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Gestalt therapy in the eclipse of dialogue
Des Kennedy

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Abstract: This article deals with Gestalt therapy in the modern setting. I deal with that aspect of Gestalt (a dialogic therapy) which was emphasised by the founders and somewhat neglected in the literature: interiority. Following Merleau-Ponty, I investigate the archaeology of pre-reflective perception which is our primordial body-contact with the world. I see how this sets the scene for all subsequent contact and how it relates to identity, time, and the therapist-client relationship. I see also how it forms the basis of meaning for reflective perception commonly known in the world of Gestalt therapy as 'awareness'.

Key words: dialogue, Gestalt, perception, consciousness, interiority, primordial contact, phenomenal field, lived-body, trauma.

Introduction

My aim is to explore the belief that Gestalt therapy is essentially a meeting in dialogue of two persons at the pre-reflective level of perception and then, through reflecting upon this dialogue of personal experience, there emerges a wider world of choice.

The words 'pre-reflective', 'pre-personal', and 'pre-conceptual' occur frequently in the following pages. They describe the kind of consciousness or perception which we experience when we are totally engaged with a thing or an event, like enjoying an ice cream on a hot day. At the time we do not even advert to the fact that we are experiencing something. Later on we can reflect on what happened. That renders us a different kind of consciousness - reflective, personal, or conceptual consciousness. For the purposes of this article I shall use these adjectives as having the same meaning and apply them equivalently to quality experience, perception, and consciousness.1 I shall elaborate upon the meaning later. Dialogic therapy is about the appropriation of personal experience; that is to say owning and responding to all aspects of my life and history. This owning and responding is essentially a bodily movement and involves our capacity for reflective perception: 'I ate that ice cream too quickly'. Because our experience is of its very nature transcendent (we move ever on towards more - there is always another hill to climb, something more to be experienced), it is in this appropriation that growth takes place. A man learns to live in peace, for instance, apart from a woman he feels great love for.

The question may be legitimately asked here how this approach is related to the concepts of boundary, contact, and self which we find in Gestalt writing, particularly in PHG,2 the original text for the theory of Gestalt therapy. Two corollaries must be kept in mind:

(i) That early Gestalt therapy theory is anticipating what becomes more explicit in a later, more developed phenomenology, as for instance in Kepner (1995, passim) who deals with the lived body. This is, in fact, the pre-reflective - it carries that anonymity out of which all reflection emerges. This is why the early Gestalists discounted Freud's 'unconscious' as establishing an unhelpful split in the human person.

(ii) Paul Goodman, who is generally considered as the author behind the theoretical part of PHG, was groping his way towards a theory underlying a quite new form of therapy. He must be numbered amongst those of whom Merleau-Ponty speaks when he says 'It was not so much a matter of encountering a new philosophy as of recognising what they had been waiting for' (PHG, p. viii; Fii).3-4

The priority of perception

There is a tendency in our culture to degrade first-hand experience; this is the eclipse of dialogue. Every therapy must be 'scientifically' shown to be effective, everything must be 'scientifically measured and monitored' before it can be accepted as 'real'. This subverts the value of dialogue in that it forgets that it is first-hand experience (dialogue) which confers meaning upon 'scientific' data. We only know our experience when it is the subject...
of our discourse and, if what one says is dismissed as of little value, it is difficult to be forthcoming. We need to shout it from the rooftops, reflect, and derive its validity from pre-reflective perception. A map gets its validity from the countryside it represents. Scientific knowledge is reflective perception and derives its meaning from some pre-reflective experience. The degradation of our everyday perception is compounded and paradoxical when scientific knowledge is disconnected from that which gives such knowledge meaning, which is immediate experience, for instance when the phenomenon of perception is reduced to ‘the activity of these little specks of jelly in our heads, in our brains. There is nothing else’ (Ramachandran, 2003). Who can make an experienced connection between ‘those specks of jelly’ and the ‘miracle’ of our perception? Impossible, because such a statement thinks ‘that our being can be brought down to our knowledge’ (PhP, p. 62; F76). The widespread unchallenged acceptance of statements such as the above is what I call ‘the eclipse of dialogue’.

The person: a single cohesion of life

I shall discuss several aspects of pre-personal consciousness which is what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the phenomenal field’ and which I wrote about elsewhere. We need to define it as the locus or field of therapy (Kennedy, 2003). Following the early Gestaltists, I shall demonstrate the view of Gestalt therapy as a dialogic therapy originating in pre-personal consciousness. This dialogue presupposes that each of the participants is not a machine, a ‘homo mechanicus’, but a single cohesion of life, so that any word or action involves the totality of each person. I shall bring into view the importance of pre-personal perception, which is a very little voice in the literature of Gestalt. It is described as what I understand by pre-personal perception, which is not at all as mysterious as it may sound and demonstrate how it undergirds the I-Thou relationship. In this connection I shall call into question the use of the word ‘awareness’ to cover all stages of consciousness. Such a usage of ‘awareness’ fails to encompass the subtleties of human consciousness that have emerged from advances in phenomenology. At the same time I shall argue that the changes which is brought about by therapy generally demands the full exercise of what we call ‘awareness’ – which is a term encompassing both pre-personal consciousness and reflective consciousness. Here I take forward somewhat the brilliant work of Yontef on awareness; also I shall briefly touch upon the role of love in therapy. I am thinking of that love which precedes knowledge, a kind of openness of heart which predisposes us to an I-Thou relationship, which is too easily written off as ‘transference’ and which some regard as incipient pathology. It is important to note how working at the pre-personal level with clients makes demands upon the therapist, not so much at the cognitive level but at the level of authenticity, that is to say at the level of the kind of human being I have become.

In this article I am not going to deal with that formidable group of thinkers who would abolish immediacy and thereby abolish our therapy (cf. Varela et al., 1993). This would require a further article.

Primordial contact and the genesis of pre-personal perception

Pre-personal perception, which is the same for our purpose as pre-reflective consciousness, is as the name indicates, ‘that layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us’ (PhP, p. 57; F69, emphasis added). In other words, our lived body. It becomes a personal perception through appropriation of this first given. This will then enable me to say: ‘Now I see’. We need to look at the archaeology of this first given consciousness because it is still operative in our every act of perception now. Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls this very first given the ‘tacit cogito’: ‘tacit’ means ‘silent’, ‘cogito’ means ‘I think’; this is in reference to Descartes’ famous search for a foundation for knowledge that is certain. Merleau-Ponty intends something else altogether: ‘cogito refers not to thought but to a most basic and originating experience: there is something. This is the wordless experience of the lived body in contact with the world. This calls for an exploration of what Merleau-Ponty calls variously ‘primordial contact’ or ‘primordial comprehension of the world’ (compréhension origininaire) (PhP, p. 327; F377) or ‘first faith’. It is important for Gestalt psychotherapists because it has to do with the actual level of therapeutic contact with the client. We recall Jung’s teaching that an abundance of knowledge can actually get in the way of genuinely therapeutic work.

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the point that our very first contact with the world permeates our every perception. ‘Because each of us is . . . one single experience inseparable from itself, one single “living cohesion of life . . .”, the first beginning of our perception is still operating in us’. Merleau-Ponty says often that the entire movement of his phenomenology is towards a reduction of perception to the lived and pre-objective realm where primordial contact is disclosed’ (Malin, p. 53). If we want to know the reality about our human being, if we are serious about discerning truth from falsehood in regard to our lives, if we want to ground ourselves in the being that we find ourselves involved in then, [Our task is to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first things as it can]

A pre-suppp

At this pre-reflective contact with life begins. This and it dialogue with the therapy. It is four Kurt Lewin’s field of earliest psychoanalytic systems perspect 1989, p. 8). The dialogue is not a co-creation. Peck while their relations are found of ‘in the wri of the person who cons inspired by the conglomeration of the person, 2. Such is the int that Merleau-Ponty terms: they find in the individual (ibid). Communication: body with things is, to continue t with which they do not have ‘world’ no they co-create or them toward the situation of every other re. Just as the elab of roads, railways, upon the stability my relationships in and responsive relationships in pr is the emergence of the world is given. That first b is ever-present at the root of the tree.

My first percep surrounded it, is tradition; even a perception, the cc by it is . . . [So] I acts, for the into a synthetic
things are first given to us, the system 'self-others-things' as it comes into being. (PhP, p. 57; F69)

A pre-supposition

At this pre-reflective level we engage with that 'primordial contact' with the world with which every human life begins. This is the beginning of our dialogue with the world and it constitutes human life. This primitive dialogue with the world is a pre-supposition of Gestalt therapy. It is found seminally in Perls' incorporation of Kurt Lewin's field theory 'so that Gestalt is one of the earliest psychotherapeutic approaches to incorporate a systems perspective on human problems' (Clarkson, 1989, p. 8). The basis of field theory is dialogue and dialogue is not constituted by contiguity but is a form of co-creation. People can sleep in the same bed for years while their relationship rots. The developed and elaborated form of 'primordial contact' or dialogue can be found in the writings of Gestalt writers such as James Kepner who constantly assumes a primitive and experienced congruency between the body and the environment (Kepner, 2003, p. 6).

Such is the intimacy of our belonging in the world that Merleau-Ponty speaks of it in religious and sexual terms: we find ourselves 'dedicated to the world' (voué au monde) (ibid., p. 8): ... every perception is a communication or a communion ... a coction of our body with things' (un accompagnement) (ibid., p. 320). This is, to continue the philosopher's own metaphor, the marriage of our lived bodies with the world. There is neither 'world' nor person before this marriage because they co-create one another. This relationship is henceforth the situation of all situations and the basic support of every other relationship which features in my life. Just as the elaborate superstructures of our cities - the roads, railways, power supplies - ultimately depend upon the stability of the earth, so the great structures of my relationships depend upon my body being rooted-in and responsive-to the structures of the world as established in primordial contact. When I reflect on the archaeology of my sense of selfhood, two facts emerge: I find myself given to myself, and I know for sure that I was not consulted before being plunged into the world. Life is a gift - something utterly gratuitously given. That first beginning, by the very logic of situation, is ever-present and supports every subsequent perception.

My first perception, along with the horizons which surrounded it, is an ever-present event, an unforgettable tradition; even as a thinking subject, I am still that first perception, the continuation of that same life inaugurated by it ... [So] I am not myself a succession of psychic acts, nor for that matter a nuclear I who brings them into a synthetic unity, but one single experience inseparable from itself ... This is the mode of the gift given us in primordial contact.

Epistemological justification

Just as there has to be a beginning to my life so there has to be a beginning to my perception. It is a necessity from the nature of knowledge itself - as it is necessary for you to have come to the present reading from a place where you learned to read. It cannot be the same as my perception of that oak tree outside my window.

Whereas the opening of our eyes on a sunny morning with the cat beside us is still informed by our primordial contact, they are not the same. We cannot really say what primordial contact is like because, by very definition, it antedates all conceptual knowledge, all words, all ability to formulate and subsume under a category. Primordial contact has to be devoid of specified content. (It could only be that through differentiation from a former content which would simply push the problem further back) It is our very first meeting with the world and therefore with ourselves. Let us further explore this notion.

I belong and I am beautiful

Something enormously important happens to us in those primitive moments of ourawning perception. The formula Merleau-Ponty uses to express the basic truth that primordial faith yields is: 'There is something and not nothing' (PhP, pp. 330, 354 and 397). By examining this phrase, we can better understand the original intuition of our thrown existence. 'Our first truth ... will be that there is presence, that "something" is there' (Malin, 1979, p. 62). There is something and not nothing and I belong here. It is a threefold revelation: there is something; it is the same as me; I belong and I am beautiful. 'Belonging' and 'beauty' are inseparable. Even the iconic and masked 'beauty' of the cosmetic industry acknowledges that. It comes from the profundities of our hearts we glimpse a beauty and a belonging that we can never forget. I think we can appropriately call this moment the 'kiss of the world'. It describes a state before the first act of perception. Merleau-Ponty says 'we are already at work in a world' and a sense of space has been 'already acquired' (PhP, p. 254; F293; and p. 130). "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.). Merleau-Ponty attaches the adjective primordial to ‘space’, ‘world’ and ‘contact’. This teaching of Merleau-Ponty seems very congenial to our project as Gestalt therapists. We work to the principle that every spontaneous bodily initiative on the part of the person moves in the direction of his/her health. Merleau-Ponty sees this inauguring moment of ‘perception’ as constitutive of every subsequent perception.

This is what some of the existentialists call our moment of ‘thrownness’ (Macquarrie, 1973, p. 149). Such an expression has a ring of harshness to it. Some Gestalt therapists follow this melancholy train so beloved of Kierkegaard and speak of this moment as ‘making us strangers in a strange land’ (Wheeler, 2000, p. 31). Merleau-Ponty sees it differently: he never tires of saying how we are given to ourselves, that our lives move in the direction of ever-increasing but never complete meaning and that we come into a world of ambiguity, so that nothing is ever quite what it seems to be. This is the energy-direction or dynamic in what we call pre-personal perception or ‘pre-personal awareness’. This pre-personal perception becomes ‘personal’ through my appropriation of the experience, as if I ‘enter into the joy of my inheritance’.

The emergence of self

Goodman says the same thing:

... there is no sense of oneself or of other things than one’s experience of the situation. (FISG, 1951/72, p. 431)

Merleau-Ponty had already taken this position forward, emphasizing the invaluable subjectivity of the lived body, yet acknowledging that same subjectivity as meaningless apart from the world:

... the body by withdrawing from the objective world will carry with it the intentional threads linking it to its surrounding (a non-entourage) and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world. (PHP, p. 72; F86)

The pre-reflective contact with the world, which informs the lived body, is altogether prior to the objective world of acquired knowledge; this contact safeguards the individual physiognomy of things, respects the special ways in which living things organize their worlds, and inserts subjectivity into the thickness of its history. In other words it is not knowledge of things through abstract categories, but an openness to the existential reality of each entity. It brings to mind how a child sees the world – in detail and experientially (by putting it into his mouth, for instance). It is ‘the layer of living experience’ which makes sense of our generalisations as the actual river or mountain or coastline makes sense of a map. This is, if you like, the ever-present, taken-for-granted underlay of every human perception.

This pre-personal consciousness is that which makes of things a world. So, my unity as a person is always in dialogue with the world as an enduring totality. If you think of this as merely a state of mind, something going on in the brain, independent of the rest of the person, you are on the wrong track. Pre-personal perception is the whole of you caught up and engaged with the world. This engagement with the world constitutes what we call our life; one indivisible ‘cohesion of life’ from birth to death, one unceasing dialogue between me and the world so intimate, so interdependent, that I can say that ‘the world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside’ (PHP, p. 407; F467). It is as if in every single moment of my life I am dependent upon the world to know who I am and where I am and what I am about. This is pre-personal perception in that it is just given, it does not derive from me and it is not me who will ultimately end it. When I open my eyes in the morning after a long night’s sleep, at first I may not know where I am or what I am about, but when I look around the room at my clothes, at the curtains and the sun streaming through the window, and am greeted by an impatient cat looking for his breakfast, then things cohere and I am part of a world. This is not just a thought – it is a grand illumination and a ‘felt sense’, to use Gendlin’s phrase.

My consciousness – a power of transcendence

The world gives itself to me and tells me who I am and what I am about, and this is only half the process; the other half is that in opening my eyes and gazing about I make of these things a world. It is impossible to say, ‘this bit comes from me; this other bit from the world’. Such black and white divisions are not the stuff of actuality but of mathematics. The emergence of a world is an act of transcendence. That is to say I take up and transform what is at the end of my gaze. How does it happen that when I open my eyes and look around I do not see an array of separated and disconnected things? Clothes, curtains, cat, light, and so on! How come they all fit so snugly together to become a coherent world? This is what my lived body does, because it not only has a power of transcendence, it is the power of transcendence. The details of what I perceive are illuminated with meaning on account of the global view of my embodied perception. ‘Perspective of any object provides a global perspective on the whole world’ (Malin, 1979, p. 25).

That because of every perception nothing of me as a correlate in my life is evidenced in the world as things. The phenomenology of my living is to discern this grasp as a profound s-belong. It goes: own home, here from my home Gobi Desert. I fit the world. The gritty hard sunlight inessential of the animals herders, cobe emerges is build which we call ‘the scene would

What makes so important

In 1911 Edmundsology by a summ the world through to go back to the 1972, p. 100, E world to speak cence. This is the on Gestalt therapy is press emphasises learn the effectiveness reflective analytic advances of neuro

The scientist which Ramachar fact that it is d original experient therapists, who inferiority feeling their more health field the physiologists and so thinking which a They become con psychotherapy. I recovery, evident tendency to split
The eclipse of dialogue 19

1979, p. 25). This will make sense only if I remember that because of my being one undivided cohesion of life, every perception is present to every other perception, nothing of me is lost. So the world presents itself to me as a correlate of that unity with which I experience myself in my lived body. Not only that, but I experience the world as there for me.

Phenomenologically, that is to say reducing the speed of my living to a frame-by-frame slowness, we can discern this gratuitous 'advent of being to experience' as a profound sense that this world of things is where I belong. It goes much deeper than simply being in my own home, because it happens even when I am far away from my home in a foreign place, even in a tent in the Gobi Desert. I find in myself a profound fellowship with the world. The wind, the flapping of the tent material, the gritty hardness of the stones, the peculiar illusion of sunshine induced by the colour of the tent, the sounds of the animals and the reassuring shouting of the herdsmen, cohere to yield me a world. The world that emerges is built upon this underridy of self-presence which we call 'consciousness'. Without consciousness the scene would make no sense at all to me.

What makes pre-personal perception so important for therapists today?

In 1911 Edmund Husserl inaugurated his phenomenology by a summons to philosophers to stop looking at the world through the lens of the physical sciences and go 'back to the things themselves' (cited in Luijten, 1972, p. 100). By this he invites people to allow the world to speak directly to them as an original experience. This is the invitation that today urgently presses on Gestalt therapists. The world of dialectic psychotherapy is presently operating in a culture which emphasises learning outcomes, ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of therapy, assessment, diagnosis, reflective analysis of experience, and where the amazing advances of neuroscience are in vogue amongst therapists. The scientific talk that people engage in, and of which Ramachandran is an example, is forgetful of the fact that it is dependent for its meaning upon this original experience of the world. Dialogic psychotherapists, who have long suffered from a kind of inferiority feeling, make great efforts to line up alongside their more prestigious colleagues in the 'mental health field (the psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychologists) and in these efforts are drawn into ways of thinking which are at odds with the dialogic approach. They become complicit with the tendency to medicalise psychotherapy. The result can be a focus on speedy recovery, 'evidence-based' behavioural adjustment, a tendency to split the person amongst specialist depart-

ments, and the importation of technique-based psychotherapy, such as we see in the use of self-help programmes of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy on the internet. Early Gestaltists like Perls set their face against absorption into the medical approach. In this he is unwittingly siding with Merleau-Ponty as he discusses 'the problem of the onlooker who participates in the scene he perceives' (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/83, p. 246 cf. Madison, 1981, p. 18). We must recall that Mary Henle's devastating criticism of Perls alleged that he participated far too much in what he perceived. This was the point of her relegating Gestalt therapy to the category of 'Geistwissenschaft' (Henle, 1986, p. 25).

There is a questionable assumption at work in the 'medical model' approach: that a human life is basically a series of dispersed incidents - 'one damn thing after another', and not one single seamless cohesion of existence where the totality is present in the least moment and the least moment is a fractal of the totality. Let us see how this works out at the level of trauma.

Trauma injures at the pre-personal level

When a person is traumatised the injury happens primarily at the level of pre-personal experience. The cognitive level of the person can remain seemingly unaffected. The adult may know perfectly well that as a child of nine he had no choice about the sexual abuse that he suffered. Yet he feels guilty and repulsive. Nameless feelings crop up on him from heaven-knows-where and overwhelm him. It is as if that pre-

personal stream of being or existence upon which the nine-year-old's life is carried along was contaminated at source. The adult's thinking is intact; he can even teach about the psychology of child sexual abuse, while all the time he carries in himself a no-go area around tracts of his own experience. His knowledge seems to bypass the stream of experience that sustains his experience. This is the condition of being split. On the one hand there is my thinking and my know-how, and on the other there is my body that carries the whole of my history which may, on occasion, announce itself in an uncontrollable convulsion of shame. Like some lawless tribal region in the mountains of Afghanistan where life depends upon the arbitrary word of an unpredictable warlord, the violated emotional enclave in the abused person may constantly threaten him with loss of control. The writ of rationality does not run in that region, so from time to time he can have the unnerving experience of losing his identity, of actually seeming to himself to be someone other than who he is.

It may be possible, and even sometimes helpful, to control and moderate the symptoms of the split. How-
ever, if that is all I do then the person remains split and
this means that whereas his behaviour may be 'normal'
he can remain deeply unhappy and insecure. In fact, my
treatment may reinforce the very split which therapy
would move to heal. 12 As we look at the actual work of
Gestalt psychotherapy which is a leading dialogic
therapy, it quickly becomes apparent that if the ther-
pist is serious about wanting to facilitate the healing
process she must intervene at the pre-personal
level.

Emotional intentional at the
pre-personal level

In their very interesting piece about Presence, Chidiac
and Denham-Vaughn (2007) make mention of 'the
intentional use of self' and connect this with 'the odd
experience of “finding” ourselves imagining how a
client smelt, or tasted, or how they might feel, as we
were looking at them’. I am not sure why they confine
themselves to “imagining” because we do in fact ‘smell’
clients and ‘taste’ them and experience all manner of
shared experiences with them. We call this ‘emotional
intentionality’. It is part of the pre-referential level
of perception and is hugely important for therapists. Take
the shared experience of trust, for instance.
It is at the level of pre-personal perception that a
client begins to trust us. She begins to feel safe. The felt
sense of her body ‘reads’ the felt sense of the therapist’s
body and a different kind of world comes to be between
them. And the therapist also has the felt sense of change.
At this level – and it is not yet the verbal level – the client
knows how the therapist regards her. Meleau-Ponty
puts this down to the extraordinary capacity which even a
tiny baby possesses to read the emotional intention-
ality of anyone close to him. ‘He [the baby] perceives his
intentions in his body and my body in his own, and
thereby my intentions in his own body’ (Php, p. 355; F404).
Then our interventions acquire a different energy; it is as if a different echo was returning to us.
We notice maybe that we begin to interrupt the never-
ending cycle and there is a thicker feel to what is passing
between us. Our client begins to appropriate her his-
tory. It is a mark of trust and an honour for the therapist
when the client invites her to enter the domain of her
pre-personal experience. Such an invitation will come
not so much at the articulate cognitive level but at the
less precise pre-personal level of experience, when a
look, a gesture, a movement of the head, a catching
in the voice of the client, finds adequate reciprocity in
the body of the therapist and they connect. This is a felt
sense in the body of the therapist like a fresh breeze
blowing through the window, changing the atmos-
phere. The therapist also feels less defensive with the
client and there is the implicit invitation to take the risk
of allowing her heart to reach out to the client. It is a
moment of meeting in which there is a shared experi-
ence of belonging. This is the opening for the possibility
of Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ relationship. This beckoning of
another to body is essentially a movement of hearts
informed by deep human affinity that unites us in the
world.
It is not difficult for a therapist to fall into the trap of
being content with talk. Talk is necessary but that is only
the beginning. We need to descend below the conven-
tional level of talk to that primitive realm in the client
and in ourselves where a world is emerging. Otherwise
we are in danger of remaining with our client in the
world of ‘as if’. Meleau-Ponty puts it this way: ‘Our
view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail
to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath
the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long
as we do not describe the action which breaks this
silence. The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a
world’ (Php, p. 186; F214–5).
This level of shared ‘felt sense’ we can call ‘emotional
intentionality’ and, like every process of the body, it
unfolds within the boundaries of time. Therefore the
reciprocity of felt emotion between therapist and client
will wrap itself around the duration of the relationship.
There can be no reflection without duration, and the
experience of subjectivity is an experience of the pre-
sentation to myself of being in contact with you over
time. I receive myself back from you in the way you look
at me, listen to me, speak to me, move around me; you
become familiar to me, so that I feel at home with you.
With the sense of belonging there emerges a sense of
owned identity. This will ultimately enable the client
to become aware of her situation, take responsibility for it
and set her life going in the direction of a new sense. This
will require another kind of consciousness – reflective
consciousness – which I will discuss in the last part of this
essay.

Time in therapy

Because of the cultural emphasis on instant, brief,
measurable, recordable, visible improvement expected
from evidence-based therapy, I feel it is important to
consider the role of duration or time in the emergence
of the person, which seems to me to be what dialogic
therapy is finally about. One cannot properly discuss
identity without discussing the role of time. My identity
emerges from the level of pre-conceptual experience
lived through over time. This is the key to the ongoing
experience of identity. I live to myself with my self
enough to discover who I am. I speak here of identity in
the sense of self-presence rather than in the sense of
passport or work permit identity. When I wake up in
the morning in, for example, a B & B in Wantage, and
for a few so doing there that the spu
continues always to consti
The way on 'What am I as a task to
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for a few seconds do not know who I am or what I am doing there, I am having a mini identity crisis. Notice that the question "Who am I?" which can be very useful for contrived meditation, usually does not come solo; it always trails its fraternity of space and action which is the way our being is given to us: "Where am I?" and "What am I doing here?". My embodiment is given to me as a task to be done. These are questions proper to an embodied subjectivity; whereas "Who am I?" is more proper to an angel."

Time and personal identity

The question is then how time is connected with identity. To understand this there are three things we need to keep in mind about time. First there is the paradox of time: it keeps things together by holding them apart. This will not seem so contradictory if we reflect on a married couple with a family and each parent working all the hours of the day and sometimes of the night so that they do not meet and talk much with one another. Mutual affection may have drained away so they are kept together by what keeps them apart! The second thing to keep in mind is that time (like distance) is nothing apart from the unfolding process of our bodies. Whereas we may think that our bodies get their time from the clock, it is, in fact, the other way round: clock time has meaning only in terms of a living body. The third thing to keep in mind is that each human life is a gestalt; just as my body is a gestalt so that every part of it is present to every other part of it (except in illness), so every minute and day of my life is present to every other minute and day of my life. They lean on one another like a row of dominoes, so that if one collapses the whole row is endangered. (Think of someone who turns up at a meeting but does not know where he was before that!)

Holding those three principles in mind, think of a person who, for example, comes from Islington to live and work in Wantage. At first it all seems strange; he does not know where to buy shelving for his flat or a bedside lamp for reading. After a week there he knows the shops and some people and can locate the local church and school. At the end of the first year – depending upon whether he has been able to say goodbye to Islington and means it – he may have a burgeoning sense of belonging. Now, notice what is happening: his body, day-by-day, week-by-week and month-by-month is gathering information and incorporating this information into a lifestyle. If it all came to him at once in one great inundation it would overwhelm him. None of us could contemplate in one glance the aggregate of sedimented data in our lives, rooting us through our bodies in a particular place and time. There is some valid analogy in thinking how nauseating it might be for any of us to contemplate in one place the aggregate of the eggs we will eat in a year. One at a time they are fine. Our perception can cope.

Returning to the Wantage analogy, we can think how our body accumulates a great mountain of knowledge and know-how about the town and its citizens. Now, because the person is one single undivided cohesion of life (a gestalt), every bit of this knowledge is present to every other bit of this knowledge, just as my eyes are present to my feet. So there has developed a new kind of self-preservation: I have become ‘Wanted’. Here again we are faced with the body’s extraordinary ability to reflect upon itself. This is our identity: that cord of continuity that holds all the various events of my life together by keeping them apart.

Identity and continuity

My body and my life are the same in this regard: that the totality is present in the least part and the least part is holding the totality. If you hurt my friend you hurt me. This is why Merleau-Ponty will say that my very first contact with the world is present in every subsequent perception. Similarly, what the dentist says to you about the condition of your teeth can be significant for the whole of your health. When a person makes a no-go area of one section of his life he is backing away from the whole of his life in the world. A man who shot an innocent policeman in the civil war and who ‘forgets’ that murder will never find peace because he can never be present to himself. His body carries his history and it is through his whole body that he is present to himself and others. This forgetfulness is essentially a withdrawal from the experience of embodiment.

When a person comes to us and says she does not know who she is, this can indicate some break in her relationship with her body. A woman who has been raped will generally protect herself by splitting off from her body. So, the totality of her life will not be present to her in her reflection: the experience of herself will seem flawed, empty, fragmented. This means that the world of her body is no longer present to her in all its richness and diversity. Her dialogue with this world is halting. She is stuck with a present – the trauma – which refuses to become a past and, like some dreadful vortex, sucks into itself everything else in her world. Her body’s extraordinary ability to reflect upon itself has now become a source of torment in that it continually serves up to her the shock and pain of the trauma. She has become a burden to herself. Her identity is no longer a name full of richness, individuality, connections, and history but a generalisation: ‘rape victim’. She could be anyone.
Implicit reflection and anonymous experience

Merleau-Ponty recalls that dictum of St. Augustine that everybody knows what time is until you come to talk about it and then no one knows anything. Let us reflect upon it with Merleau-Ponty. Time has to do with a doubling back of consciousness upon itself. This happens in every act of perception. The illumination of perception is precisely that doubling back of body experience upon itself. But this, like sexual arousal, is not something that just happens in consciousness. My body has this extraordinary capacity that it can bend back upon its own experience of itself and carry in any part of that experience the whole of the experience. Think of eating an ice cream: the joy of the first lick persists through all the other licks and all together constitute the pleasure of eating an ice cream. It is not an experience that is over in a flash. In eating that ice cream I touch the world and the world touches me and my body is able to hold together all the moments of that experience so that we are not left with a fragmented series of 'licks' but one coherent experience that joins up with the rest of my life. This doubling back upon itself of that touch of the world, which I call 'my experience', constitutes time and is, in fact, the basis of my subjectivity — my ability to utter with meaning the word 'I'. Notice that during sleep, there is no time because there is no real consciousness of a real world. The horizon, that ever-present pulsing of the world like the hum of a distant city, goes silent. During sleep I am not engaged — except in my dreams — with any project. So when I awaken from sleep I frequently do not know who I am. But now, as I open my eyes consciousness possesses me and time is reinstated.

When we reflect on it we see that this is, in fact, a different consciousness from that which in Gestalt we generally call 'awareness'. As my world gathers itself around me the illumination is totally unreflective, in that the illumination is not itself the object of my gaze: I am not saying: 'How wonderful is perception! Now my shirt and my slippers are in league with the bedcovers and the cat, to render me a coherent world!' The whole thing is unfolding without any effort of mine at all: it does not proceed from me, it goes on whether I notice it or not, in fact I cannot stop it. Like the elderly Jesus said when listening to an appalling practice sermon by a novice in the refectory: 'If only I couldn't hear him'. Sorry, mate, but you can't switch it on and off like a light.

This was the problem writ large for Sartre's strange Antoine Roquentin for whom waking in the morning was not to a world of sunshine and pussycats but to disgust, 'as if I had awoken in a bed full of vomit' (Sartre, 1965, p. 65). The unstoppable flow of reality was for him 'nonsense' — the title of Sartre's story. The awful thing about it (in the sense that it is profoundly mysterious) is that it goes on quite independently of me as if I were just a channel for all this unfolding drama. Perhaps we could liken it to the dual movement of our planet which, while quite unnoticed by us, underlies our day and night and the seasons of the year. This movement of the earth permeates our every moment without our advertising it to all, and it goes on inexorably whether we like it or not. Here, of course, we are speaking of pre-personal perception. At the same time we must acknowledge that it will be shot through with reflections we have gathered from our education, from our culture.

Of that, more later. Here our interest has been primarily in the undergirding experience of this flux of life which forms the basis of my understanding and making sense of the world. We need to recall what I said earlier about primordial contact because if, as I hold, every human person is a single undivided cohesion of life, then what happens in the very first 'moments' of human consciousness will set the scene in a highly significant way for the unfolding of all subsequent perceptions. Perception is a simple act, so self-coherent that it does not admit of decomposition, yet it is at the same time complex and its dynamic is towards reflexion; that is, towards making itself the subject of perception, so that I say, 'I am experiencing a lot here; this will help for my dissertation'. This is reflective perception which I shall now turn to because it is essential in therapy.

In preparation for that I shall look at an act of perception and notice all the layers of its composition, and how the pre-conceptual marchs hand-in-hand with the reflective like a loving man and woman. Unfortunately, the comparison does not end here because as happens frequently in relationships, one can swallow up the other. The danger for us in dialogic therapy at the present is that the pre-conceptual perception is in danger of letting itself be swallowed up by his reflective partner. For the present, simply notice the merging of layers in the act of perception.

Layers of meaning

I look through the window of my study at the oak tree just outside and watch a pair of squirrels playing hide-and-seek or whatever it is that squirrels play. I become absorbed by this spectacle. This absorption is the harmony between my bodily emotional intentionality and the world of the squirrels in the tree. It is immensely pleasing and in the process I am out in that tree with them. 'In order to perceive things we need to live them' (PhP, p. 325; F376). There is no way I could be so enchanted did I not in some way become what I am looking at. On reflection I see that my perception of this scene will be full of meaning.

There will be the sense, squares w aesthetic appreciation of level of ecology between the welf and the shade of the literature for the scores of little co these different lev very identical if colours of the re direction of my li is increasing to i meaning? It is that I spoke abo and are in harmo is when somethig This is the 'felt se And what I say i tured by me fr meanings lad d indeed. So, it is v — unless cos there will be som on my face, my t and phrases, my

The flux of t

When I look und lation that is my percep through me so br being ti personally. It is p in something w there after I am and what is happenin current of being. this is nothing o so that 's every up of a possit proposition of p. 208; F241).
scene will be happening at several different layers of meaning.

There will be the level of coherence: what I see makes sense, squares with the rest of my life; the level of aesthetic appreciation: it is beautiful, pleasing; the level of ecology: I am appreciating the correlation between the welfare of the tree and the welfare of the squirrels. There is the philosophical level which is connected with my ability to reflect so that I wonder if the tree I am seeing is real; and the ontological level because I have known oak trees since I was very young and stood under a giant oak and look up at the sky through the shelter of the branches. I know how they feature in literature for their strength and how the tree is home to scores of little creatures like squirrels. And what holds these different levels together? They are neither separate nor identical: they merge into each other like the colors of the rainbow and all inhere in me and the direction of my life. For Merleau-Ponty that direction is increasing to move towards meaning. And what is ‘meaning’? It is precisely that coherent self-presence that I spoke about earlier. It is when the parts cohere and are in harmony with my experience of the world. It is when something adds up and squares with my world. This is the ‘felt sense’ that Gendlin speaks about (1996).

And what I say in that language will have been structured by me from layers and layers of sedimented meanings laid down in me since I was very young indeed. So, it is very hard to see what is original about it — unless of course I am a poet, which I am not. Yet there will be something of me in it — my voice, the look on my face, my posture as I speak, my choice of words and phrases, my accent and emphasis.

The flux of brute being

When I look underneath all this structuring and articulation that is my being, and move down to its origins, I perceive myself as flux of perception; this is passing through me so that I am being carried along in a stream of brute being that really has very little to do with me personally. It is pre-personal. It is as if I were caught up in something which was there before me and will be there after I am gone. All the while my body is taking in what is happening around me and seems to be at home in this current of being. In fact, it appears that the origin of all this is nothing other than anonymous bodily existence; so that ‘. . . every act of reflection, every voluntary taking up of a position is based on the ground and the proposition of pre-personal consciousness’ (PhP, p. 208; F241).

Reflective consciousness

Reflective consciousness is when my own perception becomes the object of my consciousness so that the world by means of which I know myself is my own consciousness. To understand this we need to recall that principle so dear to Gestalt and established long ago by Brentano and reinforced by Goldstein: I can be present to myself only in terms of the world. This principle covers both pre-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness. So, we say that we receive our identity from the eyes of the other. That is pre-reflective; there is no inferential movement. However, when I think about that experience I am into reflective consciousness and am distancing myself from the actual experience in some way. This is the way people sometimes control their passionate anger or lust: as soon as I say, ‘look what is happening to me now’, I have taken a step back from what is happening to me. In Gestalt we commonly talk about this as ‘becoming aware’. And this is an essential for a change in behaviour. Once I become aware that I have an incipient drink problem I can do something about it; once I become aware that a certain feeling of tension in my stomach signals a regressive episode, I can step back from it. Once I am aware that I am avoiding the eyes of my partner then I can explore further what this means.

I think it would be more helpful if I confine the meaning of ‘awareness’ to ‘reflective consciousness’, that is, to reviewing or thinking about an experience at the pre-reflective level. Talking about ‘awareness’, Yontef gives the example of a woman on a date who is ‘aware’ that her partner does not look at her. This is not an inference but an immediate bodily experience. Yontef, however, will say of this that it happens to her ‘out of awareness’. She knows it but she does not know that she knows it, she is not telling herself that her partner is not looking at her. So, the awareness which is missing is something different from basic consciousness which is ‘her being towards the world through the medium of her body’ and without which it would not be a human act at all. For Yontef, ‘the awareness that cures’ (1993, p. 82) kicks in when she notices that she notices it and moves into reflective awareness which in this article I refer to as ‘reflective consciousness’. This reflective consciousness is the beginning of my behavioural change. It was his reflective consciousness that allowed Descartes to say: ‘I think, therefore I am’. But in order to say that he had to step away from the actual existence which gave meaning to his ‘I think’. Descartes got it back to front.
The danger from the cult of reflective consciousness

Whereas Gestalt therapy cannot happen and be effective without reflective consciousness or what the Gestalt books call ‘awareness’, it also could become the monster that could gobble up our wonderful therapy. The danger is this: the substitution of talk and display for that kind of contact which is special to therapy. There is a tendency to degrade everyday experience and replace it with statistics. Recall that reflective consciousness is thinking about experience. That is the same as reading about it or talking about it. Just as talking about working is not the same as working, so talking and thinking about therapy is not the same as doing therapy. In the training of therapists today there is huge emphasis upon learning and the achievement of targets. Furthermore, many agencies have introduced a strict limit on the number of sessions that their therapists may devote to any one client. It is remarkable that this has been accepted by most therapists and training institutes as inevitable, even desirable, without much discussion of the significance of such a limitation. The significance here would seem to be that therapy has come to be regarded as a treatment, much like a stay in hospital, rather than as a journey of personal quest in relationship with a wise therapist. The emphasis is on doing something to someone rather than living through the trauma with the person, so that he or she may have the courage to appropriate their alienated selves, and enter upon a fuller existence.

The emphasis upon interiority, upon heart and humility in the process is not much in evidence today. It seems to be left to the psychoanalyst to deal with the anonymous side of human existence. Some claim for it a therapeutic priority. On the other hand some people, like the present writer, will argue that Freudian psychoanalysis may serve to reinforce the very split in the person which is the source of the pathology in the first place; and anyway, psychoanalysis is not widely available and is extremely expensive. We live in a culture which is obsessed with ‘scientific’ surveys. Only those things which can be measured are thought to be worth considering. Something as manifest as our crowded road system or a dangerous road crossing are deemed unworthy of credence until they have been statistically validated. People are taught that personal experience is trivial and encouraged to look instead to abstract pronouncements.

The degradation of personal experience

Because we live in a culture where second-hand or third-hand or even virtual reality is the general rule, a world of round-the-clock radio, TV, and voluminous newspapers, the pull is away from the interior life of the therapist in training and towards the achievement of standards and certificates. A trainee therapist can get by with a minimum of clinical experience. One of the largest training organisations1 used by the NHS for its counsellors and therapists says that there is no need for its trainees to have personal therapy as a component of their training (MindFields College, 2006 Prospectus). The University of Manchester recently advertised an MA in the principles and theory of Counselling – a course devoid of clinical experience – which implicitly classifies counselling as an activity of the mind. If reflective perception becomes unlinked from pre-reflective perception, as I have explored it in the earlier part of this article, then therapy in the sense in which I have spoken of it will become increasingly scarce.

Reinstating interiority

The emphasis upon do-it-yourself therapy, the general abridgement of the process, the unquestioning acceptance of the dominant role of neuroscience in psychotherapy without humble acknowledgement that those findings are second-hand experience which derive their meaning from the pre-conceptual perception, constitute a tide pulling against what phenomenological analysis tells us about ourselves. One of those findings is the disconcerting realisation that I do not fully coincide with myself. In fact, I remain a mystery and a question to myself. There are great hinterlands of myself that reach me only in vague rumour, like the whispers of angels or the curses of demons. My body carries millions, even billions, of secrets about me. Why is it, for instance, that I am powerfully attracted to one person and powerfully repelled by another? What is that mysterious pull which people feel at times to follow a dead person into death? Why can I not fully grasp my own consciousness? Surely this is what Descartes did in the darkness and solitude of his room as he meditated upon philosophy? Not even Descartes, the great meditator, could do it: because we see that my thinking, my consciousness rests on an ‘unreflected fund’ which can be called indiscernably bodily existence or temporality (Madison, loc. cit., p. 61). And this is indeﬁnitely vast – as vast indeed as the innumerable correlations which my body has made with the world.

The ‘awareness that cures’ is neither, I believe, pre-reflective consciousness nor reflective consciousness, but both together as body-articulations. Consciousness cures and heals because it is in preceeds knowledge contact and we client by a the heartlessness to do Therapy as

Dialogtic therapy two people people talk with one another. The reconfiguring sounds lovely as your world upper through reconstructions of platter fall. Buber in this book Thou appear a seductive and re extremes, loses questions than security. . . .

In other words Thou, Perception we can say that perception is the elaboration upon Notes

1. In this usage I mean that Malin, for instance, speech, language reflects the possibility contains ‘more tension’ in the a manner than which Heffernan and T
2. PHG refers to the Heffernan thesis.
3. The situation is This has often been mented upon by
4. Henceforth I shall and give the phrase been repeated followed by the Phenomenology unchanged since
5. It will be appa Lichtenberg and as a ‘guiding for drawing’ I am a reflective mode.
cures and heals not in virtue simply of its being perception or a movement of the body towards the world, but because it is informed by love. This is the love that precedes knowledge, that is given with primordial contact and which is awakened in the heart of the client by a therapist who brings her own openness to the session.

Therapy as transformation

Dialogic therapy – Gestalt for instance – is all about how two people perceive each other. If they really and truly talk with one another, something extraordinary happens. The world of the one undergoing a reconfiguration and each emerges changed. This sounds lovely and it may be so; but it can also turn your world upside down and send an earthquake tremor through your comfortable homestead, so that bits of plaster fall off the ceiling and your little cat dashes for cover. Buber says it better:

In this chronicle of solid benefits the moments of the Thou appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes seductive and magical, but tainting us away to dangerous extremes, losing the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security

In other words dialogic therapy moves towards 1-Thou. Perception and love go hand-in-hand. Indeed, we can say that the key which opens the doors of perception is the loving attitude of the therapist. But elaboration upon this theme must wait for another day.

Notes

1. In this usage I am following Dillon (1997) and Mallin (1979), who use these terms interchangeably in a variety of contexts. Mallin, for instance, says how each existential region (such as speech, language) is given to the other and it is lived or pre-reflexively obvious to them (p. 67), so that speech implicitly contains ‘movement’, and Dillon speaks of the unresolved tension ‘in the account of unreflective or perceptual consciousness’ Merleau-Ponty sets forth in the phenomenology (p. 105).

2. PHG refers to the authors of Gestalt Therapy (1993/73): Perls, Hefferline and Goodman.

3. The situation is not helped by Goodman’s peculiar prose style. This has often been remarked upon and is eloquently commented upon by Mackinn, M. (1995), p. 57.

4. Hereafter I shall refer to Phenomenology of Perception as PPh and give the page as it is in Colin Smith’s translation which has been reprinted ten times since 1962. I shall also give, as if followed by the page number, the page reference to the original Phenomenologie de la Perception which has remained unchanged since its first publication in 1945.

5. It will be apparent that I view awareness differently from Loehnenberg and Gray (2006, p. 20). They are talking awareness as a ‘guiding force during the flow of contacting and withdrawal’. I am viewing awareness in the Gestalt literature as a reflective mode of being of the subject, a particular way of being towards the world. I do not think that the two views are mutually exclusive.

6. In such cases the best thing the doctor can do is lay aside his whole apparatus of methods and theories and trust to luck that his personality will be steadfast enough to act as a signpost for the patient’s journey. The Collected Papers of Gestalt Therapy, Vol. 16, p. 10. Delivered as a lecture to the Zurich Medical Society in 1935.

7. Daniel Isen in a different context refers to ‘the great reservoir from which all subsequent contacts draw their abundance’ (1985, p. 67).

8. ‘. . . 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’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1979, p. 256). ‘But from this it follows that the words most charged with philosophy are not necessarily those that contain what they say, but rather those that most energetically open upon Being, because they more closely convey the life of the whole and make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 102).

9. Mallin makes the point that: ‘objects, acts, and relations are real in themselves only for the analytic attitude or the “prejudice of the world in itself”. Such entities are parasitic. They exist only on the ground of and as a cognitive sublimation of the pre-objective “relation” of the subject to the world’ (Mallin, 1979, p. 39).

10. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has been famously called a philosophy of ambiguity. This was the title which A. de Wachter (1951) gave to his commentary on Phenomenologie de la Perception (1945) and in his Avant-Propos to M. Ferdinand Alquié for appropriating the title from an earlier work of his about Merleau-Ponty.

11. There is an excellent account of this in Mollon (2003, pp. 20–51).

12. D. M. Lewis, Pathologies of the Modern Self (1987) points out that modern technology tends to reduce the self to an ego. This is all the more a danger when technology replaces the ‘other’ in psychotherapy.

13. There is an excellent and elaborate comment on this by Stephen A. Noble in CHASM International, 2005.

14. ‘My body is a movement towards the world’ (PPh, p. 350) and ‘Consciousness is, in the first place, not a matter of “I think” but “I can”’ (PPh, p. 137).

15. ‘sedimented knowledge’ and ‘acquired worlds’ are discussed by Merleau-Ponty in his chapter on the spatiality of one’s own body and motility (Part One, Ch. 3, p. 130).

16. Bernard Loeven, a Canadian Jesuit acknowledged as one of the 20th century’s greatest philosopher/theologians, interprets intentionality as projection in human life as ‘a prior act of appreciation or evaluation that discerns and welcomes God as “the transcendent Thou in both nature and history”’ (Loevesen, 1975, p. 115). On the other hand, Paul Davies (2006, p. 264) feels great constraint about using ‘the forbidden “I” word’ – ‘ontology’ – on account of its theological overtones. Gestalt therapy knows no such constraint accustomed as we are to working with interpenetrability as it operates in every area of human intercourse.

17. In the section ‘The Human Helpers Diploma Course’, p. 3: ‘There is no requirement for personal counselling or psychotherapy for students on this course as research shows this is unnecessary and does not make for better counselling’.
18. CORE is an attempt to measure one side of this change.
19. So much so that it is hard to tell which comes first — as if such a question made sense anyway. But how can I love what I have not perceived! Well, you can’t, but you can love what you perceive in a vague way. Like parents who love their children before they are conceived or a man’s heart can be open to a woman before he meets her (otherwise he would never ‘recognise’ her), or a saint like Augustine can glimpse a beauty he cannot forget. These are just some examples from the huge range of experience comprehended by ‘perception’.

References


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As I prepared this paper, I was taken by — from my life — the initial rough awareness of the concept that this episode was the field of the North of Ireland. My experience and the events of the years during that period were steeped in the ebb and flow of the people who developed most of the oil. My memories of those years — except for the camaraderie of the peers — are not clear. After that, however, there was a visceral awareness. The fire was a metaphor for a use of the land and the labour of what was being done.