapy Theorists

The Language Debate can constitute a *substantial distraction* from the most urgent task that faces Gestalt therapy at the present, which is to reinstate the centrality of the body and found itself philosophically. It is not necessary to still the voices of those who say: ‘You must first deal with the difficulties arising from Sassure’s writings before you can have confidence in your foundation.’ The test of a philosophical foundation for Gestalt therapy is to be found in the way it *facilitates* and *deepens* work with clients, not in the *imprimatur* of some post-modern philosophers. This distraction for Gestalt therapy theorists can arise from the sometimes indecent rush amongst them to become

'academically respectable' by linking into the curricula and awards of the University system. The rush to 'respectability' is most likely to happen if people view Gestalt therapy as a 'profession' where money and status mark success rather than as a *life choice*, an invitation to take on a particular lifestyle, with its own set of values and goals. The seduction is dangerous when the therapist feels the urge to 'take on' or 'join-up-with' the 'professional' philosophers and run with whatever is '*à la mode*'. Very respectfully, I have a different take on language and speech in Gestalt therapy.

The Two Related Positions

What follows I take mainly from two works by Professor M.C.Dillon a person very familiar with the work of Merleau-Ponty. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (1997) and *Semiological Reductionism* (1995). This last is a book devoted to 'a Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Post-modern Thought'.

The debate is over the foundation of language. Dillon agrees with Merleau-Ponty that:

The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth. (Merleau-Ponty, 1946/ 1964, p.13)

Dillon uses two terms to describe the positions of the philosophers who want to have nothing to do with 'foundations': Semiological Reductionism and Post Hermeneutic Scepticism.

Post Hermeneutic Scepticism

For this group the truth is always and only my interpretation; there can be no question of what I call 'true' having any validity apart from the constructions with which I inform every thing, because, they say, that is the very law of perception itself. In this view there is no point in the hermeneutic circle because there is no escape for me from the immanent world of my own thought. Thought is made possible by language. So the reach of

language is the reach of thought. Therefore, it is correct to say that ‘ language is the temple of Being’ (Heidegger,1971,p .132). Thought is grounded in language, but language itself has no ground. This position is based upon an interpretation of Heidegger. It says he viewed perception as necessarily throwing ahead of itself a projective understanding which washes over everything we meet, so that we contact nothing but only our own projections. Merleau-Ponty takes a similar view of *cognition*: this projection is our movement towards being - which he calls *écart* - ultimately ends in a Gestalt, which is a figure against a horizon. It delivers to us our lived world:

Let us therefore say rather,that the life of consciousness - cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. (PhP.p.136;F158)

Semiological Reductionism

The second position – semiological reductionism, says again that our cognition is necessarily confined to the immanence of language. Semiology is the knowledge of signs. The premise that transforms semiology into semiological reductionism is that *signs refer exclusively to other signs*, that signs cannot refer to extra linguistic realities (Dillon, 1995, p.13; 1997,p.181). This position argues, on the basis of Sussure’s teaching, that words get their meaning from other words and not from things. Words he says, are pure signifiers. They point to other words and cannot point elsewhere. The ‘reductionism’ enters with the claim that ‘there is no egress from the chain of signifiers, no access to transcendent reality.’ If the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound image (de Sussure 1959, p.16), then language becomes a *catena* of signifiers *without foundation* in reality (cf H.P. p.20 definition of Primacy of Perception).

The attraction of this theory of language/ perception is that it brings together Sussure’s thinking and Husserl’s transcendental idealism. In this combination language assumes all the functions accorded to the transcendental Ego by Husserl (cf. Dillon 1997, p.183).

Difficulties Arising for Gestalt Therapy Theory

It would follow from this that the Gestalt therapy principle that we are healed by the *immediacy* of our relationship with the other is based on illusion. Furthermore, meaning making is not derived from our contact with reality but from an *immanent* activity. Here again the role of the body in perception becomes problematic. It would follow from this that the stress in Gestalt theory on 'bodywork' which embraces also linguistic articulation is *without foundation*.

An Embarrassment to Gestalt Therapy

Acceptance of either of these views will constitute an embarrassment for Gestalt therapy. Both of these views clash with the Gestalt therapy view that 'perception is inseparable from the consciousness it has of reaching the thing itself' (PhP.p.374;F429). Furthermore, they do not accommodate the presupposition in Gestalt therapy theory of *bodily intentionality*. My bodily intentionality is towards being, towards the expression of meaning (Madison, 1981, p111). The intentionality of the body is the way in which the world (the horizon of horizons) is present to me. This intentionality obtains in all the cognitive structures not just in the linguistic structures. If I move to open a window there is a sense in which that act -opening the window -already is present to me in my body, even before I actually perform the operation. Similarly speech is my-presence-to-you and your-presence-to-me in a shared *logos* or meaning. This is intersubjectivity, which means *sharing a world with the other person*. It is a basic belief of Gestalt therapists that our existence is about sharing a world, and every sentence in *Gestalt Therapy* presupposes that. I shall say a lot more about the implications of intentionality in Chapter 10.

Conclusion

It has been the theme of this chapter that language is the highpoint of human being-in-the-world. I have been careful to emphasise that language itself does not found or ground our being but is itself *founded* upon the reality of the world of which each of us is a part.

Yet in this belonging in the world there is the same ambiguity which marks all else about us. Our speech does not adequately express our experience. We are not entirely just another thing in the world, but through our transcendence transform the world into utterance.

I have been careful not to involve Gestalt theory in the debate amongst the philosophers about the limitation upon our perception imposed by language. I have, in this debate, taken the line that Gestalt therapy theory requires a supporting philosophy that promotes the rationale of its work rather than says it is impossible. In this attitude I am supported by Merleau-Ponty, Dillon, M. (1997), Mallin, S.B. (1979) and Madison, G.B. (1981). This position is summed up by Merleau-Ponty as he speaks about what phenomenologists call the '*Fundierung*'.

Thus every truth of fact is a truth of reason, and '*vice versa*'. The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*: the founding term, or originator - time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception - is primary in the sense that the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest. (PhP.p.394;F451)

We have expressed here what is at once the strength and the weakness of Gestalt therapy theory; nothing is black or white, or plain and simple about our human existence; the beginning is in the end and the end is in the beginning; language is the high point of human perception; this is so only because it is inextricably tied to the limitations of our body; and although it is the high point, it falls short of and loses out on the full richness that is perception.

PART II

Chapter 6 – Foundations of Gestalt Therapy

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An Introduction to the Chapter

The point of this chapter is to look hard at Gestalt therapy in its beginnings and see if, in its classic text and early practice, it is the kind of enterprise which invites the application to it of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

First of all I show it as a *holistic* therapy from the start, which *theoretically* places the body as the *focus* of application. I demonstrate the difficulty arising from Goodman's foundational formulation in *Gestalt Therapy*.

In sketching out the difference between 'body' as intended by Goodman and body as intended by Perls we see that Goodman's 'body' – as interpreted especially by Gordon Wheeler is close to Merleau-Ponty's 'phenomenal body'.

We then review points of theoretical agreement amongst Gestalt practitioners. We look at the widely used text *Gestalt Therapy* in its content and I write an account of 'best practice' as we find it in the literature and as I myself experienced it in the early days (70's).

Returning to theory, we see that whereas the authors were not expressly phenomenological, they were implicitly so, and I bring forward four arguments. However, they did not follow through on their insight, they failed to view therapy in terms of perception and they yoked the therapy to a constraining paradigm.

As an example of this constraint I take the analysis of sexual touch from Gestalt therapy. I demonstrate what difference the summary application – under four concepts – can make to the analysis. I conclude then with a Formulation of Gestalt therapy from the point of view of the Phenomenology of Perception.

Section One: Gestalt – A Holistic Therapy

The Defective Foundation of Holism in *Gestalt Therapy*

The theoretical foundation of the Gestalt therapy that I am writing about in this study was laid down by Paul Goodman in the opening section of Book Two, Part I of *Gestalt Therapy*:

Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment
What is real are the ‘whole’ configurations of this functioning We speak of the organism contacting the environment, but it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality (PHG, 1951/73, p.273).

This is the statement – maybe not all that clear – of the holism that is the cohesive foundation of Gestalt therapy theory. It is also, in my view, a deficient foundation. Firstly, I shall talk about it as a deficient foundation for the holistic approach and then I shall say why it is sufficient, in its own way.

Why Goodman’s Formulation is Deficient

First of all I need to say what I mean by the ‘holistic approach’. By the holistic approach I understand: ‘... treating a person at all times as a whole person, whose body, emotions and perceptions function interrelatedly as one complex relational whole’ (Mackewn, 1997, p.45). In other words doing away with the mind/body dichotomy. In my view, it is not possible to limit holism to the unity of the person themselves; the very structures of our sense functions are mirrored in the structures of the world and the same cohesion that holds me together as a person, binds me to the world so that I am in the world as the heart

is in my body (PhP.p.203;F235). Whereas PHG intuitively extends holism in the way that I understand it, I think that Goodman's foundation is unequal to such an extension. But they do it anyway!

The defect in his formulation is that he omits a more primary experience: 'I am given to myself': (or 'One is given to oneself' to avoid the dispute about 'I' as a cultural construction). His oversight is to assume he is stating the total primary experience. His statement is that of a detached observer reflecting upon a primary experience.

Let us look at this a little more closely. It will become very important in the latter part of this chapter because this omission will block the way to the human body as *transcendent*, as opening up a whole future of creative possibilities.

When I reflect upon my experience, the unity of myself with the environment is certainly present and, concomitant with that, is the experience *that I am given to myself*. This is what Goodman missed. It is *in* this givenness of me to myself that 'the upsurge of the world' which constitutes my experience is also given. This 'upsurge of the world' (PhP.p.53;F65) happens as a polarity of my subjectivity. Subjectivity is my presence to myself. It is only in the light of my presence to myself that I can have any sense of 'other'. I experience myself only in terms of the world – of that which is 'not-me'; but it is in the luminosity of my subjectivity that I experience the 'not-me'. So, what Goodman has done is by-pass the subjectivity and point to the 'not-me'. So the subjectivity is omitted, over-looked.

At no point in PHG does he or any of the others raise the question of this more basic *constituting* element of experience. and this lack has consequences for his insight as an undergirding philosophy of Gestalt therapy.

Yet it Founds the Holism of Gestalt Therapy

It is a basis for holism because he is placing experience neither in the organism or outside the organism but in the totality, organism-and-environment. This means that my unity is

not centred in myself but in my connection with the world. It would be illogical to postulate unity with the environment without previously postulating an organic coherence of the organism within itself, which is to say that the person is a Gestalt. The statement above is Goodman's version of 'being-in-the-world'. It may become clearer with an example. A woman presents herself in my office for therapy. As far as possible I approach her with an open mind and open heart. (I don't ordinarily read any notes, for instance, that might come with her referral). So I have not turned her into a 'case for treatment'! I have prepared myself and my office for her and I sit in such a way that I am facing her and able to give her my full attention. So I am, in the situation, already being impacted by her as she is by me. The reality of our meeting is not in me nor in her but *between* us, as a totality, involving both. Our bodies carry our worlds. The description I give is of a modality of a *pre-objective view*, which is what we call *being-in-the-world* (PhP.p.79;F95).

My grasp of this totality (my degree of presence) is a function of my degree of presence to myself. The situation as a Gestalt, that is a meaningful whole, will be a correlate of myself as a Gestalt. This means that if I am not a meaningful whole to myself then I will not be present in the situation. If, for instance, my wife has just told me she is leaving me, or if my young son has gone missing or if I have sexual designs on this woman, then I will be split and so will the meeting be split.⁴⁷

Gestalt Therapy – Body-Centred

I place importance upon this statement of Goodman's because it is widely taken to establish the holism of Gestalt therapy. Despite its incompleteness, I think it does that effectively and thereby establishes Gestalt therapy as body-centred. I have explained earlier why I think it a defective foundation and the consequences of that.

(cf H.P. p.136; p.177).

⁴⁷ In Chapter 13 under the heading Creative Adjustment where he is talking about fullness of contact, Goodman lays down 'conditions' which allow 'The Self' to be 'figure'. 'The figure embodies all the concern of the self, and the figure is nothing but its present concern, so the self is figure'

It is not my intention in this place to explore whether or not Goodman carries through the promise of this early section – in fact he does not – but to explain how Gestalt therapy was, from its start, a body-centred therapy. The opposite of holism is dualism – the division between body and soul, consciousness and body, subject and object; holism in Gestalt therapy, on the other hand, will admit no such division. ‘Once beyond a certain stage, one recognises that ‘subjective – objective’ is a false dichotomy’ (PHG, p.46). ‘The definition of an animal involves its environment’ (ibid p.307). To make the point that he is departing from (the early) Freud in rejecting the dualisms in the person, Goodman brings in Aristotle’s dictum that ‘the vegetative functions, sensation and motivity ---- are “identical in act” with the nature of food, the objects of sensation etc.’ (PHG, Bk Two, Part 2, p.303). Therefore Goodman’s view of human being is as a unity, a Gestalt. This means that a Gestaltist can say with Merleau-Ponty: ‘I am my body’.

But I am not in front of my body, I am in it or rather *I am it*.

.... we do not merely behold as spectators the relations between the parts of the body and the correlations between the visual and the tactile body: we are ourselves the unifier of these arms and legs, the person who both sees and touches them (PhP. p.150;F176).

Goodman also quotes Koehler ‘the whole process is determined by intrinsic properties of a whole situation’. And Wertheimer: ‘Imagine a dance full of grace and joy Do we have a summation of *physical* limb movement and *psychic* consciousness? No’. (PHG p.304).

Goodman, in my view, goes further than the *Gestalttherorie* psychologists. They retained the myth of the objective world – of a world *already* composed of things – *out there*, despite their firm establishment of the human being as a Gestalt. In this they did not follow the logic of their own discoveries. Maybe, Lewin did take this step and Goldstein too, as Wheeler asserts (1998A, pp.44-45).

Introducing *Gestalt Therapy*

There are some preliminaries we need to discuss before entering upon a discussion of the origin and format of the foundational text. One of these is some doubts that have arisen around the meaning of 'body' as it is used in the text.

Perls and Dualism

It is a matter of dispute amongst Gestalt writers, particularly in regard to Part I of *Gestalt Therapy*, what to attribute to Perls, what to Goodman. Be that as it may, the stated philosophy undergirding both parts of the book is in rejection of dualism. Wheeler (1991/98, p.44) places a question against the way Perls was understanding 'body' and 'organismic': Was Perls still regarding the body as a thing separate from the environment and unwittingly holding a dualistic outlook? Those eighteen 'experiments' which form the 'corpus' of Book One of *Gestalt Therapy* under the title *Mobilizing the Self* and which are especially attributed to Perls (Stoehr, 1994, p.84) are not, I think, the work of a someone who regards the body as a 'thing'. There is also his claim in this part of the book to be including 'the experimenter in the experiment' (PHG p.32); and his emphasis upon the therapist as 'catalyst' (loc. cit. p.40); furthermore we must take him seriously when he says the following - or allows it to go into a book under his name:

'It will be strongly stated later on, that we deny *independent* status to 'mind', 'body' and external world. What these words apply to are artifacts of a dualistic tradition which has sought to build them right into the functioning of man's organism Those who cherish their 'minds' and intend to cling to them to the end will, at the very least, decline our suggested procedures if we show so little understanding of how they genuinely experience themselves – that is as non-physical 'mind' operating a physical 'body' in an 'external world'. This way of experiencing oneself is the fruit of the socialisation process, which we all undergo as children'. (PHG p.42-43).

Here as in other places Perls rejects the dualism of mind and body.

Wheeler (1998B, p.40ff) makes the case that Perls, in his earlier work (1947/1969), is strongly dualist. He argues this in the context of showing how the declared intention of Perls in his earlier work 'To replace the psychological by an organismic concept' comes to nothing. 'When Perls speaks of "holism" and the "holistic approach", he generally does not mean, as the Gestaltists did, the organismic and environment field (Arnheim 1959), nor does he use the term as Lewin and Goldstein in particular used them, meaning the organism in its "life space", including environment, overall goals, and the dynamic interaction of all these things (Goldstein 1939; Marrow 1969), but rather again, the *organism as body*' (Wheeler, loc.cit. p.44).

Wheeler says that Perls inherited his notion of body and body-work from his much admired therapist Wilhelm Reich who derived his theory from the earlier instinct-based psychoanalysis of Freud. As we shall see in a later chapter, there are some substantial doubts about this lineage. Perls, says Wheeler, is limiting himself to the psychosomatic whole.

'Nor does Perls seem at all aware, here or later (PHG,1973), of the crucial work of Lewin in understanding motivation in terms of the "whole field" – including Lewin's emphasis on the "here and now" (1936) and the "demand quality" of unfinished situations' (Wheeler, loc. cit. p.45).

Whereas I may not agree with Wheeler in his judgement of Perls, I want to acknowledge that Wheeler is making a very valid and important point. The importance of this is to demonstrate that *the body* that is central to Gestalt therapy, is not the psychosomatic body, the body is not the isolated individual body of the medical school or the gymnasium. Merleau-Ponty calls it 'the phenomenal body' (PhP, p.232; F269) which is the body about which a world is ever forming and changing, wherever one goes.

Points of General Agreement

Another preliminary is to give the reader some idea of points of agreement amongst Gestalt therapists. Even though *Gestalt Therapy* is held in high esteem, there is no way the practitioners accept it all as if it were holy writ. Let us look at points of *general* agreement amongst Gestalt therapy practitioners. I say *general* because I find that as soon as they begin to discuss any of these points, divergent views begin to emerge.

Firstly there is *general agreement* that Gestalt is essentially about *awareness* and that its focus is *immediate* -that is, it is concerned with the holistic bodily presence of the therapist-and-client; secondly, that Gestalt therapy embraces basic Existentialist teachings in regard to the human person: that the human being is social, responsible, self-determining, rational, affective, unique and inevitably intersubjective. Gestalt therapy is an Existentialist therapy and subscribes to those characteristics drawn up by the American Association of Humanistic Psychology and known as the Bugental Postulates (Yalom, 1980, p. 18). In addition to these basic postulates there is general acceptance of the *phenomenological* nature of Gestalt therapy. Agreement about this last is less general, as we shall see - different schools of Gestalt therapy understand this differently. All are agreed that the therapeutic element in Gestalt therapy is mainly in the *relationship between therapist and client*; a relationship of healing *dialogue*. The client feels supported enough to become aware of his/her condition and appropriates it in a creative way. Gestalt therapy generally *claims to avoid interpretation* as an instrument of therapy; but, of course, interpretation takes place and is not always *owned* - especially as it is acknowledged as counteractive to phenomenology. It is significant that despite the universal embrace of Gestalt theory there is general avoidance⁴⁸ of the term 'perception' and frequent use instead of words such as 'contact' and 'awareness'. The text *Gestalt Therapy* is generally held in esteem rather than actually used. In my experience I could find no trainees who had read it all; most were acquainted with Book 1 and a little of Book 2. Yet it is widely and respectfully quoted by the writers e.g. Wheeler, Philippon,

⁴⁸It is significant that in Wheeler's most recent book (2000) he uses the word frequently and freely. The significance is that Gestalt therapy theory is in a state of change.

Yontef, Parlett, Robine, Spagnuolo-Lobb, and many others.

Section Two: The Book: *Gestalt Therapy*

The Arrival of Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy arrived on the scene in the early 1950's. This was in the format of the collaborative work *Gestalt Therapy - Excitement and Growth in Human Personality* by Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline and Paul Goodman published by Art Ceppos of the Julian Press (Stoehr 1994, p.85). One of the main influences behind this new therapy was Laura Perls, Fritz's wife, but her name appears nowhere in the book. Perls was a practising psychoanalytic therapist; Hefferline was a university teacher of psychology, Goodman also taught philosophy in the university. The original arrangement was that Goodman would edit the work of Perls; but as it turned out, Goodman became the main writer and Perls took the role of the consultant expert (Stoehr loc. cit. p.88; Clarkson & Mackewen, 1996, p.21). It consists of two books: Book I contains exercises designed to increase the person's awareness. Book II is an abstract statement of Gestalt therapy theory with an on-going polemic against Freudian analysis. It is not a scholarly or precise work and the writing is sometimes confused and obscure.⁴⁹ The slim manuscript given him by Perls containing a number of 'concentration exercises' grew hugely under Goodman's pen and became the formidable volume that is now known as 'PHG'. Hefferline was the only certain Ph.D. amongst the three of them. The emergence of the book is thoroughly and sympathetically treated by Stoehr. It appears to have begun in a casual way but gained momentum as the book emerged. Perls was undecided what to call the therapy but they settled for 'Gestalt' out of deference to the influence which the Berlin school had had on them - mainly through the

⁴⁹I am not alone in this view: Mackmin, M. (1995 p.56) excoriates Goodman for pseudo-scholarship and unclear writing. Also Simkin - a leading Gestalt therapist - said publicly that he could not understand Goodman. (in Yontef, G. 1993)

work of Goldstein (Stoehr loc.cit. p.90).⁵⁰

The Context of Gestalt Therapy

To put it in context and see Gestalt therapy as part of a wider, perhaps political, movement we need to remember that the authors lived in very exceptional times. These were dangerous days in the USA world. It was a time when America was driven with fear of infiltration by Communist radicals. Under the respectable guise of wanting to purify the states from traitors, Senator John McCarthy had inaugurated his 1950's version of the witch-hunt of Salem.⁵¹ The thrust of Gestalt therapy was out of step with this popular movement. Perls, Hefferline and Goodman showed courage in launching this new liberating therapy. Two of them were, in their own ways particularly vulnerable people: Perls was a Jewish refugee and Goodman was openly bisexual. All through the text of *Gestalt Therapy* but especially in Book Two there is manifest disenchantment with psycho-analysis, anger and resentment at the curtailment of freedom, which was especially personal to Paul Goodman (Stoehr, T. 1994.p.2).

The Shift to Experience

It is important to note how Gestalt therapy exemplifies that epistemological transition away from *authority* as a source of knowledge and towards *experience* as the main object of philosophic investigation⁵²(Buckley, M.J., 1989, pp.443f). Philosophically it rode the tide of the paradigm shift away *from the nature of thought processes*, which was so

⁵⁰Speigelberg, H. (1972, pp.301-318) notes that Goldstein never professed himself a Gestalt theorist. Perls had worked with Goldstein as a laboratory assistant in the Frankfurt clinic and very much admired his work. Merleau-Ponty also was heavily influenced by the work of Goldstein. In 1934 Kurt Goldstein fled from the Nazis to the US and came to Columbia University. Paul Goodman earned some sorely needed cash by teaching him English (Stoehr 1994, p.99). This was only one year before Perls fled from Germany to Holland (Perls, P, 1977, p.40).

⁵¹This is well documented in such works as Chambers, W.(1952) and Miller, Arthur (1953/82).

⁵²cf. Buckley,M.J.(1978, p.633). cf Kemp-Smith, N.(1963, p19f) in Preface to Second Edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

investigated in the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, and towards *human experience* and its expression as the foundation of all knowledge. Language and action *bound* together, in the ellipse of human experience, became the primordial source for 20th century philosophy. This movement was taken up by the Gestalt therapists and enabled them to break with that view of human being which confined experience to something happening in the head. Therapy now becomes essentially relational - an event unfolding in *the field of the between*. It seems to me that the founders only vaguely knew the implications of what they were saying. And that is why, I think that they were part of the *movement* that is phenomenology, to which Merleau-Ponty refers.

...phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy. (PhP p.viii; FII) emphasis in text.

Their ability to move therapy away from some immanent event so that it becomes instead a *field* event was the gift of the Gestalt psychologists⁵³. The Berlin researchers demonstrated that the organisation of experience derives neither all from my mind nor all from the thing but is intrinsic to *the field*, that is, to the situation of perception. As Dillon, M. (1997) says:

The principle of autochthonous organisation maintains that there are intrinsic relations obtaining among the parts of the perceptual whole, that these relations are grounded in phenomena and that they constitute the perceptual significance or fundamental meaning of phenomenal experience (op.cit.p. 65-66).(cf Dillon loc.cit. p. 63; PhP.p.7;F14).

In other words, the perceptual world carries meaning *in itself*. My world arises out of a dialogue between my Self and the world. Therefore, I am not confined in a world *purely* of my own construction; if I were, there would be no point in a therapy that accords the body *the* central role. The Gestalt psychologists demonstrated that the phenomenon

⁵³On this most important subject of the *Gestalttheorie* cf Wheeler,G.(1991/1998 p23ff;) and Yontef (1993 ch.7)

unveils to me a *meaning-full world* and therefore I am presented with a range of relationships bearing unlimited possibilities of change and growth and becoming, which find their articulation in my body. Gestalt therapy is built upon these insights and calls this intimate co-creative commerce or contact with the world, 'dialogue'.

The Return to the Things Themselves

Gestalt therapy no longer made the 'unconscious' the familiar focus of attention nor interpretation the main vehicle of cure. It was the genius of Freud to 'discover' the roots of 'mental illness' in the forgotten secrets of that dark crypt of the human mind called the *unconscious*, what Merleau-Ponty called Freud's 'protean idea' - 'the unconscious conceived as a system' (Richardson W.J. 1979, p.2). Freud held that the *reality* of the person was encrypted in that system in a code, which only the analyst could read. So, *the reality of the person showed itself not from itself but through the analyst*. The Gestalt therapists however, go to the totality of the person's bodily presence and, through raising her awareness, allow her to speak from herself about herself. Although they did not recognise it formally as such, the Gestalt therapists were following Husserl's crusading maxim in his phenomenological revolution and 'returning to the things themselves' (Dillon, M.C. 1997 p23ff. and Luijpen W. 1960/1972, p.100) (cf H.P. pp.254-5;264). The question of bracketing 'facticity' did not even occur to them. Just as Gustave Fechner (van den Berg, 1980) opted for the beauty and brightness of the park as the 'true' reality, as against the darkness and silence of the 'scientific' view of that park, so now the first Gestalt therapists *implicitly* by-pass the interpretation of the unconscious and opt for what is before their faces.

This new therapy breaks the sacred seal on that immanent sanctuary of the unconscious, in that it finds those secrets not so secret after all; because they intrude upon and proclaim themselves from the rooftops in manifold ways in the *everyday life* of the person, even and *especially* in the therapy room with the therapist (PHG p.164). Instead of 'probing the unconscious' the Gestalt therapist sets herself to engage with the person in the 'here-and-now' event of their meeting. Because they work in the context of the field *everything*

that is required is in the room (PHG pp 59 & 287 et passim). They allow experience itself to utter itself from itself.

In this book (we) take the dynamic structure of experience not as a clue to some 'unconscious' unknown or a symptom, but as the important thing itself. This is to psychologize without pre-judgement of normal or abnormal, and from this point of view psychotherapy is a method not of correction but of growth. (PHG p.284)

A Summary of 'Best Practice'

I speak now of the *best practice* of Gestalt therapy *contemporary* with the early days of the book and well documented in several publications: Perls.F. (1969/1971): *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*; (1971): *Gestalt Approach and EyeWitness to Therapy*; Polster, E and M. (1974) *Gestalt Therapy Integrated*. In Gestalt therapy⁵⁴ a person is seen as a unity not as a duality - not as someone living at two levels - the level of the conscious and the level of the unconscious. If I can allow my awareness of the *now* to grow and elaborate then I am in contact with the *real*. That is the source of all nourishment. (This is in contrast with thoughts, surmises, memories, other people's thoughts, surmises, memories etc., and the whole paraphernalia of '*cogitationes*'). This is the thinking behind the series of exercises, which make up part I of PHG. It is also the thinking that underlies *Awareness* by John O.Stevens'(1971) widely used in the training of Gestalt therapists and containing whole sets of exercises to enable people to become aware of the difference between surmises, thoughts, hopes memories and the here-and-now observations and feelings.

Perls and his colleagues were effectively denying the split between 'the inner life' of the mind and the movements of the body in the 'external world'. My thoughts and

⁵⁴Here I write about *best practice* -as I experienced it myself in workshops with Eoin O'Leary, Helen Davis and David Boadella in the 1970's -and as documented in *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (1969/1971), *Eye Witness to Gestalt Therapy* (1976), *Awareness* (1971). (I am also aware of Masson's savage indictment of Perls (1992 pp.54f)

imaginings are a *different* mode of contact with one and the same world or environment. The consequence of this is that everything going on in the room between therapist and client is, potentially, informed by the meeting of their embodied subjectivities and therefore affords material for therapy. For instance, the fact that the client does not sit back in the chair and accept its full support for his body is a statement of his existence *vis-à-vis* the therapist (cf Perls, F. 1976; p.76). It is not that he *should* sit back and relax. There is *nothing wrong* with the way he is sitting. It is the client's style of being in the world and he has a right to have it respected by the therapist. His posture carries the whole of his history. It may be that the whole of the session is taken up with the discussion of this in 'experiments' with posture and distance. A conversation between bodies. The therapist must be careful - as much as he can - not to focus on the *interpretation* of such things - he picks up the signal *in his own body* and checks and re-checks again with the way in which the client is *coming to be* with him. It seems to me that diagnosis/interpretation is intrinsic to what we do. The dynamic of our rationality is to make sense of what is unfolding around us, i.e. to interpret it. What he is after is *not* to diagnose the malady of the client, but to be present and as aware as fully as he can be, of what is going on *between* himself and the client⁵⁵. The method of working is no longer interpretation but *relation*. This is important to note.

Perls not Always the Best Model

It has to be said that Fritz Perls did not always model the therapy he taught. As we read some of the considerable body of 'examples' of his work, which he has left us, some of it reads rather like heavy-handedness. Take the interview with Marek (Perls F. 1976, p.128). It reads more like a robust confrontation than a person-centred therapy session. For sure, Perls brings out what is happening between them; but he does not sound really concerned for the client. I would like to know what Marek brought away from the

⁵⁵Yontef, (1993) Part iv Ch,13 discusses the question of Diagnosis in Gestalt very thoroughly. 'When I have not been clear about diagnostic issues with a patient, my understanding of the patient and of the patient's self-experience has been reduced' (p.389) cf. Delisle, G. in *British Gestalt Journal* I, 1.1991 pp42-50)

session. I think *I* would have felt exposed and shamed; but then I only *read* an account of it; I don't hear the voices, I don't see the faces, I have no notion of what kind of history Perls and Marek have with one another. I am also acquainted with the reputation Perls acquired for being a show-man (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1996, p.137ff). I say 'not always' above because there is an abundance of very impressive and truly 'Gestalt' therapy by him. (loc.cit. p.94ff)

For Perls the goal of the therapy is awareness of the Here and Now. The context of personal relationship, of dialogic movement leading to Martin Buber's 'I-Thou' moment, took a long time to establish itself in Gestalt therapy. It was not until the 1980's under the influence of powerful writers like Gary Yontef and Lynne Jacobs that this *development* finally established itself with the therapists. I deliberately place the emphasis in that last sentence to remind ourselves that Gestalt therapy was revolutionary right from the start. Contrary to the usual medical procedure of those times, Gestalt therapy intimately involved the client precisely as a human person in the therapeutic process. I am not sure if Kuhn (1970, p.43) would agree with my use of the expression, but it seems to me that Gestalt therapy marked a paradigmatic change in the approach to and treatment of 'mentally' sick people.

Why I think the Authors were phenomenological

I shall bring forward four arguments to show why I am persuaded of the phenomenological basis in the thought of the authors. In order to do this I shall draw on the analysis of Merleau-Ponty to articulate what I see as an implicit and limited phenomenology in the text of the authors. Later, I shall demonstrate that they did not follow through on their primary insights.

A Summary of the Arguments

Each of these makes the same point in a different way; they mutually reinforce one another: Gestalt therapy is an exercise in purification and liberation: purification from

those things that cloud perception and liberation to live through the inviting possibilities of the real.

- Stress on actuality
- The Experiments as Phenomenological Enquiry
- Holism: Beyond the Subject/Object Dichotomy
- A Phenomenological View of What Constitutes Health

Stress on Actuality

Here I need to refer the reader back to my chapter on the term ‘Phenomenology’ (cf H.P.p 76) and the meaning I am attaching to it in this study. I follow Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of phenomenology as ‘the study of the advent of being to awareness instead of presuming its possibility, as given in advance’ (PhP. p.61; F71). Very close to this is Heidegger’s definition which I have cited several times in the study so far: ‘to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself when it shows itself from itself’ (in Richardson, J.P. 1986, p.56). This allows for phenomenology not only in the descriptive sense, but also of becoming aware of pre-objective being i.e. ‘the constituting process out of which self and world actually develop’ (PhP p.53;F65). That *pre-objective being is my body*. In this sense I think the founders were phenomenological in their approach. It was axiomatic in their view that only in the immediacy of *actuality* does a person grow. Immediacy for them is the *locus of creativity*, which, in turn, is the mark of life and growth. Their quest therefore, was for ‘the advent of being to awareness’. Indeed the very first experiment in the book focuses on the way in which the subject comes to awareness of his/her actuality.

Try for a few minutes to make up sentences stating what you at this moment are aware of. Begin each sentence with the words ‘now’ or ‘at this moment’ or ‘here and now’. (PHG, p.59)

To make explicit the phenomenology implicit in each of these quotations we can invoke some reflections of Merleau-Ponty. The above exercise is one in immediacy. Being ‘immediate’ with something means being ‘joined-up-with’ it so that my existence and the

existence of the thing 'stand together' and, through my body, *form one system*. The structures of the thing and the structures of my perception form one system.

'The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it and can never be actually in *itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity.' (PhP. p.320;F370)

To elicit the phenomenology latent in the following passage we would need to ask the writers: But how does the novelty nourish? In order to do so the 'novelty' must 'be lived' by the subject.

We must then conclude that all contact is creative and dynamic. It cannot be routine, stereotyped or merely conservative because it must cope with the novel, for only the novel is nourishing. (PHG p.276. Pt. II)

Merleau-Ponty in his chapter on The Thing and the Natural World helps us:

If one tried, according to the realistic approach, to make perception some kind of coincidence with the thing, it would no longer be possible to understand what the perceptual event was, how the subject managed to assimilate the thing, how after coinciding with the thing he was able to consign it to his own history, since *ex hypothesis*, he would have nothing of it in his possession. In order to perceive things, *we need to live them*. (Ph.P.p.325; F376) (emphasis mine.)

Such also is the prescription for the good life advocated by the authors of *Gestalt Therapy*:

'...the authors believe that the Gestalt outlook is the original, undistorted, natural approach to life; that is to man's thinking, acting and feeling. The average person, having been raised in an atmosphere full of splits, has lost his Wholeness, his Integrity. To come together again he has to heal the dualism of his person, of his thinking and of his language.The unitary outlook which can dissolve such a dualistic approach is buried but not destroyed and, as we intend to show, can be regained with wholesome advantage (PHG p.14).

The regret in this passage is about dualism in perception. Things have got in the way and blocked immediacy and the unfolding of 'natural approach to life'. What else can it be but a distortion of perception? The presupposition is that there is possible through Gestalt therapy, a more healing mode of perception, one more in harmony with one's belonging in the world. The authors presuppose such an outlook in the Gestalt therapist. It is the systematising and organising and indeed, the 'education' of folk that gives rise to problems.⁵⁶ The enemy is 'shouldism' which schools people in self-inhibition (*Retroflection* in PHG p.183ff). If I am pretending to be calm when, in fact, I am feeling very agitated because this is what is expected of me, then I am not in immediate touch with my world but accepting a version of it from someone else. I am showing myself but not *from myself*. The authors prescribe for the therapist that he give up control and allow the client to get on with his process without getting in the way. In this context Goodman quotes the Tao: 'Stand out of the way'. (p.295).

The Experiments as Phenomenological Enquiry

The professed aim of these is to raise the person's sensory awareness, to promote the emergence of 'meaning' in the person's life. Anyone who has done these experiments will know how powerful they are. They raise not only sensory awareness but heighten the over-all awareness of the person. There is, in the book, no effort to give these experiments any ontological basis. There is a repeated invitation to live more fully. That is the closest they get to establishing an ontology.

We have in store for you no 'easy steps to mastery', no moral uplift programme, no guaranteed rules for breaking bad habits which you are actually determined to keep. We undertake to do nothing *to* you. Instead, we state some instructions by means of which, if you so desire, you may launch yourself on a progressive personal adventure wherein, by your own active efforts, you may *do*

⁵⁶Ivan Illich was profoundly influenced by Goodman and this attitude appears in Illich's writings on education.

something for yourself - namely, discover it, organise it and put it to constructive use in the living of your life. (PHG p.28) (italics mine)

The '*something for yourself*' is to bring the person close to her own experience, which is the aim of all the experiments and first condition of psychological support. These experiments feature, especially in Book One. They are the technology of awareness, which brings the ability to appropriate one's own experience *as one's own*. This enlarges the range of one's choice. Some of the experiments are very elaborate. Under the heading Self-Awareness in Experimental Safe Emergencies (PHG pp.336-7) they propose a set of eight steps to excite such a safe emergency for the patient in the consulting room. The goal of the exercise is once again the acceptance by the patient of a new figure *as his own*. Such a goal is implicitly phenomenological. This way I co-create my own world. A phenomenologist like Luijpen (1972 p.104) would say that through these experiments the 'concealed' becomes the 'unconcealed'; being discloses itself - which disclosure phenomenologists call 'meaning'. The Gestalt therapy way of speaking about such a disclosure of 'the concealed' is to say that Gestalt therapy is primarily interested in 'process'. Process does not stop at 'contents' but contemplates the way in which being comes to awareness.

Holism: Beyond the Subject/Object Dichotomy

Originally, when first they brought the book to the publishers, what is now Book Two and the highly theoretical part of the book, was Book I. So, the original intention was to straightaway plunge the reader into a view of the world that was quite oblique to the commonly accepted view but one familiar to phenomenologists.

You and your environment are not independent entities but together you constitute a functioning, mutually influencing total system.your sense of the unitary interfuntioning of you and your environment is contact
(PHG.p.104) Emphasis in text.

When we say 'boundary' we think of a 'boundary between'; but the contact-boundary, where the experience occurs, does not *separate* the organism and its

environment. (PHG p.275)

Here right at the beginning of *Gestalt Therapy*, but not formally articulated by the authors, is the rejection of 'the prejudice of the determined world' (Ph.P.p.58-9) which is 'the presupposition that things are, in themselves, completely and unambiguously determined.' (Dillon, 1997, p.62). Once past that, then the meaning of 'immediate' is transformed. It can no longer be the 'impression' or 'impact' of the thing on my senses but 'the meaning, the structure, the spontaneous arrangement of parts' (PhP.p.58;F70). Intersubjectivity is impossible if the other is to me only an *object*, over, opposite, against me. It becomes possible if the other is inhabited with such meaning, because then, in my gaze we can form one system, one Gestalt. This is what a phenomenological reduction of our perception discloses to us. (PhP.Part Two ch.4)

A Phenomenological View of What Constitutes Health

The conviction that the authors of *Gestalt Therapy* were basically phenomenological in their orientation is reinforced by their view of what constitutes health - by their view of what is truly human in regard to behaviour:

The description of psychological health and disease is a simple one. It is a matter of the identifications and alienations of the self: if a man identifies with his forming self, does not inhibit his own creative excitement and reaching towards the coming solution; and conversely, if he alienates what is not organically his own and therefore cannot be vitally interesting, but rather disrupts the figure/background, then he is psychologically healthy,.....(PHG p.282)

To the extent that your feeling of actuality has been split off from your workaday personality, the effort to experience actuality will rouse anxiety (masked, perhaps, as fatigue, boredom, impatience, annoyance) - and what specifically rouses your anxiety will be the particular resistance by which you throttle and prevent full experience. (PHG p. 67 their emphasis)

To 'identify with one's forming self' is to allow oneself to become aware of the structures and meaning of reality forming itself in my awareness. This is a creative act of integration; the kind of unity envisaged here is only possible within a phenomenological view of the world. How can a person identify with her 'forming self' (aware of the environment and appropriating nourishment that is *both other than and the same as the perceiver*) unless they belong in the same system?

That the authors were phenomenological is reinforced by what they say about: 'Actuality'. This is the *lived through* unity of the self-and-environment. This is the key to health. The way to regain wholeness, they say, is to allow oneself to experience 'actuality'. Such a one lives his life in the 'here and now', risks being spontaneous, finds the basis of his action in the experience of himself rather than in any body of rules, and he eschews the dead hand of stereotyping, convention, routine and control.

Creativity and adjustment are polar, they are mutually necessary. Spontaneity is the seizing-on and glowing and growing with what is interesting and nourishing in the environment. Unfortunately, the 'adjustment' of much psychotherapy, the 'conformity to the 'reality principle', is the swallowing of a stereotype. (PHG p.277)

In this tension between creativity and adjustment in the self-same event, we have the phenomenological resolution of the subject/object split: one lives through the coming of being to awareness. So, therefore, in their untiring stress on the primacy of immediacy, in the way in which they structure their book to engage at first hand with the person himself and prescribe how he must act in order to be touched by what is real, in their taking a stand that challenged the immensely successful Cartesian view of the world, in their simple equation of health with immediacy of perception, the founders of Gestalt therapy were phenomenological in their orientation.

Section Three: A Critique of Gestalt Therapy

I argue that whereas the founders were basically phenomenological in their approach,

they did not follow through on this position. I am not retracting what I said earlier *and* I must now deal with the problem of their not living up to the promise implicit in that approach.

General Points

Basically, they were not equipped for such a task. In order to follow through and develop their insight they would have needed to be familiar with four concepts basic to phenomenological ontology: intentionality, transcendence, anonymity and intersubjectivity. These notions derive from reflection upon our *embodied subjectivity* and are developed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1979). These are not separate *acts*: they are separate only in the sense that we can *think about them* as distinct aspects of the *one* act. I shall, in the course of this study, considerably elaborate upon each of them (Ch.9). Here in this chapter we shall have to be content with *very summary* and incomplete statements just sufficient to make sense of what I say.

My argument here has three steps.

1. I explain what I see as three *basic flaws* in their approach
2. I then take what appears to me as a pivotal analysis, which they make of sexual touch. This is their best effort at dealing with intersubjectivity.
3. I make a general comment upon this analysis and then demonstrate how their treatment of it would have been transformed by the application of the four concepts of which I spoke earlier. Since each of these four notions is implied in each the others I realise that my choosing to discuss the analysis separately under each of the headings is somewhat contrived.

The Basic Flaws

Three factors illustrate and, indeed, undergird the inadequacy of the foundations they have laid:

- a) Their point of departure assumes a dualism. I have already stated this earlier in this

Chapter: this is a basic phenomenological flaw.

- b) They do not see therapy in terms of perception (cf H.P.ch.2 Sect.Four). I refer the reader to my discussion of this under the title: Gestalt Therapy as Perception. Perception is access to the advent of being. This is not clear in PHG. It means also that they will be limited in their access to phenomenology in elaborating the concepts of their therapy.
- c) At the centre of the whole work is *a constraining and reductionist paradigm* of human experience; this is the organism/environment paradigm. The Constraining and Reductionist Paradigm

The alimentary model of contact is not original to Perls, although he uses it extensively in *Ego Hunger and Aggression*, a book he wrote in collaboration with his wife Laura and published in 1947 (Clarkson and Mackewn 1996 p.54-55). The model was used by Dewey previously (1920/1991)⁵⁷ whose profound influence stamps the whole work (Stoehr, 1994). This is the general paradigm for all forms of contact from eating to loving. In his *Gestalt Reconsidered* model, Wheeler (1998A) trenchantly criticises this model: 'what is left out is nothing less than the whole relational context' (Wheeler, loc.cit. p.53). There is always an exchange - the organism takes from the environment, maintains individuality, rejects toxicity, absorbs nourishment and, as a result, grows. The exchange becomes a synonym for *contact*. This, in turn is used to express the *whole relationship* between 'the organism and the environment' (PHG pp.273,275 etc); contact extends to 'appetite and rejection' (PHG p.276); when they want an example of this they 'envisage an animal freely roaming' in 'creative adjustment to the environment' (PHG p.277); 'good contact' removes the problem concerning the relations of 'mind' and 'body' or 'self' and 'external world' (PHG p.303); 'when these processes require for

⁵⁷This is very reminiscent of John Dewey's style in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920/1991) when he is lecturing on the revolution in the notion of experience. He works from 'a psychology based upon biology' and his notion is linear and scientifically based. 'Wherever there is life there is activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment. This adaptive adjustment, moreover, is not wholly passive; is not a matter of the moulding of the organism by the environment.....'(loc. cit. p128).

completion new material from the environment - and this is the case in turn with every organic process - ..we have to do with contact.’(PHG p.324); contact has to do with ‘the wisdom of the organism about its needs’ (PHG p.324); ‘By contacting we mean food-getting, eating, etc. (PHG p.427). They seem to be seeing contact as *contiguity* - one body surface pressing against another body surface - and the *field is forgotten*. The reductionist element in this model is that it subsumes under the same category a shark eating herrings and a man saying goodbye to his dying father. I suggest that this reductionism (so apparent in the works of John Dewey) accounts for the sense of superficiality which some people experience as they read this book and which was remarked upon by Wolfgang Kohler (Stoehr, loc.cit. p.100).⁵⁸

The Inadequate Analysis of Sexual Touch

Towards the end of the book under the heading Creative Adjustment II: Final Contact and Post-Contact, the authors analyse sexual touch. The constraining influence of the paradigm stands out:

‘Love aims at proximity, that is, the closest contact possible while the other persists undestroyed. The contact of love occurs in seeing, speech, presence, etc. But the archetypal moment of contact is sexual embracing.This archetypal contact shows also the creativity of the self. At the height of awareness, the experience is novel, unique, and original. But when, at the orgasm, the boundary is ‘broken’ and the self diminishes, one has the sense of a conservative instinctual gratification of one’s own familiar body. (PHG pp.476-7)

A General Comment

We notice here that the sexual embrace in this description is *lacking intersubjectivity*. The emphasis is almost entirely upon the individual experience of the subject. They speak of the experience of love being ‘in seeing, feeling, presence etc.,’ ‘the creativity of the

⁵⁸Kohler had the ms. of the book two days before they wanted a decision from him about it. His damning comment on this application of *Gestalttheorie* was: ‘rather harmless but almost cheap’. He also wanted ‘*Gestalt*’ removed from the title. (Stoehr.loc cit. p.101)

self' being evident. Is the 'diminution of self' intended to be *the* experience of intersubjectivity? If so, then what do we call that huge increase in self-esteem, that peace of knowing one's place, that all-pervasive sense of connectedness that heightens one's experience of uniqueness, which marked for instance the relationship between Brian Keenan and John McCarthy as set down in *An Evil Cradling?* (Keenan, 1993, p.91 et passim).

Intersubjectivity is lacking in their analysis – as, indeed it is, in the eight-step experiment I mentioned earlier (PHG pp.336-7) - because the concepts of intentionality, transcendence, and anonymity are not available to them in their analysis.

Section Four: The Application of the Four Concepts to their Analysis of Sexual Touch

Intentionality

We can develop this notion of intentionality and see it as the way in which the world is *already present* to us *before* we move, and *draws us*⁵⁹ '.... from the outset the grasping movement is magically at its completion' (PhP p.104; F120). 'Intentionality means that consciousness precedes and surrounds the boundaries of personal identity' (Brooke, R. p.43). For instance, someone returning home after a hard day may have his actual home-coming present to him even before he places his key in the door. This presence becomes his self-image, his body-sense, his pace, and so on. Intentionality is not a *contingent* but a *constituting* element of our perception which enables the whole of my past to be present to me *as mine* in every 'now' perception (PhP.p.418; F478, cf. p.204;F236). Omit this notion and it becomes impossible to analyse phenomenologically the gaze between loving people. There is no sense of profundity in the authors' analysis either here or elsewhere. Is this it, then? No mention of what the parties are bringing to the embrace. There is no sense of its being a conjunction of worlds.

⁵⁹This is a very ancient notion and profoundly informs the theology of St Augustine in his thinking about the way God is present. '*Amor meus, pondus meum*' 'My love pulls me' (-like a magnet.); '*Deus meus, non omnino essem nisi esses in me*' (Conf.lib.I cap.II). 'My God, were you not in me, I would not *be* at all.'

Is it unfair, I wonder, to speculate on a correlation between Goodmans' unhappy relational life and the thinness of his treatment of sexual touch? With neither of his wives did he have a love-bound sexual relationship. Each of them tolerates his persistent and frequent 'cruising' in search of homosexual sex. Stoehr says of this: 'He (Goodman) was clear about the sequence of his obsession: first he took the risk, made the pass, had the sex and then sometimes felt the lust. If he was lucky he might also make a friend' (1994, p.206). At the same time he was a very devoted and loving father to his daughter Susan who got polio (loc.cit. p.227ff) and his son Matthew who was killed in an accident in the White Mountains in 1967 (loc. cit. p.288).

It cannot be said of Fritz Perls that he was so devoted to his children, at least after they had passed from babyhood; nor was he so devoted to his wife, Laura. After 27 years together he drifted away and took up with Marty From who was half his age (Clarkson P. and Mackewn J., 1996, pp.11,22,23). When he was 63 years of age he met Marty From. He became her therapist, lover and companion for many years.

Transcendence

We need to discuss this concept briefly before applying it. This is one of the concepts, which seems excluded by Goodman's deficient analysis of experience at the start of his theoretical formulation.

Gestalt Therapy seminally contains this idea but never explicitly discusses it. This notion of transcendence as applied to human being derives from Heidegger (1927/1973, p.62 et passim). (De Waelhens, A. (1946) cap. II and XIII). I shall later on in this study (cf Ch.10 p.259ff) deal much more deeply with this rich notion. Suffice for now to allow De Waelhens to speak.

Unlike things, (Dasein's) existence is always *in jeopardy (mis en jeu)* -) He is fundamentally a *power-to-be (pouvoir-être)*. He is ever more than he is and his 'more-being' depends on him. Of necessity man is possessed of the liberty to surpass himself. This necessary liberty is not a (contingent) property of Dasein but belongs to his very existence (*mais l'être meme de son existence*), this is

what Heidegger calls his *transcendence*. (De Waelhens op cit.p.26.mt).

‘More-being’ means a transformation of the situation and this is one of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty uses the term (PhP p.169;F197).

By transcendent here I mean our capacity to transform any situation into a ‘higher’ situation⁶⁰ precisely because that ‘higher situation’ is *already present* as possibility of the field and draws us ever forward. Lovers transform one another and *their* situation is transformed. ‘The body’s role is to ensure this metamorphosis’ (PhP. p.164;F192).

Now let us apply this concept of transcendence to sexual touch. In PHG’s analysis of sexual embrace, the point of departure is also the *terminus ad quem* which is the biological welfare of the organism. The ‘archetypal act of love’ really goes nowhere. The high-point is marked as the orgasm in which there is a diminution of self; there is no indication of the hope or perpetuation in children or of projection for a future together or of the myriad exchanges that go on between people who love one another or of the transforming aura that comes upon the whole field with people who love much. There is no mention, let alone analysis, of *reciprocity* and its transforming power (cf. PhP.p.357; F410). Their omission of the concept of *transcendence* is a regrettable because the whole enterprise of therapy is an exercise of transcendence.. The closest they get to mentioning it is in a footnote (PHG p.476) on ‘Compassion’. ‘In the practice of compassion, it is not some interest of the “I” but the integration of the “Thou” that is in motion.’ The statement on compassion similarly lacks depth. It is also unclear.

Anonymity

We have already noted the importance of this in any analysis of experience when we discussed Goodman’s formulation. We notice all through PHG a great emphasis on

60 Here, in using the word ‘higher’ I am alluding to Madison, G.B. (1981, p.13) where he dares to give what he calls ‘the essence of Merleau-Ponty’s thought’ and quotes from *La Structure du Comportement* (1942) where the philosopher speaks of ‘the soul’.

subjectivity. There is no hint of that limitless opaqueness which we are to ourselves and which is the very atmosphere within which we experience our lives. Who can undo a mistaken judgement when reversing in the car? Who can *make himself* hungry when he is not? Who can *make himself* sleep? Certainly, we can invite these conditions like the Greeks *invited* the gods to appear in their rites, but we *cannot* bring them about. This opaqueness is the otherness, which I am to myself in my bodily experience. In this opaqueness reside the possibilities of my existence which is *given* to me not as an 'I am' as an 'I can' (PhP p.137; F160). Without it, subjectivity has no interiority, no depth. And intersubjectivity is *inconceivable*.⁶¹ Significantly, Merleau-Ponty, opens his chapter on intersubjectivity with a section on this opaqueness, which begins:

'I am thrown into a nature...My voluntary and rational life, therefore, knows that it merges into another power which stands in the way of its completion...
.....the lived is thus never entirely comprehensible.....in short I am never quite at one with myself. Such is the lot of a being who is born; that is, who once and for all has been given to himself as something to be understood.' (PhP.p.346-347; F398ff)

Again and again Merleau-Ponty returns to this anonymity and opaqueness which, again, is not a contingent but a *constitutive* element of our being (cf.PhP.p.354; F406).

Is there, perhaps, an allusion to this anonymity in PHG when they say that 'at the orgasm, the boundary is 'broken' and the self diminishes.'? But that is as far as it goes. There is no development or discussion of this noematic or objective aspect of our being in the whole of the book.

My argument here is reinforced by Wheeler, (1991/98). He criticises the boxed-in subjectivity that he finds in Gestalt therapy theory, which ministers to a dead-end individualism (Ch.4, Pt.2.). He resolves this by shifting the focus from figure to ground and relates the persons involved in the event with one another *through* the shared ground.

⁶¹Madison, G.B. (1981, p.39) makes this anonymity, which adheres to our embodiment, the key point in his discussion of intersubjectivity. 'The secret of the presence of the other resides, therefore, in the perception that I have of my own body.' My own body is by no means transparent to me. For instance, digestion.

Wheeler, by changing the focus from figure to ground actually moves from the *subjective* element in the event to the objective or, better still, to the *anonymous* element in the event. This way he breaks out of the boxed-in subjectivity in which the focus is entirely on *the individual*. He humanises the ground. He creates the area of intersubjectivity. That Wheeler's criticism of the individually-based model in which the self was figure has a basis in history.⁶² is shown by (in) famous 'Gestalt Prayer' set down by Fritz Perls at the end of his introduction to *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (1971) and wildly popular in that decade :

The Gestalt 'Prayer':

'To be able to do this (take sides in the race between fascism and humanism) there is only one way through: to become real, to learn to take a stand, to develop one's centre, to understand the basis of existentialism: a rose is a rose, I am what I am, and at this moment I cannot possibly be different from what I am. That is what this book is about. I give you the Gestalt prayer, maybe as a direction. The prayer in Gestalt Therapy is:

I do my thing; you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations

And you are not in this world to live up to mine.

You are you and I am I,

And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped.'

This is the apotheosis of the isolated individual facing the world on his own and *needing* no one.

Intersubjectivity

The application of *intersubjectivity* to the analysis of sexual touch will be covered in the

⁶²Wheeler, G. (2000). This is a work devoted to an examination of what he calls the 'paradigm of individualism' and the practical possibility of shifting this and substituting a more socially inclusive way of thinking.

section below devoted to the Gestalt therapy view of human being. (cf H.P.pp 136; 158ff;278;Appendix A.XII)

Section 5: A Formulation of the View of Human Being Implied in Gestalt therapy

Every enterprise however big or however small is informed by a particular view of the world. Giorgi calls this 'an approach' and he names it as ' the fundamental viewpoint towards man and the world that the scientist brings, or adopts with respect to his work as a scientist, whether this viewpoint is made explicit or remains implicit'. (1970, p.126 in Brooke p.29).⁶³ I propose now to formulate just such a view in advance. This formulation is necessarily very abstract and summary. It is important to bear in mind that in the following formulation 'world' comprises, not just the material ambience, but the massive network of intersubjective and other relationships that we carry with those who now people our world - human and animal, and with those who have gone before us into death.

Gestalt therapy presupposes that health is to be found in the awakening of a person to a fuller experience and awareness of his/her being-in-the-world as an *incarnate subjectivity* in close contact with other *incarnate subjectivities*. This experience is a bodily event in which the subject experiences himself/herself not as a system of externally related organs and limbs, however wonderful that may be, but as coherent and dynamic *unity* - a Gestalt-in which each part ontologically implies all the other parts, the totality, and the world. A person belongs in the world as her heart belongs in her body. The same cohesive dynamic that holds my limbs and organs together in one body binds me to people and to the world unity. The subject becomes increasingly aware of how his body intentionally carries the profile of his world in his ability to move (motility). It is only in movement towards the world that the capacities of the embodied subject find their realisation.

⁶³It was his awareness of the profound but little articulated difference between the world that informed the empirical sciences and that which informed everyday living that moved Husserl to write his monumental *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*(1970)(cf Hammond Howard and Keat 1991, p.5).

Neither the body nor the world makes any meaning as an isolated entity. They each make meaning only if they are in a posture of *transcendence* towards one another. This means that my embodied subjectivity takes up and transforms the world and the world takes up and transforms my embodied subjectivity; they each *belong* with the other. An amputated limb is an obscenity, in that it is a reality out of place. The capacities of the body find their realisation only in that *intentional movement* that signifies the way the world is present to me and I to the world. Gestalt therapy recognises the presence in the person of bodily schemata and acquired worlds; these determine to a large extent what I become aware of and how awareness grows in me. Such worlds and schemata, while they are the sources of richness and happiness for the person, can also carry psychopathology. The foundation upon which these schemata and acquired worlds are built is that initial experience of belonging in the world, which the Existentialists call 'thrownness'. (cf H.P. pp.XI;XIII;XIX;XXVII;54;165;296;). This is developed by Merleau-Ponty as 'primordial contact'. This primordial contact informs and founds all subsequent acts of perception because it is my being-in-the-world. This is the level of operation *proper* to Gestalt therapy, although it does operate throughout all the other levels also. This means that Gestalt therapy operates through the client's *coming to be* or showing himself /herself precisely as *from* themselves and not in terms imposed by the therapist.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have endeavoured to view Gestalt therapy in its beginnings and asked if it is the kind of thing that can benefit from the application to it of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. My conclusion is positive. The founders of the therapy belonged to that group who were long awaiting the advent of phenomenology – especially in the form in which Merleau-Ponty articulated it. It would require a whole new study to explore why for so long this huge support for Gestalt therapy has been neglected.

Chapter 7 – The Lived Body in Therapy Practice and Theory

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Introduction

This Chapter shows two contrasting sides of Gestalt Therapy.

In Section One, we see that aspect of Gestalt therapy that directly addresses the body. I do this by narrating the work of Gestalt therapy in the tradition represented by Laura Perls and continuing down to our time.

In Section Two, we see the contrast – where the lived body seems to go into eclipse.

There is a lot of evidence around to support my view that the body has been 'forgotten'. One indication was the recently published collection of seven papers which leading Gestalt writers and trainers produced as a result of nine days of lectures, demonstrations, supervisions and experimental work. It is published under the title *Contact and Relationship in a Field Perspective* (2001). There is hardly a mention of 'the body' in any of the papers and where there is mention (p.30), it is '*en passant*'. Another indication is the use of the phrase 'body work', which is widely used amongst Gestalt therapists as if it was an added extra to the practice of Gestalt. Thirdly, I know it to be still standard practice in some institutes that trainees wishing to take the Diploma examination must submit a twenty-minute tape and a transcript as matter for examination. There is never any question of their needing to demonstrate their skills in dealing with the lived body in therapy practice. What happens in all the training institutes that I am acquainted with is that a specialist in 'body work', like Ruella Frank, Susan Gregory or James Kepner, is invited to give a workshop or a series of workshops and the students are expected to

integrate this into their practice. Finally, I notice that amongst the essentials for Gestalt therapy mentioned by Resnick and Yontef there is no mention of 'body work'.

Section One: The Body Directly Addressed

In this Chapter I wish to demonstrate how work with the living body in the therapy has been there from the start and is still an integral part of authentic Gestalt therapy.

It is my intention to show: that work with the lived body is part of Gestalt therapy; that this has suffered some eclipse and that it is, as a matter of fact, being operated by leading therapists.

Gestalt Therapy

One of the reasons why I do not entirely agree with Gordon Wheeler when he says that Perls' view of 'the body' was of the isolated individual body, is that array of eighteen 'experiments' which is acknowledged as Fritz Perl's own special contribution to this classic text. I have found that these experiments return me to my body; and the more I return to my body the more I appreciate the Gestalt of myself, how every bit of me is intimately connected with every other bit of me; and as that happens to me then I may begin to experience myself in the world in a very integrated way, so that I am reminded of my belonging and my *otherness*. The resistance of the ground, the sheer weight of my body, the sense of movement in my limbs; the resistance I sense in myself to the contrived nature of these exercises; these become my world in which I belong 'as the heart belongs in my body' (PhP p.203;F235). Once a person has educated him/herself to experience themselves *as a totality*, that is, to be *present* and at home in their own body, then it is only by doing violence to oneself in some way that one can prevent the constellation 'self-others-world' (PhP p.57;F69) from being the basis of all ones perception. The violence I speak about can be a scientific method which I am deeply invested in, and which I cannot afford to let go of in my personal life. It can also be a split in myself that I am wedded to for different reasons. While I do think that Perls' experiments are very individualistic in focus and give very little reach on

intersubjectivity, the dynamic in them is intersubjective. If they are practised as part of a group, for instance, they serve to open members to relationship with the others.

Elsa Grindler with Fritz and Laura Perls

It was part of the genius of Fritz Perls that he was sufficiently open to learn from others, to acknowledge some of his own limitations and to overcome crippling adversity. It can help us to appreciate the nature and thrust of Gestalt therapy as a body-centred therapy if we look very briefly at the likely genesis of these exercises. I am taking a good deal of what I say in this short survey from a remarkable article by Susan Gregory (2001) about a remarkable and heroic woman called Elsa Grindler (1885-1961). Gregory calls her a 'Lost Gestalt Ancestor'. She lived in Berlin and had a long career (1917-1960) as a teacher, educating people from all walks of life to take possession of their bodies. She taught people breathing, walking, standing, postures and perceiving. 'For real standing', she said, 'we must feel how we give our weight pound-for-pound onto the earth'. Grindler was a conscientious and meticulous teacher; she kept detailed records of all her work and pupils; the whole lot perished in 1945 when her house went up in flames. She was the kind of woman who was able to live in defiance of the Nazis for so many years. In that fire in 1945 not only were her records lost but a group of Jews whom she was sheltering in her cellar had to flee; they were all murdered.

Perls came powerfully but indirectly under the healing influence of Grindler. It came from three directions: Laura, his wife, Reich his therapist and Charlotte Selver his teacher. Laura Perls was a pupil of Grindler, but only for a short time because Laura, Fritz and Renate their daughter, had to flee Berlin in 1934 for fear of the Nazis. Then they found they could not stay in Holland because they were denied work permits (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1996, p.13-14), and decided to go to South Africa. There Laura and Fritz collaborated in the writing of *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1947) a forerunner to *Gestalt Therapy* (1951). Laura wrote two complete chapters in that first book and her mark is on the whole text; Grindler's influence is obvious, even to 'the achievement of

concentration', the title over part of the book: 'Concentration Therapy' 'its aim is to regain the "feel of ourselves" to awaken the organism to a fuller life' (1947, p.220).

This is very similar to Grindler's:

'The aim of my work is the achievement of concentration'.

It was Laura who first changed her way of doing therapy while they were in South Africa: she sat in front of the person, for face to face dialogue.

Just about the same time that Laura was learning from Grindler, Fritz was advised by Karen Horney to go into analysis with Wilhelm Reich. The Reich historian, David Boadella, says that it was only after Reich's second marriage to the influential Elsa Lundberg that he developed his ideas on body armouring. This was the second influence upon Perls in the style of Grindler. The third happened when the family left Capetown for New York in 1947. There, Perls was endeavouring to start a practice and applied for lessons in 'body work' to Charlotte Selver, a former student of Grindler. That same year in a lecture at the William Alanson Institute in New York, he included "a study of the approach of the Grindler School" amongst a list of three areas of study for anyone engaging in work with human personality.

It is important to note that this influence upon Laura and Fritz Perls went on over a period of eighteen years *before* the actual publication of *Gestalt Therapy*. It was not just for 'body work' in the sense of something complementary to the 'real' work of psychotherapy – although there is some evidence from negotiations between Perls and Charlotte Selver that he saw it somewhat like that. All this time he was with Laura and her approach was certainly not that of 'Gestalt *and* Body work'. She saw attention to the body as an integral part of any therapeutic process: 'It's not use of the body The point is *to be a body*' (Perls, L. 1992, p.210).

It seems to me that this integrated approach', where breathing, movement and awareness-training form an essential part of the dialogue between therapist and client, is an essential characteristic of Gestalt therapy.

Present Day – Frank, Gregory and Kepner

The tradition of the body as integral in therapy is basic to Gestalt therapy from the start and is evident today in the work and writings of people like Ruella Frank, Susan Gregory and James Kepner. One of Frank's main teachers was Laura Perls who was for Frank not only an encourager, but a model. It was under her influence that Ruella entered training as a Gestalt therapist in the early 1980's. Her particular focus is on 'developmental psychotherapy' and offers what seems to me a very acceptable model for Gestalt therapy. I prefer to think of her model as demonstrating the body as carrying the whole history of the person. Here is an abbreviated example of her work with a client.

Ruella Frank with Kanla:

When the processes of differentiation do not emerge flexibly, an awareness of the primary supports that are basic to maturation recedes more and more into the background, often irretrievably. To observe Kanla's structure is to notice her diminished essential supports for contacting the parts of her body that are blotted out from her awareness, manifest in a weakness of structural support. The weakness reflects visible difficulty in the emergence of movement patterns. Imitating or 'trying on' Kanla's patterns while reading these passages is a direct route to entering Kanla's world, and to feeling empathy and compassion. (Frank, R. 2001, pp.53-62)

Frank then goes on to describe clearly and beautifully her process with Kanla and how that woman became increasingly aware of her body. Her experiment with Kanla was to invite her to sit on a large red physio-ball about 95 cms, in diameter. This served to exaggerate the lack of support for herself in Kanla's postures. Then follows 'The Therapy' through three pages. At the start of this she tells us one of the secrets of her powerful work with clients.

I resonate with Kanla's bodily expression, and feel the edge of a quickly developing exhaustion. I lengthen my spine and inhale deeply. Having considered my own experience, I ask Kanla to attend to her body. We have worked together

now for almost two years and Kanla is now accustomed to these kinds of experiments.

Reflection

Her close observation of her client reminds us of Perls advice to therapists quoted earlier: 'All you have to work with is in front of you' (Perls, F. 1976.p.76); then he details the things he would expect a therapist to notice. What strikes me about her account and what has been confirmed for me by some of my supervisees who have worked with her, is the sense of alignment between her and the client. Her gaze is not a scrutiny, it is a thinking, full-bodied presence, that elicits a sense of acceptance and strength in the client. To recall Merleau-Ponty: Ruella Frank's gaze

'... is that perceptual genius underlying the thinking subject which can give to things the precise reply that they are awaiting in order to exist. (PhP. p.261; F302)

It is through consciousness (awareness) that our world has meaning 'consciousness *is* this power of giving a form to the stuff of experience' (PhP p.121; F141). Those areas of our body that are 'blotted out' no longer have meaning for us; they are unavailable to us so that my presence to myself may feel thus, empty, insubstantial. I recall a client of mine who told me after a walking experiment that she had no sense of feeling in her body from her waist down. This woman feels out of touch with herself and others, she had to leave her teaching post because she could not support herself in the face of her pupils or colleagues.

To return to Kanla's therapy, notice how Frank constantly checks what is going on in herself with what she is observing in Kanla, she feels the exhaustion in herself and then turns to Kanla. Here is Frank's summing up:

Kanla's withdrawn posture served to sustain her primary relationships in an earlier environment, and provided a semblance of protection from a world that was habitually critical and shaming. In the present it left her out of touch with both herself and others. An integration of developmental movement patterns into

therapy provided the incremental and necessary underlying supports to move Kanla from her routine patterns to a more differentiated experience of self. (loc cit. p.65)

James Kepner and the Phenomenon of 'Splitting'

In the same tradition as Ruella Frank are the writings of James Kepner. He too is an established Gestalt therapy trainer and I had the pleasure of making a five-day workshop with him in Chester about five years ago. In a Forward to Kepner's *Body Process* (1987), Joseph Zinker, another Gestalt therapist and a stalwart carrier of the holistic tradition in Gestalt therapy, says what summarises the approach in Kepner's work:

What do I do as a Gestalt therapist, when sitting with someone? What do I take in? What model do I construct inside me to manage a meaningful intervention,. I see, for one thing, a man sitting before me, leaning forward, talking passionately, his chest turned inward. I see this dark-eyed, delicately formed man trying to make sense of his experience as best he can.....

(And he continues to describe what he observes)

..... But the moment I respond to his words alone, I don't see him as clearly. My vision of him is filtered by his concept of himself or diagnostic pondering about him. It is as if both of us become two little black boxes attached to a voice apparatus. One's eyes become glazed with insight. I join the client's linguistic perspective, landing myself in the tracks, getting hitched in like a horse to the wagon of his perceptions. In the meantime what happens to his chest? What happens to his mother and father 'standing' behind him? What happens to us in the room? How can we manage all that without becoming scattered or confused? (loc. cit. Pp. X11-X111)

Kepner begins his book with an exercise to help the reader become aware of how split off from his body he may be.

Just as you are sitting, without intentionally altering your body posture or position, begin to attend to your body experience (p.6).

He takes time to discuss what he means by 'self' and he views 'self' not as a thing, a static structure but as a fluid process. In this view it would be accurate to say that the 'self' is nothing else *but* the system of contact functions. '*The self and contact functions are one and the same to the Gestalt view*' (p.10-11) (italics mine). (cf PhP. p.320;F270).

Kepner focuses on the phenomenon of *splitting*; this is to make '.... The body itself an "It".... and relegate the "I" or identified self to the mind; so, our body in a sense becomes the "disowned self" ' (p14). Here we have very well illustrated why Gestalt therapy cannot find its foundation in any dualist philosophy such as Cartesianism, either in its empiricist or idealist form. A dualist philosophy when embodied becomes a psychopathology. I am *here* (my mind); my body is *there* (a thing).

A great deal of Kepner's book (1987) is taken up with the phenomenon of splitting. Part II deals with Body Phenomenon and the Cycle of Experience. There he deals with sensation, perception, movement, action, contact and withdrawal – all in relation to body process. Kepner is careful to distinguish the kind of 'bodywork' proper to Gestalt therapy from what he calls Reichian bodywork. In a table of comparisons of concepts from the two approaches the 'mechanical' approach of Reich based on 'desire' theory is contrasted with that of Gestalt therapy which is holistic. For instance in the Reichian approach 'resistance' is 'physically manifest as tension'. 'A defence to be broken down so that the "true" impulse can be expressed'. In Gestalt therapy, on the other hand, 'resistance' is an expression of the self (i.e. an ego function) to be made aware and active rather than static and passive; then expressed so that full choice can be made (loc. cit. p.211).

Reich's goal in his body work was to *break through* the resistant character of the patient so that he (the patient) could accept the interpretation of the analyst.

Kepner points out that Perls saw expression and withholding as an attempt by the patient to meet his needs in the given environment. Whereas, Reich was primarily interested in some kind of cathartic break-through, mainly concerning the inner life of the patient. Perls' concern was the realization of the 'sense of self' of the patient (p.214). In the final pages of his book (1987), Kepner acknowledged that Gestalt therapy remains somewhat ambivalent about fully implementing the body process theory of their therapy (p.215).

Healing the Split

It is a point of agreement amongst psychotherapists that one of the most difficult problems confronting us is how to be effective in helping adult survivors of sexual abuse in childhood. In the Appendix I shall be devoting a special chapter to the nature of this kind of trauma. In his book *Healing Tasks* (1995), Kepner describes brilliantly an approach he uses with people who are split as a consequence of their having been sexually abused as children. His approach is to reconnect the person with their bodies/the environment. He calls this 'grounding' and he does this by means of a graduated series of exercises, which form part of the healing dialogue with the therapist in which the client finds courage to explore her style of living. The whole thrust of the therapy is to build the person's self-support by self-aware reconnection with her body – 'the vehicle of (her) being-in-the-world' (PhP p.82; F97). The therapist acts as a kind of 'pontifex', a bridge-builder. In her relationship with the therapist and in her increased self-support, which comes of body-awareness, the client learns to tolerate, and then to embrace the denied feeling, the buried experience. This process which operates standard Gestalt theory in regard to contact, movement, completion and change, is radicated in the phenomenology of human situatedness.

I could proceed to describe similar body-awareness work for several other Gestalt therapists, Mackewn, Rubenfeld and Wheeler come to mind. Were I to do that, you

would find it far less concentrated than in the case of Kepner and Frank, as I have described them. The extensive and powerful exercises in Wheeler's book, *Beyond Individualism*, are not so much focused on evoking actual body-awareness or movement as upon finding the sources of environmental shame and support, as they arise for one in recollection. For many adults, it has to be said, movement can be shaming; so, fantasy work of the kind described by Wheeler can be considered as a powerful form of lived body involvement. Mackewn (1997) devotes two chapters to exploring the integration of fantasy (imagination and dreams) and 'working with embodiment, energy and resistance' (pp. 129 to 169).

Ilana Rubinfeld is an example of someone who, though not professedly a 'Gestalt therapist', includes the three essentials of Dialogue, Phenomenology and Field Theory in her therapy sessions and these consist of lived-body work. Significantly she was invited to contribute an article on her 'Rubinfeld Synergy Method' to a collection, *Gestalt Therapy, Perspective and Applications* (1992). She was personally encouraged by Fritz Perls to experiment with the integration of Gestalt therapy and the Alexander Technique. They even collaborated in joint sessions with groups when they met at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California in the mid '60's.

Neither Kepner nor Frank nor Perls nor Goodman anywhere clearly discuss dualism in therapy or bring forward a solution to it. I have already discussed Goodman's statement and solution which I find neither clear or satisfactory.

Section Two: The Body Eclipsed

The 'Lived Body' Forgotten

In the first part of the Chapter we saw how, from the beginning there was in Gestalt therapy a marked emphasis upon the involvement of the *whole person* in the therapy. We noted the anomaly of people speaking about the 'role of the body in therapy' as if there

could be any psychotherapy without involving the whole person. We noted also how the earlier practical holistic approach has endured.

There is something of an irony in the fact that the same has not happened in regard to the articulation of Gestalt therapy theory. The *body* does not feature explicitly all that much in the theory writers who sometimes seem to me to have forgotten the body. The body they have ‘forgotten’ is the ‘lived body’. This is a scary thing to say and I am reminded of Robine’s fear (1999, p.63): ‘...*la peur que j’évoquais tout à l’heure...*’.⁶⁴ By ‘lived body’ I mean the body which knows exactly where its parts are without looking for them; the body as a master-piece of mechanical engineering, yet at the same time is informed by manifold intentions, which I realize only through my body’s material; the body which carries the projects of other worlds, like playing the organ or driving a car, and incorporates these specific projects into the over-arching ‘personal project of the body as being-in-the-world’ (Langer, M. 1989 p.4); the body as incarnate intentionality; the body as an expressive space: it is an altogether different experience to live by oneself like some Cathusian monk than it is to share one’s house with another person: the meaning of the *space* entirely changes with the presence of another. That is the experience of the ‘lived body’.

Three Gestalt Therapy Theorists

In the remainder of this Chapter, I choose three representative and acknowledged Gestalt therapy theory writers, Peter Philippon, Gary Yontef and Gordon Wheeler. I summarize a piece of their work and then take it forward with the application of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. Finally, I take a remarkable essay by Yontef: *Gestalt Therapy : A Dialogic Method* (1993, p.202) and bring it forward in summary form; I point out how this exemplary piece of Gestalt theory manifests a flaw in basic analysis.

⁶⁴ ‘the fear which seized me immediately.....’

Peter Philippon: Three Boundaries of Self-Formation

- A Chapter in *Contact and Relationship in a Field Perspective* (2001)

In this chapter Philippon is interested to talk about the self and its boundaries.

He is concerned not to tie our concept of the self to either thingness or process.

Self can be both, he says. His discourse is 'about three boundaries which in themselves and in the relationships between them make up our experience of self.' (p.24)

The first is 'some kind of interaction which involves both sides'. And he gives what he calls a 'beautiful example' of this from chaos theory. He envisages the organism as eating drinking, defecating and having sex; this distinguishes it from a non-living thing.

The boundary process here is experience, and the organs of that experience are the skin, the nerves of the skin, proprioceptors, and our sensory and motor organs. So that is where experience comes from. The important thing to notice from this model is that 'this is not in any sense *my* experience' (p.26). It is anonymous.

The second is the 'self/other boundary or ego boundary'. Out of the complexity of the first boundary there 'somehow' develops a sense of, "This is my experience, this is me, this is other": a sense of one-ness develops. 'Here it is possible to talk about 'my experience'. The interaction at this boundary is contact not experience.' At this second boundary, choice is developing. I'm already choosing what aspect of otherness I'm creating self in relation to. This approach makes for a fluid self, very useful in psychotherapy.

The third is 'the personality boundary.' This means identifying with certain aspects of my personality and alienating others; 'so I say: "I am a generous person" and I would alienate my meanness'(p.28). This is the area of choice regarding life-choices, commitments, values and culture. It is from this area that we get a sense of the stabilization of self. Philippon sees a continual feedback loop between the boundaries at all three levels; the ego boundary and the personality boundary have continual feedback on the 'physical boundary' which is 'the most basic; the

precursor. ... sensing the field' (p.30). With this feedback the ego boundary transforms the physical boundary.

He sees the physical boundary as correlating with the *Id* – as it is spoken about in PHG. 'The *Id* appears as passive, scattered and irrational; its contents are hallucinatory and the body looms large.' This is 'the moment before any kind of figure gets formed' (p.30). This definition of the *Id* fits well with the idea of the *Id* as being pre-self, as *Id* being the ebb and flow of the field – it's to do with field rather than me. It's the crucible out of which self-experience comes, with little bits of self and small figures' (p.31).

His paper finishes with a very instructive clinical application of these concepts. There are great merits in this delineation of the 'boundaries of the self'-as is shown in his application to practice as the openness of the therapist to the client and the totally non-partisan attitude of the therapist, which allows the client to choose and grow. At the same time it affords a good example of the lack that I find in Gestalt therapy theory.

My Critique of Philippon's Chapter

Philippon begins from that view of the self which is set down in the opening chapter of PHG:

"Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and it's environment, primarily the skin surface and the other organs of sensory and motor response. ... we speak of the organism contacting the environment, but it is the contact that is the simplest and the first reality." (PHG p.273)

Then he ingeniously develops this structure into a theory of the self.

Straightaway we are faced with the flaw in Gestalt therapy theory structure: the analysis is not radical enough; - I have elsewhere explained this (cf H.P.Introduction, p.7 and Chapter 6:Foundations). At a psychological level his analysis seems fine to me. I agree with many of the points he makes - that the self is

not a thing but may be at times regarded as a thing, that there is an element of anonymity about experience, that there are stages of development in the individual self, that field perspective is essential in the appreciation of 'Self'. At the same time we are faced with this hiatus in the basic analysis which misses out on the *givenness* of the body.

An Application of Radical Analysis

I would like now to take forward what Philippson says by demonstrating what a radical analysis of the experienced self would look like. From my point of view, I would want any *account of the self* to straightaway identify it with the *lived body*. When I reflect upon my own self

I have a glimpse of an anonymous flux, a comprehensive project in which there are so far no 'states of consciousness', nor, *a fortiori* characteristics of any sort.... (PhP.p.434;F496)

In this flux I find my body immediately becomes figure and everything else in relation to *that*: it is my weight upon the chair, the lighted room about me, the feel of my fingers upon the keyboard, the way in which those fingers find their way so quickly round the keyboard – without any interposition of thinking – is my experience of self.

I do not know what contact with the world can be like apart from the experience of my body. Experience *is* our contact with the world. This contact cannot be a contact of cause and effect; otherwise the lived body becomes a determined thing in the world, and we can find ourselves at a loss to explain both the way in which the body is alive to itself, and the way in which everything else in the world takes its position and its status from its relationship to my body. Although I may not be all the time aware of it, I know without having to prove it that my body is the *ever-present* subject of all experiences. My body is what makes experience possible.

As I read Philippon about 'the self' in all its phases, I find I am left with a series of discontinuous but rather ingenious notions rather than with an idea of the self that is expressive of my experience of myself. I have to go back to the actual experience of my body in motion to bring all the predicates together into a conceivable reality.

If someone speaks (as Goodman does) of experience as arising from nerve-endings and sensory organs interacting with the environment, I find it so easy to regress to my earlier education and revert to that dualism of body and consciousness, of matter and spirit of subject and object, of person and environment which marks the familiar tradition of my education and which I have come to recognise as the bane of psychotherapists. When I think of experience, I think of my wife's four-year-old grandson who, for the first time, experiences the sea and the beach at West Kirby. Clearly, he is not self-aware in his screaming and delight at the sand and the sea. But he must be aware at some level, otherwise he could not bring all those disparate excitements together in himself and behave as one who delights in existence. Even before he has enough concepts to engage in elaborate world-interpretation there is this on-going exchange in which every cell of his body is in tune with the surrounding environment and is banking up experience for use in future perceptions. He finds in his body a 'power towards the world' which pre-dates understanding. I see this power as 'something incommunicable and incapable of being an object for an outside consciousness, it is power, not a thing known' (PhP.p138; F161). This four-year-old 'delves into the thickness of the world by perceptual experience' (PhP p.204; F236). This all 'takes place in the world, not in a consciousness' (PhP p.157; F183). He does not seem at all confused – as he would be if he were not experiencing a delightful *unity* about it all. Where does this unity come from?

I suggest it arises from the unity which he experiences in his own body. It is not just the nerves under his skin which react to the stimulation of the 'feel' of a thing; his whole self is in unity with the whole of the object and his ability to perceive a thing is a correlate of the way in which all his senses unify in his perception. If I look to the world itself: 'There is nothing in the appearance of the landscape, an object, or a body whereby it is predestined to look "gay" or "sad", "lively" or "dreary", "elegant" or "course"' (PhP.p.23-24; F32). I do not have to infer these predicates. They arise out of the dialogue

with the environment. This dialogue is essentially a way in which my body belongs in the field, that is, the world and is *at home there*. *The thing is given* to me as a possible modality of my existence. And that modality is realized in my body.

I live my Self in an atmosphere of givenness: the air, the rain, the animals and the people surround me and give themselves to me in a great inundation of perception. I would go so far as to say that, to live in a body is to experience 'being-given-to' and to respond by giving back what was given in the first place. My perceptions all invite me *to do*, to live a new way, to go out from myself. It is not just a thought in my mind. This invitation is experienced by me in my body. The thoughts in my mind are nothing if not sustained by the feelings, sensations, the imaginations and the movements they engender in my body. The knowledge I have of myself – as such – of me as an identified 'I' is nothing if not rooted in the earth. In order to be happy I need to experience this *belonging*. This is not a thought, it is an embodied and lived existence – that is to say 'a standing out' from all the rest.

Anyone acquainted with Philippon's work will see that my approach and his are quite different. Without the centrality of the lived body we can have my body and the environment forming an impressive system, but we would then have a nexus of *objective correlations*. It is my view that when we place the lived body at the centre of our reflections it is possible to build up a nexus of 'lived through correspondences' between the world and myself, so that the unity of the world is a correlate of the unity of my own body. '(PhP.p.204;F286).

As I read Philippon I see his account represents the 'self-system' which we experience at different levels, without almost any reference to the body. It seems to me that unless the lived body features as the central vehicle of experience *at all levels*, it becomes very difficult to account for experience at any level.

A question for each one of us arises out of his chapter: Do I actually experience my life as arising out of the interaction of skin, nerves and sense organs with the environment? I know I can *infer* from observing myself that something like this is going on, but is that

my experience? Is this the way Philippon actually experiences himself? Rather does it look to me like an inferred idea of *how* experience occurs. His account omits so much of that wealth of bodily feelings, sensations, impressions and connections, which thicken and liven what we call 'experience'. How otherwise can we account for the distinctive form of cultural objects or of people's faces? Are we going to account for the magic power of these by an appeal to transference and the projection of memory?

Gary Yontef: Relational Gestalt Therapy

- *What it is, and what it is not - Why the Adjective 'Relational'?*

- A further Chapter from Robine, J-M. (Ed.) (2001 pp79-94)

Yontef is concerned to emphasize the relational nature of Gestalt therapy. His questions draw attention to the tautology: 'Relational' / Gestalt therapy. He openly uses the word 'perception' saying it is of its nature relational. It is interesting that he is identifying therapy as a perceptual activity. Similarly, he identifies Phenomenology as a relational activity. Perception is not only *relational* but *always* perspectival. This means that everyone sees reality differently and reality is co-constructed. All perception is interpreted. I imbue everything with my humanity. No self-awareness totally coincides with my Self.

Field Theory

He selects some Gestalt principles: All the forces in the field are interdependent. There is no environment without an observer. We are not *in* a field; our very substance *is of the field*. This mode of speech caused a degree of misunderstanding amongst the audience. 'Of the field', he agrees, is a departure from Lewin's description of the field. There is no explicit treatment of the lived body either as the *locus* of the field, or the medium of relationship.

Gordon Wheeler: 'Towards a Gestalt Developmental Model' (1998B)

The problem he is addressing is this: When working with children and adolescents

therapists find it useful - even essential, to have a model of human development in mind. The models most frequently available and most influential at present are those developed by Eric Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg and Kohut. The difficulty is that all of these depend on conceptualising the self as an entity *in its own right* over against the environment. He draws attention to the fact that this model is typical of the way in which 'we are always navigating with some implicit map, however deeply buried or unspoken are the assumptions' (Wheeler, G.1998B p.116). It carries the assumption long-cherished in Western culture that the "self" or the essential individuality of a person, already exists in a real way prior to (and apart from) relationships and development in a relational field. He instances how this model of the isolated individual does not hold up when, as Daniel Stern did, we look at the actual way in which infants develop (1985). Wheeler puts a very serious question:

...how can we take up a different view of self and development, if the one we have now, and the very language we express it in, are enclosed in deeply-held assumptions about human nature that are (in part) out of our awareness and very firmly embedded in our culture. (p.116)

He finds the beginning of an answer in Goodman's writing in Part 2 of PHG (1951) in his opening chapter on The Structure of Growth: 'Adapting Goodman, we do better to picture self-process not *in the hidden centre of the person, but "at the boundary" between me and my environment*, actively poised to resolve the world I think of as "outer" and "inner" into some workable, liveable whole'(p117). (Italics in text.) But this takes time, he argues, because it involves unlearning a habitual mode of thinking. Inner and 'outer' make no sense except 'as it relates to, and is informed by, the other'. This yields a more promising view of the child/adolescent/adult. They are seen as intimately belonging in the environment – it is no longer just 'the environment of the child's self' but 'the dynamic material, which is actually being integrated'. 'In this model political and social considerations become something more than background: they are integrated into the self-structure of the developing subjective person'. (p.118)

Wheeler is critical of the view of Perls on development in that it proceeds by identified

stages in a linear way, stage by stage. According to Perls, 'We simply "get over" our infantile needs, as we become firmly individuated and non-dependent adults.' This contrasts with the more modern Gestalt model developed by Mark McConville in which a new, far more complex, matrix of relationships develops. Wheeler claims (p.119) that amongst the cohort of competing models, the Gestalt model alone offers one that sufficiently addresses the context of the relationship and therefore does justice to the whole field.

In the last part of the article he applies the Gestalt developmental model to four areas:

1. Intersubjectivity and Intimacy: Meaning-making - the process of integration of self and environment – is accomplished in exercising skills that can be learned only in intersubjective experiences. He gives the example of a father carrying on a conversation with a very young child in which he (the father) also speaks *for* and *to* the child.
2. Support and Shame: The whole field model moves away from the position in which the goal is maximum autonomy achieved by a great deal of self-support. '.... in a field model we view support not just as an environmental transaction, nor as a sign of immaturity or dependency, but as a field condition, a dynamic aspect of a field living.'(loc.cit.p.121)
3. Gender and Identity: Gender differences are part of the process from the outset. The threat of shaming is the instrument whereby gender stereotypes are enforced and introjected. Identity - 'who I am in-myself and in-the-world, a kind of boundary experience or bridging concept which has always tended to nudge the individualist models in a social field direction, is likewise a deeply gendered notion' (p.122). In the Gestalt model identity emerges only from *interaction with the field*; in fact, it is the boundary with the field.
4. Voice and Narrative: In the Gestalt model the mature Self can be conceived as one who has come to achieve and articulate 'that coherent, connected point of view ' (p.122). This moves the concept of Self away from the older model where it was more associated with self-assertion and robust self-expression. Such a developed view of 'self-development' is far more complete and brings more satisfaction than the individualist one.

The achievement of full voice is utterly dependent on *a developmental field of other voices* - i.e. other selves who can first lead and then engage in a kind of intersubjective dialogue which is essential to evoke and support self-development' (p.123).

Wheeler goes on to say that essential to this Gestalt model is the future-orientation of Gestalt therapy. It embraces the idea of sequences: 'first this and then that'. That enables a person to voice his concerns in a timely way. It is this built-in future orientation of Gestalt therapy that so well accommodates the notion of human life as story. 'That is why we can say, in Gestalt, that the human being is a "story-telling animal"' (Wheeler, 1998B, p.123). We do not compose our own stories:

Rather we find and create our story *in the telling of it to another person* and that act *is the same as* the creative construction of the self (ibid.).

The phrases 'good gestalt', 'good form' used by the *Gestalttheorie* psychologists apply to '*a narrative self*'; story and story-maker form a Gestalt. Wheeler, in opposing the notion of the 'solid' self, is developing a theme familiar in Gestalt therapy writing from the very beginning (PHG p.281)⁶⁵. James Kepner warned, in his *Body Process* (1987), against reifying the self (loc. cit.p.10, p.14) 'Gestalt Therapy views the self not as a thing ...but as a fluid process'

A Reflection on Article

A theory of the Self must always be a theory of perception and a theory of being, because it is from our experience of perception and of our existence that the theory of self arises. The Self – if we take this in the sense of my illuminated identity does not coincide with

⁶⁵Paul Goodman (1911 - 1972) is generally regarded as a co-founder of Gestalt therapy with Fritz Perls. I have spoken more fully about him in the Chapter 6 where I contextualize my study and discuss the value and deficit of his philosophical contribution. (cf H.P.ch.6.p.152ff)

That Wheeler is drawing on Lewin we know from his references and other places. In both his (1991/98) *Gestalt Reconsidered* and his (2000) *Beyond Individualism* he draws heavily on Lewin.

my body. There are areas of my lived body that are not accessible to me – my digestion, for instance. The body is the locus of the Self.

This is *not* the body of the Institute of physiology in Gower Street or the body of the pornographic literature on the top shelf in Smiths - it is what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the phenomenal body’ or ‘lived body’. Of that we have already spoken and we shall say a lot more later on. (cf pp. XV;XXIII;XXXV;2;6;11;59;62.109). A final point is this: An important reason, as I see it, why the ‘thing’ self is unacceptable as a concept in Gestalt therapy theory is that such a concept is at the basis of psychopathology itself. If I, as a psychotherapist, am working from a position where I see the client and experience myself as necessarily split – my body *and* myself – then I will be implicitly promoting the very split which under-writes psychopathology - as the word schizophrenia indicates.

‘Towards a Gestalt Developmental Model’ – Brought Forward

As we shall see in detail in the Chapter, The Body Situated, Wheeler is profoundly in agreement with Merleau-Ponty when he places the integrity and growth of a person as a function of their union with others ‘in the field’. This is also the theme of his book *Beyond Individualism*.

What I hear Wheeler calling for, in his article, is a *reform of perception* – the healing of perception – at a profound level - a turning away from the Cartesian mode in which our most immediate experience ‘is subordinated to the knowledge we have of it through the medium of ideas’ (PhP p.199; F231). In this Cartesian mode there is widespread discounting of the need we experience for the close support of others: for instance where a child who is fearful of school is told to ‘grow up’ and ‘stand on his own two feet’. His fears are dismissed: he is dismissed. ‘Look, you have nothing to be afraid of; the teacher is nice and all the other children are also new’. Merleau-Ponty calls this ‘mutilating experience from below, treating it immediately as knowledge and forgetting its existential content’ (PhP p.53;F65). A culture delivered over to an individualist ethic – as described by Wheeler (2000) – will discourage people from a holistic view of their experience – the

ideal being the self-made *man* going it alone, like Clint Eastwood. Sensation becomes detached from knowledge and knowledge becomes detached from the lived body.

This involves taking for granted and passing over in silence the decisive moment in perception: the upsurge of a *true* and *exact* world (PhP.p.53;F65).

This upsurge is the experience of the lived body; and this raises an important question for Wheeler and for all Gestalt therapy theorists: Where is 'the field'? Is this a construct of thinking? A way of viewing the world? Professor Heath(2000) is raising a valid point when he accuses Roberts (1999):

His article is an attempt to turn a belief – in 'the field' –into a fact By asserting the existence of the field and of its universal influence in the construction of all human experience (Heath, 2000 p.13).

I do not agree with Heath's conclusion – yet his point is valid . So, if 'the field' is a reality, we need to be able to locate it; if 'the field' is such an ubiquitous influence upon us we need to be able to experience it. Where then is the *locus* of 'the field'? *'The field' is the lived body.* Each of us carries and experiences the 'upsurge of that true and exact world' in us. In my body is present the aggregate of all those influences, experiences and possibilities that comprise the field. It is all so much *there* that it constitutes our biggest problem. Wheeler does not locate the field explicitly in the lived body. Merleau-Ponty sees the *locus* of 'the field' as a point of departure.

'The problem of the world, and to begin with that of one's own body, consists in the fact that it is all there.' (PhP.p.198;F23)

I wish now to elaborate upon my saying above that 'the field is the lived body'; what is not present in some way or other for me does not belong in my field. I do not see how else the field can be real, if not in terms of the lived body.

When I open the door of my office to a client and she walks in I sometimes get sense 'Not good to-day!'. Then there is 'something' about the way she looks at me or does not look at me that confirms that 'first impression'. Similarly when I approach a friend's

house and as I do so, I am suffused by a sense of peace.⁶⁶ It is a commonly used technique in Gestalt therapy with people who are trapped in a 'victim' state to suggest that they adopt the body stance appropriate to their experienced condition and intensify it in their bodily posture; then recognising what they are doing they can adopt a different posture and contrast the feelings in each situation. Frequently they may find that, as they allow themselves to take on the 'victim' posture, they experience a current of archaic thoughts and feelings moving through them. The opposite posture may bring with it a feeling of freshness and newness and guilt and a tendency to hide. Our bodily postures and movements seem to trail our history. It is the woman's history I am sensing.

What we gather from these examples is that our vision, our sense of touch, our sensation of movement 'is already inhabited by a meaning which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence' (PhP.p.52;F64). My living body is full of sensations and this sensation-filled body constitutes 'the whole field'. Sensations are never just 'qualities' they transcend themselves and bring in their train *realms of meaning*. The world in which we define sensations in terms of electrical impulses and explain them (away) as physiological changes, is the same world as isolates the individual from the community and makes of neediness a source of shame. This is the world of 'dead' qualities, 'a world of darkness', so eloquently described by van den Berg (1980) in his article about Gustave Theodor Fechner.

The whole field is first and foremost present in my body, 'that heavy mass' (PhP.p.52;F64) supported by gravity, endowed with these designer-made senses, exactly fashioned for 'world conditions'. Every least sensation involves a reference to the body. And that least sensation 'is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. ...It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness. (ibid.pp.52-53).

⁶⁶ Although not numbered amongst the phenomenologists, Martin Buber alludes to this kind of 'model perception' in his own works. This is the point of A. Hodes's essay, *The Asylum* (1972, p.11).

Yontef: Gestalt Therapy: A Dialogic Method

I shall now set down an extended account of Yontef's theory of Gestalt therapy. I have two main reasons for doing this. Firstly, it offers an extended account of Gestalt therapy theory within which the lived body is present but eclipsed. This theory actually works. It is clear and sufficient unto itself. Yet, because it derives from an analysis of experience that omits the *givenness* of bodily experience, it can too easily become a knowledge that is detached from the embodied subject. Secondly, I give so much space to this *exposé* in order to supplement my all too brief and inadequate and personal account of Gestalt therapy in the Appendix (cf H.P. Appendix B). I shall, a few times, interrupt this account to apply the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty; and then at the end, I shall add an extended comment.

Originally circulated as an unpublished work, in 1983 Yontef's paper was published in German. It was first published in English in 1993.

Yontef begins with the statement that 'The theory of Gestalt therapy is a theory about what makes good psychotherapy. It integrates ideas, observations, and techniques from diverse sources....' (p.203). He requires a complete system of psychotherapy explicitly or implicitly, to include:

1. A theory of consciousness, including a viewpoint on what kind of Awareness or insight is being sought and a methodology for reaching that goal;
2. An attitude or prescription about the therapeutic relationship between therapist and patient;
3. A scientific theory.

He then proceeds to define Gestalt therapy. Three principles define Gestalt therapy:

One : Gestalt therapy is phenomenological; this founds the technology of awareness.

Two : ‘Gestalt therapy is wholly based on dialogic existentialism, i.e., the I-Thou ⁶⁷contact/withdrawal process. This is the basis of our relationship theory.’

Three : Gestalt therapy’s conceptual foundation or world view is Gestalt, i.e., based on holism and field theory. This is the scientific theory that sources our understanding of key concepts such as ‘now’, ‘process’, ‘polarity’.

From the very beginning Dialogue has been stressed in Gestalt therapy theory, even though the language was then different and less precise than it is now. He envisages dialogue as essentially two or more people talking and being open to one another in such a way that there is a possibility of what Buber calls the ‘I-Thou relationship’ developing between them (Buber 1923/1996).

The Characteristics of Dialogue

Awareness: this is a form of experiencing: when continued it leads to insight, that is to an immediate grasp of the obvious unity of disparate elements in the field.

Here, I want to *take forward* what Yontef says about Awareness.

I deem it a mistake to view awareness as a ‘state-in-itself’, (something in the thinking). Sometimes Yontef speaks of it in such a way as would lend itself to such a view:

‘The awareness that cares is the awareness that forms a clear Gestalt, with a figure organized and energized by the person’s dominant need at each moment’ (1993 p.182) or

.....the awareness that is sought in psychotherapy aims for insight as defined by Gestalt psychology; ... a patterning of the perceptual field in such a way that significant relations are apparent’ (loc. cit p.247).

⁶⁷ In a foreword to the 1993 edition of this article Yontef says that he has changed his terminology since writing this piece:

‘Thus the terms “I-Thou attitude” and “I-Thou relationship” in this paper are the same as the terms “dialogic attitude” and “dialogic relationship” I refer to in later papers. I have elected in this summary to retain the terminology of the original paper’.

Is he viewing awareness as a 'state of mind'? Or as a modality of existence for a person; i.e. a *realisation* of his perceptual region? As a modality of the person it is a condition of the *body-subject*, the epiphany or manifestation of that person at some particular level of being. The 'awareness' itself takes up the limits of that person and brings them on to transcend/surpass themselves – as, for instance, when a therapist invites a client to dance with him (in special context of the therapy, of course).

If, instead of bogging down in a view of awareness as a state of mind, we take it instead as a modality of that person's existence, then it is only through the intervention of inhibitory agencies that the awareness will not take the client forward to new worlds of possibility. Yontef himself inchoately acknowledges this when he says 'Awareness is accompanied by owning'. This power that is awareness occurs frequently in the *Phenomenology*.

'Awareness is transcendence through and through, not transcendence undergone it is the actual effecting of vision' (PhP p.376; F431)

In other words awareness is existence that thrusts towards inexhaustible possibilities.

Yontef continues: Three things to notice about complete Awareness: It must figure the *dominant present need* in the field; it is concerned with *reality* of the situation and comprises *a component of appropriation* or ownership/ responsibility; this is always here-and-now and open to change. Awareness can override habit and enable the person to regulate herself by choice. 'Phenomenology is the method Gestalt therapy utilises to learn about the Awareness process. Our goal is to learn enough so that Awareness can develop as needed for Organismic Self-Regulation' (Yontef, 1993, p.205)

Notice how more expansive is our view if we take awareness as 'life process of the lived body'. Then awareness becomes my *gaze*, which is at once creative and receptive, which

discerns, or is able to discern, what is coming from the subject, what is coming from the world, which amazingly becomes

‘... The gaze which is that perceptual genius underlying the thinking subject which can give to things the precise reply they are awaiting in order to exist before us.’ (PhP p.264; F305)

Whereas a parallel between Merleau-Ponty’s and Yontef’s view of awareness may not be justified by the texts presented here, such a parallel can be justified, I think, if we extend the range of our enquiry.⁶⁸ They may be parallel, but they are also different.

We have met Yontef’s description of phenomenology previously. ‘Phenomenology is a search for understanding based on what is obvious or revealed by the situation’... (ibid). (cf H.P. pp.89-91). It works by entering the situation experientially and allowing sensory Awareness to discover what is obvious/given. Phenomenological exploration opens the way to a clear and distinct description of what IS, as distinct from what can be speculated about, imagined, or hoped for. Yontef calls the phenomenology of Gestalt therapy ‘experimental phenomenology’ and derives it, in part, from Gestalt psychology.

The Contact/Withdrawal Process

In Gestalt therapy, dialogue is articulated in the contact process. This process has four moments: connecting, separating, moving and awareness. This process is the ‘organ of meeting’ of the boundary individual/environment which constitutes the existence of the person. A person can lose himself in the environment or isolate himself from it. The regulation of these polarities is the work of awareness. In regard to the contacting process itself, Yontef quotes PHG and Lynn Jacobs:

The contacting process is “ the work that results in assimilation and growth”; it “is the forming of a figure of interest against a ground or

⁶⁸ In this connection consult the following references in *Phenomenology*: pp.121;130;140;215;219;279;291;292;376;434.

context of the organism/environment field.” (from Perls et al., 1951, pp230-231)

Jacob notes: “Two essential characteristics of contact are implied by this definition. First, contact leads inevitably to living and growing. Second, contact involves behaviour that establishes a relationship with the figure of interest, one must move either towards or away from this figure.”(from Jacobs, 1978, p.28) in (Yontef, 1993, p.208).

In growthful contact people connect/separate/connect while maintaining their separate identities. Movement is necessary in order that a person may manifest different aspects of herself. Yontef makes the point forcefully that because a human existence is relational, the isolated person cannot be said to ‘stand out or exist – i.e. be a defined person and feel alive’(p.208). The polarity of isolation is confluence which is an absence of differentiation between self and other. The person who has abandoned himself in confluence will long for aloneness, just as the isolate will long for confluence.

I-Thou: The Existential Base

Gestalt therapy says Yontef is a *therapy of existence* as contrasting with a therapy that stresses ‘essence’. A therapy of essence such as classical psychoanalysis, searches out the unchangeable drives in the person and de-emphasises personal choice. Gestalt therapy focuses on the present, on what is going *on now in this therapy hour* and allows the person to experience his freedom of choice. The stress in Gestalt therapy upon self-determination and freedom, does not reach to analysing that freedom. Merleau-Ponty points out how freedom is lost by avoiding the situation I am actually faced with; the challenge is to take hold of my situation and transform it. I transform it by actually integrating it into the lived experience that goes on every day. Through my talk, my walk, my breathing, my teaching, I join myself and any situation with the world. ‘I can miss my freedom, only if I try to by-pass my natural and social situation, by refusing to take it up, in the first place,

instead of assuming it in order to join up with the natural and human world'.
(PhP.p.456;F520).⁶⁹

Yontef continues: The second way in which Gestalt therapy is existential has to do with the relationship between therapist and patient. This is a *defining characteristic* of Gestalt therapy. It is called variously, 'dialogic Existentialism' 'I-Thou Dialogue', and finds its eloquent articulation in the life and writings of Martin Buber. The I-Thou is a special kind of meeting of which phenomenological analysis and the heightening of awareness are but the servants. In such a meeting the parties experience themselves as personally addressed and 'reached' by their 'Thou'. Each finds herself respected and affirmed in his/her uniqueness. It is the polar opposite of using a person as a means to an end. (e.g. as a source of income). That would be to reduce a person to an 'IT'. The demand upon the therapist is *to move in the direction* of the possibility of 'I-Thou' with the client.

This is a most important statement by Yontef. He here defines the *healing component* in Gestalt therapy; and he has support in this not only of the seven names whom he thanks on p.1 of the unpublished edition of this paper⁷⁰ but of the wider Gestalt therapy community. This view is endorsed in every current manual of

⁶⁹ An example of such situation avoidance is, perhaps, offered to us in the reception given to Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception* in Britain. Although published in 1945 it was not published in English translation until 1962; then it was two more years before it was reviewed in the leading *Philosophical Quarterly*. The reviewer half-dismisses the book as 'mainly derivative'; (but, of course the translation was 'eminently worthwhile'); what Merleau-Ponty says is 'not new'; the demerits of the book outweigh the merits. The eminent reviewer savages the last part of the book (the source of my quotation above) calling it 'grandiose' and 'rhetorical'. Then comes the '*coup de grace*': 'Only someone absolutely blinded by prejudice that anything European is more interesting than anything English could seriously believe that much value should be attached to these final ramblings' (loc. cit. p.375). The reviewer was Mary Warnock (1964).

⁷⁰ 'I want to express my appreciation to: Jeffrey Hutter, PhD.; Lynne Jacobs, PhD.; John Long, PhD.; Robert Martin, DSW.; Robert Resnick, PhD.; Lolita Sapriel, MSW.; and James Simkin, PhD. for their aid in the preparation of this paper.' He omits this in the 1993 publication of his paper.

Gestalt therapy that I have seen. From this principle flows the ethical approach of the Gestalt therapist which Yontef elaborates upon later in the paper. This approach demands total respect for the feelings, convictions, world-view of the client; adaptation of language to facilitate dialogue and non-exploitation of the client at any level. The reader will notice how it squares exactly with what I said in my Introductory Chapter: the healing is in the *authenticity* of the Between.

The dialogic attitude of Gestalt therapy is incompatible with any approach which has *interpretation* as its main technology. I here must emphasise '*main*'. Of course, I have already said that 'interpretation and diagnosis are intrinsic to what we do' (HP p.148). But the *therapeutic* component in Gestalt therapy is the *authenticity* of the relationship. At the same time the mainly interpretative approach, as in psychoanalysis, says Yontef, must objectify the patient as an It, and implies a psychic determinism, which works through transference and makes genuine dialogue impossible.

Similarly, is it incompatible with any therapist – even a Gestalt therapist - who thinks he knows for sure what is best for the patient.

A Gestalt Therapist who uses his own charisma or Gestalt techniques for rapid change in the patient that is not grounded in dialogue and in the patient's Awareness and self-support, is another example of vertical treatment and feeds the ego of the therapist more than the competence of the patient. (loc.cit. p.212)

Here is a confirmation of our analysis of phenomenology, which pointed the way to a method of investigation congenial to Gestalt therapy. (cf H.P. ch.4)

Shouldistic Regulation

Gestalt therapy with its emphasis upon the existence of the person and its technology of awareness, summoning the person to live through the I-Thou orientation, will enable the patient to deal, not only with his presenting problems, but to experience growth in all areas of his life. One of the great antagonists to

growth is inherited attitudes which may tend to shrink and cripple the spontaneity and effectiveness of that person in his everyday life. Such alienating attitudes and values are called in Gestalt therapy terminology 'introjects', and phenomenologically, they manifest as 'shoulds' in the person's vocabulary. Yontef contrasts a life driven by inherited 'shoulds' with one that proceeds organically from the person in response to genuine needs and chosen beliefs. Such a person is appropriating his life by Organismic Self-Regulation.' Shouldistic regulation inevitably splits the person: he is torn between that part of him which knows what he most needs just now, and that part of him that is caught up in loyalty to his 'introjects'⁷¹. If the therapist moves to become an agent of change for the client or rescue him from his slavery to introjects, then he only increases the split by promoting one side of it, and upstages the client in doing his own work. Yontef is careful to point out that the person conceptualized as separate from the field is not the person as envisaged in Gestalt therapy. In Gestalt therapy the person is sustained by and 'of the field'⁷², which means that his being is essentially relational and has meaning only in relation to the environment. (this includes other people, of course). 'An organism only exists in a context' (Yontef, loc.cit. p215).

What Yontef is saying here – the person is sustained by and 'of the field'- is brought forward in a different way by Merleau-Ponty in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*:

The world is not what I think but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible. 'There is a world' or rather, 'there is the world'; I can

⁷¹ The compelling, almost magical powers of the introject have to be experienced to be believed. A woman whose mother never showed her any love but who regularly abused her emotionally during the course of her childhood and youth will still at the age of forty-eight hope for the love she never received and still, with trepidation, dutifully visit her every Sunday.

⁷² 'Of the field' – this phrase does not occur in the paper I am reviewing. I am taking it from a paper which Yontef read at a meeting of Gestalt therapy International Network in 2001: Relational Gestalt Therapy. His use of this expression triggered many questions (Robine, J-M, (Ed.) 2001).

never completely account for this ever-reiterated assertion in my life. (PhP xvii; Fxx)

Therapy Without a Change Agent

This becomes possible only if the therapist through his phenomenological focusing (laying aside his prejudices) can allow space in which the patient can feel heard, and therefore respected and free - and if the atmosphere is such between therapist and patient that they can address one another horizontally as human beings, then the therapist has stepped down from his place as 'change agent'. Here again we see how possible it would be to take forward Yontef's notion of the 'change-agent-therapist'. If I think I know better than my client what is 'good for her', then I am in that way of thinking lapsing back into a dualism. I am saying: 'my mode of being is superior to your mode of being'. This is easier to live out as a 'mental' attitude; if we see the 'shared awareness' as a meeting of body-subjects each contributing to the 'between', it becomes more difficult to adopt the non-horizontal stance.

The use of *experiments*, such as suggesting to a client that he imagine that he is little boy whose mother asks him for a hug – is not designed to change the patient but to *enhance awareness*. 'The focus in Gestalt therapy is on what needs to be explored rather than on what needs to be changed.' (loc.cit.p16)

A good relationship is worked at by both parties with and for Awareness and that is the heart of the process in Gestalt Therapy.

....Acknowledgement of IS in the sense of Awareness and in the sense of a real meeting, is the therapy – it is the natural process of living and learning. (loc.cit.p.220)

The Dialogic Relationship

These he lists as 1. Inclusion, 2. Presence, 3. Commitment to Dialogue, 4. Non-Exploitation

1. Inclusion: This is a term taken from Buber (1968)⁷³. It indicates that the therapist endeavours to live at the other pole of the relationship looking at himself and the world *through the eyes of the patient*. He is not looking upon the patient as 'a case', a 'disturbed person who needs my help' but himself enters the world of the patient and honours that world. The honouring of the patient's world is possible through a phenomenological approach. This means that I prescind from all my prejudices, beliefs and assumptions about the patient. (As much as possible, anyway.) That way there is no question of judging the patient positively or negatively. This creates an allowing attitude.

Let us take this forward a little. It is possible to glimpse here what a difference it can make to the facilitation of the relationship if the therapist lives in an atmosphere of 'givenness' and therefore of gratitude. Just as the person's body-awareness is rooted in and heightened by a basic attitude of 'being-given' to-himself' (PhP p.360; F413), so he sees the client as a 'gift' to be respected and cherished. It is a misconception to view givenness as a contingent element of our being, like having skills in music; Merleau-Ponty sees it as *constituent* of our very being.

⁷³ This is Yontef's reference to Buber's address on Education in Heidelberg in 1925. The reference I find is different: (Buber 1968 p.124ff).

2. Presence: Honesty and authenticity mark Gestalt therapy. The Gestalt therapist does not wear a 'professional face' or try to be anything that he is not. So, if he is scared or puzzled or angry he does not pretend otherwise. This does not mean that he vents anger upon the patient or behaves sexually. This would be to abuse and exploit the patient. It does mean that he is genuinely present with the patient and does not hide behind a façade. It also means that he is not there just to administer warm acceptance, but will, as occasion requires, give the patient what he may not want – accurate feedback. At the same time he is educated and knowledgeable and able to guide the work and confirms the patient in his strengths.

3. Commitment to Dialogue: 'A commitment to dialogue not only means each expresses his inner self to the other and is also receptive to the other's self-expression, but it specifically means allowing the outcome to be determined by the Between and not controlled by either individual' (loc.cit. p.223). This means accepting the limits and giving up control of the process. The more one *tries to bring about* the I-Thou moment the less likely it is to happen. 'It is *given*, not made by me or my patient.' "Allowing contact." This takes two and must happen by an act of grace that goes beyond making contact' (loc.cit. p.224).

4. Non-Exploitation: Under this heading Yontef expands upon the ethical implications for Gestalt therapy of the Dialogic approach, as he defines it. He discusses four forms of exploitation;
(A) A person is treated as a means to an end. (B) There is an inequality of language– the therapist talks down to the patient. (C) The therapist does not do his job fully. (D) The therapist fails to abide by the limits of the situation – for instance, by the inappropriate use of humour, so that the patient feels shamed.

I shall conclude my summary here, not because I consider the remainder of Yontef's paper unimportant but because what is said in there is implicitly contained

in the earlier part where he states the operative principles of Gestalt therapy. Furthermore, my comments on this paper which aim to take forward what he has said will mainly feature the earlier part of the paper.

My Comments on Yontef's Essay

I would consider the whole of my study to be a kind of commentary upon this profound and thoughtful work by Yontef. What I propose to do here is to take some points and show how what he has proposed here can be further illuminated by the application of the insights of Merleau-Ponty.

Meeting with the Client – Observation is not Perception

When a client presents herself to me I may take time to note things about her: I can notice what she is wearing, the way she moves, how she looks at me or does not look at me; I can take note of her voice, her skin colour, how she sits and whether or not she takes charge of her environment. I can list and note those things and draw inferences from them and, maybe, even think that this is being phenomenological and opening the way to the dialogic relationship. And maybe it is, by the way, laying the ground preparation for such an encounter. Yet, when I reflect upon this note-taking, is it all that different from that of the scientist who translates the body into terms of chemical and electrical structures? And as I reflect further I am confronted by a perception of that woman which is 'anterior to such observations' and without which the whole edifice of my observations and inferences would amount to nothing.

It is simply a question of recognising that the body, as a chemical structure or an agglomeration of tissues, is formed, by a process of impoverishment, from a primordial phenomenon of the body-for-us, the body of human experience or the perceived body.....(PhP.p.351;F404)

My body is ahead of me all the time and I do not completely coincide with it. By this I mean that because it is of its very nature relational, the arc of its intentionality is *already* engaged with that woman before I have even opened the door to her. 'My body is a movement towards the world and the world is my body's point of support' (ibid). This movement is 'given' to me with my existence and goes out unless I choose to interrupt it. This movement is the response of my being to the presence of the woman. This is not a 'thinking about' but a *movement towards* the realisation of a *possibility*, a mode of being. This is 'my gaze at grips with a visible world.' As we look at one another our worlds meet;' that expressive instrument called a face can carry an existence as my own existence is carried in my body, that knowledge-acquiring apparatus'(PhP.p.351;F404).

The Phenomenal Body

My body and that of woman who visits me are not co-ordinated by a series of functional relationships which can be listed and pondered upon. She is present to me as an *incomplete individual* through the agency of my body as a possible mode of my being-in-the-world. My awareness is suffused with sensations of her presence in an atmosphere of opaqueness. The body that my body responds to, cannot be that of the institute of physiology, because such a body is incapable of being inhabited by a consciousness; such a body must be for me an object only, an IT. That would not be a foundation for Gestalt therapy. The living body of Gestalt therapy is what we call 'the phenomenal body'.

Will the Healing Presence not Happen anyway?

Before we look a bit closer at the meaning of that intentionality, let us ask ourselves the question: If my body is ahead of me and goes out to 'the other' unless I interrupt that movement, then what is so special about the therapeutic relationship? What Yontef, after Buber, calls the 'I-Thou relationship' seems to me to be the *given direction* in every meeting between people. But, as Buber warns, such a

relationship carries risk (Buber 1923/1996 p.51). Therapy is a safe place in which to enter into such closeness. Children, unless they have been hurt or introjected with some contrary teaching, will automatically move to a relationship of closeness of intimacy with you.

Intentional Presence

Let us explore a little further that internal relation, which exists between my body and that of another. If I reflect upon the relation I experience between my body and my awareness, I see they belong with one another as music belongs in my hearing, or my heart in my body. Although I can *think* of them as distinct they are not so and I know it so in my experience. I know for sure that I can behave, and have behaved, as if they were separate objects and that such behaviour always leads to pain of some kind. So, it can happen that for the sake of seeming funny, I can make a hurtful remark to my wife. That is where I move from sensation, through to action, without allowing the mobilization of my feelings and a fuller bodily response, which would be a more human response. When I reflect upon the relation that exists between my body and the body of another, belonging and denial of belonging both seem similarly possible. I certainly can behave as if they did not matter to me, as if there was no relation. But I have to do violence to myself to behave that way; my body moves in reply to their speech, my eyes follow their movements, so my senses are alert awaiting recognition; their presence has already transformed my world: it is as if I already 'know' them ever before I move to enquire about them.

No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behaviour is about to make of them. Round about the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn and so to speak, sucked in. (PhP.p.353; F405)

How can it happen that I 'know' the person before I meet them? Or is this an illusion? Perhaps we get some explanation of this in what happens with a very young baby as Merleau-Ponty mentions.

If for fun I take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to chew it, the baby of fifteen months will open its mouth. And yet he has scarcely seen his face in a mirror and his teeth are not like mine. It is that his mouth and his teeth, as he feels them inside him, are straightaway for him designed for chewing, and my jaw such as he sees it from the outside is straightaway for him designed for the same intention. (PhP.p.352;F404)mt.

It must be that the baby perceives the intention in his own body; he perceives my body with his body and my intention in his own body. He does not have to go through any process of thinking or preparation for this kind of perception. His body does it for him. This is the way our bodies are *towards one another*. In a similar way my body does it for me when I go to open the door to a client. This is the pre-personal perception which our bodies are amazingly engaged in *all the time*. And it is upon this that all subsequent knowledge builds. The skills of the therapist so painfully learned, build upon this perception. All his training is directed to allow this meeting to happen because this is the beginning of a perception that heals.

Conclusion

This chapter has given a sketch of the actual practice of body-based Gestalt therapy. It also shows, in contrast, how the *lived body* has become somewhat forgotten in the theoretical articulations of Gestalt therapy. This chapter also affords a context for an extended statement of Gestalt therapy theory from the writer whom I consider to be an outstanding theoretician: Gary Yontef. I take forward his statement in a application of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

Chapter 8 – Field Perspective

Chapter Preview

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Conclusion

Introduction

Gary Yontef, who has written and taught extensively about Field Perspective, says that in his experience, it is one of the most difficult areas of theory for students to understand

(1993 p.286). This will not surprise anyone who is well acquainted with the subject: students find it so difficult because Field perspective presents them with a view of the world that is very different from that which has informed their education, during all the years of their schooling. For almost every one of us, the unity of the world, the possibility and solidity of knowledge, was represented in the solidity, reliability, simplicity and continuity of our knowledge of things, nicely separate, each one in its own place over, opposite against us, *out there*. We relied on our ability to describe each thing as a 'network of general properties'; and for a deeper and even more reliable knowledge of things we could always fall back on Science. We got used to knowing things by themselves with no complications. Field perspective changes all that; just as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy 'of ambiguity' changes all that. Field perspective invites us to a world in which 'a wooden wheel placed on the ground is not for sight the same thing as wheel bearing a load.' (PhP.p.52;F64). And that same wheel carries about with it the history of its fashioning and of the designer whose thought it articulates. The light of a candle is no longer just a chemical interaction resulting in light, but for a child who has been burned, it becomes a repulsive thing; things are viewed 'as concentrating in themselves a whole sceneor segment of life' (PhP. *ibid.*). A person is no longer just an individual living her own life, but is carrying the influences of her family and neighbourhood. The two boys who killed the toddler Jamie Bolger are no longer just two youngsters given over to their own private evil; their neighbours, their relatives, their teachers, the journalists, all of us, in fact, have a part in what happened. In the field perspective, everything is connected with everything else, not by the bond of 'efficient causality' but because we belong in the same world and we belong with one another. '...field theory invites the Gestalt practitioner into non-linear thinkingIt honours the specific nature of situations and people....It is relativistic and nondichotomous....It underlines present-centredness and the uniqueness of moments. ...Above all the field is organized (meaning arises out of the constellation of energies, vectors, or influences in the field as they act together)'. (Parlett, 1997, p.19)

'Field Theory' or 'Field Perspective' is one of the three supporting pillars of Gestalt therapy theory according to Yontef (1993) and Resnick, (1995). Since it was first

launched (rather ambiguously) by PHG in 1951 it has been the main growth area for theory. In this chapter it is my aim to *embody* this rich concept and demonstrate how the advances in thinking about it can serve to unify Gestalt therapy theory around its central concern; *the lived body*. I shall first of all describe and explain Field Theory. Then I shall show how this theory is best understood if we come to it phenomenologically. This is in contrast to an approach used by most writers of deriving it from the pioneering researches of Kurt Lewin. I shall use this to contrast the phenomenological methodology of Gestalt therapy with the ‘scientific’ approach. I shall then review the way in which some outstanding Gestalt therapy writers deal with Field Theory and endeavour to take forward their insights by the application of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

Section One: Field Perspective Described

Yontef, a leading theoretician of Gestalt therapy, includes Field Theory as one of the three essentials in order that an approach in psychotherapy can legitimately call itself Gestalt therapy (1983/93 p.203). Field perspective is important in Gestalt Therapy because it enables the practitioner to work in a clinical way that is appropriate to Gestalt therapy, which is by being open to the *total field* of the person in a very focused way. This means, as Robine (1999, p.65) and Wheeler (2000, p.29f) eloquently tell us, that the therapist is no longer an individual ‘relating’ to an isolated individual; but each of us sees himself as embedded in a world of relationships and our meeting becomes a meeting of communities. We can ask “Where is this community”? The community is present in my lived body – more-or-less according to the love that binds me to people. In practice, this means that it is no longer a source of shame to have needs, or to carry injuries; it is no longer a shameful thing to show one’s weakness and ask for support and receive it. By means of Field Perspective a therapist sees herself differently – no longer an enthroned ‘professional’ having to put up a front of knowledge and strength - ‘I’m OK but you’re not OK – yet!’; he/she embraces the totality of their humanity. I recall how helpful it was to a supervisee of mine, who was extremely embarrassed as she played one of her taped sessions on the cassette player, when I told her just how embarrassing it is still for me, after all these years, to play tapes of my sessions.

There follows now a brief explanation of Field Theory in Gestalt therapy: I am taking the indented passages from Malcolm Parlett (1991, p.90).

- The essence of field theory is a holistic perspective towards the person (this extends to include environment, the social world, organisations, and culture.....
- As a general outlook, a way of talking about and making sense of human experience, field theory attempts to capture the interrelated flow of unfolding human reality, impregnated as it is with our personal meanings and significance.....
- A method and a whole way of thinking which relates to the intimate interconnectedness between events and the settings or situations in which these events take place (ibid.p.70).

Those three formulations above can readily be seen as *abstract representations* of the phenomenological gaze, a global experience of the other which is at the heart of Gestalt Therapy. In much of the writing of Gestalt therapy theory, field perspective is portrayed mainly *as a theory*: as a way of *thinking* about the situation with the client. This thinking is what makes it so difficult, as Yontef remarks ‘perhaps the most difficult aspect of Gestalt therapy to discuss’ (Yontef G. 1993, p.286). It is not hard to appreciate the importance of Field Perspective for the practice of Gestalt therapy. It is essential to allow the *total* person to emerge.

And then Parlett proceeds to explain at length Five Principles of Field Theory:

- (i) The Principle of Organisation: Everything is interconnected and meaning derives from the total situation.

In practice this can mean *not* using handy rules of thumb to find the meaning of clients’ behaviour. So, if a client arrives late, I cannot conclude that he does not want to come to therapy - the meaning belongs in the whole situation.

- (ii) The Principle of Contemporaneity: It is the constellation of influences in *the present* field, which explains present behaviour.

In practice this can mean that if a client is behaving with me as if I was his father, then the explanation of this is to be found in what is going on in the room *now* (this includes me as therapist). This principle calls into question the way a therapist can stand back from a transference as if it had nothing to do with him. Here we have the invoking of temporality; not only is the NOW present, but the NOW is carrying the past and promising a future.

(iii) The Principle of Singularity: Each situation and field is unique. Generalisations are, therefore, suspect.

It demands that the therapist respect the specialness of each client and stops him (the therapist) jumping to conclusions about what is best for the client. The uniqueness of a situation properly belongs in the uniqueness of bodily experience; feelings, sensation, posture, breathing and so forth.

(iv) The Principle of Changing Process: This refers to the field undergoing continuous change. This states the enormous complexity of the field.

In such a view absolutes are out. Labels that can be stuck on a client and follow her everywhere are contrary to this principle. If I predict and expect a client to behave in a particular way then I am introducing a potent factor into the field and may even induce the expected behaviour.

(v) The Principle of Possible Relevance; no part of the total field can be excluded in advance as inherently irrelevant however mundane, ubiquitous, or apparently tangential it may appear to be.

Note here 'possible' relevance: it does not mean that everything is equal in relevance, but that it is not possible to decide *before-hand* – which is a common practice. (For instance, you may know from another place that a client has been sexually abused. This may not be the most relevant factor in the meeting with the client – you do not know until the meeting happens). What is ruled out by this principle is specification in advance. The field is *other* and therefore inexhaustibly complex.

This principle asks great openness of the therapist. A client presents, for instance, with an inability to form lasting relationships, and ‘happens’ to have a slight lisp. This may seem to have nothing to do with the presenting ‘problem’. Field theory would ask the therapist to be open to every possibility.

It may seem from reading the above that the benefit of Field Perspective is simply in having many high and noble thoughts and imaginations. Field perspective is essentially a *bodily experience* in that it is a challenge to pass from what I am to what I aim to be; and this is accomplished by *movement*.

Field perspective can be seen as the implementation in psychotherapy of my ‘being-in-the-world’. This means that ‘I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world’ (PhP. p.354;F354).

Section Two: The Problem of the Importation of Field Theory from Science

The difficulty here is the way in which Gestalt therapy writers seem to bypass phenomenology as the source of Field Perspective thinking, and look instead to the exact sciences. There is a question immediately about the derivation of this ‘theory’. My point is this: Unless field perspective arises out of the *lived experience* of the therapist then it must be classed as *knowledge* and becomes a category of subsumption. That way it constitutes only a way of *thinking* in Gestalt therapy. The literature of Gestalt therapy theory generally represents field perspective as deriving from the work of Kurt Lewin. To my mind, it would be better for the cohesiveness of Gestalt therapy theory if it was taken as *an aspect of our perception*, which has emerged through phenomenological reduction.

In this search for the validation of Field Theory in the writings of Kurt Lewin we have an illustration of the consequences of a founding philosophy that lacks radical connection to the lived body. It is only when we enter what Merleau-Ponty calls the phenomenal field, where my body is the pivot of the world and unites in itself the “subjective” and the “other”, that we seek within our own immediate experience the validation of our world

view. When people think (consciously or unconsciously) in terms of a determined world (PhP p.208; F241), then they quite naturally look to the findings of science to validate and elaborate their world view.

Reviewing the Attribution

Let us briefly review this attribution to Kurt Lewin by Gestalt therapy theorists.

Mackewn (1997, p.14) widens the attribution but stresses the importance to Gestalt therapy of its emergence amongst the Berlin psychologists. Yontef (1993 p.240) anchors Field Theory firmly in the work of Kurt Lewin; Wheeler (1991/98; 2000) finds its origins in the thinking of Paul Goodman; but he also attributes the theory to Lewin. Parlett also, whom I quoted above and who has written most lucidly about Field Theory, finds its source in the genius of Kurt Lewin who pioneered the study of social groupings of field theory.

Under the influence of powerful writers like Yontef, Field Theory has more and more come to be seen as *the* key element in Gestalt therapy. Some texts do not formally treat of it at all; eg Polster and Polster (1973); Zinker, J. (1978) and Korb Gorrel and Riet (1989). Zinker makes up for his omission in a *later* book (1998)- and extends himself to a lengthy explanation of field theory - attributing its origin to Kurt Lewin.

I am not calling into question its pivotal position in Gestalt therapy theory. Without Field Theory, Gestalt therapy could be at a loss to establish a basis for its holism. The question is about the *derivation* of Field Theory.

Lewinian Field Theory Yields a World View Uncongenial to Gestalt therapy

There is abundant evidence that Lewin was and remained all his life⁷⁴ a dedicated natural

⁷⁴Speigelberg (1972, p.80) says that Lewin is frequently mentioned as a leading American phenomenologist; but this was mainly pre-Husserlean phenomenology, such as he would have learned from Carl Stumpf his director and supervisor - who had also been a teacher of Husserl.

scientist (Marrow, 1969, pp.188ff, de Rivera, 1976, p.3). He carried the assumptions of a scientist of that time. This means that he worked with the assumption of a *determined world ruled by causality*. In such a world perception is reduced to 'an inspection of the mind' (Mallin, 1979, p171). Causality implies predictability: 'The practical tasks of mental hygiene and education demand conceptual tools which permit prediction' (Lewin, 1940/1951, p1.). Such expectation compromises the methodology proper to Gestalt therapy theory. It is not possible to separate a method from the world view that it begets; just as it is not possible to separate a theology from the view of ultimate reality that inspires it; or the laws of a state from the envisaged 'common good' that informs laws.

The methodology from which Lewin's theory arose was one of scientific observation and the verification of hypotheses with the goal of telling us about the 'thing-in-itself'. We have an example of this methodology in the work of Tamara Dembo, a student of Lewin's, who was guided by him in constructing her work on anger of which I shall speak more fully further on in this chapter. The observer is not involved in the experiment.

For Lewin *Thinking* is the high-point of contact with the world. The real world is the world of Science. It seems to me that Lewin, like his colleague Koffka - working in the culture of that time where Science was thought of as the *only gate* to real knowledge (Kohler, 1930, p.26) - thought of a 'return to things' in totally different terms to that presented in Gestalt therapy.⁷⁵ Just as Kohler does in his *Gestalt Psychology* (1930) so does Koffka in his *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935) - they both make it the task of Psychology to refine its methods, learn from the established sciences and 'catch up'. They are locked into a Cartesian paradigm of perception, which sees in *thinking* and reflection the high-point of contact with the world. (Van den Berg 1980, p.23-24)

⁷⁵ An example of this is the opening words of ch. 1 of his *Gestalt Psychology*. 'There seems to be a single starting point for psychology, exactly as for all the other sciences: the world as I find it, naïvely and uncritically'. In fact, as you read on, you see it was a very formed and structured world he was speaking about. His starting point was not radically phenomenological.

So, for Koffka in Ch 1 of the *Principles*: (he is sketching out the emergence and development of the scientific outlook) *thinking* is what perception is all about :

And man slowly discovered the errors in his original world. He learned to distrust what things told him, and gradually he forgot the language of the birds and stones. Instead he developed a new activity called THINKING. (Koffka 1935, p.7) (emphasis his).

The methodology of Lewin is to deal with *events* or *things* in the world. This is abundantly clear on every page of his *Field Theory in Social Science* (1952), - I give an excerpt below - this is the source most commonly cited by Gestalt therapy writers. According to Heelan (1988, p.157), whose work lays the foundations for a philosophy of Science based on the primacy of perception, there was *one general assumption* underlying the naturalistic approach of classical scientists: that the human being is a product of the earth like anything else and is subject in all her/his movements and experiences to the same laws as govern every other 'natural' thing. It is the world of Galileo, Descartes, Newton and Maxwell - a world of causality, which presupposes extension – "*partes extra partes*". In such a view of human being, there is no room for ambiguity, for what we call *embodied subjectivity*, which implies *both* a belonging in the world *and* a transcendence of that world. Scientific method cannot work within a philosophy of ambiguity, which treats a person as belonging in the world just as much as anything else, yet transforming and creating the world; where the unity of the body is not a notional unity, but inhabits the body through an intention 'that is not a thought But takes for granted all the latent knowledge of itself that my body possess' (PhP p.233; F269). A philosophy of ambiguity such as that of Merleau-Ponty,⁷⁶ admirably suits

⁷⁶*Une Philosophie de l'Ambiguïté* is the title given by A. De Waelhens to his commentary on *Phénoménologie de la Perception* which Merleau-Ponty published in 1951. De Waelhens had previously used this as the title to his forward to the second edition of *La Structure du Comportement*. The opening words in the *Avant-Propos* of de Waelhens 1951 work is a humble apology to M. Ferdinand Alquié who

Gestalt therapy which is concerned with perception/intersubjectivity. Perception cannot be called 'an event in the world' like a shooting star and yet, it has a profound commonality with the stars. But if I treat it as just another event then I miss out on its depth and meaning and set up again the subject/object dualism within which Gestalt therapy becomes impossible.

I wish now to demonstrate the approach of Lewin so that we can appreciate how his goal and methodology are inappropriate to Gestalt therapy.

Lewin's Approach Illustrated

I have some hesitations about going into such detail about Lewin's method; especially as Parlett (1997) specifically states that we do not have to follow him in this numerical/algebraic ideas to appreciate his fundamental insight. At the same time I am aware that Yontef claims 'a scientific theory'(1993,p.203) as one of the essentials for a viable psychotherapy; I also recall that in my own Gestalt therapy training we were inducted into his exacting procedure. Furthermore, the point I made earlier stands: unless Field Theory comes out of my own experience then it is difficult to integrate it with the other theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy.

Lewin is quite straightforward in his statements about method:

“Formalisation will have to be achieved if psychology is to become an acceptable science, and psychology can and must take definite steps in that direction now. As psychologists, we are interested in finding new knowledge about, and deeper insight into, psychological processes. Theory, mathematisation and formalisation are tools for this purpose”(Lewin 1952, p.51).

A few pages further on under the heading **The Basic Assumptions and the Main**

had *first* used the title in an article in the review *Fontaine*. Merleau-Ponty himself did not much like that label upon his philosophy. Obviously, others, very enthusiastic about his work, thought otherwise.

Derivation he uses the work of his pupil Zeigarnik who provided a first experimental test of the theory that ‘the effect of intention was equivalent to the creation of an inner personal tension’ to illustrate what he means by ‘formalisation’.

(A1) *Assumption 1*: The intention to reach a certain goal G (to carry out a certain action leading to G) corresponds to a tension (t) in a certain system (Sg) within the person so that $(Sg) > 0$. This assumption co-ordinates a dynamic construct (system in tension) with the observable syndrome popularly called “intention”.(loc. cit. p.9)

And so Lewin proceeds through A2, A3, A3a and then D1.

I see such procedures as enormously valuable for proving in a formalised and mathematical way that, for instance, there is a greater tendency to recall spontaneously unfinished tasks than finished tasks. *This clearly belongs to a different realm of discourse* than that of Gestalt therapy whose realm of discourse is that of phenomenology which is ‘the study of the advent of being to consciousness instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance.’ (PhP p.61: F74)

Lewin’s Goal is also different he aims for predictability and clarity of concept. In Gestalt therapy theory the goal is always the phenomenology of awareness which is another way of speaking about the hermeneutic circle (Richardson, W.J. 1963, p.41-42)⁷⁷. The basic assumption of Gestalt therapy is the givenness of the lived body; everything else trails behind that.

The clash of the two realms of discourse emerges starkly if we consider an example. Suppose a Gestalt therapist is asked to intervene in a dysfunctional family. He approaches to assess the stricken family using the Field Theoretical Construct

⁷⁷ The presupposition in Gestalt therapy theory is that the human being begins from a comprehension of Being. Otherwise they would not stress *immediacy* as they do. ‘This comprehension is presupposed in that vague, pre-conceptual, self-evident seizure of being which Heidegger holds to be indisputable’. This is Merleau-Ponty’s ‘givenness’. The hermeneutic circle moves from the vague to the precise (Richardson W.J. 1963).

“Tension”(loc. cit. p.9) as the instrument of investigation. He cannot but then assume the presupposition built into this instrument: that we best know a thing when we objectivize it. This, of itself, weights the process and outcome because the very inherent structure of understanding is ‘that it always projects a context of meaning or involvement ahead of itself’ (Dillon, M. 1997. p.179). He sees himself as *apart* from that family - this will in turn, affect the members of the family and affect their behaviour in his presence. In the Lewinian approach - as is apparent in the experiments of Dembo(1976) - he must omit from his experience of the family a whole world of phenomena which do not come under the construct but which phenomenologically register with him *in his body*.

Bodily space may be given to me in an intention to take hold without being given in an intention to know. (PhP p104; F121)

It is universally accepted amongst Gestalt therapists that whereas speech is very important it is certainly not the only factor in the interactive field. There is gesture, movement, breathing, looking, feeling, the voice itself allows a huge range in tone, modulation and speech – all of which are of a piece with the look on the face, the eyes, the angle of the head and so on. Every part of the field is of possible relevance.

‘To start with the assumption some part of the field is unimportant (violating phenomenological principles) may exclude access to that here-and-now residue of past experience that is available e.g. in body language or hidden assumptions. To be purely verbal and try to be ‘here-and-now’ would miss too much to be effective . (Yontef, 1979/1993 p.193)

I take the point made by Parlett (1997) that Lewin’s ideas can inform practice not research; however, such ‘tagging’ will not promote a cohesive body of theory.

The Lewin Approach Does not Deliver the Total Field

Field theory - as formulated by Parlett, for instance - makes the point that *the whole world* is, ultimately, the field of all fields. This is the approach required if one is to take the phenomenon seriously as our only access to reality, it is the approach of a phenomenological ontology. Otherwise we enter an infinite regress in endeavouring to

ground the reality of our enquiry. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty makes this presence of the world the guarantor of the reality of my perception and sanity:

“...because from the very start I am in communication with one being, and one only, a vast individual from which my own experiences are taken, and which persists on the horizon of my life as the distant roar of a great city provides the background to everything we do in it”. (PhP p.328; F378)

We need to take this just one step further, before we move on; *the world is present to me in my body*. My body is not just a collection of processes, ‘defined once and for all’, it is incorrect to say ‘my body is in a place or space’, since my body itself *makes a place* to be what it is, like a woman’s smile gladdens the world. *Where my body is the whole world is present*. ‘The problem of the world, and to begin with that of my body, consists in the fact that *it is all there* (PhP p.198; F121).

Essential to the Lewin approach is a pre-conceived construct. This is bound to prejudice the outcome because it is too narrow and accommodates only certain elements in the field. What is really happening is that I am telling my body *how it must respond* – which may be fine in scientific investigations but unsuited to the phenomenal field which is the realm of Gestalt therapy. Here ‘it is the body which points out, and which speaks’ (PhP p.197; F230).

We see a variation on the same difficulty in that Lewin’s limited approach is concerned with theoretical constructions *about* the phenomena. ‘Phenomenology is concerned with the study of the structure and the variations of structure, of the consciousness to which any thing, event, or person appears.’ (Giorgi , 1975, p.83). Lewin imposes structure, *phenomenology* allows structures to emerge.

Support from Frankel’s Study

My misgivings about the wisdom of importing Lewin into Gestalt therapy theory is supported by the findings of Cynthia Frankel’s interesting study: A Theoretical and

Empirical Dialogue between the Lewinian and Phenomenological Approaches to Psychological Research (1979).

Frankel's study takes further the dialogue between the Gestalt and phenomenological approaches. She first of all summarises the Lewinian and phenomenological approaches to psychological investigation. Then she takes two empirical studies on anger: one by T. Dembo, one of Lewin's pupils (1925 - 1928) and the other by E. Mann of Duquesne University (1969), a phenomenologist. She compares and contrasts them. She points out how they begin differently: Dembo 'defines the situation in advance' - she designs the investigation so as to arouse anger in the participants. Mann brackets her everyday knowledge of what anger is, so that she will not pre-define either pole of the phenomenon. Mann does not engage with the *actual anger* of the subject but 'presupposes that individuals have reflective access to their experience'; so she works with the *recollected* anger of the subjects. Dembo sees herself as 'an objective scientist' 'unaffected by the struggle that ensues between her and them (the subjects)'. Dembo also takes it for granted that she 'grasps the real situation' and 'fails to reflect on how she, who is extremely involved in the situation, is constituting her own psychological field which comprises, after all,' "her access to her subjects'" experiences' (Frankel 1979 p.94). Mann, on the other hand 'seeks to sustain intimacy with her subjects by adhering to their described experiences and continually reflecting upon her own participation in the process. Whereas for Mann, the duration of the experience of anger was left to the experience of the subject, for Dembo it was confined to the temporal limits of the experiment. This meant that the anger of the investigation was removed from the life-context and that the most important *other* present was never 'angry-back'. In contrast to this, Mann's methodology ensured that the whole of the person's life was present in the narration of their anger; and the important other in their experience of anger could be recollected as being angry. We see here clearly in Dembo's work the limitation of the field - which excludes the total life of the subject. This is also true of her relationship with her subjects: it is limited to the experimenter-subject area. Mann is investigating the *lived world* of the subject; Dembo is focussed on an *isolated* event.

Section Three: Some Gestalt Therapy Theory Writers

The Consequences of Importing Field Theory

To demonstrate the consequences I shall take three outstanding Gestalt therapy writers and draw on their works: G. Yontef; G. Wheeler; A. Roberts. These are all leading theoreticians with many publications to their names. In this section I shall confine myself to one relatively short but highly significant work by Wheeler, an article in the *British Gestalt Journal*. His other works require more attention than I can give them here. It is my conclusion that Lewinian Field Theory has been imported into Gestalt therapy theory without facing up to the difficulties which it brings along with it.

Yontef and Field Theory

Yontef sees Field Theory as a *useful tool* and as many other things too: an excellent aid in the essential work of unearthing assumptions:

Not examining Perls' individualistic, confrontative and drama oriented theoretical stances of the 1960s, had an extremely harmful effect on the development of Gestalt therapy. A field analysis would look at the total context of the work, especially the interpersonal relations. (Yontef, 1993, p.287)

Furthermore Field theory provides 'guidance and orientation'; it is a 'vital part of Gestalt therapy theory'. It could 'help resolve many issues in psychology' which a Newtonian approach cannot resolve; field theory language avoids the dilemmas created by dualistic thinking; it surmounts the objections which people raise against the inclusion of 'physical energy as a necessary aspect to a holistic theory', as a throw-back to Freudian drive theory. The theory of self in Gestalt - which avoids reifying the self by seeing the self as dialogic process - can only be understood in the context of field theory. So, Field Theory is very 'useful'.

On the other hand he makes Field Theory the *central element* of Gestalt therapy theory. Although he speaks of it as 'a theory' he sees it as embracing every other theoretical

element in Gestalt. Yontef equiperates holism and field theory. (1993, pp.77,86,90,181 et passim). He makes it a cornerstone of the edifice of Gestalt theory and says that Gestalt, long before other therapies, accepted that the truth of any event or person is to be pursued in the *relationships* of that the person/event (loc.cit.). He links field theory with dialogue (1989/9, p.131-132) which he lists as the first essential mark of 'genuine' Gestalt therapy.

It does not appear to me that Yontef appreciates the confusion and limitation that accompanies the importation of Field Theory from the work of Lewin. Although he does say ' In the light of all this I believe it behoves us all to show some caution about introjecting theories from physics.' (1984/1993, p.365). The 'all this' is the 'rapid change' and conflicts within physics as an area of study. In this essay he has an excellent discussion of the relation of Gestalt therapy to the empirical sciences, yet he does not seem to me to appreciate the difficulty adverted to by Merleau-Ponty (Ph.P.p.396; F454)⁷⁸ associated with the transfer of evidence from one realm of discourse to another. Whereas Yontef appreciates the necessity of a dynamic view of the world (which avoids the consequences of the 'determined world view'), his concept of phenomenology does not allow him to see where else such a view can be derived from, if not from Lewin. In this regard it is significant, I think that he makes field theory *and* phenomenology two of the three principles definitive of Gestalt therapy theory.

A Counter Argument

Someone may urge, as Strasser does, that Merleau-Ponty himself in his *Phenomenology of Perception* draws extensively on empirical work - for instance on the work of

⁷⁸ The context here is Merleau-Ponty's discussion of evidence; historical evidence moves not from an idea but from 'something'. In order to move from one realm of thought to another I can do so only by taking for granted a whole world of thought as 'self evident'. 'Once launched and committed to a certain set of thoughts, Euclidean space for example I discover evident truths; but these are not unchallengeable' (PhP loc. cit. supra). The difficulty for Gestalt therapy theory is that the 'self evident' truths of Lewin's world, are unsupportive of therapy.

Goldstein (cf Strasser, E. 1963 p.291). The famous case of Schneider's wound is one such instance.

This objection is met by noting the way in which he makes use of the anomalous behaviour of this man with an eye injury. He treats of this in the chapter on the 'Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility' (PhP p.98;F114). He uses it to show that the anomalies cannot be understood either in terms of causal explanation and attributed to a breakdown in visual ability or in terms of a breakdown in 'symbolic function' because my body is provided with a 'praktognosia' - 'it has its world or understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying function'(PhP p.140-141;F164). So, Merleau-Ponty concludes we must look instead for explanation in terms of bodily intentionality and the way in which our body is not 'in' space but *lives* space. So, far from importing a scientific theory into his analysis, Merleau-Ponty makes use of the observations of the scientist to *confirm* his own analysis.

Wheeler: How Field Theory Meets a Problem in Development

In this section I wish to return to the article of Gordon Wheeler's, which I used in Chapter 7 Section Two: The Body Eclipsed. We recall how Wheeler, using the notion of Field from Lewin and joining it up with the seminal notion of Field in PHG, brings forward a concept of Self favourable to a developmental model in therapy. I intend to show how this can be further understood and developed by the application of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

Recall the article headed: Towards a Gestalt Development Model (1998B).

Recall also the problem Wheeler is addressing: the reification of the person – to see a person as a thing; as an object, as a 'resource'. This is part of the 'natural attitude' and is quite taken for granted throughout our society; e.g. travellers are 'customers'; people who work are 'human resources'; managers count 'human units'. The difficulty is that if we *regard* people as 'objects' we go on to treat them as such. It is destructive of the whole project of Gestalt therapy to treat a person as an object.

Wheeler proposes in this article a different and dynamic view of self - which, as he points out, he draws from what has been part of Gestalt psychotherapy theory from the start.

Quoting Paul Goodman⁷⁹ - he relocates self-process at the boundary between me and the thing - rather than having it hidden in the centre of the person.

In Wheeler's concept the self is no longer a *res*, it is a process - so the *self* is discernable only in terms of the world. In this view person and world merge.

Wheeler is in fact re-instating the original Goodman vision while at the same time looking over his shoulder to the assumptions of a psychology based on a determined world view. He knows that such views will not work in Gestalt therapy.

Taking Wheeler's Notions Forward

By this model of the SELF, which has the powerful advantage of connecting the person closely to the world/environment, Wheeler facilitates the dialogical approach so characteristic of Gestalt therapy. In such a model the subject is perceived as a carrier of meaning – able to answer questions and commanding the respect of the therapist in every area of their encounter. Here there is no question of perception being viewed as 'contents being presented to an ego' – a model which in no way promotes dialogue.

By introducing the time dimension, which adheres to our body as its natural element, we can take forward his notion of self as process. Let us first see the SELF as the lived body; always changing, always in dialogue with the environment. The lived body is the *foundation* of any notion of personal identity – just as it is the foundation for any other specification such as 'I am sad' or 'I am a mathematician' or 'I have suffered a terrible loss'. This SELF articulates itself through my choices, through my thinking, through awareness of the ever-changing landscape of its feelings, sensations and movements. This

⁷⁹Paul Goodman (1911 - 1972) is generally regarded as a co-founder of Gestalt therapy with Fritz Perls. I have spoken more fully about him in Chapter 6 of this study, *Foundations of Gestalt Therapy*. That Wheeler is drawing on Lewin we know from another place. In both his (1991/98) *Gestalt Reconsidered* and his (2000) *Beyond Individualism* he invokes Lewin.

SELF is aware – painfully sometimes, of the passage of natural time both as opportunity and threat, and it knows how, through the pulse of its existence, it can transcend the 'instants of time' (PhP p.397;F399). Such transcendence opens up the possibility of a 'totally new future to me in which I shall be able to reflect upon the element of opacity in my present' (loc.cit). Such reflection brings with it a realization of my *place* in the world and in the scheme of things. The threat of damage is part of my SELF in that 'I shall never manage to seize the present through which I live with apodictic certainty and since the lived-in is never entirely comprehensible, what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience' (PhP p.347;F399). As such a SELF I have to come to terms with the fact that I am never quite at home with myself.

Wheeler is tentative in coming forward with his resolution - expecting resistance from his readers. There would not be that resistance if his suggestion was a natural follow-through from modes of thought already established. This indicates, perhaps, that field theory is *not* arrived at *as emerging from the lived experience of the therapists* but is adhered to in an abstract way as 'belonging' to the traditional teaching of Gestalt therapy.

Primacy in Perception?

I wish to look more closely at an interesting remark by Wheeler.

'The most crucial feature of this picture is one that is often left out ... the fact that the field of self-experience is not for the most part a field of objects at all. Rather it is a world of people '(loc.cit. p.117)

I think Wheeler is saying that the intentionality, the thrust in our perceptual, motor, cognitive/linguistic regions is towards intersubjectivity; and that is in accord with what Field perspective is about. On the other hand our mode of existence – being in-the-world makes no distinction between people and things. We can reach people only in things and things only in terms of people.

As we shall see in my chapter on The Body Situated, my very existence is sustained and

made meaningful by my relationship with things and their existence is sustained in their relationship with me. We lean against one another; mutual support. The relationship is reciprocal but not symmetrical. The things that surround me, that graciously disclose themselves to me, the furniture of this room, the ticking clock, the patio door, *need* me in order to be a world; and I need them to *live* my world. 'A world' is born of this between; this 'world' is not present exclusively in either polarity, in me or in those things, but in the *between*. I respectfully suggest that to accord a primacy to the perception of persons, the way Wheeler does, runs the risk of re-instating dualism. We need to be on our guard against lapsing back into *two kinds of being* – the being of my relationship with things and the being of my relationship with people. Just as it is only in terms of the world of things that I know myself, so it is only in terms of that same world that I know you, a person. I see you walking in the same street, responding to the cold, I hear you speaking, I perceive you hurrying. My body picks up on your body, just as the body of a baby responds to movements of your hands and mouth in pretence of biting his toes, without the infant having any previous knowledge of such behaviour (PhP p.352;F404).

I would agree with Wheeler if he means that when we *reflect* we can see that *everything* about us is ordered to intersubjective relations. At this level we can have competition between things and people in our perception. But at that level of perception, where the world is the horizon of our perception, the other person is, literally, inconceivable apart from the world which we both share.

'The thing is inseparable from the person perceiving it and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity'. (Ph.P. p.320;F370).

⁸⁰ It is worth noting that this *between* is intentionality, the noematic / noetic structure, the objective-subjective and the subjective-objective (cf Ch.2;p.30). There is an ineluctable tension *between* these aspects of one and the same event.

What is the Whole-Field-Self

I have already addressed the question of the locus of the whole-field-self.(cf H.P. pp2;183;187;290) The third point I wish to address is the ontological status of what Wheeler calls the 'whole-field-self'.

Although the body is central to Gestalt therapy *in practice*, it has been very difficult to marry this centrality with theory. Field perspective in Gestalt therapy theory amounts to nothing more than the way our embodied subjectivity is present in the world. This is as apparent as one would expect it to be in the writings of Yontef, Parlett, and Roberts or Wheeler. Nor is it the viewpoint of Lewin, as we have seen.

Gestalt therapy - Theory standstill

Gestalt therapy theory has difficulties with development (Wheeler, 1992/98, p.v-xxi).. This is due to the fact that whereas Gestalt therapy professes to be phenomenological it inherits an undeveloped form of phenomenology, which is of little help for theory elaboration. And furthermore, although it moves at the phenomenological level, Gestalt therapy theory does not in its undergirding philosophy accord a clear ontological status to the phenomenon as our *only* access to reality. Lastly, we have seen how its most basic position omits the lived body; nobbled in this way by its beginnings, the writers struggle to integrate the various aspects of the therapy into a coherent schema. Attempts at such a schema, under the umbrella of Field Theory, were powerfully promoted by Yontef and others in the late 1970's and during the 1980's. All of them referred back to Kurt Lewin. He was a brilliant researcher, the founder of social psychology, a Gestalt psychologist from the original Berlin Institute and a close colleague of the famous triumvirate Wertheimer, Koffka and Kohler. Field theory has since become a platform from which development in Gestalt therapy is launched.

Arthur Roberts

It is from this launching pad that Arthur Roberts speaks. Almost as a lone voice he

addresses the fundamental problem in his article *The Field Talks Back* (1999). Roberts tells us that his article derives from his strong sense that 'Gestalt theory has, stalled' (loc.cit. p.37). He says that the season of the Constructivists applying their insights to Gestalt theory has had its day. What has happened to transform all the excitement of the early days 'into a kind of intellectual standstill'? The mistake has been, he says '*to neglect the order, which is inherent in the field.*' (p.33.emphasis in text.). The problem is that he sees no clear way out of the difficulties that attend anyone for whom the only world is the-world-as-I-understand-it. (This is precisely the world of Kurt Lewin and the Gestalt psychologists).

Roberts appeals to a field that is 'not socially constructed' that 'existed prior to our thinking and talking about it'. He finds intimations of this in language, narrative, ethics and poetry. I notice that he works from the base of Heidegger's famous dictum that 'language is the house of being' which gives rise to what Dillon calls 'post-hermeneutic scepticism'- 'that there is no access to either Being or beings that is not mediated by language' (Dillon, 1997, p.178). The philosophy that he finds in Gestalt therapy is simply unequal to that challenge. The problem that Roberts faces is that language has replaced the world as the theme of philosophical discourse. He discerns a 'disconnection from the source on which language relies and to which language always refers: *our felt experience*' (Roberts, A. loc.cit.p.37). Because he is not schooled in phenomenology, he is unable to develop this insight by the vocabulary of 'primordial contact' or Merleau-Ponty's distinction between 'originating and creative expression' and 'secondary or institutionalized language' (PhP.p.197;F229) (Dillon, 1997, p.182ff). Roberts notices that 'experience itself seems to be intimately connected to that which is not experienced', this makes it 'the field-phenomenon par excellence'. But this is where Gestalt theory grinds to a halt. He does not have available to him those profound concepts of anonymity, intentionality and transcendence so developed by Merleau-Ponty. Gestalt theory has ground to a halt because it has, in some respects, wandered into a realm of discourse that is foreign to it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have treated the most pivotal concept in Gestalt therapy theory: Field perspective. It is pivotal because it at once distinguishes Gestalt therapy as a truly holistic approach in therapy and defines the realm of discourse proper to Gestalt therapy. The twofold source from which the Gestalt theorists draw this notion is the writings of Paul Goodman in *Gestalt Therapy* and the work of Kurt Lewin the founder of Social Psychology. Goodman, under the strong influence of Dewey and James omits phenomenology almost entirely from his explanations of this theory; furthermore his explanations are confused and although profuse, are not convincing. Lewin is, on the other hand, very clear and convincing but not phenomenological; and his theory brings in its train an approach that is inimical to the Gestalt therapy view of the world. The effect of this is to close down for Gestalt theorists the very opening they need in order to develop and more deeply endow their theory.

Part III

Chapter 9 - The Body Situated

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Introduction

This is the Chapter where I make good my claim in Chapter 4 that it would benefit the theoretical structures of Gestalt therapy to root its field theory in phenomenology rather than in the theories of Kurt Lewin. (cf H.P. Ch.8 Field Perspective).

In this chapter I intend to outline a *point de départ* for Gestalt therapy. To do that is to found Gestalt therapy ontologically. By 'ontologically found' I mean to elaborate a view of the world which makes sense of our experience and of the enterprise we embark upon in therapy, *in terms of Being*. If it is to be a *point de départ* it must, in some manner, contain its *terminus ad quem* - just as a pen before it writes at all must be 'suited for writing'. It must be an integrating philosophy, which holds together all the disparate facets of Gestalt therapy in a cohesive system.

The *point de départ* for Gestalt therapy, which I outline in this Chapter, is different from that which we find in '*Gestalt Therapy*': *there* it is reductionist in two ways: (i) the human being is reduced to being a series of experiences: 'You and your *environment* are not independent entities but *together* you constitute a functioning, mutually influencing total system... *Your sense of the unitary functioning of you and your environment is contact*' (PHG p.275). (ii) the theory is constructed upon the analogy between the human being in the world and 'the organism in the environment'. This is reductionist in that it omits the more basic human experience that '*I am given to myself*'. It would probably more correct to say '*One is given to oneself*,' since the 'I' can be seen as a cultural construction.

The *point de départ* that I deal with in this Chapter is called Situatedness, which describes the ontological status of everything in our world and constitutes a situation of ontological dependency between things. So, the 'body situated' is another way of describing my being-in-the-world. Situatedness is the 'givenness' present in every event in my life. It is the impersonal at the heart of every act of perception.

Perception is always in the mode of the impersonal 'one' Rather than being a genuine history, perception ratifies and renews in us a 'pre-history' (PhP.p.240;F277).

This pre-history is the foundation of situatedness. It is that silent moment preceding 'the upsurge of a true and exact world' (PhP.p.43;F65).

'I am given, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world - *I am given to myself*, which means that this situation is never hidden from me (PhP.p.360;F413). Italics in text.

This is the root of my situatedness and it is the starting-point of Gestalt therapy as centred in the lived body. I shall begin by describing a therapist and client together, then we shall see that this admits of a fourfold view. The cohesive element in the situation is the bodies of the people involved. We shall then see how by using the concepts of intentionality, anonymity, transcendence and intersubjectivity we can gain a richer view of the possibilities of Gestalt therapy theory.

Section One: Presence and Situation

A client presents saying he is depressed to the point of wanting to kill himself. He has been referred by his doctor, who feels the patient might be helped by counselling.

At first glance this looks like a simple situation - a meeting of two people. Here I am in my familiar surroundings, sitting in my usual place, with the symbols of my life on the bookshelves each side of the gas fire. The man tells me who has referred him to me, and he uses the word 'recommend', rather than 'referred', so this introduces another person into the meeting. There he is, a man in his early 50's, somewhat over-weight, breathing heavily as he moves and sits down in the chair. He sighs with relief as if he has got there after a lot of effort.

I am aware of myself through wordless dialogue with my body which is me, and yet, in some sense, not-me. I experience in myself the pull of the earth upon me, which we call

gravity. I know what I know and am aware of the limitations of my knowledge. I am aware of being supported by the tea I have had and which feels warm inside me; I also know that this man is the last person before lunch; my presence to-day is a little shadowed by that letter which I received this morning; brings me bad news of my friend Michael who has been in hospital for a time. Here I am, present to myself and to my client, yet this presence to myself is only partly luminous, because whatever I know of myself is already shot through with the inexhaustible opaqueness of the world. I know myself only in terms of things that are not me, and I am aware of not completely coinciding with myself.

To say it abstractly, that special unique incommunicable experience which I alone can have and which I call my subjectivity is accessible only in relation to objectivity/otherness and that otherness cannot be known except it can be enlightened by subjectivity (Mallin, 1979, p. 18ff). Whereas I know myself a lot – with the insight of psychology – that knowledge is always of what *was*, and even then it was my biased view of what *was*! We have then a foursome: subjectivity facing otherness and otherness in turn facing subjectivity. And each of these implies the other. This drama of the forces of existence, this coincidence of past, present and future is realised and present in my living body.

The Situational Dialectic

But that is not all - there is my client. Can we meet? He sees himself in terms of me as I begin to see myself in terms of him. This is intentionality, we 'lean' towards one another. He can protect himself from me in a myriad of ways. The danger to him is that I shall view him as an interesting case - objectify him; and his only defence in turn will be to do the same to me (PhP.p.361;F414). The problem is that we have here two worlds reaching to become one. So that the same situational dialectic is operating between us as is between each of us and the world. This is what we mean when we say that to be a human being is to be *situated* - my being is to be involved with countless others. We are by no means just spectators of the world as the Idealists would have it, but *involved*. And the

experience of the world ‘...is lived from a certain point of view: the body’s. It is this point of view which makes possible. “both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.”(PhP,p.304;F350 in Hammond, Howarth and Keat 1991, p.188).

Situatedness - le ‘point de départ’: Explained

To be a human being is to be in a *situation*. From the very first moments of my dawning awareness ‘...a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me’ (PhP.p.ix;Fiii). This is my primordial contact with the world. It precedes all knowledge; it is of this that all subsequent knowledge speaks,

and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derived sign-language, as is Geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is (PhP.p.ix;Fiii).

I am here using the word ‘situation’ in that special sense which Mallin (1979, pp 8-9 et passim)⁸¹ gives to it. He sees the concept of ‘situation’ as the basic building block of Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysics. This is *ontological situatedness* so that ‘situations interrelate to form a unified world’ (loc. cit. p.10). It is because I am *situated* that I can wake up during the night in a strange room and recover myself from the sight of my clothes on the chair. My subjectivity is in jeopardy and is restored to me in my commerce with otherness, which in turn must carry a ‘subjective’ side. (Otherwise it could not be otherness). I only know who I am if the world about me tells me. It ‘tells’ me who I am by being ‘not-me’, that is by resisting me. It is only in the magic world of cartoons that DIY jobs can be accomplished without stubborn resistance from the world! And this resistance is not of my making. It at once proclaims my belonging and my alien condition

⁸¹ Mallin (loc. cit.p.10) excludes the sense in which Sartre uses the term ‘situation’ in his collection of essays under that title. For Sartre it designates ‘external circumstances’. Mallin attributes its origin in Merleau-Ponty to the influence of Hegal’s use of the concept *Begriff*.

in this world of things. Situatedness is entirely inescapable, immediate and totally universal; I open my eyes and I am surrounded by things and people; I open my ears and I hear all manner of sounds; I reach out my hands and I feel the surfaces of things; I smell and taste the world about me with my nose and mouth. I find myself surrounded on all sides by circumstances/events/people who challenge and resist me and evoke my potentiality for struggle. Every one of my senses immediately involves all the others so that a defect in any sense registers in my whole perception of the situation.⁸² And this intimate and enduring connection with things and the world through my body *constitutes* my existence. This overall condition of affairs is *ontological situatedness*.

Here I am *not* considering *situation* as a collection of brute facts which have to be dealt with, as for instance the *situation* of a political party after a bad election result; or the situation of being stranded at Crewe on a snowy winter's night. In those instances situation is no longer being considered as the unavoidable human condition but as an unfortunate contingency. *Situation* here is what I am born into and what departs from me, presumably, in death. I am not using 'situation' in the sense accorded to it by Robine, J-M. (2001, p.95). There it refers to a definite field or dyad of therapist and client.

Every experience of human being is of *being-in-the-world*. 'My body is the vehicle of *being-in-the-world*' (PhP p.82;F97) (my emphasis). So, in this view then, my being which is not distinct from my body that is essentially relational, essentially dialogic, essentially ambiguous and essentially spatial. I am an *embodied subjectivity*. We can say that our on-going being is *given* us from the world - just as the world's being is conferred on it by us. Just as the moon without the sun is blackness to our vision, so a person without the 'gaze' of her surrounding world is darkness and non-being. Here now, as I sit writing, my world is constituted by the press of the chair under me, the screen to my left, the music of Classic FM coming like a gentle zephyr from the landing, the brightness of

⁸² Schneider's wound was in his eye and this it was that gave rise to all his other complicated problems (PhP. p.113;F131).

the morning, the project of this work and those countless other relationships which comprise my life.

'Through and Through compounded of Relationships'

When I modify all those adjectives above, naming our human being as relational, dialogic, ambiguous, spatial, and embodied with the word 'essentially' I mean to indicate that the tiniest movement of my body is already informed by these structures and finds meaning only in reference to the situatedness of the *whole person*. So, when I gesture my client towards the waiting chair there takes place in me a total re-configuration of my world and this is articulated in the corresponding adjustment in the sinews and cells of my body. That person enters my world and my whole being lives out the intention of signalling him to sit in the chair.

I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; (*prise sur le monde*); now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body comprise a system (*forment ensemble un system*), so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously (PhP.p.354;F406).

The relationship between us is 'anonymous' because neither of us can be said to own it or cause it; neither does it consist in my feeling or *his* thought or my intention, it is *given* to us by the situation; it informs those millions of imperceptible movements between us - of our eyes, tongues, breathing and so on - so that our bodies are 'singing the world' in a duet (PhP.p.187;F218).

This is the kind of being we have: that we are: ' through and through compounded of relationships with the world.'(PhP.p.xiii;Fvii) (loc.cit.xiii). If a man turns his head to look at a woman riding by on a bicycle, there takes place a total re-configuration of his

world. That woman on her bicycle moves him as his intention, aware or unaware, to turn his head and look after her. He would not turn his head if she was not *present* to him. This is *intentional* presence. In his turning to look after her we have the *specification* of the general reference to the world that constitutes his body and is indelibly written into every part of it. This reference to the world is given him and belongs with that 'otherness' or opaqueness which marks every event in our lives. Merleau-Ponty expresses this when he says that: 'The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself.' (PhP.p.407;F467). It is the way in which the world is present to me so that I am summoned to *action*. This is the marriage of my body with the world. This built-in intentionality informs the stuff of our experience, guarantees the cohesion and continuity of our existence and allows our least subjective act to have meaning. This abiding reference to the world is seen in the mysterious operations of our reflexes and of our sense functions:

In fact, the reflexes themselves are never blind processes: they adjust themselves to a 'direction' of the situation, and express our orientation towards a behavioural setting ...they (the reflexes) trace out from a distance the structure of the object, without waiting for its point by point stimulation. It is this global presence of the situation which gives meaning to the partial stimuli and causes them to acquire importance, value or existence for the organism (PhP.p.79;F94).

In Merleau-Ponty's view, perception is not a response to stimuli coming from the 'outside', but a way in which a person is present in the world and takes up and transforms that world in his process of becoming. This is co-creative dialogue and it constitutes the being of the person.

The reflex does not arise from objective stimuli, but moves back towards them, and invests them with a meaning which they do not possess taken singly as psychological agents, but only when taken *as a situation*. (PhP.p79;F94).

Section Two: Situatedness as 'Field Theory'

The Field is the Lived body

Even in this brief account of situatedness we can begin to see how it inevitably involves every principle contained in the field theory of Lewin imported into Gestalt and described by me in the preceding chapter.

We begin with the living body. All the parts are interconnected, co-ordinated and create 'space'. My body generates its own internal coherence, the perceptual meaning, the configuration of parts within the Gestalt contexture is intrinsic to the body through the 'sensuous content' (Dillon, 1997, p.81).

This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the principle of 'autochthonous organisation' (PhP. p.441;F503) (cf Dillon, 1997, p.196). This is *the* characteristic of the *Gestalt*. And the beauty of this principle is that it resolves the opposition between the immanent/ subjective and the transcendent/objective. It does this because the *Gestalt* embraces *both*. The living body is not just all one pulsating mass of subjectivity. The opaque, inaccessible, inexhaustible world, is also me. 'I am given to myself' and that gift is not just of an individual isolated mass of flesh and bones, it pulls in its train a world of inexhaustible abundance. And that inexhaustible abundance only becomes 'world' through its correlation with an embodied subjectivity. This autochthonous organisation extends beyond my body into the world that I move through. My body is present there 'as the heart is in an organism' (PhP.p.203;F235). That client sitting in the chair in my office belongs in my world and I in his. Neutral presence is impossible: our bodies form one system with the world (ibid). I can, of course, back away from this and kill off our burgeoning relationship by the death of a thousand words. Otherwise, I am vulnerable to him. He can hurt me. Jacobs requires the therapist to 'step forth out of his protected

professional superiority into the elementary situation between one who asks and the one who is asked'(Jacobs, L.1989, p.44).⁸³

'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth ...'(Ezechiel ch18 v2).

When we bring together the Gestalt principle of autochthonous organisation (Dillon,1997, p.81) and our situatedness (and they are really only aspects of one and the same phenomenon) then we can see that the unity which I have with my body is extended to include the whole history of my body and therefore of the influences and 'acquired worlds' (PhP.p.130;F151) which constitute me as I am to-day. All this manifests itself in my body. We carry not only the scars and trophies of our own struggles but those of our parents and of our parents' parents as well. This has impressed me most powerfully when I participated as a 'representative' in the family constellations of Bert Hellinger (1998). He uses this technique successfully with people whose families were traumatised by involvement in the events of the Nazi concentration camps. In Hellinger's 'constellations' the bodies of the 'representatives' - without their knowing *anything* of the history of the family member they represent - amazingly portray the symptoms of the family member. It is as if the suffering of that (perhaps dead) member has to be acknowledged before the present family members can be at peace. The metaphysics of Merleau-Ponty open before us a scheme of things in which we are far more intimately connected with one another than is comfortable to imagine.

Temporality – The Present Field

The rich heritage from Wilhelm Reich (1907-1957) shows itself in the Gestalt therapist's belief that the person's body carries their history (cf H.P. Ch. 7). Like so much else in Gestalt therapy that is so powerful in the treatment of clients, this belief goes unexplained

⁸³ Here Jacobs (citing Friedlander) is alluding to Buber's *I and Thou* (1923/96). It is interesting to note that whereas Gestalt therapists take their field theory from Lewin, the scientist, they look to Buber the poet and

in the literature. In order to explain it as part of field theory we need to recall what we said about my subjectivity being dependent on otherness and how this otherness itself possesses a subjective side as well as its objective side. I can know myself only in terms of what is 'not-me'. So, in order to know my past I need to make an object of my body. My body has knowledge that is not accessible to my thinking; for instance my body knows how to digest food; this knowledge and a whole lot else has banked up in me over the years. These are 'acquired worlds' (PhP.p.130;F151) possessing my history. Memory is not merely a thinking process trying to re-construct what happened in the past; it is also my body alerting to the past in the present and re-creating in me the postures, feelings, and sensations that *then* constituted my 'present'.

The part played by the body in memory is comprehensible only if memory is, not only the constituting consciousness of the past, but an effort to re-open time on the basis of the implication contained in the present.... (PhP.p.181;F211).

So, this is the ontological and epistemological constitution of the situated Gestalt. It is in the exploration of this fourfold relationship that we find a richer, more coherent and more suggestive explanation of field theory. Let us shine this light on the principles as enunciated by Parlett (1991).

In connection with temporality, we recall the Principle of Contemporaneity: 'It is the constellation of influences in *the present* field which explains present behaviour' (loc.cit.p36). The 'field perspective' is my body perspective. My body carries the field, the whole field. Where else can it be *realised* if not here in this pulsating mass of flesh that is me? We can take this forward somewhat: Suppose a woman presents herself for therapy in my office. The field now changes. Our *present* behaviour explains, indicates, represents, *embodies* the constellation of the field. Here is the mystery of time: I can never quite catch it. It is the present when I say: 'stay with what you have just said' and go silent, and we allow ourselves to become aware of our being aware. And then it can

mystic for their theory on dialogue while neglecting entirely to explore phenomenology that makes up the *everyday* stuff of their work.

be that she sees how her life is not yet her own but shadowed and haunted by an internal monologue, which bullies her and denigrates everything she does, every appearance she makes. The room is now peopled by her and me and her father and mother and her daughter and grandparents and teacher colleagues and neighbours and many, many others. And I am with her at this procession of people all caught up and entangled in their own lives. Then she decides, at my suggestion, that it may be time for her to address this persecutor that is her constant and uninvited companion. Her eagerness to do this marks a change.

This is the way the past is present in the NOW not *as past* but as NOW. Such is the *richness* of the present moment. The principle is the abstract statement of what is happening now in our bodies. It emerges from situatedness that the influences are present not just by themselves naked, but clothed in their histories. We can take it further and say that *the world* is summoned to witness our meeting.

My Body Carries the Time of My Life

Because they all participate in the figure/horizon structure every *thing* in my world leans against and is supported by every other thing; and the same is true of the time of my life:

Each moment of time calls all the others to witness....each present permanently underpins a point of time which calls for recognition from all others, so that the object is seen at all times as it is seen from all directions and by the same means, namely the structure imposed by a horizon (PhP. p.69;F83).

The Scholastics recognised how time was founded in the body: they used to call it *Ens rationis cum fundamento in re* – ‘a being of the mind with a foundation in the thing’ - the *res* or *thing* here is the body. What is it I notice when I reflect on how time registers with me? It registers in my body, by a series of movements in response to my reference to the world. No *body* awareness, no time. So, when I am under anaesthetic, or sound asleep I have no awareness of the passing of time. My awareness of time is the counting of my process:

...time comes into being from our relationship to the world and has no existence apart from that relation. Further, since subjectivity *is* the act of transcendence towards a world, which thereby comes into being as world, we can say that we ourselves are time. (Langer, M. 1989.p.124)

It is possible for us to think and talk about the *age* of the stars and ‘history’ of the universe; and this talk makes sense because there is a *hidden subject counting* the years. Let me explain this. When I say: This house was built in 1939, the house was built 63 years ago. How do I make sense of this? What I say becomes meaningful only when it means something to me as embodied. I know how a day feels, how a month feels, I know the feeling of a year. Then there is the feeling of sixty years – it is all in relation to my age, to my experience. I know this immediately – without any *process* of reasoning or comparison. Of course, I can *deepen* my appreciation of its meaning by imagination and by building up comparisons. So, when I say ‘there is a hidden subject counting the years’, I am simply referring to what we do automatically with our thinking to make time meaningful – I’m referring to my own body-time. The stars take not only their age and history from my body, but also their bearings from the location of my body.

We ourselves are one continuous question, a perpetual enterprise of taking our bearings on the constellations of the world, and of taking the bearings of things in our dimensions (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, F.p.102, from Mallin, 1979, p.69)

Time is the unfolding of my process. Wherever I am, that process is dependent upon all that has gone before and must in some way still carry it. To be here NOW I have got to have come from a WAS; and, because I am embodied, I bring that ‘was’ to ‘now’ which is pregnant with a possibility and is, even as I speak, becoming itself a WAS in giving birth to a ‘possibility’. The *constant* here is me who am all the time being re-constituted in identity by the a world which is at once resisting me, because it is other, and yet whose structures are the very structures of my body (PhP.p.205;F237). With this world I am in such intimate communion that it is not always clear where one ends and the other begins (PhP.p.212;F245). I sit in the garden and listen to the birds. Where is the bird song?

We can see this more clearly, perhaps, if we think of it in physical terms of identity and belonging. I know who I am because of the world's resistance to me and this is also a disclosure of my belonging. If I stand beside you and lean against you, your body resists me but also stops me falling over, so that I can stand on my own feet and know that I am *not you*, but am supported by you. But I could not be supported by you without your *resisting* me. Furthermore, you can only resist me if we share the same world. So I belong in your world and you in mine. We belong with one another. So, your resisting me is also your supporting me and validates my belonging. And you, in turn, are supported by others, and they in turn by others still, to that ultimate support and guarantor of all our identities, which is that great individual - the world

...from the very start I am in communication with one being, and one only, a vast individual from which my experiences are taken, and which persists on the horizon of my life as the distant roar of a great city provides the background to everything we do (PhP.p.328;F378).

Just as we have the paradox in spatial terms of your resistance being that also which makes me belong, so we have the paradox of time being 'that which holds events together by distancing them from one another.' (PhP.p.422;F483) (cf Mallin, 1979, p.9) There can be no interconnectedness without time. Yontef correctly defines a relationship as 'a contact continued over time'. My body carries the whole of my history because it is present with me - or rather I am present NOW through my body (PhP.p.85;F71).

Yesterday and the day before are not lost; they are still with me but I am not *thinking* about them. Unless something very significant and incomplete happened in those days I will not spend my time re-living them. The basis of Merleau-Ponty's theory of what Freud called 'repression' (PhP.p.83;F98), is given in his theory of time. We shall see later how, in this, we have the point of departure for a new view of trauma and the resulting psychopathology.

Section Three: The Phenomenal Field

The Realm Proper to Gestalt Therapy

Situatedness allows us to establish the metaphysical framework within which Gestalt therapy theory can develop and unfold. It is called being-in-the-world. We have seen how congenial it is to Gestalt therapy theory: how it implies a powerful field theory and extends this theory to embrace time also in all its dimensions; it dispenses with the idea of the detached observer. It opens up a new view of a world which is no longer just a spectacle presenting itself to a surveying subject nor just a construct emanating from a transcendental subjectivity, but a correlate of our bodily structures, an on-going co-creation. The actuality corresponding to this view Merleau-Ponty calls 'the Phenomenal Field'.

The importance of this for Gestalt therapy theory is that it defines the realm or universe of discourse within which the therapist moves and theorises. It is instructive to note that he treats of this in the 4th and final chapter of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which is headed: Traditional Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena. As the heading indicates, a great deal of the chapter is devoted to clearing a way for the analysis, which is to follow in Part I: 'The Body'. This comprises six chapters which all place the body at the centre of perception. His clearing process in Ch 4 sets out to show how any experience, which is separated from the body, descends into the meaningless. So he sees sensation as 'that intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart' (p.53;F65); 'psychic states' must not be separated from the living body so that 'the empirical selves become objects and subjectivity ...an impartial spectator' (p.56;F69). 'The impression' is not to be confused with 'the phenomenon' which is the Gestalt possessed of meaning, structure, spontaneous arrangement of parts (p.58;F70, 71). 'Consciousness' must 'cease(s) to be a particular region of being, a certain collection of

“mental” contents’, ‘ but *is* the power which ‘derealizes itself... in giving form to the stuff of experience. (PhP.p121;F141)

The Prejudice of the Determined World

Every one of the above ‘prejudices’ arises and thrives under ‘the presupposition that things are, in themselves completely and unambiguously determined’ (Dillon, 1997, p.62) This is called ‘the prejudice of the objective world’ (PhP.p.58;F71) (cf H.P. p.77,80;128;139,iv;xxix, et passim). This is generally a pictorial world lending itself to measurement (Heelan, 1988, pp.157-8). It would seem to be the world-view still very generally accepted in our Western European culture as is shown by the fact that only ‘facts’ that have been ‘scientifically proven’ (i.e. measured) are granted the status of genuine knowledge in our news media.⁸⁴ That the determined world view affects the Gestalt therapy community is apparent not so much in their literature or declared teaching but in the structures, regulations and priorities that obtain in some of the Gestalt therapy training institutes. The acceptance of this view is shown by an emphasis upon what ‘appears’ by constant references to what is ‘laid down’, by looking back over one’s shoulder to seek approval; in other words this view damps down the co-creative element and has recourse to *authority* as the source of knowledge. The determined world is the world of classical science of which I spoke earlier; but it is not the world of Gestalt therapy theory nor of phenomenology. To have a body is to have a world and the world of the body is the phenomenal field.

It is because it is a pre-objective view that being-in-the-world can be distinguished from every third person process, from every modality of the *res extensa*, as from every *cogitatio*, from every first person form of knowledge – and that it can effect the union of the ‘psychic’ and the physiological’ (PhP.p.80;F95).

⁸⁴I am thinking here of a recent report on traffic congestion. Everyone who uses the roads knows about the congestion; but it attains the status of ‘true’ knowledge only as a result of the survey.

The Phenomenal Field is the lived world in two senses – Firstly, it cannot be assumed for a task, like a white coat in a hospital, but is a way of life in Merleau-Ponty's sense – a lived experience ever drawing upon that reservoir of belonging which is primordial contact. It is this contact which helps a person to live in truth and makes the hermeneutic circle meaningful. Now let us explore this a bit further.

This Realm of Discourse Gathers in the Therapist

When I say that the approach of situatedness opens the way to a 'new' 'kind of world and we call this 'the phenomenal world', I do not intend this in any idealised sense. I mean that when a Gestalt therapist meditates upon this situatedness and enters the phenomenal world in her attitudes and practice as I have described it, she finds herself having to review the way she lives. It is not possible, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Kennedy, 1998) to be a 'part-time' Gestalt therapist. To be a Gestalt therapist is to be committed to certain attitudes and values. Truth, respect, love and the valuing of human life will tend to become priorities in the life of the therapist. The reason for this is simple: If a person goes the way of situatedness, and takes the phenomenal world seriously, then she may soon find two convictions growing as she exercises her skills and knowledge with stricken people. One is enormous and grateful wonder in the face of the world; and, secondly, an ever-growing sense of belonging; that is to say, that she belongs with people and that they 'belong' with her. The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty becomes meaningless if it is separated from life-positions. He himself lived his philosophy. This we know from a glance through the essays which he published in *Les Temps Modernes*: I refer in particular to his essay *The War Has Taken Place* in which he raised the highly sensitive issue (at that time, June 1945) of anti-Semitism and collaboration with the occupying German forces. We allowed the abomination to happen, he says, because we told ourselves lies and refused to see what was in front of our faces (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp.142-3). Phenomenology challenges our life-style.

By exploring the phenomenal field we place ourselves in a favourable epistemological position for bringing forward our enquiry. This concept gives us entrance to the

'members box' in that we no longer have to concern ourselves with questions arising out of the 'prejudice of the objective world' and which could distract us in our study. That metaphor, however, limps badly in that we shall never understand or savour this rich notion by looking at it from a distance: what Merleau-Ponty said in the Preface to his *Phenomenology* is more than ever true here: '*We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else the unity and true meaning of phenomenology*'. (PhP.p.viii;Fii) italics mine.

The Phenomenal Field is the World of the Lived Body

We see that it is primarily a world of the body, which is where all phenomenology - in the sense of 'the advent of being to awareness, instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance' (PhP.p.61;F74) – begins and ends. There is no way I can 'study' the field unless I am 'of it'; nor know of it, unless it takes place in my body.

The phenomenal field as the lived body arises out of our study of situatedness, which is the mainstay of Merleau-Ponty's ontology (Mallin, 1979, Ch.I). It prepares us to explore further those four key structures of the phenomenal field: intentionality, anonymity, transcendence and intersubjectivity.

I shall first briefly describe Merleau-Ponty's view of what constitutes the phenomenal field then I shall relate this to its place in Gestalt therapy literature. I shall choose particularly 'health' and 'openness'. I shall give three contrasting examples from the literature, of the way patients/clients may be perceived. I shall then add a long comment on the foregoing.

The unreflected-upon world, which we live through, is called by Merleau-Ponty the 'Phenomenal Field' (cf H.P. ppXXV;XXIX;XXXI,210;241ff;287;301;et passim). This is different from the world of thought, of objective measurement, of geometrized conceptions of things, of reflection and of classical 'Science'. The phenomenal field sees the world and its objects as our home, the 'familiar setting of our life' (PhP.p.53;F65). In the phenomenal field we notice and are affected by the jumble of interconnections that exist between things and ourselves and one another. In the phenomenal field a certain

institutional building is no longer just a construction of stones and other materials where so many people work and live and wear white coats and come and go in cars. It is alive with memories and charged moods and terrifying states, so that my client takes a long detour to avoid passing it. The phenomenal field is alive with meanings and memories. It is the hollow within my time where my heart's desires jostle and elbow each other for preferential place. It is where:

Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (sens) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence.

.....(where) the problem is to understand these strange relationships which are woven between parts of the landscape, or between it and me as incarnate subject, and through which an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene or become the *imago* of a whole segment of life.

(where) sense experience..... invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body. (PhP p.52; F64)

Elsewhere (PhP p.72; F86) He speaks about those 'intentional threads' which intimately bind the body to the surrounding world 'and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world.' It is important to note that these 'intentional threads' are not just *cogitationes* but felt movements of the body. The meaning of that movement is not at all explained by description in terms of chemistry and electricity but is to be found in the mode of presence of the world to the body of the subject and the subject's presence to the world. (PhP p.351;F403-4)

The Phenomenal Field Implicit in Gestalt Therapy Theory

I wish to emphasize that when I draw attention to unasked questions or lines of enquiry unexplored, I am in no sense criticising the authors or their works. I am drawing attention to two things. (1) That they are writing their theory for an operation which can take place only in the phenomenal field not in the objective world of clinical science. Implicitly, they are affirming the holistic nature of Gestalt therapy. (2) A text book is a

basic learning book and not a philosophy of Gestalt therapy. To put this another way: we can envisage perception in three stages. There is the basic state where I am being impacted/noticing my client, but not noticing that I am being impacted. Secondly, there is the stage when I reflect on this experience and theorise about it – this is the stage that produces the text book. Thirdly, there is the stage of reflecting on the reflection and this is the beginning of philosophy.

The core of philosophy Lies in the perpetual beginning of reflection at the point where an individuals life begins to reflect upon itself (PhP p.82;F75).

When Gestaltists speak of their therapy as being ‘holistic’, when they promote ‘body-work’ as essential in the process of healing, when they speak about ‘integration’ they are affirming that Gestalt therapy operates in the phenomenal field (Mackewn, 1997, pp 2-7 et passim). Mackewn emphasises this by an explanatory footnote to the title of her excellent Ch.22.

Attending to body structure, body experience and body process.

Note: The title of this section suggests a duality, which is alien to the holistic essence of Gestalt, because Gestaltists are always endeavouring to work with whole persons, body, mind and soul. In this section I am merely making body process and energy flow, figural for the moment (p.162).

She repeatedly emphasises that body movements and exercises are used in order to involve the whole person and *bring into awareness* feelings and attitudes carried by the person and awaiting articulation through the body. She is not concerned to explore in depth the theory undergirding her practical approach. What constitutes the nature of this ‘carrying’ by the body, the implications of this carrying for the subject’s relationship with all the rest of the world, the residence of ‘meaning’ in the body; these are questions not entered into by Mackewn. (I would not expect that such questions even belong in a textbook for trainees).

Her approach is implicitly phenomenological because action/movement is the *only* way any state of ours can *appear*, that is, *come into awareness* - which is, you will well recall

by now, Merleau-Ponty's definition of Phenomenology. She is seeing the living body of the person intimately bound to the environment by these 'intentional threads' and therefore, she is, without using the terminology, speaking of the phenomenal field. Furthermore, *nowhere* in her book does she make an attempt to explain what is happening in terms of *cause and effect*, as if the body was a machine and could be 'explained' in that way. Similarly, when Gestalt therapy theorists emphasize that the organismic functioning of our bodies is always in the direction of our health (Korb, Gorrell and Van de Riet, 1989, pp. 11ff, p44ff), they are speaking of the phenomenal field. They make the important point that, at the therapeutic level the person is not acting simply from the level of thought:

'When the organism regulates itself in harmony with its nature – and this is not easily done – the individual behaves spontaneously and naturally. There is no effort of planning or doing' (Korb et al 1998, p. 11).

The authors make no attempt to explain what they mean by 'nature' or whether and to what degree a person can act without the intervention of learned programmes. Nor do they attempt to tell us how it is possible for a person to 'just be'. (Phenomenologically it is apparent that *my existence is given to me not as an 'I am' but as an 'I can'* - just look at the structure of your body - and you are your body!) (PhP p.137; F159)

For Yontef the phenomenal field is the domain of that special relationship which informs the therapy and within which the therapist respects, facilitates, allows and even loves the client:

In Gestalt therapy these tasks (sorting out problems, reviewing decisions, etc.) are all embedded in the I-Thou relation and are used to continue the exploring by the therapist/patient dyad of each other. (Yontef, 1993, p. 190)

For him this is well-nigh sacred ground in which there is no pay-off whatever for the therapist, but in which the client is always empowered:

The Gestalt therapist indicates by his behaviour and words that he cares, understands and will listen.....Giving subtle approval cues would be a form of

conditioning that reinforces the patient's struggle to impress the therapist rather than express himself. (loc.cit.p.194)

The practical wisdom here is manifest and compassionate. Yet Yontef does not seek to identify the ways in which this special domain of interaction is structured and registered *in the body of the patient and therapist*.

Lastly, I see the main thesis in Wheeler (2000) - that Gestalt therapy must abandon its confluence with the cult of individualism and become far more 'field' oriented - as directed by the insights of Paul Goodman and Kurt Lewin - as an appeal to Gestalt therapy to operate far more in the phenomenal field.

The Openness of the Phenomenal Field

I return now to describe Merleau-Ponty's view of what he calls the Phenomenal field. Another characteristic of the phenomenal field is its openness or generosity. This means that the thrust of energy in our bodies is towards *giving, receiving and belonging in the world*. The human person longs with a fierce longing to go out from herself and thereby find herself. We shall see later that, like time, it is the existential condition of subjectivity that it opens itself to the Other. As for instance, when I have good news, I rush to the phone to share it. People wear special clothes and jewellery to celebrate their uniqueness. Such openness is our very existence and therefore our surroundings glow with the aura of the particular attitude we are striking vis-à-vis our life setting, which is all the time beckoning us to go out from ourselves.

.... the living present is torn between a past which it takes up and a future which it projects. It is thus of the essence of the thing and of the world to present themselves as 'open', to send us always beyond their determinate manifestations, to promise us always 'something else to see' (PhP. p.333;F384).

This openness to the other and transcendence of ourselves is in response to the unending flow of invitations from the world, experienced by us as sensations in our contact functions or orifices. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he says:

The body is the vehicle of being in the worldfor if it is true that I am conscious of my body *via* the world, that it is the unperceived term in the centre of the world towards which all objects turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world: (PhP.p.82;F97)

In the Phenomenal field there is no such thing as 'pure sensation'. That concept belongs in the 'objective' view of the world, proper to the exact sciences. In the phenomenal field our sensation is already informed by meaning. It is the global presence of the situation that gives a meaning to the partial stimuli and causes them to acquire importance, value or existence for the organism (PhP.p.79;F94).

Our presence in the world is not confined within the skin of our bodies; our presence hangs about us like the aroma of a woman's perfume wherever we go, and it impregnates the objects close at hand through which we articulate our motility. So, a blind man's stick ceases to be just a stick for him and becomes an extension of his presence; similarly we are in our clothes so that we have a sense of how they (our clothes) speak about us; in the rucksack I carry on my back so that I know how to move without hitting the other rail travellers with it; in the piano so that its wires embody the tensions of my heart. Such experiences are not the result of thought processes yielding a notional unity, but of an embodied subjectivity living out primordially intended connections. Merleau-Ponty sees this quest of contact/integration at work at all levels of human existence. For instance in the context of speaking about sensation he sees the fact that we have two eyes but only see *one object* as a manifestation of the intentional existence of our phenomenal body.

It is not the epistemological subject who brings about the synthesis, (two images becoming one) but the body, when it escapes from dispersion, pulls itself together and tends by all means in its power towards one single goal of its activity.

We withdraw this synthesis from the objective body only to transfer it to the phenomenal body, the body, that is, in so far as it projects a certain 'setting' round

itself, in so far as its 'parts' are dynamically acquainted with each other, and its receptors are so arranged as to make possible through their synergy the perception of the object. What is meant by saying that this intentionality is not a thought, is that it does not come into being through the transparency of any consciousness, but takes for granted all the latent knowledge of itself that my body possesses.
(PhP.232-234;F269)

The Language of Phenomenal Field in Therapy

Perception that is *healing* takes place in the phenomenal field. This is what constitutes truly *human* perception. In Gestalt therapy training, there is very great emphasis upon what is called 'the phenomenology of the client'; this expression means that it is very important for the therapist to actually *notice* the client - all the details about him or her and to allow himself *to be affected* by what he notices. This is not a sequence of two actions; first notice; then 'be affected'. It is one act of perception in which the therapist is engrossed. The follow through is for this to affect his language during the session. Much of the language of psychology, being torn from its own vital roots in experience 'perpetuates our modern alienation (Brooke, R. 1993, p.41).⁸⁵

It is because Gestalt therapy is very aware of this that the use of poetry, metaphor and image is so much encouraged in the training of therapists. Mackewn encourages therapists to evoke metaphors describing the processes of their clients: '...their relationship with the environment; or of the cycle of contact and withdrawal; or their styles of moderating contact in their relationship with others and to various field conditions; their styles of supporting themselves and so on.' (1997, p.103) The metaphor and the simile, the language of poetry, heavy with memories, feelings, unspoken desires, is the language of the phenomenal field.

⁸⁵ Here Brook gives as an example the Freudian term 'complex' as replacing talk of a 'god' in describing the patient's difficulty.

Daniel Stern (1985, pp162ff) makes the point that while language acquisition brings with it a whole new dimension of shareable interpersonal experience, it also drives a wedge between the experience as it is lived and as it is verbally represented. In regard to therapy he says that it is one of the major tasks of the therapist to help the patient find 'a narrative point of origin in his/her own story and the imaging of this in a metaphor. (loc.cit. p.262).⁸⁶ As this kind of dialogue takes place in the phenomenal field the client feels seen, heard and effectual and therefore no longer alone. Such nurturing of the embodied presence of the client is polar opposite to regarding the client from a distance or through a window.⁸⁷ Every other way of perceiving a person can be done safely only *in reference* to the phenomenal field. So, some directors of Gestalt therapy groups make a point of suggesting that the members not mention their professional status as they introduce themselves to the other group members. The phenomenal field is not only the domain of therapy, but it is also the domain of trauma. I make this point in Appendix A of this study. Just as it is at this level that we are healed so it is at this level that our world is subverted and our identity can be taken away from us.

The Effort to Know Takes Apart the Phenomenal Field

When two people meet, the possibilities of action can be manifold. Everything I do - or even think - in the presence of a client - is, technically, an intervention; because everything I do modifies the field. If I am watching myself and 'tip-toeing through the tulips' then that too is an intervention and may dissipate the field. Such a spectrum of variation is to be expected because of the chaotic complexity of the phenomenal field.⁸⁸ Although they may be in broad agreement about theory, no two Gestalt therapists will operate in the same way, even with the same client. On the other hand I must, as a

⁸⁶ Stern is not *professedly* a Gestalt therapist yet he works phenomenologically, in a field perspective, and, as he abundantly demonstrates, in a nurturing dialogue with his patients; wherefore, in my view (and that of Yontef) his work belongs as a model in this study.

⁸⁷ Romanyshyn, (1994) devotes a whole book to this theme of bodily detachment.

⁸⁸ Here I am using 'chaotic' in a mathematical sense as in Davies,P. (1995 pp52-56)

therapist, *maintain my thinking* while allowing myself to be drawn into the situation. Yet my thinking must not be such that I objectivize the other so that he becomes to me a thing (PhP.p361;F414). The experience of being regarded *as an object* will sometimes be described by the subject as a feeling of annihilation or suffocation so that he experiences difficulty breathing. A person who is so looked upon is being taken out of his human world, which is his proper element and plunged into an alien environment. Unless the impersonal regard, which may be necessary at times - in some medical procedures for instance - is accompanied by a compassionate human gaze then the maintenance of identity becomes increasingly problematic. Consider, for instance, the way in which a student is being invited to view a patient in the following excerpt: The context is 'Physical Treatment' for schizophrenia).

Although improvement with phenothiazine drugs usually commences during the first 7-14 days of treatment, it may be delayed as long as five or six weeks. It is not possible to predict which cases will respond promptly and there is a proportion of patients who fail to improve with phenothiazine drugs but who make excellent response when these are combined with electro-convulsive treatment. Patients in a catatonic stupor will often be slow to respond to phenothiazines and those in catatonic excitement may bring themselves to a dangerous point of exhaustion unless their symptoms are brought under rapid control with a few convulsions. (Mayer-Cross, Slater and Roth, 1972, p.330)⁸⁹

As I read this immense and prestigious volume I have a sense that the patient is being taken away from his *lived world*, and labelled as a 'case'. He has got to have things 'done' to him, so that he can once again join the assembly of the 'normals' such as you and me and the authors. Even in Kaplan and Sadock (1991) the preferred method of treatment all through the book is to act upon the patient (literally 'the suffering one') from a safe distance rather than build a bridge of relationship with him and gather about him in reassurance that he is one of us, our brother, indeed. The approach in these texts

⁸⁹ In the more recent text, Kaplan and Sadock (1991) there is more space given to discussing the benefits of psychotherapy but the approach is basically the same: 'The human brain is the common denominator for all schools of thought regarding human behaviour' (loc. cit. p.87).

heavily stresses the subject/object dichotomy. This is always the mark of departure from the phenomenal field. It automatically relegates the 'object' to the status of thing, ranks him with the other things in the world, and explains him in terms, not of what makes him a person, but in terms of that efficient causality which is the relationship and coherence of the things of the world. Such an object is not another subjectivity like me, but belongs to a different order of being and therefore beyond the range of my personal engagement. Such an 'objective' posture *vis-à-vis* the 'sick' person is not confined to the world of psychiatry, it occurs also with predictable inevitability, in all organizations – even in religious orders. Yes, and in psychotherapy training also. It may even be encouraged in the name of professional ethics and good practice.

Buber and the I-IT world

The question of making people into 'things' or 'objects' in Gestalt therapy requires that we mention Martin Buber. I shall deal with his place in Gestalt therapy theory more fully when I come to discuss Intersubjectivity. Martin Buber occupies the place of *the* philosopher of dialogue in Gestalt therapy theory. His I-Thou relationship as set down in his book, *I and Thou* (1923/1996), is the headline or model for the healing relationship between therapist and client. This is where a person is treated as an end in himself; 'where the person says 'Thou' nothing is present to him except this one being, but it implicates the whole world' (loc.cit. p.49). This moment of meeting sounds pretty intense, and it is. So, one cannot maintain it for always. So we relieve it by talking about the weather or some triviality or by using the person in some way. That is the I-it relationship.

But this is the exalted melancholy of our fate that every 'Thou in our world must become an IT As soon as the relationship has been worked out, or has been permeated with a means, the THOU becomes an object among objects' (loc.cit. p.31).

Yontef would say that any contact with a client, which is not dialogue, is I-it contact (Yontef, 1993, p.40). Therefore, for the therapist to have an 'aim' or 'goal' for the client

– even with the best intention, is a departure from dialogue as it has come to be understood in Gestalt therapy. His terminology is of consequence here. Whereas he reserves the term ‘I-Thou’ for the peak moment of coming together he applies ‘dialogic’ to the on-going quality of the relationship between therapist and client (Yontef, 1993 p.34). The difference between such an on-going relationship and everyday contact is that it is always *open* to the I-Thou meeting. It excludes, as much as possible, I-It or the relationship of use.

As an Existentialist theme, the objectivization of the person, the reduction of a person to a thing to be manipulated for someone’s use and benefit, was explored very profoundly by Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), Russian philosopher and mystic. He spoke with that special knowledge of the subject that comes to those who live what they teach (cf Kennedy 1994).

Section Four: Ontological Situatedness and Dialogue

The World of Light and the World of Darkness

This is at once the basis for and the articulation of that explicit anthropological stance which I spoke of earlier (cf H.P. p.22). Therefrom arises that dialogue which Yontef marks as one of the three specific *essentials* in Gestalt Therapy⁹⁰ and which is rooted in our *ontological situatedness*.⁹¹ This means that I find myself already in a world that is familiar to me in the sense that it is of the same stuff as I am.

I find in the phenomena ‘a basic layer of experience, a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning The features, the layout of a landscape or a word

⁹⁰ I count 93 references (1993)

⁹¹ ‘Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy may be characterized as a philosophy of situation.’ So begins S.B.Mallin’s monumental work (1979). This is really no different from A.De Waelhen’s marking Merleau-Ponty’s work as *Une Philosophie de l’Ambiguité* (1951)

in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment as with earlier experience'⁹² (PhP.p.21-2;F29-30).

This is the 'setting' of the phenomenal field within which all therapeutic dialogue/movement takes place. It speaks of the condition in which every human being spends every moment of his/her life. It marks my very existence *as such*. In that phenomenal field there live in me the very structures of the world which are 'designed' to engage with the structures of my body. Lighting engages vision; smells engage my power of smell and so on. But where *is* the light? Is it *in* the eye or *outside* the eye? Where is the smell? Such is the measure of the intimacy of our contact with the world. And every one of my senses immediately involves all the others as the Gestalt emerges. Every experience of human being is of being-*situated*, an experience of the phenomenal field. This is Fechner's world of light in contrast to the world of darkness which he saw as the Cartesian world of Science, a silent and dark world where things live in isolation and the 'intentional threads' no longer count for anything (van den Berg J., 1980, p,22).

Living in the phenomenal world I open my eyes and I am surrounded by things and people which beckon me; I open my ears and I hear all manner of sounds inviting me to participate; I reach out my hands and I feel the surfaces of things - I touch them and they touch me; I smell and taste the world about me with my nose and mouth. I find myself surrounded on all sides by circumstances/events/people who challenge and resist me and evoke my potentiality for *action* –*only because they have the same structures as me.*⁹³

This dialogue tells me every moment *who I am* and that *I belong*.⁹⁴

⁹² 'What I discover and recognise through the *cogito* (primordial contact)is the deep-seated momentum of transcendence which is my very being, and the simultaneous contact with my own being and with the world's being' (PhP.p.377;F432).

⁹³'No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance.....round about the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn.....(PhP.p.353;F406)

⁹⁴'Without the world I would not know, without I, there is no world humanly conceived' Yontef (1993, p.251)

‘My first perception, along with the horizons which surrounded it, is an ever present event, an unforgettable tradition; even as a thinking subject, I still am that first perception, the continuation of that same life inaugurated by it’
(PhP.p.407;F466)

I engage with the world because my being is given to me ‘once and for all as something to be understood’ (PhP.p.347;F399) that is, as something which has meaning - which *only* the world can give me. Such is the broader meaning of ‘dialogue’. These summarised reflections come about through the hermeneutical circle of my interrogation of the phenomena, a continual, never ceasing *conversio ad phantamata* - (‘return to the phenomena’). (Sum. Theol, 1a.86a.1)⁹⁵ Psychopathology is an interruption to this dialogue of return.

Shared Phenomenology

Yontef describes dialogue as ‘shared phenomenology’ (loc.cit.p.279). In this sense it is essentially a reciprocated *movement* of persons towards each other *precisely as persons* and is the bedrock of Gestalt psychotherapy. Yontef for the most part sees ‘dialogue’ in the clinical sense of patient and therapist. The broader horizon of dialogue, which is of movement that generates the phenomenal world, is taken up by others, notably Perls and Kepner. They do not analyse it as I have done above, because their interest is mainly clinical. Perls and his colleagues do not use the phrase ‘phenomenal field’ but devote the whole of Book I of *Gestalt Therapy* to exercises designed to put the reader participators in touch with the *actual*. They illustrate how inability to experience, a loss of feeling for the world ‘within’ us or ‘outside’ of us impairs our awareness, stores up trouble for us, and sabotages our contact with others. Kepner’s two great books *Body Process* (1987) and *Healing Tasks* (1995) are, as their titles imply, discourses on our dialogue with the

⁹⁵Summa Theol, 1a,q.86.a1. This is a key text for Rahner (1968) in his *Spirit in the World*, which is an attempt to confront Thomism with the problems of modern philosophy.

world *through our bodies*. He succinctly states the thrust of Gestalt therapy in terms of movement.

The founders of Gestalt therapy (Perls et al. 1951) have emphasised that the self is not a fixed given so much as it is created through contacting.⁹⁶ That is, I do not *have* a negative self-image; rather, I *experience* myself negatively through something I *do* - e.g. by criticising myself for behaving in ways inconsistent with my values, or by creating visual images of myself that are unpleasant. Similarly, I do not “have” a self-image as powerful so much as I experience my power through my behaviour and action, that is, by experiencing that power of my feelings and my impact on the world. (Kepner 1987, p.145)

This is phenomenological description – an interpretation, in the best sense – of basic experience. I think it calls for more amplification. Here Kepner is *assuming* an ontology of *situated* embodied subjectivity undergirding Gestalt therapy. He is *assuming* a particular kind of *being-in-the-world*. He is assuming what Mallin calls ‘the foundation building block’ of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology: *situatedness* (Mallin,1979, Ch.1). Kepner’s view of being-in-the-world is at odds with the ‘natural attitude’⁹⁷ or the ‘common-sense view’ and requires from each Gestalt therapist the confirmation of his own experience. Such confirmation cannot come from inference or from reading about it in a book; it has to be of the same order as a person has for her sight *-by actually seeing*.⁹⁸ ‘We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else the true meaning of phenomenology.’ (Ph.P.p.viii; Fii). This is that immediacy in which a person knows his own body and

⁹⁶ More accurately, perhaps, ‘the-self-in-the-world’ is created.(cf PhP.p.79;F95))

⁹⁷ Merleau-Ponty speaks of this as ‘the prejudice of the determinate world’ - this is the presupposition that *independently* of my perception the world I see is actually there. In other words the subjective element of perception is excluded. Giorgi (1982) warns: ‘Whatever presents itself to consciousness should be taken precisely with the meaning with which it presents itself and one should refrain from affirming that it is what it presents itself to be.’(In Brook loc. cit p.33) cf Dillon (1997) p62; Heelan (1988) p9.

⁹⁸ Merleau-Ponty labours this point in his chapter Cogito.. If we know what we know only by means of a *tertium quid* then I don’t really contact the world at all and miss out on the very essence of perception.(cf. PhP p376; F431)

knows also that this is the *only way* a human being can *be*. This principle of immediacy is to Gestalt therapy what the '*cogito*' is to the Cartesian system. When we speak of ourselves as *working in the phenomenal field* we mean that we work at that level at which we experience ourselves as essentially embodied, essentially relational, essentially dialogic, essentially ambiguous, essentially spatial. This is the level of operation *proper* to Gestalt therapy

Conclusion

In this chapter I have endeavoured to reinstate the lived body at the centre of Gestalt therapy as it is at the centre of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. I have shown how this is part of the logic of situatedness. This most basic concept which implies the intimate interconnectedness of all beings in our world, is implicit in the stated theories of Gestalt therapy. Along with this comes the other notion of the phenomenal field. This is the world of the lived body and also the realm of discourse of Gestalt therapy. It remains for us now to look more closely at the world of the lived body and the precise aspects of it, which are most relevant to Gestalt therapy.

Chapter 10 - Action and Presence

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Section One: The Gestalt of the Lived Body

Introducing the Four Concepts: Intentionality, Anonymity, Transcendence and Intersubjectivity

The point of this chapter is to demonstrate how each of the four concepts above help us to found the intimacy between the world and the person’s body. This is a follow-on in the logic of situatedness which gives rise to the phenomenal field. I have explained earlier how situatedness leads to the phenomenal field. In this Introduction I want to delineate the view of being-in-the-world which informs each of the above concepts. We must keep in mind that although the Gestalt therapy literature does not speak of ‘being-in-the-world’ or ‘the lived body’, it implies the concepts and gets close with ‘field perspective’.

Ultimate Point of Reference: The Lived Body

It is important as we enter upon this chapter that we remind ourselves how the 'lived body' is the root that gives life and meaning to those four concepts:

Intentionality, Anonymity, Transcendence and Intersubjectivity

Let me introduce someone to you:

A young woman in her thirties comes to me for therapy because she has had a 'breakdown' in work. She is chronically tired, dispirited, cannot get up in the mornings, has no motivation for going out or dressing-up and will sometimes pass the whole day in pyjamas and dressing gown. She lives with her parents, is symbiotically attached to her mother and cordially abominates her father. She has a son in his late teens who looks mainly to his grandmother and regards my client as a financial resource and taxi. Fifteen years ago at a New Year's party, my client was raped and has never recovered herself from that trauma. None of her family knows about the rape. She was also sexually abused as a child; none of her family knows about the abuse. She has lost all sense of being a woman, feels unattractive, rejects men and would like to die – except that she is afraid of dying.

We could put reductionist abstract terms on her condition and call it a Depression, probably Major and Clinical, with elements of secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and that can be helpful in its way. These are terms that generalize upon observed modalities of being, ways in which we can conceptualize her narrated experience.

The reality upon which the validity of any of these terms is founded is the *lived body* of this young woman. Those terms refer to some idealised *subject* shorn of background. So there is no reference to the pain of sleepless nights, the vague continued fear of invasion, the nausea at mealtime. 'The objective world of things in themselves' (Mallin 1979, p.45) is the horizon against which such a 'case' is figure.

It is the same with Intentionality, Anonymity, Transcendence and Intersubjectivity; whatever meaning these terms have is rooted in the lived body of that young woman. She is the “peak” or “wave” of Being; Heidegger’s ‘clearing’, the “Da” of “Dasein”. These terms have no meaning or worth apart from the lived bodies of people. They afford us *ways of speaking* about what we experience in our bodies. In reality – in the body of that young woman they are not distinct; so it is of questionable value for me to say that because her intentionality has broken down, she no longer desires a man and is lacking energy. The image of Humpty-Dumpty is closer to the reality: something awful has happened to her and she has been injured. She no longer experiences herself as a totality; co-operation and communication between the areas of her bodily being has broken down. She is frantically trying to put herself together again and cannot. Her sense of substantiality has drained away, she feels hollow and empty; we could call this ‘a breakdown in her experience of anonymity’ but it is also a failure of transcendence and also of intersubjectivity. Again, as always, we come back to the point that all our concepts are *rooted* in the lived body. In fact, I can have no idea whatever of what is going on for her – and she would immediately and certainly be aware of my ignorance – unless I can meet within the scope of my personal experience, things similar to what she experiences. Again we come back to it: my ability to meet her is rooted in my body.

I choose these four concepts because each of them is *operative*, that is to say, each carries a particular way in which the *unity of the person* with the environment (that includes persons, of course) may be seen and experienced in the movements of the body. Each of them is specifically articulated in the body of the subject and none of them can be understood without reference to the other three. With unity as the core of Gestalt therapy theory, it is entirely essential that it is underwritten by a non-dualistic philosophy; otherwise, there is no adequate theoretical support for the therapy. The separation of subject and object, of person and environment, of body and soul, of mind and sense-function, yields us a world in which the person is divided against herself. This in itself promotes emotional and ‘mental’ disorders in people, as I have said in the previous chapter. The subject/object, mind/body split is a world view in contradiction not only with Gestalt therapy theory but with the very way a person experiences himself/herself *in*

health. (cf H.P. pp. 19;30-34). 'Avoiding dichotomous thinking is central to our theory and method of work' (Parlett, M. 2000, p.17). A dualistic world-view promotes and validates a person's withdrawal from her embodiment. This we call 'fragmentation' and it is the definition of ill-health in Gestalt therapy. Reporting on this fragmentation the person will say things like: 'I can't enjoy anything, I have lost all interest in things'. 'I'm here, but I'm not here. It is as if I'm in a glass cube and nothing reaches me and I can't reach anyone'; 'It is like my heart is dead so that I feel nothing at all'. 'If my Mum died I would not cry.' This is an example of fragmentation, of a person divorced from her body. A man may experience himself as so vile and repulsive that he will not venture to leave his flat for months on end. Such a person is profoundly at odds with himself. When we look at this phenomenon more closely we see that the split is essentially experienced as a *bodily phenomenon*: 'I feel soiled and repulsive'; 'my stomach churns with anger and my chest area is all dead'. Because the sense function has shut up shop, the person experiences herself as isolated, cut off from the world. Our senses remain the *only gate* to our meaning-making intelligence. 'And intelligence seizes on that *unity* which has as its correlate the unity of my body' (De Waelhens, 1951, p.178)mt. Any belief or philosophy, which normalises the split, will tend to promote it.

The Open Upon the Phenomenal Field

The domain of operation of these concepts is the phenomenal field. This is that realm in which the person and the world are experienced as joined up in a closeness that is *not* a contingency but a *constitutive element* of their being. It is that realm of experience, which undergirds and informs all scientific endeavour. In the phenomenal field my body finds its place. It becomes

...the unperceived term in the centre of the world towards which all objects turn their face, ...for the same reason, my body is the pivot of the world. (PhP p.82; F97)

Our embodiment not only creates space but this spatial dimension is meaningless and inconceivable without *time*. The *enduring* nature of my bodily presence is the *basis* of a

union with the world. Without time, which is really body-process, my senses could not function - no movement. Change by very definition takes time.⁹⁹ The changes of space, time and movement are the basis upon which all cognition is founded.

The world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought. (PhP p.92; F108)

We shall see how intentionality, anonymity, transcendence and intersubjectivity all express ways in which the world and the subject are intimately involved with one another. 'Being' in Merleau-Ponty's view 'runs through them' (where 'them' is the lived body and the world). They flow into one another; the world and the subject belong in the same system; the *other* becomes a prolongation of myself. His body and my body are tuned-in to one another. Gestalt therapy rightly places the body at the centre of all therapy. I suggest that it is only with the use of such concepts that Gestalt therapy can integrate the sort of radical and exciting thinking which we see coming more to the fore in such writers as Wheeler (2000) and Parlett (2000)

Section Two: Intentionality – the Enactment of Situatedness

This means that my perception at all levels – even preconceptual – is always world-directed. 'Consciousness is *always* consciousness of something' (Brooke, R. 1993, p.42.) In Gestalt terms, perception is always figure against horizon; and the horizon of horizons is the world. The concept of intentionality is not much more than adumbrated in the classic text *Gestalt Therapy*. In the chapter on Self, Ego, Id, and Personality, under the sub-heading: *Self is the System of Present contacts and the Agent of Growth* the authors say this:

.....in any biological or socio-psychological investigation the concrete subject matter is always an organism/environment field. There is no function of any

⁹⁹ We can admire the scholastics' succinct definition of change. *Numerus motus secundum prius et posterius*. (The counting of change with regard to before and after). (Joannes de Fonte; 13-14 Century).

animal that is definable except as a function of the field. (PHG.p.426)

What this means is that nothing and no one stands by itself separate from the environment. So, things are understood in terms of their relationship to other things or to me. If I speak of a client, I do so under some aspect of his relationship to me or to the world. He is generous, forgetful, loving and so on. And just as I cannot know another except in terms of her environment, so neither can I know myself except in terms of my environment.

Intentionality is my hold upon the world. That is the way I manifest myself not just to others but to myself. In Merleau-Ponty's view it is just not possible to know myself *as such*. In fact I don't even perceive my own unity - 'it is invoked rather than experienced' (PhP.p.406; F465). At the core of my being is bodily motility, which he calls 'basic intentionality'. My awareness is *always* awareness of me-in-the-world, that is of *my movement* towards the world 'I am given to myself as a certain *hold* upon the world' (PhP p.354; F406) (Italics mine). This hold is an embodied experience and manifests itself in my least movement: my walk is my dialogue with the world; my breathing is, indeed, that hold upon my life.

This *intimacy of our belonging* has not been neglected by modern Gestalt writers. Gordon Wheeler in his work *Beyond Individualism* is concerned to show how a willingness to acknowledge others, to count on them for support, to believe them when they say they want to be with us, can deal effectively with crippling issues of shame. He does not explore just *how*, in terms of our existence, we belong with one another and in the world. He assumes the primacy of intersubjectivity as the foundation of perception. I think it is fair to say that the literature of Gestalt therapy theory is all about our connectedness with the world and how to promote that connectedness and the obstacles to it. What is lacking is any discussion in depth of the phenomenology of that belonging.

Intentionality is itself knowledge. Investigating the character of human consciousness, 'Husserl conceived of consciousness (knowledge) as intentionality - as orientation to that

which is not consciousness itself.' (Luijpen, 1972, p.33-34 and 101). The reader will recall how I said earlier, that if one accepts this as a definition of perception one also accepts the *impossibility* of the critical question - are we in touch with the real? (cf H.P. pp.37;51;56;59;75;132, et passim). His definition is congenial to Gestalt therapy if we hold fast to the facticity of our lived world. That is to say, it is all there and I did not bring it about! There is, however, a dispute amongst philosophers about intentionality in Husserl's reduction.

This has importance for us in regard to the present study; I refer the reader to my Chapter 4: A Phenomenology for Gestalt therapy.

Intentionality as Appropriation

Intentionality is not a bridge between environment and subject: it is a *structure of consciousness*, presupposed in phenomenology. This structure means that I 'lean towards' the environment in every second of my life. It is a particular aspect of situatedness; the world around me draws me and is drawn to me; this is the dialogue which makes the stuff of my life, and, when it is interrupted, I become unhappy and ill. So, here we have intentionality as the mutual *dynamic* presence of the world and myself. By extension we can see that it is also the way in which I appropriate the environment *as my own*. The track I leave behind me in the world is one of *appropriation*.

... with my first perception there was launched an insatiable being who appropriates everything he meets, to whom nothing can be purely and simply given because he has inherited his share of the world, and hence carries within him the project of all possible being, because it has been once and for all imprinted in his field of experience (PhP p.358; F411).

Important to note is this: Intentionality is not something *I* do. *It is done for me*. If the toast is burning I cannot stop myself from smelling it; I cannot stop my eyes from seeing, my ears from hearing, my body from experiencing the presence of others. I cannot *make myself* sexually desire someone, or feel love for them. This relationship with the world is there, whether I like it or not and can operate against all my expectations. So it can

happen that a woman who underwent an abortion without much thought when she was in her late teens is shocked and surprised in her mid-thirties by the magnitude of the sadness she feels for her lost baby (Kirton 1998).

Our intentionality is the ontological dynamic in the way we heal ourselves and also in the strange ways of psychosomatic illness. The speech therapist and attendant consultant at a cleft palate clinic were astonished some time ago when a child who, according to all the previous assessments and observations, should not be able to speak turned up for the clinic chatting away to his Mum and young sister. When they examined him with video fluoroscopy they saw that against all expectations, a layer of tissue had grown across the gap; this enabled the child to speak. On the other hand when the urge to express is either lacking or thwarted, illness can result. Joyce McDougal, a psychoanalyst, has made a very interesting study of this correlation and gives many examples of it (McDougal J.1991).

In the appropriation associated with intentionality we have the philosophical context for Yontef's analysis of awareness (1993). He points out (Corollary Two p.205) 'that awareness is accompanied by "owning". It is this owning, he says, which actually brings about change in the person's life. If a man comes for therapy and cannot move from the position of blaming the hospital for his wife's death, his parents for his own fecklessness, his children for his drinking, his teachers for his poor achievement, then no progress is possible. Similarly, with couples who come for therapy, the condition for the possibility of any progress is that each begins to own their own part in bringing about the misery they are now in. And such owning comes of *awareness*.

Intentionality and Self-Awareness

An interesting question is this: Why do people need psychotherapy to become aware? Perhaps they could get it from reading a book or from a software programme on the PC? Perhaps so. In the context of this discussion, however, there is the twofold fact of the vastness and formidable nature of the field that is the person's life. As a client, the world

that faces me is entirely beyond me, terrifying and inexhaustible and I am summoned to *choose* what I shall *allow myself* to become aware of. This summoning is my intentionality. Things beckon me to become involved; 'in order to perceive things we need to live them' (PhP.p.325; F376). And this holds as much for the ghosts that haunt me as for the flowers in my garden. I 'become' what I allow myself to be aware of. (PhP.p.197;F230). What I am *called upon* to become aware of is at once a correlative of my knowing body and yet a rejecting of that body (PhP.p.325;F376).¹⁰⁰ When I say 'a correlative of my body', I mean that the person/environment before me are not primarily given me as something that I plunge myself into and get lost there, or as a kind of problem of disparate elements, which I must synthesize, like I would solve a crossword puzzle. My experience is that I am *dynamically drawn* towards the person/environment without any blueprint of what I am going to find, yet carrying in me an openness to the other as the response of my being to the situation. At the same time that I am 'given' a person/environment possessed of an infinitude of possible aspects – shape, colour, size, sounds, smells, feel, new, familiar, connected and so on, my body seizes upon only those aspects which are *helpful* in the situation. I do not *constitute* the person/environment in the sense of actively synthesizing the elements, making inter-relationships between the separate parts, relating them to different sensory organs.

We have expressed this by saying that I perceive with my body My gaze understands the logic of lighting. Expressed in more general terms, there is a logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms, and through which things of intersensory significance become possible for us (PhP.p.326;F376).

When I speak of a 'rejecting of that body' I mean that in order to perceive, my body must be transcendent towards itself. That is to say, in the very act of perception my body must, in a sense, abandon itself for the constitution of the object. If, for instance I do not transcend my sight or sense of smell, then I never get to perceive the scented *flower* with its perfume and beauty - I am not holding on to the appearance (Mallin, 1979, p153) but

¹⁰⁰ Self-conscious awareness means I am aware of myself being aware. This implies a stepping-back from myself; this distancing happens in every event of self-consciousness.

moving straight on to the *thing*.

Awareness can be a very painful process. My decision will be determined to a large extent by what seems to me to promote my values - particularly my own welfare. If, in the context of therapy, I come to value truthfulness with my therapist and he has created an *ambience* of safety around our dialogue, then I can risk entering those areas of me that have become 'no-go' zones, and I become aware of a wider range of events in my situation. There is here a paradox: to permit myself to become aware, is an event which I alone can allow, it is as personal as eating; yet I cannot give it to myself but must accept it as the gift from another in whose presence I no longer feel alone. Awareness, like everything else about us, ends up being *intersubjectivity*.

Brooke says of intentionality that it is 'the ontological "there" of world-opening which makes it possible for a thing to "be" and consciousness to be appropriated as "someone's"' (Brooke, 1993, p.42-43).

Let me re-state in a different way these reflections on intentionality/awareness.

When a person permits himself to become aware of some event - for instance that he has a growing alcohol problem, or the terror that haunts him around closeness to a woman - this means that he allows his body (himself) to-touch-and-be-touched-by an event. He enters the whole cycle of perception - what Gestalt therapists call the 'cycle of awareness' - and, over time, his world re-constellates itself. The act of appropriation is precisely the union or 'communion' (PhP.p.212; F245) of the person with the world; a replay of that moment of primordial contact which sustains and informs every subsequent act of perception. The transformation happens because of the *realisation* of that person's capacity for being.

The person becomes more real. From being someone who hardly dared to speak because of terror, he feels free to explore a whole world of relationships. The job of the therapist in all this is to support, protect, promote and validate the work *with* the client. The therapist is one 'who addresses the longings of my heart, and who knows also the darkness of my heart - with a knowing that is also a loving' (Dunne 1985, p.130)

When Yontef describes awareness as ‘a form of experiencing’ (1993, p.183) he makes sense if he intends by this a *reflective awareness*, a consciousness of the intention present and operative in an act of perception. When further on (loc.cit. p.184) he makes the point that the element of appropriation in awareness is the transforming element, so far as therapy is concerned, he states a very important insight. He does not explain this important insight in any depth, as I have above.

Intentionality Makes Present

We can develop this notion of intentionality and see it as the way in which the world is *already present* to us before we move; it *draws* us. ‘Intentionality means that consciousness precedes and surrounds the boundaries of personal identity’ (Brooke, 1993 p.43). For instance, I notice that as I set out to cycle a long distance, the journey is present to me precisely as my project before I have completed it. ‘The end is in the beginning’ as Heidegger says. This presence modifies my self-image, my body-sense, my pace, and so on. It is quite different from the sense I have of myself if I am merely going to the local newsagents to collect the Radio Times. I am not here talking about the process of planning which makes the journey present to me *in a different way*. Planning establishes ‘a collection of objective correlations’ (*un faisceau de correlations objectives*) whereas intentionality, which is primarily a bodily experience, establishes ‘a collection of lived-through correspondences’ (*un ensemble de correspondances veçues*).’

(Ph.P.p.204;F236).(cf H.P.Appendix A, I)

Let me explain this nexus of objective correlations. Suppose I look around my office. I have my chair here – just to the left of the patio door, so that I can easily open it and allow fresh air through my office; also the client can more easily see me because I am not silhouetted against a window. The client’s chair is so placed that she can look past me to the background of my garden. Here is a nexus of objective relations. It is all very clear, cohesive and reasonable. Philippon’s paper *Three Boundaries of Self-Formation* in Robine (Ed) (2001) is in this style.(cf.H.P.p182;288). On the other hand if I say: ‘Even before I actually opened the door to her I felt a pressure in my chest; then there was something in the way she came through the door, I sensed her not looking at me, a sense

of strain in her voice, and the pace of her entering my therapy room, the overall sense of stress in my own body that warned me; be careful today, make sure you have the Marantz recorder switched-on. This is an example of ‘lived through correspondences’. Ken Evans’s (2000) article is in this style.

Lived through correspondence as a process belongs to the phenomenal field. It is the basis of phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty sees it as *le point de départ* for philosophy, which ‘lies in the *perpetual beginning of reflection* at the point where an individual life *begins* to reflect on itself’ ((PhP. p.62;F75). (I have added the emphasis). ‘*Begins*’ is very important here. Intentionality *makes present* and can be distinguished from *what* is made present. I pointed this out in my criticism of Kohler’s and Yontef’s notion of ‘naive and unspoiled experience’. Perception has the trick of hiding itself in the thing perceived. (cf H.P. p.85)

Intentionality and Gestalt Therapy Practice

In Gestalt therapy an understanding of intentionality illuminates some of the basic concepts. The body is a unity and its primary dynamic is to maintain that integrity. Therefore, as I pointed out earlier, we say in Gestalt therapy theory that the basic movement of the organism will always be in the direction of health. This is explained and explored by Kepner (1987, p.65-66; 212ff), withholding is coming from a need to adapt to a dangerous situation. This is true even of people who harm themselves. It will seem to them at the time, that this is the best way to maintain that integrity. This is really a statement of intentionality.

Similarly with regard to what is called the Paradoxical Nature of Change. This principle states: *change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not* (Beisser, A.R. 1970, p.77) italics in text. In other words the more a person tries to be what he is not, the more will he stay stuck in what he is. This applies also to the way a therapist works with a client. If he acts as a ‘change agent’ he may be hindering rather than helping the client (Yontef 1993, pp. 216ff).

‘When a therapist “leads” or “heals” a patient, the therapist is actually pushing or

pressuring the patient to be different, and the more the patient is aimed towards a goal, the more he or she will stay fundamentally the same' (Yontef, loc cit p.27). So a therapist will not set goals for the client saying 'You should be like so', or express disappointment or disapproval of him for not making more 'progress'. By doing so he may be interfering with that primordial intentionality which belongs to the client as a struggling human being, and which, in the first place, brought the client to therapy. For an intention to be effective it must be a specification, an articulation in the body of the client that is deriving from this primordial intentionality – that personal experience of his body's belonging in the world. If the therapist imposes his own goals on the client, then he (the therapist) may be making grandiose assumptions about his comprehension of the world of the client. This is to disrespect the ultimate opaqueness, the otherness and mystery that belong with every subjectivity as our common inheritance. In that way the therapist is withdrawing himself from that posture of equality and respect in which *intersubjectivity* can flourish.

It is the same in regard to the common Gestalt practice of not opposing or breaking the resistance of the client. (Kepner, J. 1987, ch.5). If the therapist believes in the process and has faith in the client, he can afford to wait, *and to wait*, with the client.¹⁰¹ He can also simply go along with the resistance of the client and invite him to say: 'I am not angry, I am *not* angry, I am *not angry*. (Each time inviting him to put more power into his protestation). This may bring into the awareness of the client just how much he is inhibiting his anger. He must, of course, be careful not to set up a client to 'fail' in an experiment.

Section 3: Anonymity – An Aspect of Intentionality

This title refers to the fact that when I reflect upon my experience I find that, to a large extent, it '*happens to me*' (PhP p.240; F277). The element of anonymity which belongs

¹⁰¹I am reminded here of that beautiful and very moving testament to her therapist by Sarah Ferguson : *A Guard Within* (1976)

in every experience, is by-passed by Goodman when he defines experiences as a 'function of the boundary' (PHG, p.273). We have seen earlier in regard to intentionality how there is an opaqueness about it. This confirms my saying earlier that whenever we come to analyse any situation, we find it has four sides to it: subject/objective/subjectivity/otherness. Subjectivity and otherness indicate what I have called the inexhaustibility and opaqueness that we find in ourselves and the world about us. When I say in that first sentence, 'to a large extent', I am leaving room for the ever-present subjective element. This may seem to challenge the existentialist principle of self-determination, but it does not. The passivity here indicates no diminution in responsibility for myself, but the necessities which press upon me as a being-in-the world. In existentialist terms it is part of my 'throwness', which is contained in Merleau-Ponty's expression: '*I am given to myself*' (PhP.p.360;F 413). Mallin elaborates upon this idea: 'the core of the idea of throwness is that there is meaning in the world before I initiate it, but at the same time this meaning discloses my "connaturality", that is to say that the nature of myself is the same as the nature of the world' (1979 p.42). This is related to the primordial experience of belonging.

'I am given to myself'

It is only in my being given to myself that I am given a world. With this comes my movement towards the world or my 'intentionality'. This movement which is intentionality, is, *for the most part* experienced anonymously. I open my eyes and the world is just *there*: 'The problem of the world and to begin with that of one's own body consists in the fact that it is all there' (PhP.p.198: F230). This is Roquetin's problem in Sartre's novel *Nausea*. For him it is a nauseating experience: any touch of reality utterly disgusts him. One evening he enjoyed himself: 'After that, the next day I felt as disgusted as if I had awoken in a bed full of vomit.I need to clean myself up with abstract thoughts as transparent as water.' (1965,p.85). He cannot help himself; objects insist on touching him. He is really trying to wash away that presence of the world, which is intentionality. Intentionality is an abstraction – a general way of speaking about the pulsating, live event that is my life. Of course, I do not experience intentionality *as such*;

to do so would be to experience myself as such and that is not a possibility; so, it is best if we say I *invoke* my intentionality and I experience *myself* in the world. And the background to this, is the circum ambient opaqueness. As I ride along by the moorland on a sunny day in May I smell the perfume of the gorse. As I reflect on that I notice two things: (i) I cannot *not* smell it: it is *given to me* and is of a piece with my belonging in the world. It belongs to a world which was there before me and upon which I come as I move about. (ii) It does not come about on account of my creative activity. Of course, it would not be what it is without the structure that is my sense faculty; yet part of my perception of it, is its *otherness* from me. The gorse perfume takes me over, enters into my body, and affects me not only in my smelling-capacity but suffuses my whole existence, like a magic spell, and haunts my world. It is part of me and I am part of it so that I feel it belongs to my existence, as if it had been long here waiting for me to arrive. In the actual experience there is nothing more manifest than that I am both active and passive at the same time. I am aware of allowing myself to enjoy, savour, feel, enter into the experience; yet I know full-well that I am *being-done-to*.

....if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream or depersonalisation such as we experience in that quasi stupor to which we are reduced when we really try to live at the level of sensation.....I am no more aware of being the true subject of my sensation than of my birth and death (PhP.p.215;F249)

'Given' but not 'Compelling'

To a limited extent I can close down on this experience - by deflecting myself from it by *focusing my thought* on the experience: 'This would be a wonderful experience to analyse and set down in my thesis, concentrating on effort.' Or I can turn to some other sight or smell - but only with some effort. I notice, that whereas I am gathered up into the experience of the gorse perfume and feel very much alive and energised by it, the experience is only *relatively* compelling; if I start *thinking* about it, then the intensity of the experience diminishes and may even vanish altogether.

Sense experience is that vital communication with the world, which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness. It is the intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart. (PhP.p.52-52; F65)

Anonymity, Contingency and Appropriation

Anonymity is the 'object side' of the experience, which permits my subject side to be manifest. It is important in therapy that both sides are acknowledged. Now, I wish to return briefly to what I said earlier (Ch 5 p101) about speech in Gestalt therapy.

It is a common practice in Gestalt therapy to invite the client to *own* her experience by changing the language in which she speaks of this. For instance, instead of saying: 'One naturally feels bad at wanting to leave someone whom one loves so much' (in Clarkson, 1989, p.86) the client will be invited to say something like: 'I feel bad about leaving John whom I love so much'. The impact on the client of such a change in language can be dramatic. It may bring about the expression of unspoken feeling and emotion. There are several therapeutic reasons behind this change of language and they *leave intact the anonymity* of perception stressed above by Merleau-Ponty. Let me very briefly summarise these reasons here.

1. By owning his feelings, desires, ambitions etc., the client becomes more aware of them and is, therefore, in a position to change his life if he so wishes. It is important, at the same time, that the client learn to accept his feelings as 'given'.
2. By accepting these movements as his own he reappropriates his sense of *urgency* which his trauma will have taken away from him (Stern, D. 1985, Pp.76-81). A traumatised person may thereafter go in great fear of the opaque, the anonymous element in all emerging situations. This may be articulated in a fear of the night, which calls into question our anchorage in the world:

'The distress felt In the night is caused by the fact that it brings home to us our contingency, the uncaused and tireless impulse which drives us to seek an anchorage and to surmount ourselves in things, without any guarantee that we shall always find them (PhP p.283; F328).

3. Using the impersonal form of the verb can be a way in which the client de-realises/ de-

personalises himself and distances himself from his life. Clients will say how they can yearn to 'fade far away dissolve and quite forget' as if the responsibility of being oneself is too much. Gestalt therapy travels in a different direction - which can make it an inappropriate therapy for people of some fundamentalist religious beliefs.

As Clarkson points out (*loc. cit supra*) there is a strong correlation between the way a person speaks about himself and the way he experiences himself. A mode of speech can limit the scope of the experience. (Stern D.1985, p.176)

A difficulty, in Gestalt therapy, is that the exploration of the *subjective* field - the actual feelings and sensations of the subject - has, traditionally, been paramount, and the opacity and anonymity of the objective side is forgotten. For instance, there has been a tendency in Gestalt therapy to prize displays of emotion; to emphasize how important self-support is as against community support (Perls 1976, p.103). It is out of this 'do-it-yourself' attitude that Wheeler's indictment of individualism emerged (Wheeler, G. 2000). The opaque is alluded to when Yontef speaks of relationship: '...Relationship develops when two people each separate...contact each other, recognising and allowing the differences between them' (1993, p.189). It will be pointed out, I'm sure, how the objective side, in so far as it enters awareness, *becomes the subjective side* - the feeling of helplessness, of awe, of frustration - the objective side *as such* cannot be encompassed in awareness. I reply that the *union of subjective and objective* is the experience of reality; when I say that the opacity is forgotten I refer to the cult of the clear figure as the important goal in Gestalt therapy:

'The awareness that cures is the awareness that forms a clear Gestalt with a figure organised and energised by the person's dominant need at each moment' (Yontef.1993, p.182). This is a logical consequence of Yontef's position on the unconscious which I have dealt with earlier - he does not go along with the idea of the unconscious as a system or acquired world - although this would be more in line with the Gestalt approach to the centrality of the body, that mysterious repository of my total past. It was his past that enabled Schneider to act from the acquired world of the barrack square soldier when his more spontaneous acts were disabled. This work of Goldstein with Schneider shows that

at all levels people operate within systems.¹⁰²

Anonymity: Re-instating the Unconscious

One of the difficulties which Yontef faces in *'doing away'* with the unconscious is that he thereby deprives consciousness of that whereby it defines itself as consciousness-of-such-and-such. In every act of self-awareness there is also present a negation 'I am this but not that.' Just as I know *where* I am by the resistance of this ground, this wall, and this tree to my body so my self-definition leans on what I am *not*. So, if there is no hinterland of the unconscious but simply a movement of figure/ ground then I have abandoned the field and collapsed my perception to 'an inspection of the mind'. (Mallin 1979, p.171). In fact, my sense faculties tell me of a much larger world, with acquired worlds of behaviour, which, while not being figure, still comprise my world. In this regard Mallin remarks: 'Consciousness can only comprehend itself in the otherness that it continually delimits articulates or makes present.' (1979 p.99). Otherwise, subjectivity itself drifts into superficiality - as I exemplify in my analysis of intersubjectivity and compassion in PHG. (Ch.6). I do not think that Yontef in any way wishes to dismiss the common experience we have of placing actions that derive from we-know-not-where (cf van den Berg, 1980). The dynamic causality that the Freudians place in the 'unconscious' is now seen by Gestalt therapists as an incomplete Gestalt from the past, residing in the lived body.

The focus on the subjective side is behind the Gestalt therapy reputation for producing 'I-people' - that is for affecting people in such a way that their subjectivity is to the fore in their lives. And there is some justification in this. I refer the reader to my Chapter 6 on Foundations where I set down what has become known as 'the Gestalt Prayer' (cf p.163). Wheeler further documents this in his *Beyond Individualism* (Chs I-IV)

102 Merleau-Ponty cites the case of Schneider, a former soldier, whose brain injury made it impossible for him to point to his body parts; but if he was asked to salute he could go through it and all the attendant circumstances also. (PhP.p.116;F128-9)

What then, can be the value of focusing on the anonymous element in perception?

Anonymity and Gestalt Therapy Theory

Merleau-Ponty never tires of saying in different ways that our being-in-the-world is not at our own disposal. When he says 'I was thrown into the world' (PhP.p.360;F413) he does not take this in any sense as a misfortune, a dreadful act of carelessness on the part of a cruel fate - as Wheeler takes it (2000 p.31) - but as the event which conferred my freedom upon me: 'to be unable to reduce myself to anything that I experience, to maintain in relation to any factual situation a faculty of withdrawal' (PhP.p.360;F413).

The central phenomenon at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world - *I am given to myself*, which means that this situation is never hidden from me, it is never round about me as an alien necessity, and I am never in effect enclosed in it like an object in a box. (PhP.p.360;F413) (Italics in text.)

It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty is describing above the ideal or 'normal' situation. Being-in-the-world can become an agony for individuals; being 'given to myself' is beautiful and congenial so long as the person *wants* it so. The contrary is well described in that masterly piece of Existentialist writing by Kierkegaard *Sickness unto Death* (1849/1983). I have already referred to Sartre (1965) who has brilliantly depicted the misery of Roquentin the man who could not reconcile himself to the human condition. In Appendix A, where I shall write about sexual violation, I shall attempt to explain the phenomenology of trauma, which I see as the total loss of the *given* world by the traumatised person.

Whereas in the question of completing the incomplete, Gestalt therapy has a great deal to offer, in the actual meaning of the process of dying it has much less to offer. 'Anonymity' and 'being given' are concepts that call for further work in this area. An example of such work is that by Evans (2000) in which he describes how he and his wife Marie shared the experience leading up to her death.

Anonymity and Escape from Experience

Splitting is a common term in Gestalt therapy for the process whereby a person loses touch more or less with their body or parts of their body. The case of a detective engaged in the investigation of a child abduction being himself later charged with paedophile pornography offences, is an example of splitting.

Such a loss is possible because of our mysterious capacity for splitting ourselves. Yontef defines this as 'Parts of self-experience that together constitute a whole are kept apart in awareness without influencing each other. The person is aware of both parts but never at the same time.' (1993, p.462). This can happen to a person who has witnessed the sudden death of a loved one. She may set his place at the table and make ready for him to return home while at the same time she knows he is never, ever, coming home again. Such a woman is facing the opaqueness of the world. The world is not only opaque, it is inexhaustible and it is *there*. Such is the inundation of experience that floods us that at times, we fear for our lives. We are endowed with the ability to block off from us this overwhelming flood and retire to a quieter place in ourselves. But this very capacity to control the inundation of experience, can become the source of our *splitting ourselves* to the extent that I can stand back from myself and see myself as an object in the world. Our ability to 'disown' ourselves resides in the partiality of our perception and our indeterminacy. Because of my motility I can always 'leave the scene' – by turning my eyes away, but adopting a particular bodily posture, by actually walking out. There is such an abundance of perspectives available to me, I do not have to 'turn' or gaze at any particular one of them. This is how we can *refuse our world*, i.e. not attend to the totality of the phenomenon that presents itself. For instance, a man at a conference with sexual designs on a colleague that may destroy both their lives, can choose to turn away from the total field and 'forget' about his wife and children. Another example is a person suffering from anorexia nervosa.¹⁰³ Such a one may look in the mirror and *actually* see themselves

¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty has a very interesting reflection on this condition: PhP.p.164;F

fat and bulky, whereas her friends may be worried at her emaciation. The split is between herself and her body. The person she sees when she looks in the mirror is a person stricken with the fears and self-rejection. Smaller splits in ourselves are everyday occurrences; accidents, forgetfulness, irrational outbreaks of rage with other car drivers. My right hand does not know what my left hand is doing: because, whereas I cannot merge with the world so that I *become* a thing, I can withdraw even from myself, even from my body. Such withdrawal means that I cut back on what I actually see, hear, smell or feel. I no longer know what is going on in my situation. Merleau-Ponty will attribute some of these symptoms to a disturbance in the present experience of their spatiality (PhP p.282-3; F327). Our lived body makes our space.

In fact, the experience of Roquetin can become the experience of any of us in a specific way of bodily retroflexion (Kepner 1987, p.14ff), because there is never any thought of feeling that is not underwritten by bodily modification. Splitting is always manifested in some way in the person's body (PhP.p.431;F493). This 'splitting' has, from the start been a familiar theme of discourse 'in Gestalt therapy (PHG.1973; Yontef, 1993, p.287). Kepner treats of it at length in his book *Healing Tasks*, (1995). I have described his approach earlier (cf H.P.Ch.7, p.171ff) and how it is totally concerned with reconnecting the abused people with their bodies.

Anonymity and Body Memory

The neglect in Gestalt therapy writing of what Mallin calls 'the objective side' of phenomena and the focus instead on the subjective and personal awareness tends to bias Gestalt therapy as particularly favouring the 'worried well' and unsuitable for really profoundly disturbed people. Harris, O. (1992) in her essay *Gestalt Work with Psychotics*, favours an approach 'that humours the body-mind, brain-mind (divide) A philosophy of cause and effect. She makes the assumption that Gestalt therapy is not entirely suited to work with 'psychotics'. In fact we shall see that Gestalt therapy, with the body as its central focus is extremely well-suited to such work. My body, as well as being identified with me (my subject side), also surpasses me in its subjectivity. I have so many functions

in my body that I know very little if anything at all about. Whereas my body can, to some extent, become an object to me it can never become 'completely constituted (as an object) because it is that *by which there are objects* (for me) (PhP.p.92;F108); in other words, in order to see or feel something as being not-me, I must feel it in my body; but that cannot happen unless I am experiencing my body at that time. Yet I do not *coincide* with my body. I carry the physiognomy of my parents and grandparents whom I may never even have met. I can be aware of myself breathing, but how it actually happens I do not know. Mysteriously, my body carries not only my past experience but the past experiences of people connected with me. It also portends my future. How precisely it carries so much history is a subject of much discussion (Rossi, E.L. 1993) but, that it does so, is established by the researches of Reich and his pupil Lowen. More recently 'body memory' has become a growing area of study in psychology.

Opaqueness at the Centre of Subjectivity

To summarise the present section we can say that Gestalt therapy theory needs to take account of the opaqueness at the centre of our subjectivity. This contains an indication for an approach to disturbed people that moves away from treating them as if their illness was rooted in some subjective disorder; as if it was a simple matter of raising a person's awareness so that they can take steps to deal with their problems. Things are not that simple. We are not at our own disposal, and that holds for everyday experience just as it holds for someone who is caught-up in the trauma of war or childhood sexual abuse. There needs to be a place in the theory of Gestalt therapy for the utterly mysterious and opaque dimension to human existence.

I am thrown into a nature and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the centre of subjectivity (Ph.P.p346;F398).

Section Four: Transcendence: The Future in the Present

The third concept neglected in Gestalt therapy theory and yet which opens a gateway to a

whole hinterland of exploration into intimacy is *transcendence*.

It seems to me that this is one of the richest and most relevant concepts for Gestalt therapy. Transcendence is at once that inviting 'openness' of the world and the 'thrust' that informs our every movement. It is the future-in-the-present that draws us on, the mystery, which constitutes us as a question to ourselves.

It is thus of the essence of the thing and of the world to present themselves as 'open', to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, to promise us always 'something else to see'. This is what is sometimes expressed by saying that the thing and the world are mysterious. (PhP.p.333; F384)

As Merleau-Ponty uses the term, transcendence *belongs to the very structure* of our existence. It is not something *I have* but what *I am*. It is the phenomenon, the situation, the experience, even consciousness viewed as transformation. (PhP.p.121; F141)

This Midas-like power of transformation is inseparable from my bodily presence and my gaze.

Existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure, and in so far as it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning, whereby what had merely a sexual significance assumes a more general one, chance is transformed into reason; in so far as it is the act of taking up a *defacto* situation.

We shall give the name transcendence to this act in which existence takes up, of its own account, and transforms such a situation. (PhP.p.169; F197)

The relevance of transcendence is this: that it is at once a description of our being and it is ever-present and observable in our lived experience. It describes the phenomenal field.

Transcendence and *Gestalt Therapy*

Goodman originally intended *Gestalt Therapy* to supply a framework or philosophy to support the new approach in therapy. His book could never be this because its view of the human was basically reductionist. I have elsewhere (in the chapter 'Foundations')

attributed this reductionist bias in Gestalt therapy theory to the powerful influence of John Dewey (1859 – 1952) whose ambition it was to explain the phenomenon of perception in biological terms and therefore in terms of cause and effect (Dewey, 1920/1991, p.124ff). Goodman openly professed to be influenced by Dewey and his influence is confirmed by the researches of Stoehr (1994, p.120-1). Dewey's work does not embrace philosophical concepts that accommodate an understanding of the phenomenal field and the enterprise of Gestalt therapy. Goodman and his colleagues talk a great deal about growth and change, yet do not explain how psychotherapy is a worthwhile enterprise wholly in line with the existential structures of the human person: how it is that they can say that the body is always moving in the direction of health; how can it be so transformative to be in the presence of a person who accepts one precisely as one is. *Gestalt Therapy* embraces the notion of transcendence implicitly (in the emphasis on experiments, for instance) but never explicitly discusses it. So it is not surprising if Gestalt therapy theory is stuck, as Roberts asserts (1999, p.37).

It is not an exaggeration to say that I think the notion of transcendence is to the enterprise of Gestalt therapy what breathing is to an organism. Transcendence in Gestalt therapy theory can be said to have three functions.

Firstly it marks off the specialness of the human being whose existence is given as an 'I can'.

Secondly, it makes sense of the 'optimism' about rectitude of 'organismic self-regulation' which is an important concept in Gestalt therapy theory. (Yontef 1993, pp.212-6).

Thirdly, it brings us to a position of being able to appreciate of the pivotal function of language in therapy. (cf H.P. Ch.5)

It will be apparent how this notion is seminally present throughout *Gestalt Therapy*: the whole enterprise of therapy is an exercise of transcendence. (Speaking thus is to speak rather loosely about what is *constitutive of our existence* – yet, my inaccurate speech here, may serve to illustrate what ontological grounding means.). My point is that the authors do not explore this notion and therefore remain impeded in their discourse.

Transcendence – an Existential Concept

The notion of transcendence as applied to human being derives from Heidegger. It is superabundantly referenced in Richardson, W.J. (1963). It is also dealt with at great length in De Waelhens, A. (1946) cap. II and XIII. Transcendence is that which marks off *human* being from the being of anything else in the whole world. *Dasein* is in no way an 'existent' in the manner of a table or a stone.

If then we take a human being as essentially *situated* - in the sense I explained earlier - then we see that the capacity to *become* more i.e. to transform, belongs to the person-in-the-situation. The isolated person, a kind of Leibnitzean monad, is inconceivable to Heidegger and this is also the declared position of the authors of *Gestalt Therapy* (p.274). So, it is not illegitimate for us to extend this definition to that given by Merleau-Ponty and cited earlier:

We shall give the name 'transcendence' to this act in which existence takes up, to its own account, and transforms such a situation. (PhP. p.169;F197))

'Transcendent' here means our capacity to transform any situation into a more meaningful situation precisely because that 'more meaningful' is *already present* as possibility of the field and draws us ever forward. Lovers transform one another and *their* situation is transformed. A rather banal example of transcendence is a student at a lecture. The teacher says something the student does not understand so he chooses to ask the teacher a question and understands the answer. Now, he has transformed the first situation into a different and 'more meaningful' situation. This he could not have done unless the answer to his question had already been present to him *as an absence* shown in his question and he had turned himself in the direction of his *more-being*.

Creative Response - The Body Transcendent

What I wish to do here is to point the way to a more profound understanding of just one area of a particularly important schema relating to the application of the Gestalt approach to everyday living. This schema is featured in an article by Malcolm Parlett (2000)

which, though constituting a significant development in the application of field perspective, begs a framework within which the fertile ideas put forth in his writing can be elaborated upon.

The general context in which he writes is problems arising for people from the phenomenon of globalization - where the possibility of communication between people has enormously increased, where abundance for all is a real possibility and yet where our society is driven with destructive greed, inequality and injustice. Parlett delineates five areas or abilities of creative adjustment, which, if woken-up and applied by the individuals, would humanise our society. His idea is that by recognising and naming these five areas, people can be empowered to a more healthy response in various and changing circumstances. Whereas Merleau-Ponty has nothing to teach Gestalt therapists about the 'how' of psychotherapy what he has on offer is a more profound understanding of the theory supporting actual practice. Here it is his view of the body as 'the pivot of the world', through its transcendent power transforming and transfiguring situations. I take the first 'dimension' of Parlett's schema, which he calls '*Responding*' and I apply Merleau-Ponty's insight to this and see where it takes us. A similar elaboration could be made around the notion of what 'creative adjustment' means (PhG Book Two Chs 12 & 13).

'Creative' - Explained and Illustrated

Our beginning place is to agree that response is unavoidable in *any* situation. Our presence is itself a response - even if that is a closing down or leaving the scene. What is it to 'respond'? Is it not to give meaning - and to allow that meaning to become operative in me? Merleau-Ponty views the body as the *primary* meaning-giving response in any situation. As he sees it, my lived body is the cue for the constellation of any situation. How I walk, how I hold myself, how I look at people, how I breathe and so on. My body creates a 'certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence.'

...a pattern of my bodily behaviour endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for others. (PhP.p.193; F225)

This is my body's *transcendence* that is to say, opening itself to a new pattern of behaviour in the very act of appropriating the disparate elements of the situation and applying them to a project. Phenomenologically the body is characterised by its ability (indeed its inability *not* to) to endow with meaning the hitherto meaningless. Merleau-Ponty predicates this power, of *existence itself* (PhP.p.169; F197); but we must remember that the body's existence *is* its transcendence. This means, of course, that this power of transformation 'runs through' every least part and cell of the body - even my eyebrows are 'informed' by this power of transformation. Let us consider some examples of this.

When my friend shows me into the room I am to occupy during my stay, I quickly take in how the various things there, the position of the desk and window and the light suit me. My body pulls together all the separate elements of the room and illumines them with meaning *in terms of my body*. We see the same transformation dramatically in the way a leader like Ghandi pulled together the energies of the people of a whole sub-continent. People described this frail figure as 'emanating peace'. Of course, Ghandi was also a remarkable thinker; but it was his *body* that people wanted to be close to. I have seen the same phenomenon - less dramatically but still remarkable - when I was in the common room with a group of male celibate clergy when a woman entered the room. A new energy seemed to possess the priests. They were galvanized into helping with the particular project, which she was promoting. Here is that characteristic of the human body 'to take up and transform, to its own account such a situation.'(PhP.p.169; F197). Her body (her entering the room, the look on her face, the way of her gaze, the movement of her limbs and so on,) creates a space; each of their bodies responds in congenial fashion. Here is the co-creation of a new reality through love and desire (PhP.p.154; F180). It is also an example of embodied subjects thrown open to the world through the transcendence of their bodies.

'Response' – Creative Adjustment

For people who view the world objectively, who do not think and live in terms of the phenomenal field, these examples will bristle with difficulties. Not so for poets, artists, lovers and mystics, I guess.¹⁰⁴ But let us return to the common room with the woman and the celibate priests.

Transcendence will always take things much further than you expected. That is the creative or co-creative element in us. Who could have anticipated that the arrival of this 'magic' woman would elicit such an energetic response from a low-level energy group of burnt-out '*patres*'? Merleau-Ponty warns us that it is possible to psychologize such an event and so miss out on its meaning, like reducing a ballet to the 'brilliance' of the choreography. The wonder in such an event is the creativity of the exchange or 'adjustment' that takes place. It is not just the priests who are enchanted by the woman but the woman is enchanted by the priests so that the magic is shared around.

Response *acknowledged* allows a space in which the dance can happen and ..in the dance the subject and his (her) world are no longer in opposition, no longer stand out one against the background of the other....' (PhP. p.287; F333 ft.nt.4).

We can see the promise that lies for development of progressive Gestalt therapy thinking, such as that of Malcolm Parlett when it draws upon the resources of Merleau-Ponty's thinking.

Holistic Response

Here we speak of the phenomenal field where the 'intentional threads linking (the body) to its surrounding', 'finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world' (PhP. p.72; F86). In the phenomenal field there is a continuous traffic of exchange between subject and world. In Gestalt therapy literature this is called 'contact'; I would

104 Heidegger in his later works referred to the 'knowledge' of the mystics: 'The breath of all growing things which rest along the pathway bestows the world. In what remains unsaid in their speech is, as Eckhart, the old master of letters and life says - God, only God.' (in Dunne, 1985, p.13).

go further and call it *dialectical* contact or even dialogue – if we wish to nuance the intimacy of the union. Just as the meaning of a word is not contained in its sound, but trails its context, the history it has for the hearers, as well as the face and style of the speaker, so neither is the response of the body contained by its dimensions or physiological data. It makes no sense to speak here in terms of cause and effect. Such explanation will tend to diminish and lose the heart of the matter, which is the transcendent power of the body.

The meaning of the gesture is not contained in it (the body) like some physical or physiological phenomenon. The meaning of the word is not contained in the word as sound. But the human body is defined in terms of its property of appropriating in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts; significant cores which transcend its natural powers (PhP. p.193; F226).

The body here responding is not the body as studied in medicine. It is the body that understands

... a logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms, and through which things of intersensory significance become possible for us....

...to have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those intersensory correspondences that lie beyond the segment of the world, which we are actually perceiving (PhP.p.326;F377).

Response – makes a New Space

We have stated the *immensity* of the field to which I have access through my body as the pivot of the world. And just as the worlds of others illumine my field, so does my world - my body - illumine theirs. Specifically, the gesture informed by a word or sound pervades the situation and imbues it with an aroma, which affects everyone present. I think of that story in the Gospel of St John (12.3) where the woman empties a whole jar of perfume over the feet of Jesus and everyone is affected by it. Of course, unless response is responded to, no dialogue will ensue. We call it ‘creative response’ because it opens up a

new space.

Here we see before us a whole hinterland inviting further exploration of the question of human space - What is the relation of dimensional space to the 'space' within which the psychotherapist and client meet? In what way do we carry our own 'space' around with us? What of the space in which the very depressed or anorectic person dwells?

Romanyshyn (1994) says it is more correct to say that the body *is* a situation rather than that it is *in* a situation. He illustrates this beautifully:

A smile on the face of a woman I love is inseparable from my face, which I present to her. Her smile has nothing to do with her insides. It has to do with my face, with our relationship. Moreover, her smile gathers a space around us in a specific felt bodily way. Her smile does not exist in a space that contains us. Rather her smile forms and shapes a space for us. It creates and radiates its space.
(1994 ft.nt.3 p.236)

In one of his most recent papers (2001) Yontef, without any invocation of 'transcendence' makes the same point.

We are not *in a field*; our very substance is *of a field* (p.82).

I have already drawn attention to the stir that this expression aroused in his audience.

Section Five: Intersubjectivity – The Goal of Transcendence

One of the most significant developments in Gestalt therapy during the past thirty years has been the move of focus away from the individual acting alone, to the person as part of a field. This I have spoken about earlier in the context of Gordon Wheeler's and Malcolm Parlett's work. As I pointed out, each of these writers is prophetically addressing the modern situation of Gestalt therapy and they each are profound and insightful in their analysis. Although I am coming from a different *point de départ*, I am travelling in the same direction. This study aims not to challenge the validity of their analysis but to supplement that analysis; to root what they say in a solid philosophical foundation and

enable the 'reform' and development which they, each in his own way, proclaims, to become operative in the everyday practice of Gestalt therapy. I see this as happening mainly through the re-instatement of the human body as the *locus* of the Field, as that by which, in which and through which we 'Respond', 'Interrelate', 'Self-Recognise' and 'Experiment' and 'Embody' (Parlett, 2000, p.20ff).

The Craving for Intersubjective Closeness

The logic of situatedness applies to the human body just as it does to everything. To think of the human being isolated, alone by himself cut off from the world of people and things, is to imagine unreality. Intentionally every cell in our bodies craves the closeness of other people like ourselves - in place of which we may substitute at times, other creatures like cats or dogs or projects such as academic distinction or business success. The closeness that we crave is not like that between the sea and the house in Sheila Cassidy's extraordinary poem:

Good neighbours
not that we spoke much.
We met in silences,
respectful, keeping our distance
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.

(in Cassidy 1989, p.8)

Such 'respectable' closeness is really distance and isolation.

From its very inception in the 1940's Gestalt therapy proclaimed and operated upon the principle that our union with the environment is very *close and intimate*.

You and your environment are not independent entities but together you constitute a functioning, mutually influencing total system.your sense of the unitary interfunctioning of you and your environment is contact

(PHG.p.104). Emphasis in text.

When we say 'boundary' we think of a 'boundary between'; but the contact-boundary, where the experience occurs, does not *separate* the organism and its environment (PHG p.275).

Such a formulation leaves out that which enables us to go out from ourselves – our transcendence. This primary insight has never got past its stuck place. We have seen how through lack of a philosophy articulate in such matters; the theoretical elaboration of this primary insight ran into very great difficulties. However, when one reads the record of the actual practice of Gestalt therapy, we see how unity and closeness between people was central to it. In fact, it was the implementation of this insight - sometimes bazaar, sometimes genuinely caring and loving, sometimes plainly exploitative - that brought the therapy into disrepute even in the lifetime of Perls himself.

The difficulty with Gestalt therapy is that it does not adequately explain itself. It is full of unspoken questions. One such question is this: What is it to be in the presence of another person?

The Difficulty about Intersubjectivity

How can I be with another person and see and experience her as a person like me? Because our being is given to us primarily as an '*I can*', the 'natural' thing is to see the other as part of the world and therefore as 'something-at-hand-for-use'. So, a man may view a woman or a woman a man as a possible sexual partner, without knowing anything whatsoever about that person. In our culture it is assumed to be in order to depersonalize people: so, people who work for a company are referred to as 'human resources', people who use services become 'consumers', politicians regard people as 'voters'. The tendency is to incorporate 'the other' as part of our on-going project. And such depersonalization seems to me in line with *a particular way of perceiving the world*. I do not agree with Wheeler that our primary orientation is interpersonal - our primary orientation is towards the *anonymous world* - 'psyche is the lived world' (Brooke, 1993, p.89) and fantasy or imagination is simply the on-going presence of the world around us. 'If we want to understand man's existence we must listen to the language of objects.' (Van den Berg.1972, p.40)

Phenomenologically, it seems to me that the analysis in *Gestalt Therapy* does not support us in opposing such depersonalisation, because it insufficiently supports embodied

subjectivity. Depersonalisation happens when I dismiss or disregard or miss the subjective interiority of the other. A supporting philosophy must explain the dialectic within which a person can manifest his interiority to me and I to him without shame. Without this *reciprocity* it seems impossible for any of us to see another as an 'alter ego'. There is more than a grain of truth in the saying that 'the eyes are the windows of the soul'. It was not just for fear of recognition that their captors insisted that Brian Keenan and John McCarthy wear a blind fold : they could not meet the gaze of those two men. It is difficult to look into the eyes of another without sensing their humanity, that is, their embodied subjectivity. Interiority does not disclose itself *as such*. We can get some idea of the difficulty in this from the exercise which Merleau-Ponty describes (PhP.p.448; F511). If I touch my left hand with my right hand, I cannot perceive my left hand *qua* touching my right hand, that is, in so far as it is a *subjectivity* perceiving my right hand (PhP.p.92; F108). Subjectivity as the presence of self to self does not happen with regard to 'another' self, if self is simply 'the function of contacting the actual transient present.' (PHG p.425)

Self, which is interiority, is not a phenomenon and therefore *as such* is imperceptible. These and other difficulties multiply so long as we envisage the self, either as a *thing* or as *sealed-up interiority*. Basic to the elaboration of any satisfactory understanding of intersubjectivity is a satisfactory understanding of the self.

The Deficient Notion of the Self in *Gestalt Therapy*

In the section on the Self, the authors 'consider the self as the function of contacting the actual transient present.' (PHG p.425). Self is *process*; but the self does not come to awareness but only the intentionality of the self - that is, the thing that the person is contacting. And 'the self is not to be thought of as a fixed institution; it exists wherever there is, in fact, a boundary interaction. To paraphrase Aristotle, "When the thumb is pinched, the self is the painful thumb". (PHG p. 427)¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵The dictum of Aristotle which he is paraphrasing used be a very familiar one in Thomistic Scholastic circles and was repeated in the Latin translation of Aristotle from the Arabic as: *Actiones sunt compositi* 'Actions belong to the whole person.'

Why do they not say: 'The self *is* the boundary interaction'? Not an entity in itself, the self is a being-toward-the-environment; in other words it cannot be known except in the environment. - just as the light of the sun cannot be seen except when it strikes objects. They explain further on:

'Self, the system of contacts, always integrates perceptive proprioceptive functions, motor muscular functions, and organic needs.... To put this another way...it is the sensory organ that perceives, it is the muscle that moves, it is the vegetative organ that suffers an excess or deficit; but it is the organism-as-a-whole in contact with the environment that is aware, manipulates, feels (PHG p.428).

I find this a very fair statement of Merleau-Ponty's view in the chapter on the Thing and the Natural World that, 'I perceive with my body...'. Although they do not speak from within the phenomenal field, I do not think they are here envisaging stimulus proceeding from the environment via the sensory organ to the Self where it is all integrated.

Otherwise, the movement is from the outside *in* and we are back to subject/object and the Cartesian discourse. However, three things I am missing in their account of the Self: firstly, any mention of subjectivity as *interiority*: This is precisely what distinguishes *self* from *thing*. Interiority in touch with itself over time *is* subjectivity. In the absence of this you can read over the quotes above and substitute 'ingenious electronic device ' for 'self' and the statements still make sense.

The second thing I am missing, and I have dealt with this previously, is any reflection on my awareness that I *am given to myself*. This comprises the whole *objective* or opaque side of myself - the Ground against which I 'stand out' (*existere - ex stare*).

Merleau-Ponty calls this

The central phenomenon at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others (PhP.p.360; F413)

The third element I find lacking in this description of the self is bound up with the two already mentioned: I am not only present to myself and aware that I am given to myself, but that these two find their realisation *in my body*. . This is the *only way* I know myself or can be manifest as a phenomenon and because it is bodily, such a presence is of its

very nature ambiguous - no event expresses the whole of me but every event expresses a part of me so that *over time* I manifest myself more and more.

I know myself only in my inherence in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in ambiguity (PhP.p.345).

It can justly be said that in this section – and, indeed, throughout the thesis - I do not sufficiently distinguish between Self, awareness, boundary, interiority, embodiment. While we need to make those distinctions for the sake of description these terms are all abstractions and are realized only in the lived body where they are indistinguishable. I do not see how such elaborations belong in the present context.

‘The Secret of the Presence of the Other.....’

There is a very difficult philosophical problem about the meeting of embodied subjectivities where they each meet the other precisely *as such*. We have not entered this problem which is discussed in great detail in Madison (1981, p37ff). Merleau-Ponty’s resolution is of great importance to us. He resolved this problem by his finding what he calls ‘the third genus of being’ (PhP p.350; FF402): *the lived body*.

It is through my body that I understand people, just as it is through my body that I know things (PhP.p186; F216).

Madison puts it this way:

The secret of the presence of the other resides therefore in the perception that I have of my own body..... It is the lived body as circular structure which, by accomplishing the synthesis of the *in itself* and the *for itself*, makes it be that my field of bodily experience intertwines with that of the other (1981, p.39)Italics mine.

Let me explain this rather compact thinking of Madison. As we grow up we learn what various objects are ‘for’. We see someone using a hammer, or a saw or a knife. My learning happens in the ways I’m told: this is a hammer and you hold it *so* and you do

such and such and it is useful for Talk will not teach us anything unless our body takes hold of it and goes through its motions. The second way makes this easier: we see and hear and stand beside someone using a hammer; he may even ‘give me a chance’ using it. Now my body dances with the hammer; just as a very small baby makes movements with its mouth if you pretend to chew its fingers. This is the circular structure of my body – I reach out and ‘become’ the thing in my world. We do this around all cultural objects.

The very first of all cultural objects and the one by which all the rest exist, is the body of the other person as the vehicle of a form of behaviour (PhP p.348; F401). Just as I have ‘the positing of objects through that of my body’ (PhP p.350; F402) – my hand, my muscles, the angle at which I work with the hammer (and vice-versa) – so also my body ‘gives me the other as the completion of the system “self-other-world”’ (PhP p.352; F404).

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty has not, I regret to say, fully developed this insight (Madison 1981, p 37). I would like to be able to say that we have in Merleau-Ponty’s early work a complete philosophy of intersubjectivity designer-made for Gestalt therapy. Not so. In that part of the *Phenomenology* where we might expect to find such a development (Ch IV of Part II) he is very taken up with how subjectivities can co-exist. Madison (loc. cit p.38) makes the point that in his solution of this problem he is implicitly criticising his revered teacher Edmund Husserl.¹⁰⁶ Another consideration is this: one cannot discourse about intimacy with another person without disclosing a lot about oneself.

Though incomplete in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty’s thought is profound and fertile. He devotes the fourth chapter of Part II The Perceived World under the heading

¹⁰⁶Whereas Husserl seems to have thought that consciousness or interiority was sufficient to constitute the world, Merleau-Ponty held that only through the body can the world be constituted. Husserl ends his *Cartesian Meditations* with a quote from St Augustine: *noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas*. Merleau-Ponty rejects this at the very start of the *Phenomenology*: ‘Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only ‘the inner man’,...there is no inner man’(PhP.p.xi;Fv.ft.note)

'The Other and the Human World' to a discussion of intersubjectivity. He sees this as an extension of the perception of the world. And it is in that context that it has a great deal to offer to Gestalt therapy theorists. In Gestalt therapy practice there is little focus on the perception of the natural world yet this is the basis of all intersubjectivity. At the head of Part II he makes the point strongly that how you think about your body is how you will perceive the world: 'The Theory of the Body is already a theory of perception' (PhP p.203;F235). His approach is to show how the Now is interwoven (*entrelacement*) with the past. My present personal acts build upon sedimented past acts. Other subjectivities emerge from a cultural world that everywhere bears their marks. The same reciprocity that binds us to the world of things binds us to one another. In summary it is through the reciprocity of their bodies that subjectivities can recognise each other *as such*.

Unfortunately he has not left us in the *Phenomenology* an explanation of what Martin Buber calls the 'I-Thou relationship'. However, there is a great deal more development in his later works.

A very evocative and interesting question arises: Does Merleau-Ponty's incompleteness on intersubjectivity arise from the very nature of his approach in *Phenomenology* or did it *just happen* that he did not develop the theme? I have no definite view on that and I see it an invitation for a further study.

Section Six: The Between – A Healing Perception

In order to develop Merleau-Ponty's thought for the foundation of Gestalt therapy we need to come from the same viewpoint as he did: Merleau-Ponty sees the meeting of embodied subjectivities in terms of the intimate interconnectedness of being-in-the-world. Just as my thrownness means that I find myself *belonging in the world* so, through my body I find the presence of the other's body is given to me. It is not a question of my recognising the other by a *process of analogy* nor by a process of inference that the other is human like me. We are both present within the same world, through our sense functions we contact the otherness of that world. Each of us is contacting that world in our own special way yet sharing in a general way: by smell,

sight, hearing, feeling and so on. This means that what I smell, see, hear and so on, must be extended through that other person's smelling, seeing, hearing and so on. We all know how, in surprise or apprehension we can turn to someone and say did *you* hear that? Did *you* see that? If they say 'Yes', our response is totally different than if they say 'No'. We find that confirmation or doubt alters the whole configuration of our world, and the other's field is a prolongation of mine. As he says 'Yes' it is as if my intention/experience is continued in him and he sees my world from his special point of view. *How* do I know that he sees what I see, hears what I hear and so on? By his voice, his demeanour, his look, his gestures, his movements, by his lived body response. My body knows this – I don't pick up 'the data' and turn it into a series of inferences, I just *know*. And, if I think he is deceiving me, I can know that only by comparison with what I would be like if he was *not* deceiving me.

.... It is precisely my body that perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world (PhP p.354; F406).

Just as my eyes, ears, smell, touch become the logos, the utterance of a world that can be perceived that way, so now, all my perspectives become intermeshed with the perspectives of the other and become the logos of 'Being'.

'Just as my different perspectives on a thing are interwoven by being all specification of this general object situation, the global perspective that I am (that definitively characterises my reality and individuality) is interwoven with that of every other, all being specification of general Being-in-the-world' (Mallin, 1979, p.49).

Here we have a clue to why it is so important, so transformative, to share with the other, why we find that the therapeutic component in therapy is not so much my display of great learning nor my acuity of interpretation, nor my impressive qualifications, *but the quality of the way in which we are able to share our perceived worlds*. The other, in the way he looks, talks, listens, responds *gives me back my world* as validated because he represents a different perspective on the world of my experience. This is not just 'an exchange of

views' but a bodily experience, like I said above. 'A body-subject is actually presented and given to me essentially as another perspective or organization of the world itself' (Mallin, *ibid*). Such validation is important even around our football team – and indeed inspires this whole vast enterprise of football competitions; it becomes something else when it has to do with deep fears, terrors, griefs and losses of hope and meaning, which is the area of psychotherapy. This is the 'healing perception', the experience of 'the Between'.

The Anonymous in the Between

And so I find myself caught up in a system of reflection - not *withdrawal* reflection, but *mirroring* reflection in which I recognise myself because *I am recognised*. I think of what Wright (1991, p.13) says about the child finding its identity in the eyes of the mother - so that the mother delivers his meaning to the child by finding her joy in him and the child delivers her meaning to his mother by finding himself in her eyes.¹⁰⁷ Yet for Merleau-Ponty there is always something anonymous about the meeting and it is always a meeting of lived bodies.

I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, (*forment ensemble un système*), so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously. (PhP.p.354; F406)

The Between – Involves the Whole of Me

This is the same *immediacy* that I have with things. The thrust of transcendence is

¹⁰⁷ As the title of his book indicates, *Vision and Separation*, the whole subject of seeing and being seen is treated at length over several chapters in this remarkable work.

towards the essence of the thing. The essence of the other person is his embodied subjectivity and the opaqueness into which that subjectivity withdraws. We can apply here to the relationship with the other the analysis he gives of our relationship with the things of the world.

It is not just my eyes that see and my ears that hear and my nose that smells and my hands that sense texture, 'I perceive with my body' (PhP.p.326;F376)

When I perceive a pebble, I am not expressly conscious of knowing it only through my eyes, of enjoying only certain perspective aspects of it, and yet an analysis in these terms, if I undertake it, does not surprise me. (PhP.p.326;F376)

The whole of me is brought to bear on the perceptual object. I am given manifold aspects and each is responded to by a 'creative adjustment' on my part, so that I begin to *live* the thing; - 'In order to perceive things we need to live them' (PhP.p.325;F376). When we look at it in detail, we see that a great cascade of data is poured over us in even the simplest perception.¹⁰⁸

The thing is not all of a piece, for though the perspective aspects, and the ever-changing flow of appearances, are not explicitly posited, all are at least ready to be perceived and given in a non-positing consciousness, to precisely the extent necessary for me to be able to escape from them into the thing.(PhP.p.326;F376)

The Between is Inexhaustible

This flood of data is not posited in awareness but only such details of the thing - size, colour, shade, texture as I require to have, so that I can abandon them and gain access to *the thing* - the person. Merleau-Ponty makes it clear, that whereas our perception is all about reaching the thing,

¹⁰⁸This is a recurring theme in the work of Karl Rahner: 'the (human) subject is fundamentally and by its very nature pure openness for absolutely everything, for being as such.'(Foundations 1984, p.20) He sees transcendence as 'the experience of being known' (op.cit. p58). He is writing as a theologian about the love of God.

‘ the ipseity is, of course, never reached: each aspect of the thing which falls to our perception is still only an invitation to perceive beyond it, still only a momentary halt in the perceptual process (PhP.p.233; F269).

Transcendence, which is the thrust of my existence, draws me on by the promise of more to be seen while the transcendence of the thing means that it always escapes from me into its ‘aseity’ - ‘its unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws.’ (ibid.), So that, ‘What makes the ‘reality’ of the thing is therefore, precisely what snatches it from my grasp.’(ibid)

So it is, that although we may live a whole lifetime with a person - what we know of them is nothing compared to what we do not know of them.

The Between: A Basis for Ethics

It is possible to see in this philosophy of the person the foundation for the ethical practice, which informs Gestalt therapy to-day. Especially am I thinking of that culture of respect for the client, which marks the modern practice of Gestalt therapy. We never take the person for granted, we never presume that we know better than the client how she should live her life. And, however ill a person may be, they never cease to merit our best caring.

A Review of the Section on Intersubjectivity

Everything about us, right from the beginning of our lives calls for relationship with another person. Intentionality, anonymity, transcendence all serve intersubjectivity. Even so, Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of intersubjectivity in the ‘Phenomenology’ is incomplete, but it is beyond the scope of this study to follow the development of his thought into his later works. Intersubjectivity is of special interest to Gestalt writers. From the start the thing that distinguished Gestalt therapy has been its placing the core therapeutic element in the relationship between therapist and client. However, the theory supporting Gestalt therapy has been inadequate and has not facilitated a more profound development of the understanding of this primary insight. The concept of subjectivity in Gestalt therapy theory is weak and inadequate and divorced from ‘body’: the concept is missing three

essential elements: interiority, givenness, and corporeity.

To some extent we can draw on what Merleau-Ponty has taught about these concepts to elaborate a notion of intersubjectivity which founds Gestalt therapy practice.

Conclusion

Gestalt therapy already carries the promise of a new and more complete way of viewing the world. To develop this new way a method, a more structured and creative way of discussing perception must be taken on. There is evidence to show that the task is too much for the old terminology. Therefore, I bring in the four concepts: Intentionality, Anonymity, Transcendence and Intersubjectivity. These concepts enable us to move with ease and develop with elegance the discourse in that realm proper to Gestalt therapy called the 'phenomenal field'. This is characterised by openness to the totality of perception.

Chapter 11 – Concluding Chapter

Chapter Preview

Section One: Learnings in Regard to Training

Trainers – Models of Gestalt Approach

An Example of a Body-Based Trainer

Gestalt Therapy Training in the Universities

Section Two: Areas of Further Study

Spirituality

The Concept and Place of Truth in Gestalt Therapy Theory

Epistemological Approach

Truth as an Existential Issue

Truth in Relation to Authenticity

Section One: Learnings in Regard to Training

I would recommend a re-direction or re-focus of the Core Curriculum around the lived body. It seems to me, perfectly feasible to have that curriculum follow the lines sketched out by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, where the Body features as the core of every chapter. I find the attitude ‘Gestalt-and-bodywork’ is quite established and will not easily give way to a Gestalt therapy more centrally and professedly based in the lived body. Long-term, trainers may learn to think primarily in terms of the lived body, and secondarily in terms of ‘a curriculum to be taught’. Thinking in terms of the lived body means, for instance, when teaching the ‘Field’ – to follow some of the exercises in Wheeler’s *Beyond Individualism*; teaching ‘Interruptions to Contact’ means allowing the trainees to experience repeatedly and reflect upon repeatedly, that experience of those interruptions in their own bodies. This is part of the application of the hermeneutic circle to themselves. Whereas there may be great deal of experimental work

as part of the training, there needs to be an emphasis on *reflection* upon this and trainees require instruction in how to reflect upon an event. This is best done in small groups with each one articulating how the experiment was for him/her in an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement, totally devoid of competition.

As I have pointed out in my text there is a considerable amount of writing in Gestalt therapy at present, which is forgetful of the body as the realization of the person.

Trainers – Models of Gestalt Approach

In training it is necessary for trainers to model body-centred Gestalt therapy for trainees. This has to do with the personal interest they take in each trainee; the way in which they continually check-out with them how each is in regard to the personality of the trainer, how valued they feel, how really listened-to and understood they feel. This process of personal involvement with each trainee has very little to do with the multiplication of 'feed-back sheets', the 'grading' of tutors or the assessment of performance targets achieved. These things are all excursions into the 'objective' world and do not belong as part of training in Gestalt therapy. Training in Gestalt therapy has got to be trust-based. If a candidate is not trust-worthy then he should not be in training. If this personal engagement is there from the start, and if it is maintained as an integral part of training, then the 'discovery' of trainees unsuited to the Gestalt therapy way and their retirement from the courses will happen much sooner and with less bitterness. These trainees will themselves be embodied and will grow in sensitivity for damaging or disintegrating elements within the training group.

An Example of a Body-Based Trainer

I would like to sketch out how a particular trainer whom I know very well goes about personalizing his Gestalt approach for his students/trainees.

Before he delivers a training course he is careful to learn beforehand the names of the

participants. He personalises the packets of notes he prepares for each of them. He greets each personally before the workshop and then the first exercise will be a 'check-in' where he invites them to engage with the polarities of their attendance ('I want to be here ..'. 'I don't want to be here...') and to say what could get in the way of their learning this day. So there is no defensiveness, no gratuitous assumption that all the trainees are equally pleased to be where they are. This procedure in establishing a personal connection with each student is his Gestalt therapy way of *facilitating learning*. He also implicitly challenges them in regard to preconceptions they may be bringing as to what *learning is about*. Of course all this consumes a lump of the time assigned for the workshop, and this will come quite obliquely to anyone who thinks that learning is mainly introjection, the unreflective swallowing of 'stuff', dealt out by the learned professor; in other words, this approach challenges the 'mug and jug' approach.

This is not the usual approach in academic circles; and, indeed, teachers who endeavour to personalize their teaching can meet with much opposition¹⁰⁹. I am not saying that this is the way *it should be* or that this approach is better than another. The point I am making is to highlight the *contrasting philosophies of learning* which obtain in the institute of Gestalt therapy training and the university faculties.

Gestalt Therapy Training in the Universities

The most far reaching development that has occurred in Gestalt therapy in the UK during the past ten years has been the development of close links between Gestalt institutes of training and some of the universities. This, for many reasons, is a most welcome development in that it benefits the universities, who will now embrace Gestalt therapy influence and values, as part of their ethos; and it benefits the institutes in that they have the benefit of university resources and expertise in a whole variety of ways. It is also a greater inducement to the students to specialize in Gestalt therapy with the prospect of an

¹⁰⁹ Recently, a teacher from a British University was invited to the Sorbonne to deliver a series of specialist lectures to a postgraduate audience. He attempted to be more personal with them. Many got up and left.

award with degree status, which may open the way to a career in psychotherapy. This is all taking place in the context of a general tightening up of regulations controlling the registration of psychotherapists and the practice of psychotherapy (Bradley 2001, p.4ff).

One of the problems that calls for study is the difficulty of aligning the prerequisites for training in Gestalt therapy with the prerequisites for the study of similar realms of discourse in other faculties of the university, clinical psychology for instance. It is not clear to me that when we call Gestalt therapy a 'human science' we mean exactly the same thing as we mean when we call psychology or sociology a human science. As I said earlier in this study, in order to be accepted as a trainee in any of the institutes, one has already to accept a whole cohort of values and beliefs. For instance one has to accept that he/she is entering upon a course of training which requires belief in the human being as present in the world in a way totally different from the presence of anything else in the world; in other words the scientific method of induction is out of bounds for this student as a methodology appropriate to his realm of discourse. (Of course, he can use it in related spheres - just as Merleau-Ponty did when learning from the researches of Goldstein in his Frankfurt institute). For instance again, it is fundamental to the Gestalt therapy method that, in order to deal appropriately with a human being in anything but the most casual way, I must first establish the basis of a relationship with that person; that way mutual respect will enable our dialogue to be real.

It could benefit everyone to know more about the ethos that binds Gestalt therapy trainers and trainees from diverse institutes even from different countries and continents into a loose but identifiable community than those bind university staff and students into a community. What values do they share?¹¹⁰ What common basic beliefs motivate their work? What I would like to see is a shared research project in which a small number of researchers, agreeing upon a set of values and beliefs which made it possible for them to undergo the very exacting Gestalt therapy training, explore in a systematic and agreed

¹¹⁰ In all my years of training and working in Gestalt institutes I have never once come upon any incident of theft - although I know there was opportunity for it. This exemplifies the value of mutual respect.

way, the values and beliefs implicit in the teaching and *modus operandi* of the institutes of training. Abundant and stimulating material for such a project can be found in the work of Hadot (2001A and 2001B) and also of his colleague, Voelke, A-J. (1993).

Section Two: Areas of Further Study

Spirituality

There is great interest amongst Gestalt therapists in spirituality. This was brought home to me some years back when I published an article in the British Gestalt Journal (1994) on the philosopher and mystic Nicolas Berdyaev whose attitudes and teachings seemed to me to have a lot to say to Gestalt therapists. To my surprise and joy, I was awarded the 1994 Ed Nevis Journal Prize. This prize is 'organized in honour of Ed Nevis's important service to the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, (and) designed to highlight worthy contributions for the entire community of Gestalt practitioners.' Then four years later, when I published a study of Gestalt therapy principles facing a 'limit situation', - a study of the spirituality of Ety Hillesum, trainee therapist and diarist who perished in Auschwitz in 1943, I received a remarkable number of phone calls and letters from Gestalt therapists in the UK, validating what I had said in the article and asking for more.

I see the study of spirituality as basically a study of the phenomenology of perception. Whereas Gestalt therapy is not to be confused with a cognitive-behavioural approach which deals professedly with the level of the *cogitatio* or the thinking level of the person, Gestalt therapy likes people to *think* even while they engage at the more profound level of the pre-reflective. So, it is quite in order for Gestalt therapy student to approach spirituality from the point of view of the phenomenology of perception. There are, of course, other ways too - but in this chapter I am dealing with possible studies which would be a continuation and development of this present study. If such students would be willing to parallel the development of our understanding of perception with the growth and development of Gestalt therapy, I see the possibility of a whole flight of very interesting studies. I think, for instance, of the relationship between Edith Stein and

Husserl with whom she was on intimate terms for many years as a young and promising student. I think of the possibility of studying the Rules for Discernment in the Exercises of St Ignatius - which contain a lot of 16th Century “Gestalt therapy” material (Robert, S.,1997). There is an abundance of resources readily available.

When I say that such studies would require an acceptance of the parallel growth of phenomenology and Gestalt therapy, I am thinking of the strong current of which I am aware, amongst some Gestalt students to unanchor themselves from the past, to disown the traditions out of which those very questions which we now wrestle with have been handed down to us. The past, our ancestors, our teachers from former times are present in our bodies and operative in our lives.

A promising area of further study could be the phenomenology of the Family Constellation work of Bert Hellinger. In his work Hellinger continually stresses how it is totally based upon what the body perceives (1998, p.254).¹¹¹ Hellinger himself was for several years a practising Gestalt therapist and then, building upon his ‘family systemic’ work in Africa, he engaged in his acclaimed constellation work. Having had a lot of experience with this work over several years, I am convinced that it is a development of Gestalt therapy incorporating the dynamics of the ontological situatedness.

There is vast amount of work waiting to be done on the later works of Merleau-Ponty and their relevance to the practice of Gestalt therapy. I was very aware of this all the time during my study. A pointer in this direction is Part III of Professor Dillon’s book (1997).

The Concept and Place of Truth in Gestalt Therapy Theory

I have already touched on this elsewhere and explained my far-too-cursory treatment of the question. It is intimately related to what some of us call *the Gestalt Community*; I

¹¹¹ Hellinger puts it even more clearly in his unpublished manuscript (1992). Working with family constellations (given to workshop participants): Instructions to Representatives: ‘Centre yourselves, collect yourselves, forget your own problems, your intentions, your goals. Just notice the feelings and sensations which arise as you re-mold ... trust your body reactions’ (loc.cit.p.2).

have remarked how easily trust develops between members as they meet together for conferences and the like. This would not be possible without an assumption that the members were 'living in truth': transparency is one of the things that draws people to Gestalt therapy in the first place. Like the air and the pull of the earth, we take truth for granted in our work and meetings, yet people constantly declare its impossibility, as I have demonstrated.

Any study of truth will once more involve an engagement with the question of perception. I see there are three main aspects of this question which we could further study with considerable profit: the epistemological approach, the existential issue and truth in relation to authenticity.

Epistemological Approach

What do we mean when we talk about 'truth'? There are as many different kinds of truth as there are kinds of evidence. Propositional truth is different from situational truth. The evidence of a propositional truth is not the same as the evidence of a situational truth and not the same as the evidence of a body truth. Basically, the foundation of all our talk about truth is to be found in 'those very aspects of our lived experience that cannot be sublimated by cognitive experience' (Mallin 1979, p.201). The core of this 'lived experience' 'lies in that perpetual beginning of reflection at the point where an individual life begins to reflect on itself....' (PhP.p.62). In contrast to those who place 'truth' in a world of ideas, Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology* sets himself to describe that *perception of the world* which founds for all time our idea of truth (PhP.p.xi;Fv). In other words, all truth derives from that primary experience in which the very act of perception is its own evidence. Even though he changes this thinking somewhat about truth from the time of the *Phenomenology* to that of the *Visible and Invisible* (Dupond,P. 2001, p.62) Merleau-Ponty always maintained that the basis of truth is body experience. (cf Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.3ff). A thorough investigation of this could yield us ideas about truth congenial to Gestalt therapy, in place of the present confusion that I have touched on in my study.

Truth as an Existential Issue

This approach is summed up in that saying of Nicolas Berdyaev:

I have always thought ...that truth serves no one and nothing;
we must serve truth. (1944 p.14)

This theme is taken up by the eminent Jesuit scholar Michael J. Buckley (1978), as also in his monumental work on atheism (1987, p.197 et passim). His detailed analysis, (1978, pp.647ff) of the work of the six moments in the claim of truth upon us, could serve as a model of the application of the phenomenological method in this important and difficult area for Gestalt therapists. The difficulty of entering this area and speaking of the 'claim of truth upon us' is that it seems to be going right against the accepted Gestalt therapy position which abhors any kind of dogmatism. But this is very much in line with the existential phenomenological analysis of Heidegger (1927/1973): *Conscience and the Call of Care* (p.319). Dogmatism happens as soon as I forget that

I do not coincide with my life, which is forever fleeing from itself, in spite of which there *are* inner perceptions. For the same reason I am open to both illusion and truth about myself: that is, there are acts in which I collect myself together in order to surpass myself. (PhP.p.383;F439)

Truth and non-truth are inseparable; in every perception of myself there is deviation of some kind, sometimes great, sometimes little. Yet it is only by the presence of truth that I can even begin to recognise 'deviation'.

Joseph C. Zinker (1998, pp.244ff) takes up the theme of illusion and lies and their effect upon intersubjectivity, in his book on couples' therapy. His approach is pragmatic rather than philosophical, as one would expect. He devotes more space to this subject than any other Gestalt therapy writer I know about.

There is also Stephen Schoen's remarkable *Presence of Mind* (1994,pp.14,15) where he implicitly treats of the status of truth in psychotherapy but avoids the difficult question of the morality of truth-telling. The amount of material available for any student wishing to do a special study in this area of existential truth is truly immense. An interesting possible approach for a non-professional philosopher would be to study the question through the

life of some philosopher who was obsessed with the subject. For instance Heidegger - especially with the guidance of William J. Richardson's *Heidegger - Through Phenomenology to Thought* (1963); Kierkegaard was another like that, or Berdyaev, obsessed about the importance of living the truth. And then to relate this to 'truth' as it is enshrined in our codes of practice and understood amongst us.

Truth in Relation to Authenticity

This is the question of the struggle between 'good faith' and 'bad faith' that plays itself out in the depths of the human heart. I am in 'good faith' when I am authentic, I am in 'bad faith' when I am unauthentic. In order to fall into 'bad faith' I must first of all tell myself a lie. The *locus classicus* for this is, of course, J.P. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* Part I ch.2

There are even men (e.g., caretakers, overseers, gaolers), whose social reality is uniquely that of the No, who will live and die having forever been a No upon the earth. Others, so as to make the No a part of their very subjectivity, establish their human personality as a perpetual negation. This is the meaning, and function, of what Scheler calls 'the man of resentment' - in reality the No.
(Sartre, J.P. 1943/1956, p.87)

Such a direction can undergo a whole series of variations. One such is for it to turn back on the person himself so that he arrives at the point where he denies the truth to himself. On the one hand he knows the truth on the other hand he denies it. This is different from plain lying. There you have the deceived and the deceiver, two consciousness. Here there is single consciousness, which is in denial to itself. One can see what a promising area for investigation by a psychotherapist this would be.

Lack of authenticity is a recurring difficulty in psychotherapy not just for clients but for the psychotherapists themselves. Sometimes it affects just individuals and that is hurtful enough to psychotherapy as an enterprise. But it can also affect institutes of training and then the consequences can be very damaging indeed. In this connection we can take to heart the warning of that very great Canadian philosopher, Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan

has something very important to say to Gestalt therapists so I shall quote him *in extenso* below. He is writing in the context of explaining the functions of meaning; how meaning is derived from the community, and communities are of different kinds fostering different values.

This process for the schoolteacher is education, for the sociologist it is socialisation, for the cultural anthropologist it is acculturation, but for the individual in the process it is his coming to be a man/woman, existing as a person in the fuller sense of the name.

Such existing may be authentic or unauthentic and this may occur in two different ways.....

‘As Kierkegaard asked whether he was a Christian, so divers men can ask themselves whether or not they are genuine Catholics or Protestants, Muslims or Buddhists, Platonists or Aristotelians, Kantians or Hegelians, artists or scientists, and so forth. Now they may answer that they are, and their answers may be correct. But they can also answer affirmatively and still be mistaken. In that case there will exist a series of points in which they are what the ideals of the tradition demand, but there will be another series in which there is a greater or lesser divergence. These points of divergence are overlooked from a selective inattention, or from a failure to understand, or from an undetected rationalization. What I am is one thing, what a genuine Christian or Buddhist is, is another, and I am unaware of the difference. My unawareness is unexpressed. I have no language to express what I am, so I use the language of the tradition I unauthentically appropriate, and thereby I devalue, distort, water-down, corrupt that language.

Such devaluation, distortion, corruption may occur only in scattered individuals. But it may occur on a more massive scale, and then the words are repeated, but the meaning is gone. The chair was still the chair of Moses, but it was occupied by the Scribes and Pharisees. The theology was still scholastic, but the scholasticism was decadent. The religious order still read out the rules, but one wonders whether the home fires were still burning. The sacred name of science may still be invoked but, as Edmund Husserl has argued, all significant scientific

ideals can vanish to be replaced by the conventions of a clique. So the unauthenticity of individuals becomes the unauthenticity of a tradition. Then, in the measure a subject takes the tradition, as it exists, for his standard, in that measure he can do no more than authentically realize unauthenticity' (Lonergan 1975, p.80).

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Appendix A

A Phenomenology of Sexual Violation

Appendix Preview

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Introduction

Defining the Enquiry

Despite the discouragement of knowing something of the immense complexity of this subject I have decided to go ahead and include A Phenomenology of Sexual Violation. Firstly I entitle it *a* phenomenology. It is just *one* analysis of *one* aspect of this complex phenomenon. It is important to say this, as there are many other phenomenologies that could be written about it. One could write a phenomenology of the violence in a person – a man’s violence being quite different from a woman’s and each person’s being different from everyone else’s. One could write a phenomenology of deviant sex or perversion – ‘*The Erotic Form of Hatred*’ after the style of Robert Stoller’s amazing work (1986). One could write a phenomenology of criminal violence using the enormous flood of works such as Gordon Burn’s “*Somebody’s Husband, Somebody’s Son*” (1985) or Brian Master’s *Killing for Company* (1986). There are many possible phenomenologies of sexual violence.

I am intending to take just *one* aspect of this phenomenon and, in the memory of my clinical experience, and in the light of what I have written in previous chapters *meditate on its structures*. The aspect I choose is this: *What is it about sexual violation that causes such cataclysmic difficulties for people – men and woman – who suffer such a violation?*

I am *not* proposing to discuss whether what I say is what people call ‘physical’ and ‘emotional’ violence upon children – can there be one without the other? The violence is upon the person. I am not entering a debate about the difference between adult and childhood sexual abuse. I am not arguing that sexual violation *in all cases* results in traumatic subversion of the person’s life. I am not entering the question of consensual or half-consensual sexual violence – no more than I am envisaging sado-masochistic practices. Nor am I entering the minefield of people who say they have been sexually violated, but whose world has not been subverted by the event; nor of those who ‘don’t know’ if they were sexually violated but whose world is subverted. These are all important questions – perhaps far more important than the one I am asking: *What happens that is so destructive?*

In this Appendix A I intend to illustrate my contention that the radical phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty affords the Gestalt psychotherapist with an infrastructure which opens up the profound dimensions of his/her work. I propose to look at the phenomenon of sexual intrusion which underlies mental illness just as much to-day as it did in Freud’s time¹¹² and ask a question about it. There is an abundant literature available on this subject. What is not available is a literature, which interrogates the phenomenon itself. In this chapter I set out to answer the question: Wherein resides the destructive element in the act of sexual intrusion which devastates so many people? My guess is that much of what I say applies also to ‘physical’ violence and ‘emotional’ violence that is not genital. I stay with the sexual violence so that I do not have to modify and qualify my statements too much. There is no such thing, of course, as *simple* ‘physical’ or ‘emotional’ or ‘sexual’ violence. They all overlap.

¹¹²‘In his earliest accounts before 1897, Freud regarded the neurotic mind as one which has been subverted from the outside, by other people’ (Mitchell 1988, p.42).

Cultural Opaqueness Indicates the Domain of our Enquiry

It is significant for our enquiry to remark the general blindness, which obtains amongst sections of the population in Great Britain, in the Republic of Ireland and in the USA to the nature of sexual violation.¹¹³ The significance resides in the fact that the defect of perception, which prevents people taking sexual intrusion seriously, is the very defect of perception that Merleau-Ponty so robustly opposes in his philosophy. This opaqueness¹¹⁴ is to be attributed, I think, to a cultural habit of stepping back and looking at things, as we say, *objectively*.¹¹⁵ The 'idea' of sexual intrusion does not advertise its lived meaning. This is lived out in the tormented bodies of those who have suffered violation. The lived meaning operates 'in the domain of the phenomenal and does not run through the objective world' (PhP.p.106; F123)¹¹⁶, so that *my thoughts about* an event displace the *reality* of that event, so far as I am concerned. Full perception requires of us that we go beyond 'the idea of the objective world' (PhP p.58; F71), and leave ourselves open to that

¹¹³For Great Britain cf *The Waterhouse Report* (1999); for the Irish Republic - in Dec.1994 the Irish Government was brought down by the disclosure of attempts to pervert the course of justice on behalf of a pedophile priest cf. *Irish Times* 02.12.1994. The blindness of the USA bishops is amply documented by Rigali in *Theological Studies* March 1994, 55.1,pp.124-139, cf Livezey (1987); Müller A. (1983;1988;1991); Sanford (1992); de Mause (1991). For a history of child abuse up to the 19th Century with abundant references cf de-Mause (ed) 1991.

¹¹⁴About the Waterhouse Report (1999): It details how, over a period of 25 years, scores of the most vulnerable young people in society, placed for safety in residential homes in North Wales, were outrageously abused in their persons by the very people appointed to care for them. The full report of the enquiry is set out in half-a-million words, took four years to compile and cost £13.5 million. Hundreds of people knew or suspected the abuse, but took no action.

¹¹⁵Romanyshyn (1994) chronicles the growth in disengagement from the world and the subversion of lived perception in his riveting and apocalyptic work.

¹¹⁶Merleau-Ponty. The context here is body spatiality and the explanation of how a patient can readily scratch a place on his body but not point to it.

All references in this Appendix to *Phenomenology of Perception* will be made as in the body of the text.

most difficult of all experiences: ‘...to know precisely what we see’ (PhP.p.58;F71). Professor Martin Dillon (1997) explains well how we can miss what is right under our noses, when he says:

....it is evident that the result of coupling the experience error¹¹⁷ with the prejudice of determinate being is a transformation of perception into thought about things. A reversal has taken place: the concept, itself founded on the percept, becomes the model and measure of the percept.The authentic experience of perception has been obscured, and perceptual reality has been displaced by an idea of reality (p.62).

In this Appendix, I make little explicit reference to Gestalt therapy theory and practice. I have done that sufficiently in the previous chapters to enable the reader to make the applications for him/herself. To engage in such explicit applications - detailing what Gestalt theorists say, and drawing attention to the strengths and weaknesses of such theories would excessively increase the length of this chapter of my study. Merleau-Ponty has nothing to teach Gestalt therapists about the detail of psychotherapeutic intervention. They are, in that field, accomplished experts. What they can learn is a deeper understanding of the theory, which supports their interventions, skills and strategies.

Section One: Psychopathology as a World Complete In Itself

A Summary of the argument in this Appendix

Briefly my argument is as follows: Sexual intrusion is the violation of a person’s body and, therefore, of the total person in every area of their being. Because it masquerades as love its violence destroys a person’s openness to love. It assaults a person in that area of her/his being where they are most vulnerable, because the sexual area is precisely that area of our being where a thing or person *begins to exist for us through desire or love*

¹¹⁷ ‘What we know to be in things we immediately take as being in our experience of them.’ (PhP.p.5;F11)
Here it is the thing conceived under the ideal of absolute determination.

(PhP.p.154; F180). That dialogue with the world, which at once tells a person who she is, that she belongs and that she is beautiful, is subverted. Her world is taken away from her and in its place she has the world of the violator in a mutuality of ugliness.

I wish now to state the same thing in another way.

We are here concerned with the way dialogue with the world, that never-ending exchange between each of us, and his environment, is connected with a person's welfare. (When we speak in this way we must bear in mind that the perceiver is, in a way, also the perceived.) We have seen elsewhere that the environment tells us who we are, whether or not we belong and whether or not we are valued for ourselves. The experience of being valued for oneself is to feel beautiful.

Following Merleau-Ponty I shall demonstrate that it is possible to regard a psychopathological condition as a way of life making complete sense in itself; such a condition can persist once it has the status of 'an acquired world'. An acquired world is sustained by the persistence of that *primordial contact* with the world, which is the basis of all subsequent experience. Thereafter our world is elaborated by our introjection of the cultural learnings, parental attitudes and the like. All this happens through the living body. Our most powerful learning happens through our intersubjective relations where the other becomes an extension of ourselves. The logic of situation leaves a person open to having the acquired world of another which subverts the 'givens' of primordial contact and in which the person loses contact with herself and finds her world contaminated by another; so, instead of a world of beauty and belonging we have a world of alienation and ugliness.

The Protean Idea - Psychopathology as a System

Merleau-Ponty in the course of his *Phenomenology* speaks a good deal about psychopathology and psychoanalysis. He shows great respect for the work of Freud and makes generous use of his psychoanalytic descriptions; yet he does this, as usual, by incorporating it into his own view of being-in-the-world and giving it his own particular

slant. In Freud's view, psychopathology was the consequence of 'leakage' or carry-over from the repressed unconscious into the functional world of that person; so, a girl traumatised in the oral phase of sexual development becomes fixated in that phase and becomes unwilling/unable to speak, as a sign of her refusal to participate in communal life. This hidden trauma is activated by her mother's prohibition on her seeing her boyfriend (PhP.p.160;F187). Merleau-Ponty's take on this is to see it *not* primarily as a sexual problem but as an *interruption* of the dialogue between the girl and her world. Sexuality, he sees as very important but not to be confused with *genitality* - 'not the mere effect of processes having their seat in the genital organs', but rather 'a general power, which the psychosomatic subject enjoys, of taking root in different settings, of establishing himself through different experiences, of gaining structures of conduct' (PhP.p.158; F185). It is not my intention to pursue Merleau-Ponty's *interpretations* of her various symptoms but rather am I interested in his general comments on the situation. The sick girl, he says, is not miming in her body a drama played out in her consciousness...neither is she making a 'gesture'; she has 'lost her voice as one loses a memory - like 'looking past a friend I do not wish to see' (PhP. p.162;F189-190).

..if I lose my power of speech, Peter no longer exists for me as an interlocutor, sought or rejected; *what collapses is the whole field of possibilities*. I cut myself off even from that mode of communication and significance which silence provides (ibid.italics mine).

Because my existence is given to me not as an 'I am' but as an 'I can' (PhP.p.137;F160), the collapse of whole fields of possibilities means the collapse of the person's world - because my world is literally a world of *possibilities*. This is a bodily collapse because, 'my body is a movement towards the world' and if the possibility is removed then there is nowhere to move to. And yet the girl carries on living. Truly, she does not eat and she does not talk, but she is aware of her parents' worry, her senses are still structures open to the world - because when her mother gives permission for her to see her boyfriend again, she recovers.

In these views we have an example of what W.J. Richardson (1979, p.2) calls Merleau-Ponty's 'protean idea' that psychopathology was not just an illness but a whole way of life with its own systems and balances and compensations, its paths of articulation and an instantaneous intercommunication between all the sectors of it. That is why he will say that the girl's loss is analogous to the loss of a limb by an insect which then passes over into a whole new mode of 'life-without-a-leg'. It is also why he will say that people who suffer disablement become unhappy only in the light of *comparison* with their former life before disablement, or in comparison with others who are not disabled. Illness forms a whole system of its own, a complete life. It would approximate to what he elsewhere calls 'an acquired' world. It is not uncommon in people who suffer the loss of a beloved one through accident or alleged medical negligence, to consume the rest of their lives in recrimination and bereavement. It becomes for them *a complete way of life*, which finds articulation in the decor of their homes, their dress, their interests their conversation and, indeed, in every area of their lives, so that twenty years later they continue their rituals of remembrance and still rant about the hospital.

Psychopathology as an Acquired World

Each of us inhabits several what we can call 'acquired worlds' (PhP.p.130;F151). This way our lives run smoothly. If I know how to play the organ and have an interest in that practice, then that confers on me an acquired world. We can say that we move about in a whole series of acquired worlds. We inhabit this world - or it inhabits us - and it constitutes a realm which 'sustains round about it a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvement's do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited' (PhP.p.129;F150).

Merleau-Ponty cites the example of living in a house so that we can find our way round it and know all the time where things are without thinking about it. He points out furthermore, how in such a situation, 'each gesture, each perception is immediately located in relation to a great number of possible co-ordinates'(loc.cit.). What he does not point out, but what is relevant to our concern is that such 'acquired worlds' can become

confused and uncertain. If, for instance, a person lives some days of the week in a house where the bathroom is to the right of his bedroom and at weekends in a house where it is to the left, then he can find himself not knowing what way to turn if he rises during the night. Similarly, with the organist, if his stern instructor is sitting in the pews then it can be difficult for him to live with ease in his acquired world of organ playing. Our happy life is fragile and can be totally subverted by an act of sexual intrusion.

Another important characteristic of these acquired worlds is this: they are not primary in the person's experience. The condition for the possibility of their acquisition is the person's living *already in* a more basic world: the organist must have the use of at least some of his senses, and feel minimally at home in and in contact with the world. Our awareness plays an essential part in the acquisition of and exploitation of these acquired worlds. Indeed these worlds are not acquired at all unless I *live in them* and exploit them. 'What is acquired is truly acquired, only if it is taken up again in a fresh momentum of thought...' (PhP.p.130; F151). Such a fresh momentum derives from our spontaneity, it is our *élan vital* or transcendence and without this our acquired worlds wither.

We can appreciate from what I have already said that our life is layered. These layers are not separate and never isolated from one another - except perhaps in gross psychopathology - and all are resident and lived through *in our bodies*. It is important to remember that these layers of living are not only in contact with one another, but each, through all the others, is bringing the world to us. So close is this contact that it is not clear where my body ends and the world begins. This closeness is expressed dramatically by Merleau-Ponty when he says: 'The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself' (PhP p.407; F467). When I am listening to Classic FM where is the music? When the sun's rays warm me- where is the warmth? At twenty seven thousand feet up, the temperature can be minus 50 degrees despite the sun's rays. So, to state it crudely, the traffic is two-way. 'My senses are taking from the environment but are giving back to it also - only what it received in the first place.' (PhP.p.441;F503) (We have already covered much of this ground in discussing situatedness).

The importance of establishing that psychopathology is a world complete-in-itself is this: we move the centre of gravity of psychopathology away from 'something wrong with his brain' or 'very neglected by his parent's or 'a personality disorder' to encompass *the world of the person*. By 'the world of the person' I mean that unifying presence, that 'permanent being within which I make all corrections to my knowledge, a world which in its unity remains unaffected by those corrections, and the self-evidence of which attracts my activity towards the truth through appearance and error' (PhP.p.327-8;F378). So that psychopathology is 'an acquired world' superimposed upon this permanent unifying presence of the world

which is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed unity underlying all the disruption of my personal and historical life (PhP.p.330;F381).

Herein lies the hope of recovery, that bedrock of reality under-girding the bizarre experiences of the person. When we try, as we do, to help a client 'ground' himself we are endeavouring to help him get in touch with 'this permanent unifying presence'.

Section Two: The Embrace of the World

The Fourfold Message of Primordial Contact

An important question for us is this: If I am in 'dialogue with the world, what is it saying to me? If I feel the warmth of the sun then it can be saying a whole variety of different things to me - depending upon the layer of my living experience that I am addressing. The sun's warmth may say to me 'Such a lovely day for a swim.' or it may say; 'Snatch the day while you can, to-morrow it may be raining'. Or it may say: 'It is good to be alive.' All these are 'thetic' utterances, they have the form of imperatives; - they derive from my cognition, which is always the sublimation or refining to definition of my unreflective experience.

If we go further and ask What is the message that I receive in that area of my lived experience which is non-thetic or preconceptual; that layer of me which *'knows'* but whose knowledge is not available to my cognition (PhP.p.104;F120). My body knows how to heal itself from the shock of a fall and the abrasions I received when I hit the road, but this knowledge is not available to my cognition. My eye *'knows'* how to protect itself from a fly without that knowledge being available to me to describe. In order to answer the question above we must (i) explain primordial contact - how it is a bonding with the world. (ii) how this primordial contact does not cease but endures in us as a bodily experience which (iii) underlies the experience of *'thrownness'* and which can be seen as the marriage of my body with the world and (iv) engenders *belonging* because we are *'connaturals'*.

A Bonding with the World

Primordial contact describes *the most immediate and unbiased contact*, which I have with the world, and this contact is founded in my body, in fact *my body is that contact* (Mallin, 1979, p.58). I have already detailed Merleau-Ponty's use of this expression (cf H.P.pp54-55). The concept is pivotal for Merleau-Ponty. Mallin remarks that *'Merleau-Ponty often says that his entire phenomenology is meant to be a reduction to the lived and pre-objective realm where primordial contact is disclosed'*. (1979, p.53). Merleau-Ponty's problem was epistemological - how to avoid the Idealist solution: they made of experience a total construct. Such a view would make the body irrelevant as the vehicle of perception. In order to find a way forward he has to show that we are, in fact, in *immediate* contact with the world. Primordial contact does just that.¹¹⁸(PhP p.254; F294) We can even go so far as to think of primordial contact as our being named by the world as well as our naming a world.

This is the level or field in which we *'return to the things themselves'* - which is:

¹¹⁸This is an advance on Husserl's *'return to the things in themselves'*. Merleau-Ponty is very slow to criticize Husserl.. He always considered himself his most loyal disciple (Geraets, 1971, p.135).

...to return to a world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is (PhP.ix; Fiii).

A Contact that Endures

This primordial contact informs *every act* of perception:

....the *phenomenon* of the world, that is, its birth for us in that field *into which each perception sets us back*, where we are as yet still alone, where other people will appear only at a later stage, in which knowledge and particularly science have not so far ironed out and levelled down the individual perspective (PhP.p.256; F256) (italics mine).

Primordial contact lasts for always because it is *constitutive* of my every act of perception. As its name signifies, it is an event marking each person's life in which that person - entirely without any previous thematic formation - 'finds' herself in a world in which she *belong*, because her existential structures are also the structures of the world.

This timeless 'moment' is the *phenomenon* of the world where the subject is opaque to himself and, in this 'given and pre-personal existence' (Mallin, 1979 p.47), he *grounds* all his most personal acts. In his chapter on Temporality, Merleau-Ponty discusses the persistence of the past in the present:

....each present reasserts the presence of the whole past which it supplants, and anticipates that of all that is to come, and that, by definition, the present is not shut up within itself but transcends itself towards a future and a past (PhP.p.420-425;F481).

It is important to my argument that I demonstrate the way the past is in the present so I shall approach it now in a slightly different way. Phenomenologically it has *got to be* so. It is a matter of plain observation that each moment of our experience is building on the

previous moment and brings it into the present. I know where I am now only because of where I was previously. If I do not know where I was previously then I have forgotten my history; which means I am that much out of touch with my self, that is, with my history *which is body*. (Where else can history be stored except in my body which was the active participant?) Unless my present comes out of my past then I must be here by magic. So, my history must have had a *beginning*, some 'moment' when this identity that is me *began to become*. Unless my present emerges from my past and my future from my present, my experience of the passage of time is total illusion.

When Merleau-Ponty says that 'My history must be a continuation of a pre-history and must utilize the latter's acquired results' (PhP.p.254; F294), the pre-history he is referring to is that term of prepersonal life *before my cognition* began to 'sublimate' my body-perception - to separate things and give them names - and during which my living body was laying down sedimented habits of being-in-the world. Thus, in every act of perception we move back to that *original level* where the body and 'the world' bonded and that bond became the level of all levels. (I use inverted commas because, of course, there is no 'world' apart from my situatedness).

In order to appreciate the depth of the injury, which can be inflicted upon a person when the assault is upon the beginning 'place' of his perception we need to look closely at the connection between primordial contact and all subsequent perception.

Engenders Belonging

'Thrownness' is an Existentialist term used by Heidegger to indicate the inescapable *facticity* of Dasein. (Heidegger 1927/1973, p.173-4 ; cf Macquarrie 1973, p.149). It can be taken in a *negative* way - as it was for Roquetin who found his 'there being' intolerable or in a *positive* way as does Merleau-Ponty with his concept of primordial contact. *For our purposes* the two terms are almost the same. 'Thrownness' emphasises the diversity, individuality and *the irreversibility* of our human situation. 'Primordial contact' emphasises that first momentous entry or emergence of a potentiality for relating.

Thrownness is a very rich and profound notion, *which* meets the philosophical problem of how we can have *any relationship* with the world at all. The central meaning of the concept is that, at the moment of my advent, the world gathers about me like people gather around a new-born baby in wonder and welcome and say, 'Welcome! *You are one of us!*' Mallin puts it more formal philosophical terms:

The core idea of thrownness is that there is meaning in the world before I initiate it, but at the same time this meaning discloses my 'connaturality' that is to say that the nature of myself is the same as the nature of the world (Mallin, S.B.1979, p.42).

The message of primordial contact is this: 'You belong.'

It is out of this that our *sense of belonging* in the world that all subsequent perception becomes possible. This belonging which founds all our knowledge and everything else about us operates through a *lived* and pre-personal awareness (as distinct from a *reflected upon* awareness). Through my body I am caught up in a project that is altogether beyond me, about which I am not consulted but which 'looks after my best interests' in an amazing way.

It must be that my first perception and my first purchase upon the world gives itself to me as the execution of a most ancient pact concluded between X - and the world in general (PhP p.254; F293-4) (Mallin,S.B.1979 p.42).

Unless we are in some way the same, we cannot share or live together. The Scholastics used to say of God that He is '*totaliter aliter*' - 'altogether other' - the polarity of 'connaturality' and therefore *utterly inaccessible* to us. More down-to-earth we can say that if I don't speak the language, if I am culturally and ethnically distant and different, then feeling at home in a foreign country can be a problem. Intersubjectivity depends on reciprocity. To be able to share is to be able to belong.

It is useful at this point to recall the exercise we did earlier in the study, in answer to the question: How do you know who you are? Then we saw how on waking in a strange room in a strange house, familiar things like my clothes and alarm clock announced to me who I am and what I am about. The message from the environment is: 'You belong'.

Reviewing the Argument

Because we are embodied we bond with the world. This bonding happens before any act of perception and establishes the basis from subsequent acquired worlds. This permeates all the other regions of that person so that he is in a special and contained way of life. Except in extreme instances, there still remains in the person a sense - much eclipsed at times- of a unifying and validating presence called 'the world'. This is the source of that *basic orientation* and foundational thrust of my being right from the first moment of existence and constitutes a *dialogue with the world*. Dialogue takes place at different levels, depending on the level of the structures engaged - motility, sensuality, cognition, sexuality and so on, - all permeated by this critical 'contact', supremely intimate and foundational for all further acts of perception. Our sense of belonging and personal identity in the world derives from this primordial experience.

However, I am still not in a position to demonstrate the *subversion* of all this, a subversion in an act of sexual intrusion. Before entering on that part of my argument I must demonstrate how -

- a) This happens through what Merleau-Ponty calls 'natural absolutes' - perceptual postures;
- b) through primordial contact which persists as the 'operational intentionality' of the body
- c) through the existential character of shame as a body experience.

The Natural Absolutes

Natural absolutes are not cognitional categories but very general perceptual postures. It is these that are *directly* undermined by sexual intrusion, so that although the victim will still maintain her life-functions and the use of her perceptual regions, as did the girl prohibited from seeing her boyfriend, she has lost the pillars of her scheme of things and her 'world' has collapsed. It is not possible to give examples of these 'natural absolutes'

without using thematized expressions. Daniel Stern refers to 'This global subjective world of emerging organization (which) is and remains the fundamental domain of human subjectivity.....the ultimate reservoir that can be dipped into for all creative experience' (Stern, 1985, p.67).

Because I contend that not only is our capacity for personal identity established in what I have earlier called 'the kiss of the world' but also that the primary wound of sexual intrusion happens at the level of primordial contact which informs the *between-* I need to elucidate the meaning in Merleau-Ponty of this cardinal notion of natural absolutes.¹¹⁹

They are given in *Tacit Cogito*

We are trying to establish a moment in which the 'foundations of all subsequent acts of perception are laid down. Logically there can be no knowledge without absolutes or anchorage points' (Mallin, loc.cit. p.57); but these must be *general and non-specific* - otherwise our perception comes to a halt - our situatedness ceases. Because of situatedness, everything is bonded with everything else so that the *absolute* knowledge of *any-thing* means the absolute knowledge of every-thing. However, in order that perception be possible we require the *constancy of these non-specific absolutes*. These absolutes come with primordial contact - Merleau-Ponty calls them 'natural' absolutes¹²⁰ -which become the basis of all lived-out and objective certainties.

We can envisage them as possible postures of the body - a kind of operational intentionality that underpins every subsequent act. It is the way in which my solidarity with the world is asserted in my every perception: they are

that system of anonymous 'functions' which draws every particular focus into a general project. And this blind adherence to the world, this prejudice in favour of being, does not confine itself to the starting point of my life. It is this, which

¹¹⁹I am confining my investigation here to *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1967)

¹²⁰An example of such absolutes would be orientation, sensation, motility, cognition, and transcendence. These are listed in a different way by Merleau-Ponty in that passage in *La Structure du Comportement* (1942/1990 p.227) which Madison (1981, p.13) speaks of as 'the essence of Merleau-Ponty's thought'.

confers meaning on every subsequent perception of space, *it starts up again each moment* (PhP.p.254;F294 mt).

These constitute the 'natural self' and are *realised in my body*. These absolutes which are the very structures that constitute us as beings, say such things to us as 'There is *something* and not nothing'. Expressions such as 'mass' or 'gravity' are too specific to qualify as a 'natural absolutes'. Such are taken as implicit in 'motility' or 'sociality' or 'cognition' - which mark existential regions (Mallin 1979, p.41), and delineate the boundaries of my possible relatedness. When my being bends back upon itself and I am present with myself *as myself* - this is called the '*tacit cogito*'. There can, of course, be no reflection in this act, which yields me the most intimate experience I can have of myself. This antecedes all categorical experience and is the simultaneous contact of my being and the being of the world - these are not *separate*, otherwise I am making myself into an intellect and I am left with the intractable problem of bridging the gap between myself and the brute world.

Section Three: The Level of Insult

Shaming as a Constant

Sexual intrusion always trails immense shame. Sexual intrusion is a general word for the exercise of power in a sexual way upon an unwilling person. It describes a continuum of actions ranging from an unwelcome lustful look to the act of rape at knife point. I am not saying that a person is always and inevitably traumatized by every sexually intrusive act. Nor am I saying that trauma is solely associated with sexually intrusive acts. *Shame* seems to be a *constant* in all traumatizing sexually intrusive acts (Kepner 1995, p.36). It is not uncommon to find that shame is re-visited upon the victim during the enquiry for legal prosecution. This is retraumatization and it can seem even more terrible than the original event. This tells us something about the ontological status of the violent event: it remains as an acquired world in the body of the person and then is 'triggered' by words,

images, insinuations, looks and whatever. This shows how it has embedded itself in the perceptual areas of the person, which are so easily disturbed.¹²¹

A key to the phenomenology of sexual intrusion is the paralysing legacy of shame, which universally clings to the victims (Kepner 1995, p.37 et passim). Like the wound of Tristan, which would not heal without a long and arduous visit to the holy land of Ireland and the kiss of beautiful Isolde, *shame makes an alien of a person in his own land* and places an agonised and unattainable yearning in his heart. Shame is experienced as a *shrinkage of one's being*, an imminent threat of annihilation, a disfiguring of one's beauty, and an *enduring* reduction to the status of a slave (PhP.p.167;F194). It becomes the *style* of her/his being-in-the-world (PhP. p.85;F101).

‘The specific past, which (her) body is, can be re-captured and taken up by an individual only because that life has never transcended it, ... its present is still that past (loc.cit.).

This past may be lived through in her walk, in the angle of her head, in the way she glances, in the way she looks away, in the manner of her sitting or not sitting but perching herself on the edge of the chair. It is not that she intends by these movements to manifest her soul, but shame is such an overwhelming emotion that once established in a person *it drives every other feeling into hiding*, like the playful dolphins of Kaikoura Bay are driven to hide away when the predatory orcas come visiting.

Feelings of shame are resident in the body and can even be evoked when a person holds themselves in a particular posture. Similarly, I have found that feelings of compelling shame can be diminished by the person moving himself in unaccustomed ways and allowing himself to become aware of such body movements. It seems as if these regressive states are incompatible with postures and breathing that do not support them. Only an injury at this level can account for the magnitude of the upset in the violated

¹²¹ It is also not uncommon to find that a profoundly disturbed person interviewed by a professional person, who is impersonal with him, will respond by becoming psychotic.

person's life and the powerful yet anonymous anxieties that torment him - a torment amazingly inaccessible to the subject's rational convictions

Subverting the Embrace of the World

So far we have seen how the magnitude of the injury done to a person in an act of sexual violation is not manifest at the objective level of perception. It occurs at that level of the person where *a world comes into being* for him - the phenomenal level. By this I mean the *person as an embodied subjectivity*, the focal point of a field of intersubjective relationships. This contrasts with the objective knowledge of a person like the knowledge we get from reading about him in a newspaper. At the phenomenal level, people are far more 'joined up' than generally appears. The ferocious bonding within families testifies to this. Just as an acquired world can establish itself in a person's body and insures that he lives according to the introjects of a particular culture, so a condition of psychopathology can 'possess' a person and for him this can be the 'normal' world. This condition is supported, like any other acquired world, by the event that we call 'primordial contact'. This makes acquired worlds possible- as it makes language possible and lays down 'natural absolutes'. Primordial contact persists all through a person's life and underwrites all subsequent acts of perception. Unless it is subverted, this most primitive of contacts with the world, orientates the person to experience herself as belonging and beautiful. The subversion of primordial contact and the displacement of the natural absolutes can never be complete, but can happen through invasion by another, precisely in that domain of lived experience where they co-create worlds – the sexual area.

When two people meet and affect one another sexually, so that they are drawn towards one another then they co-create *a beautiful new way of being for themselves*. I say 'beautiful' because it promises happiness. In the event of sexual violation there is co-created a mutuality of ugliness. Sometimes a victim feels guilt and added shame because 'a part of me sort of enjoyed it'.

I have now to demonstrate how sexual intrusion can collapse my world - it swops a world, in which my personhood was constituted and sustained, for one in which I become a thing (PhP.p.361;F414).

Section Four: The Structure of Violation

My Ambiguity Constitutes My Vulnerability

It is the very *openness* of my being that makes me so vulnerable.

In the gaze of another I enter that new world and inhabit it (PhP.p.264;F305; cfp.414,F361). For Merleau-Ponty this is a process of transcendence (Langer 1989 p.xvi). My project is to appropriate the whole world: '...an insatiable being who appropriates everything that he meets' (PhP.p.358;F411). In the context of sexuality, ambiguity is my vulnerability. I am structured for openness, not only to the beautiful and the abundant, but also to the ugly and the mean. I am *given* to myself and so much of me comes as *a modality of a general existence* which 'runs through me without my being the cause of it' (PhP.p.216;F250). To be given a body is to be given an *undetermined* world. This means that my life can be turned in various directions. I did not ask to be born or even conceived. My being is given to me and, once given, there is nothing I can do to stop it. It showers down on me like a tropical rainstorm. As I said above - it comes to me stuffed with gifts in all the regions of my being and endowed with a generosity that defies comprehension (Mallin, 1979, p.46). My consciousness is rooted in Being (PhP.p.424; F485). My senses - these wondrous structures which embody the presence of the world to me and proclaim my own presence to myself, are not just privately mine (and yet they are in the sense of my vital activity) but immediately connect me with other subjectivities. *This means that I can become the extension of another's life-world.* The very generosity of my endowment is also my profound vulnerability.

The Sexual Body as the Sacrament of Intimacy

Just as the act of loving sexual union liberates the parties, and forms an enduring bond between them, so the act of sexual intrusion robs the person of her body space and mysteriously binds her to the violator. Although not speaking of sexual violation, Sartre, to my mind, brilliantly articulates the violation of sexual vulnerability:

...(his) space is made with my space, there is a regrouping in which I take part, but which escapes me, a regrouping of all the objects which people my universe...(he) has stolen my world from me...The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralisation of the world which undermines the centralisation which I am simultaneously effecting (Sartre, 1992A, p343. cf Langer, 1989, p.153).

Everything about my body calls for communion with the Other - for intimacy (PhP.p.212; F245). This intimacy is chief amongst the many possible projects, which my body space opens to me¹²². This is the project of all projects - as the world is the horizon of all horizons. The sacrament of this intimacy is my sexual body 'which projects a certain setting around itself' (PhP.p.232; F269). Neutral presence is impossible: my body is in the world as the heart is in an organism and forms a *system* with the world (PhP.p.203; p.354). Therefore in the presence of the invasive Other, I *co-create a world with him and lose my grip on my own world*.

'I grasp the Other's look at the very centre of my *act* as the solidification and alienation of my possibilities' (Sartre, loc.cit.).

The extensive clinical literature on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder confirms this analysis.¹²³ The act of sexual intrusion presents as an act of intimacy, that is as *an act in*

¹²²The primacy of intimacy was the theme of Martin Buber's inaugural lecture at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1938. It exposed the error Buber saw in Heidegger's teaching that a person is sufficient unto himself in his quest of wholeness (Buber 1968).

¹²³ Hermann (1998, p33ff) marks overwhelming powerlessness as a constant characteristic of the experience of trauma; this is accompanied by a terror and rage so massive that it frequently masks itself as psychic numbing and manifests as total passivity. The third most significant symptom is recurring

which there is mutual sharing of that bodily interiority that constitutes our personal identity. In fact, it becomes an act that is lacking every structure, which could constitute it as such. The untruth of this action is at the phenomenal level, which is where the 'between' comes to being.¹²⁴ The reality of sexual intrusion is not to be found in either pole (the subject or object) of the event but in the system which envelopes both, which we have called *the between*. The event clings to each of them in different ways because it is enshrined in their bodies in different ways.

A Reciprocity of Impoverishment and the Eclipse of Beauty

The end of the movement must also be in its beginning. This means that the violator must rob his intention of structures which belong there and which constitute it precisely as a human action. *Structures by their very definition are 'for another'* (Mallin, 1979 p34). We speak here of bodily intentionality. His eyes, for instance, instead of affirming the other's presence in respect, are caught up in an act of alienation and violence. Instead of its being an act of communication between equal and embodied subjectivities in which the body attunes itself to the human ambience of the other person, it becomes *a movement towards the other as object or thing*. This involves, for the intruder, a special form of violence to himself: a denial of those intentions which anonymously come into play in us when we are in the presence of another human being. Such denial is called 'retroreflection', which literally means a 'bending back' upon the subject of those energies, which have been denied. Retroreflection¹²⁵ has its own destructive dynamic in terms of that person's self-presence. In order that one person may sexually violate another he must first mutilate himself in his human structures: in those non-specific 'absolutes', in his

involuntary replays of the event. Each of these extremely painful conditions is an articulation of the transcendence, which is the life of the person, to surpass and survive what has happened and re-find himself.

¹²⁴ Martin Buber, although not speaking in the context of sexual violation but of simple relational authenticity, discourses beautifully on intimacy as constituting humanity. (1996, pp.50 -52)

¹²⁵Retroreflection is a technical term used in Gestalt psychotherapy and is extensively treated of in the textbooks.(e.g. Mackewn, 1997, pp190 -192)

senses, in his emotions, in his cognition, in the transcendent dynamic that is his very existence - otherwise the action becomes ontologically impossible. This self-denial which is the prerogative of human beings (Rahner, K. 1984, p.28)¹²⁶ is essentially untruthful. It denies

(that) prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how and why, whose realizations are never what we would have imagined them to be, and which nevertheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly (Merleau-Ponty, 1968.p 42;) (cf Dillon, 1997, p.210).

It is not my purpose to enter into a psychological analysis of the abuser. Such would involve a long discussion of 'splitting', of disassociated states, of the puzzling fact that most violators have themselves been violated. Suffice to say that such a person departs from that alignment with the world that is our gift in primordial faith and which founds our basic sense of belonging. His world has now changed for always.¹²⁷ Henceforward he dwells, like Cain, in a homeless wilderness. In order that he objectivize another he must first objectivize himself. In other words he must become a monster - the grotesque caricature of a human person. It is also important that we remind ourselves how each one of us carries a violating potential within us: The Milgram experiments (Fromm, 1977, pp.80-6), the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Nazi occupied Poland (Goldhagen, 1996, Chp.6), and the recent genocides in Rwanda have demonstrated this.

Contact Deprived of Reciprocity

On the part of the victim there may be many emotions and special features articulating the nature of the violence upon her person. However, because sexuality is a perceptual region endowed with a structure through which the *other begins to exist for me in a new way* and draws me into a shared world - there is no way a person can be sexually violated

¹²⁶: that 'he/she can overlook the totality of what he/she is, and especially is.'(p.28)

¹²⁷With his usual clarity, depth and elegance, Michael J. Buckley, S.J. addresses this very question in *Transcendence, Truth and Faith* (1978)

without being drawn into that world.¹²⁸ It is the trauma of sexual violation that one's body is made use of contrary to one's will and *without reciprocity*. This occasions massive feelings of shame-, which again is primarily a whole body phenomenon, which includes changes in awareness.

In the absence of reciprocity there is no alter Ego, since the world of the one *then takes in completely that of the other*, so that one feels disinherited in favour of the other.Once the other is posited, once the other's gaze fixed upon me, has, by inserting me into his field, stripped me of part of my being, it will readily be understood that I can recover it only by establishing relations with him, by bringing about his clear recognition of me, and that my freedom requires the same freedom for others (PhP.p.357;F410).

The context of this quotation is the chapter Other Selves and the Human World in the part where Merleau-Ponty is discussing the 'co-existence of freedoms and Egos' (Mallin, 1979, p.284). He is envisaging a couple in a relationship where there is an imbalance of love. When he says, 'In the absence of reciprocity there is no alter Ego...' he means that in so far as there is a lack of response in one, the other party will not find herself confirmed in the 'between'. However, in the case he cites there is *some* reciprocity of love, albeit diminished. In the case of sexual intrusion there is, I suggest, reciprocity but it is a reciprocity of impoverishment. The '*between*' which is not distinct from the persons involved but is their mode of mutual being, is deprived of every shred of that promise of happiness which is the definition of beauty. It is a reciprocity of ugliness.

The gaze of the violator inserts the victim into his field. In this way the victim is despoiled of part of her/his being - that of her/him which, in the primordial contact is experienced as co-creating a beautiful and generous, yet ultimately mysterious world; beautiful in that it is replete with potentialities of joy, generous in that it presents itself as inexhaustible. This loss transforms the person from:

¹²⁸ I am acquainted with people who suffered an incident of sexual 'violation' without any appreciable harm coming of it. This gives rise to questions that would require a special study .

‘an insatiable being who appropriates everything he meets, to whom nothing can be purely and simply given because he has inherited his share of the world, and hence carries within him the project of all possible being, because it has been once and for all imprinted in his field of experience (PhP.p.358;F411).

into a person tortured with ‘what psychiatrists call “dysphoria” which patients find almost impossible to describe. It is a state of confusion, agitation, emptiness and utter aloneness. In the words of one survivor, “sometimes I feel like a dark bundle of confusion. But that’s a step forward. At times I don’t even know that much”.’(Hermann, 1998, p.108). The clinical profile of the person who has suffered sexual intrusion is that of a person living through a whole series of alarming ‘creative adjustments’ to incalculable loss.¹²⁹That moment of insult (repeated and re-reinforced over time, perhaps) acquires a privileged place amongst all the moments of the victim’s life: the ever-renewed endeavour to undo that moribund contact becomes a consuming preoccupation ‘....personal time is arrested’ (PhP.p.83;F98). The impossible project of the victim is to find again the world she lost in the act of violation upon her. Instead of living in a present which surrenders to a future and so yields a new present, she is trapped in a past that is become a present which will not go away:

.... Time in its passage does not carry away with it these impossible projects; it does not close up on traumatic experience; the subject remains open to the same impossible future, if not in his explicit thoughts, at any rate in his actual being. One present amongst all presents thus acquires an exceptional value; it displaces the others and deprives them of their value as authentic presents. personal time is arrested (PhP. p.83; F98).

¹²⁹ Judith Lewis Hermann 1998 (p 121) makes the point that the victims of trauma are characterised by three things:

- (I) Involuntary replays of what happened.
- (ii) A sense of overwhelming powerlessness
- iii) Terror and rage - frequently damped down.

Loss of Identity

In order to know who I am I depend upon a continuance of the co-creative dialogue with my familiar world coming with me out of my known past and establishing me in my present. The shock of a traumatic event interrupts this dialogue; connection depends on continuity. If the interruption is radical then there can be no transition, because my body cannot find enough in common between *before and after* to begin to appropriate the new situation. All connection with that past, which I carry in my body, then becomes difficult - *even impossible* - and it becomes equally difficult to remain anchored in the world. *I no longer know who I am* or what I am doing here because that primordial moment of conjunction has been eclipsed. I lose my sense of being rooted in a world I no longer know, and then, as night follows day, I do not know who I am or where I have gone, I cannot distinguish the real from the unreal and madness beckons.

My consciousness of myself is given me not as a separate area of knowledge but as utterly inseparable from my intimate contact with the world (Mallin, 1979, p.59). It is only in terms of the world that I know myself (PhP.p.82;F97). Basically I know who I am from my body-in-contact-with-the-world. Whatever disrupts my dialogue with the world endangers my sense of who I am.

Ambiguity of Sexual Intimacy

Sexual contact is essentially an appropriation - that is to say, for each party the body of the other becomes part of his/her world. And that exchange when reciprocal is joyous and pleasurable. This is a union of embodied subjectives. Existentially each experiences in this appropriation, a heightening of uniqueness, an especial affirmation of self-hood, and at the same time a flood of sensations powerful and yet anonymous. This is the confirmation at the phenomenal level of the tacit *cogito*, which says, 'You belong'. In the act of sexual intrusion the shame that swamps the embodied subjectivity of the victim is in total contradiction to our being-in-the-world. Our being is a *becoming* and *situated* being. Everything about me is, from the very start, *relational*. In that primary

cogito ‘ There is something and not nothing’ my thrownness reveals that ‘I belong here; this is my home. In this atmosphere of *connaturality* I am given to myself as a ‘single cohesion of life’ (Mallin, 1979, p.59).

‘ in a single temporality that progressively explicates itself from its birth and confirms it in each present’ (PhP.p.328;F378).

The world delivers itself to me as a single individual of constant style and inexhaustible generosity.

from the very start I am in communication with one being, and one only, a vast individual from which my own experiences are taken and which persists on the horizon of my life as the distant roar of a great city provides the background to everything we do in it (PhP.p.328; F378).

Movement towards intimacy is the logic of situatedness. Thereto I am carried by the eager transcendence, which is my being. In the face of the beloved I read my name and find the anchorage of my being. Because my existence *is* transcendence I am drawn to this world by the very movements in my body (PhP.p.79;F95). Unless I am emotionally ill, my behaviour is automatically attuned to the ambient situation either negatively or positively. Even if I make a conscious effort not to be drawn by this gaze my effort not to enter that world becomes my way of being. So it is that Merleau-Ponty can say:

We are literally what other people think of us (p.106; F123)

It (sensation) takes place in an atmosphere of generality and gives itself to us as anonymous ... I ought to say that *one* perceives in me...(p.216; F249) (cf. Mallin, 1979, p.47.)

Even the smallest baby is caught up into the world of the other.¹³⁰

¹³⁰Lenore C.Terr (1999, pp.64ff) documents some instances of children who were sexually abused when they were 12-18 months old, re-enacting these events at a later age.

My Body is My History

Our bodies carry our history and make available to us the sedimented experience of our past (PhP.p.130;F151). Every event in which we are caught up lays down intentional tracks in us, which connect us existentially with that event for the rest of our lives. The scar on my leg from a football injury received in 1956 bears witness to this. Primordial contact is a singular kind of event. It is an ever-present inscription in every single act of perception. This 'preconceptual faith' is not something distinct from my body. It *is* my body. As my body is an event which makes it possible to speak about other events, so my body is also the guarantor of my present which emerges from my past, and of my future as protended in my present body. This body *is* the unfolding of my becoming. My dialogue with the world is happening to me *now* just as really as it happened in those first moments of my being.

My body is the pivot of my world (PhP.p.350;F402) not only in regard to orientations and distances but also in regard to what we call *time*. Let us set aside that view of time as some *thing* - like 'Ol' Man River that just' keeps rolling' along' - (as something I simply observe) and let us see it instead as *me* in process of becoming - then it becomes easier to appreciate that every event that ever happens to us is carried in the flesh of our bodies and, therefore, I can say: my body is my history (PhP.p.85;F101). That way the past can magically become the 'here and now'. Every event in my body's history remains in the field, which is my body. So it can be as operative now as it was 'once-upon a-time'. Every subsequent experience of surprise and joy - every breathtaking advent of parental love and generosity becomes possible because of this primary paradigm (Wright, 1991). It is a summons to existence - in the original sense of ' being outstanding' - being an individual with a name. This is the polarity of shame where the dynamic is towards self-annihilation. The fullness and abundance of what is given us in primordial contact persists throughout every instant of our 'lived world' (Dillon, 1997, p87). Sexual intrusion is a subversion of all this abundance.

Healing - The Re-Appropriation of Body Space

The movement in therapy, as elaborated upon so well by Kepner (1995) will be towards the restoration of what Merleau-Ponty calls 'body image' or body space. (PhP.p.98ff; F114). This refers to my body as given to me - as a dynamic relationship to a multitude of possible realisations (PhP. p.100;F111). Like receiving my rightful inheritance. This body-space has meaning in the phenomenal field and is the foundation for that 'space' which we imagine the stars inhabit. Body space is essentially a wondrous potentiality for a certain world (PhP.p.106;F123). It is - like the darkness in the cinema - 'the zone of *not being*, in front of which precise beings, figures and points can come to light' (PhP.p101; F117) italics mine. My body becomes the silent third term in all subsequent orientations because it is the orientation of all other orientations. Distances, adjustments of vision and of the other senses are contingencies attendant upon this sense of my body space. This is, in fact, my being-in-the-world (PhP.p.79; F95). Body space, and all our sense structures, as Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated, are given us in that first primordial contact with the world.

Our sedimented situations - those acquired worlds (PhP. p.130; F151) which offer launching pads for our action, can get in the way between me and my client. Pre-packaged approaches, rules of thumb, can spoil this dialogue; they belong at the *objective* level and prevent my being with this person at that preconceptual level where the injury has happened.¹³¹ I am summoned by my client to be present, not so much as a professional something-or-other, but *as a person with a person*. I *could* step back into the objective world of my thinking (Jacobs 1989,. pp.44-45) - and that way by-pass my client.

¹³¹cf Jung, 1935/1963. *The Principles of Practical Psychotherapy*. This is a remarkable text. It is a lecture delivered by Jung to the Zurich Medical Society in 1935 which anticipates the principles of 'immediate positive regard' made famous by Carl Rogers. I believe that Jung was so profoundly insightful because of his phenomenological approach (cf Brook 1993).

I need to have a care for everything that goes on between us. I need to beware of my assumptions, mindful that I am in the presence of someone who experiences the world quite differently from me. So, I check with my client, for instance, how it is for her to sit facing me – *a man*. We go very slowly. It may take months for her to become aware of her perception rather than of the *object* of her perception (me); to come from that place in her where she experiences what it is like to be where she is, sitting opposite a stranger and be safe. We are so juxta-posed in order that we may perceive one another which is not just a function of the eyes and ears but of all of our bodies. (PhP.p 326;F376). And it is she who decides where she sits and even where I sit: optimal distance (PhP.p.302;F348). She wants to be there. The thrust of our transcendence has brought us together. She has come because of her distress, which, like all phenomena, is pregnant with its form and is waiting for a context in which it can be resolved (Dillon, 1997, p.99). Masked by the shame, her heart yearns to be known and in that *being known and knowing* to be reconciled with the world in her body.

The Intervention of Psychotherapy

Gestalt therapy rides upon that primary event of primordial faith because it is in the subversion of this primordial faith that the origins of profound psychopathology are to be found. And, reciprocally, it is at this level that psychotherapy moves to restore the beauty and abundance of this first embrace of the world.¹³² The very vulnerability, which allowed the client to lose her world in the act of violation, now becomes the vehicle of her restoration.

My client and I, like the parts of one body ‘form a *system*’, a Gestalt, so that what goes on for her affects me and what goes on for me affects her. Mutuality is *given* us. She begins to feel she is no longer alone.

¹³²Mallin (loc.cit. p.58 ft.nt.) remarks that Langan (1966) misses out on the notion of primordial contact in his book. Mallin holds that to omit it is to miss out on the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology.

We proceed to co-create something. And even as I say this I realize it is not a thing we make but a *between*. 'It is *in the relating per se* that being is disclosed rather than in either of its poles, subjectivity or otherness' (Mallin 1979, p.29). Hopefully she will find in her therapist one who addresses the longing of her heart for restoration and at the same time knows the darkness of her heart, but with a knowledge that is also loving. Through this relationship which she experiences as a bodily event she *begins* to restore that contact with the world which will speak that twofold message: 'You Belong and You are Beautiful.'

Conclusion

In this Appendix we have considered an aspect of sexual violation which attracts very little attention: what is it in the act that constitutes it as so catastrophic for the victim? We considered it in the light of existential phenomenology. We saw how the sexual life of a person is that area in which he/she is most vulnerable and this is so because of its indeterminacy. Sexual violation compromises the lived body in its basic sense of belonging in the world and this is congruent with the findings of the extensive studies on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Whereas specifically cognitive approaches can be useful to resolve the persons ability to function in his/her everyday life, a therapy such as Gestalt therapy, whose proper area of operation is precisely the *phenomenal field*, is especially helpful for people who have been subjected to sexual violation.

Appendix B

Brief notes about Merleau-Ponty and Gestalt Therapy

(i) **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1908 - 1961)¹³³ was a philosopher and psychologist, a contemporary and colleague of Jean-Paul Sartre. He served in the war, was taken prisoner, released and then joined the Resistance. His first major work, *La Structure du Comportement*, was published in 1942, and translated as *The Structure of Behaviour* in 1963. In this work he steps back from himself, prescind from his awareness, and, 'using the traditional procedures of science, observes animal and human behaviour from the point of view of the of the uninvolved spectator.' (Geraets T. 1971, p.38)mt.

This research convinced him that vital activity is an integrated whole, a Gestalt, whose nature is distorted and lost by being broken down into its 'component parts'. He demonstrates powerfully the inadequacy of the behaviourist, mechanistic and neurophysiological explanations of both animal and human behaviour, which fragment the Gestalt.

This work was preparatory to his next and best known work: *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, published by Gallimard in 1945. It was translated into English by Colin Smith in 1962 as *Phenomenology of Perception* and this translation has, since then, gone through ten reprints. Thereafter Merleau-Ponty wrote a formidable amount of material, much of which has been made readily available by the Northwestern University Press. His untimely death from a heart attack in 1961 in no way halted academic interest in his thinking. Priest S. (1998) devotes twenty-nine pages listing 'Secondary Sources' for material relating to Merleau-Ponty.

His philosophic concern was with the inadequate explanations of perception brought forward by the Empiricist and Idealist philosophers. Neither of those schools, in his view, accounts for the body's role in perception as the articulation of our being-in-the-

¹³³ No adequate biography of Merleau-Ponty is yet available. For the above account I mostly reference Kruks (1981) and Langer (1989).

world; the perceiver is not just a thinking head or a passive recipient of stimuli emitted by things, but an *embodied subjectivity*. Dillon, M.(1997 xiii), says that Merleau-Ponty is the first western philosopher to offer a viable solution to that age-old problem which Binswanger calls 'the Achilles heal of psychotherapy: *the disjunction of subject and object*. Dillon (1995, p.3) also sees such post-modern' thinkers as Jacques Derrida as profoundly challenged by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. This mainly, has to do with Merleau-Ponty's central demonstration that the only valid *foundation* for knowledge is our bodily inherence in the world. Much of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is refutation of his adversaries; and in this process of demonstrating the inadequacy of the explanations of perception brought forward by the Idealists and the Empiricists, he explains his own position. He differs with Sartre on the question of the primordial orientation of a human being: Sartre said it was alienation, Merleau-Ponty said it was 'to be with' (Langer, M. 1989 pp54 and 152).

Politically he was a devoted Marxist/socialist but finally withdrew his cooperation with Sartre on the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes* when he took issue over the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolt in 1956. As a psychologist / philosopher he belongs within the tradition of Binswanger, Frankel and Jaspers seeking understanding, rather than within that of Freud, Kraft-Ebbing and Piaget who sought explanation in terms of efficient causality. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty in his work, is greatly influenced by the *holism* of Kurt Goldstein and the *Gestalttheorie* of the Berlin School (Wertheimer, Kohler, Koffka and Lewin). They see the human being as a living Gestalt where every part is in intimate communication with every other part, and where the totality is wholly present in every part. Like a soap bubble. It was in his analysis and critique of Hegel under the influence of Kojeve whose lectures he attended in 1933, that Merleau-Ponty is said to have developed his own conception of dialectical existence (Kruks, 1981, p.24). Most of all was he influenced by Husserl whom he regarded, always respectfully, as his teacher - even when he disagreed with him. He was also influenced, though to a lesser degree, by Heidegger. Both Heidegger and Husserl were Phenomenologists and called for a 'return to things' but each meant something quite different by the phrase. For Merleau-Ponty, 'return to the things' is reciprocity in giving and taking between one's body and

the world; a continuous to-and-fro between my senses and the phenomenon to check that one is *describing* not composing.

He founded his work upon two principles: (i) The ontological *primacy of the phenomenon* as the foundation of all our contact with reality: the phenomenon is all we have of reality. And (ii) The *primacy of perception* as the epistemological guarantee of all knowledge. Because of their primitive immediacy and simplicity, because they emerge from reflection upon felt bodily experience these two principles are not amenable to proof in a formal way. They are self-evident in the sense that, in order even to call them into question we need to presuppose them.

Two months before his death, Merleau-Ponty gave an interview to *Le Monde*. There he returns to his most penetrating and (for us) most relevant insight:

I have always been struck by the fact that ever since he dealt with *the body*, Husserl no longer spoke the same language (as before). One cannot study the body as anything else in the world. The body is *at the same time (a la foi)* visible and seeing (*voyant*). Here there is no longer duality, but indissoluble unity; it is the same body that *is seen* and *sees*. This is where I wish to start out from (in Geraets,1971, p.181)mt.

One could say that his *Phenomenology* is one very long reflection upon human being-in-the-world as embodied subjectivity.

(ii) **Gestalt Psychotherapy**¹³⁴ is generally attributed to and connected with Fritz Perls (1893 –1970) and his wife Laura Perls (1905-1990). Fritz served in the First World War as a medical orderly and his experience of a gas attack profoundly influenced his life. His

¹³⁴There is an abundance of material available about Fritz Perls and the history of Gestalt Psychotherapy: Clarkson P. and Mackewn, J. (1996); Perls, F..(1969); (1971); Perls et al.(1973). On Laura Perls cf Kogan (1991)

wife Laura was a gifted intellectual, well acquainted with *Gestalttheorie* and the Existentialism of Kierkegaard and Buber. She was very influential in forming the personalist aspect of Gestalt therapy and in maintaining the central focus of Gestalt therapy in the lived body. Perls himself qualified as a medical doctor and a psychoanalyst. He was not a great thinker and has suffered much criticism for his grandiosity as a psychotherapist.¹³⁵ His genius was to discern what was missing in psychoanalysis and then to gather together *with his own insights*, the insights and experiences of other people and of very diverse traditions. and come up with a powerful approach to treating emotionally disturbed people.

The 'Dark Night' of Gestalt began even before Perls died.¹³⁶ Gestalt therapy was being taken up by ill-trained people and practiced as a set of 'magic' techniques.¹³⁷ Thereafter during the 70's it went through a phase where the stress was on dramatic emotional discharges and instant charismatic effects. It speedily got itself a 'bad' name. Often it became grossly individualistic and anti-intellectual, without respect even for those boundaries around sexual contact between therapist and client. Even to-day there are still some people in Gestalt therapy practice who claim adherence to what they term is the 'authentic' tradition of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman and emerge as anarchic, anti-intellectual and sometimes disrespectful of clients. Whatever the criticisms that have been levelled at Fritz Perls it must be admitted that he launched a therapy that was far ahead of his time. He influenced many people and his own story *In and Out of the Garbage Pail* (1977) went through ten reprints in eight years. As I shall say in my chapter the Foundations of Gestalt Therapy, we can discern some anti-intellectualist bias in Perls and Goodman – another co-founder of the therapy. They were in reaction against that

¹³⁵ Masson, J. (1992, p.252-255) savages him on several accounts.

¹³⁶ Perls own views are abundantly available in *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (1971) and in his *In and Out of the Garbage Pail* (1977).

¹³⁷ This is well documented by Yontef, G. (1991) in a very informative article. He also devotes the first hundred pages of his *Awareness, Dialogue and Process* (1993) to a series of dissertations on the vicissitudes and development of Gestalt therapy. Most enlightening.

hands-off, stepping-back approach. We need to remember also that the emphasis Gestalt therapy placed upon feeling and the articulation of one's state, came as something of a shock to a society which had been educated to pack personal calamities into a bag and 'Smile, Smile, Smile!' .However we may explain it, Gestalt therapy got itself a bad name as being against *thinking*.

A change came in the 1980's with such trainers and writers as Yontef , Delisle, Clarkson, Fry, and Parlett. These were people *open to learning*, wanting to find the rationale behind this effective therapy and with an appetite to tackle difficult questions. Whereas they appreciated the power of the immediacy of Gestalt therapy, they brought to training a new rigor and insisted on standards and on *respect* as the hallmark of the Gestalt psychotherapist. Some of those mentioned above were amongst the founders of the Gestalt Psychotherapy and Training Institute which has profoundly influenced the development of Gestalt therapy in the UK. This is an umbrella organization comprising major accredited training centres throughout the UK. There are also other training centres, such as the Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute, which prepare their students for membership of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy precisely as Gestalt psychotherapists. The professional training programme is long, arduous and demanding.

I made my training in such an institute in London. It was my personal experience of being respected, that moved me to train at the Metanoia Institute in the late '80s and take my Diploma examination with the GPTI. The status of Gestalt therapy has been hugely assisted by the establishment of the *British Gestalt Journal* in 1991, which is now respected the world over for its excellence as a learned and professional journal. Gestalt therapy has many critics, most notably amongst people who know it only from hearsay. It is with Gestalt therapy, as it is with phenomenological reduction: there can be no secondhand appeal to experience to validate it; this can only be achieved by *doing it* and, *having done it*, look back at it.

Gestalt therapy 'works' from the basic principle that all illness is an interruption of that on-going dialogue with the world and with others which constitutes our lives. Because perception is essentially a bodily activity, this interruption is always manifest in 'the experiential physiognomy'¹³⁸ of the person. The therapist and client meet with one another and engage *as human beings*. (*Not* as doctor with helpless patient, or as disembodied spirits). This engagement is marked by that mutual respect of embodied subjectivities: the therapist allows the client to emerge - in her own way - so, I don't rush to prop her up with cushions or exhort her to 'sit back and relax'! The client finds/feels him/herself *seen* and *heard* and taken seriously. (Perception is essentially a *bodily* activity.) This allows awareness to develop of those areas in the body of the person that are 'dead'. This, in turn, opens the door to an *awareness of needs* and an ability to relate to others ever more intimately. Pioneering work on this *meeting* and growth towards intimacy has been done by Hycner and Jacobs (1995). Jacobs herself has become and Intersubjective Psychoanalyst, but is not slow to point out how this new direction in psychoanalysis has been the practice in Gestalt for several decades.

Gestalt is a very open therapy in that it accomodates a great range of different styles of psychotherapy. Some will emphasize movement or breathing or visualization or narrative or experiments or the expression of deeply felt experiences. The therapy is adapted to the person not the person to the therapy. Respect for the person is the hallmark of the Gestalt practitioner. For a more elaborate discussion of Gestalt therapy cf H.P. Chapter 7 p186ff.

Gestalt Therapy as a Style

My concept of Gestalt therapy has emerged from my processing a huge mass of material over many years. This volume of material comprises many different sources: my own personal experience, experience in training, supervision, therapy (both as client and therapist); the mass of written material available; conversation with colleagues, meetings,

¹³⁸ I take this expression from Brooke, R. (1993, p33)

workshops and conferences. From all this I bring a concept of Gestalt therapy that is in part shared with others, in part quite idiosyncratic. I am not in the position that I can say definitively, such and such is Gestalt therapy because the therapist is doing this or that.¹³⁹ There is rather a *style*, which I recognise as Gestalt therapy, just as there is a style that distinguishes people in their walk, their approach to life, the way they move, their silhouette and their manner of speech.

End of Notes

¹³⁹ I know that Yontef (1993) claims that any therapy that practices dialogue, phenomenology and field theory is Gestalt therapy (1993, p.203).