Transcendental phenomenology and Husserl

My wife and I were decorating and had just finished painting a wall. We stood back to admire our work. ‘That’s got a lovely subtle blue tinge’, she said. ‘It’s not a blue tinge, it’s green’, I replied. We invited a neighbour round to see what she thought, ‘I like the purple hue’, she said. No one was wrong.

In terms of perception and experience there are as many worlds as there are people on the planet. Phenomenology and field theory take the philosophical position that if there is not a perceiver then there is not a world.

The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) began as a mathematician before moving to study philosophy. He developed an interest in how humans make meaning and studied here and now experience, how things surfaced in awareness and the patterns we create from the plethora of information and perceptions that are available to us in any one moment. In doing so Husserl focused on conscious processes, but he did so from a biological stance rather than from the relational stance adopted by existential phenomenology (see Point 55).

Transcendental phenomenology is so called because Husserl believed that through engaging in a three-step process of phenomenological reduction, discussed in the following point, we are able to transcend assumed knowledge. Husserl saw the process of phenomenological reduction as central to his philosophy. Once our knowledge had been transcended he considered that we were then in a position to gain an objective view of the world through our senses, as opposed to making interpretations of sensory data, enabling us to gather knowledge through what he described as original experience. Husserl believed that knowledge begins with wonder, the sort of wonder we see in a child’s eyes as they experience something for the first time. Curiosity arises from that experience of wonder around the events and this leads to the seeking of an explanation uncontaminated by previous experience.
Husserl thought that all knowledge should be based on experience. He described transcendental phenomenology as a rigorous science because it investigates the way that knowledge comes into being and clarifies the assumptions upon which all human understanding is grounded. To make meaning Husserl believed that experience needed to be consulted repeatedly.

Whilst phenomenology integrates well with field theory in that both see perception and interpretation of the world as completely unique to each individual, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology moves away from a field theoretical viewpoint in his belief that we can stand aside from our world through separating the observer from the observed. This aspect of Husserl’s theory is incompatible with gestalt. If a client goes to see a therapist, the therapist has become an inseparable part of his situation and vice versa. The focus of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology was seeing and understanding the person from an impossibly neutral position from which he could witness the essence of the person. He argued that we could suspend our background and our perception of our phenomenal world (van de Riet, 2001). Most gestalt therapists believe that we can limit the influence of the ground of our experience so that we can receive our clients without this material colouring our meeting excessively, but I do not believe that it is possible to suspend our sedimented perceptions of the world completely. Recent neurological research would support this. However, we need to view Husserl’s work in the context of the time it was carried out. Even if we accept that his views on phenomenology are incompatible with gestalt, ‘Husserl’s phenomenology is . . . the founding basis for Gestalt therapy’s radicalization of field theory’ (McConville, 2001: 200).

Part of Husserl’s legacy to gestalt psychotherapy is that whatever is relevant and appropriate to this particular piece of work, its origin is here and now. It exists in the experiential field that is forming around me in the moment as we engage (ibid). Aspects of transcendental phenomenology may not fit neatly with a gestalt philosophy but Husserl’s work on bracketing, description and horizontalization provided gestalt with the gift of learning to appreciate the client’s reality as far as is possible. To discover more I invite you to turn the page.