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Letter to the Editor:

LYNNE JACOBS on Appreciating ‘Creative License’
THE LIVED BODY

Des Kennedy

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Abstract: This article deals with the ‘lived body’ which I propose as both the epistemological and ontological foundation of Gestalt therapy. To deepen our understanding of Gestalt therapy theory I draw upon the reflections of Maurice Merleau-Ponty whose philosophy is one protracted meditation upon the theme of the lived body. I show how this concept was pivotal in Gestalt therapy theory from the start and lies behind the holism embraced by both Laura and Fritz Perls. To demonstrate the centrality of the lived body, I elaborate upon five areas of embodiment: my lived body as the vehicle of my being-in-the-world, as the carrier of my heart-longings, as the repository of my history, as the locus of my uniqueness, and as my ever-present power of transformation (transcendence).

Key words: body, holism, foundation, correlate, embodiment, motility, immediacy, grounding, belonging, transcendence.

Prologue

I owe it to the reader to make a connection and a distinction between this piece and my article ‘The Phenomenal Field’ (2003). In both articles the point of departure is the same: the given lived body. In ‘The Phenomenal Field’ my concern was to discuss the level of intervention proper to Gestalt therapy. There I argued that this is appropriately the level of the phenomenal field – that is ‘that layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us’ (PhP p. 57; F69). This is the level of perception subverted in trauma. I argued that through dialogue the client can come to experience again what I call ‘the kiss of the world’. This is that gateway of restoration which opens upon ‘the upsurge of a world’ where the client can feel that he belongs and is beautiful.

In the present article my concern is to demonstrate the foundational nature of the lived body. This I do through description and analysis of what it means to be embodied, a notion much developed by the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty: it is an essay in phenomenology and, therefore, requires the reader himself or herself to bring what I say to the bar of his or her own experience, which is the ultimate court of appeal in phenomenology.

Introduction

I shall first of all demonstrate how the experience of the cohesion of the world, which is the basis for our theory of the ‘field perspective’, is a correlate of the experienced unity of my lived body; that is to say, it is the experienced unity of my body that enables me to experience the unity of the world. (This has, of course, important therapeutic implications for what is commonly called ‘fragile self-process’.) This experienced unity, which is nothing other than my body, is the foundation of Gestalt therapy. It was the inspired genius of Fritz Perls to grasp the fact that holism, of which field theory is a particular application, was the central concept in Gestalt therapy and he was ready to put his reputation – such as it was anyway – on the line, to emphasise the centrality of this concept (Henle, 1986).

When we look at it more closely, we see that field theory in Gestalt tells us the way we know what we know, and is, therefore, an epistemological principle. Furthermore, we shall see that it derives from the way our lived body is present in the world – an ontological principle. When I say that the lived body is the ontological principle of Gestalt therapy, I mean that it is the lived body which sustains in meaning and, therefore,
in being, everything else that belongs in Gestalt therapy.

The five areas that I have chosen to elaborate upon in this article are just modalities of that one disclosure of existence which is the life of the person, which ebbs and flows through time and movement. We shall also look at what we mean by saying the lived body is transcendent, a notion not much developed in Gestalt therapy theory, although in practice it validates our whole therapeutic enterprise and undergirds all our use of awareness techniques.

Explaining the Title

The ‘lived body’ is a translation of Merleau-Ponty’s expression ‘le corps propre’ (1945, p. 232; F235). From the contexts in which he uses the expression it is clear that he intends it to mean ‘the body that is me’. His use embraces the identity of the embodied person, the ‘I’ and also the body as a possession – ‘proper or special to me, my own’ (Dupond, 2001, p. 9). The ‘lived body’ is the body of the phenomenal field (Kennedy, 2003), in contrast with the ‘objective body’ which can be the body as machine, as object of experiment, or of postmortem, as spectacle, as show. The lived body of the phenomenal field ‘is comparable to a work of art in the sense that it is a nexus of living meanings...’ (PhP p. 151; F177, italics mine). The ‘lived body’ is my everyday self, breathing, coughing, worried, laughing or being sexually excited; my total self as I respond to the world which is with me in unending dialogue.

The Emergence of Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy emerged from a culture that had, to large extent, abandoned the body. In contrast to the centuries-old assumption amongst thinkers of that time that all great thoughts proceeded from ‘mind’, Gestalt therapy, right from its roots, was acknowledged by its founders to arise from the experience of the lived-body. They dared to ‘include the experimenter in the experiment’ (Perls et al., 1951/1973, p. 32); they did not restrict themselves to ‘situations which can be reproduced’; they denied ‘independent status to “mind”, “body” and “external world”’, (ibid., p. 42); they insisted that people ‘verify [for themselves] in terms of [their] own behaviour’ (ibid., p. 31) the effectiveness of the therapy; they promised ‘to do nothing to you’ but to give a list of instructions to raise body awareness, and then they let the subject get on with it. In all this the authors of Gestalt Therapy were addressing the lived body of the therapists and clients alike. It seems to me a wonderful thing that a body-centred psychotherapy such as Gestalt could emerge from a culture which objectified the body as much as it did. Gestalt therapy called into question the established psychotherapeutic practice of its time and came to be seen by many as a transformative departure. Yet its foundational theory seems to me to fall short of the actuality it was intended to support.

So here we have a remarkable phenomenon: a practice of psychotherapy which outpaces its philosophical underpinning. The actuality of Gestalt therapy, its extraordinary person-to-person approach, its focus upon here-and-now experience, its view of the human body as ‘the pivot of the world’ (PhP p. 82; F97), the self – no longer a thing-in-itself – but inseparably joined to the environment: such was the novel worldview of those founding few, who, as concerned and thinking people sharing their experience with one another, formulated Gestalt therapy. Their background is relevant. Let us recall that they were people more touched by the ovens of Auschwitz than by the armchairs of academia. They lived and breathed in the aftermath of a global convulsion, which was the Second World War. Fritz and Laura Perls knew at first hand the terrors of the Nazis and the horrors of war. In 1926, seven years before Hitler became Chancellor and opened the first concentration camp in Dachau, Fritz and his future wife – then Lore Pomer – worked in Frankfurt at the clinic directed by Kurt Goldstein for brain-damaged war veterans (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1996, pp. 65-66). The atmosphere there was abuzz with new ideas about the organicism or holistic nature of the human being arising out of the resources of Goldstein and his colleagues. They lived in a world in which the intellect was paramount, with the Gestalt psychologists having as aspiration no less than establishing psychology as an exact science (Kohler, 1930, ch. 2). Adhémard Gelb, a younger colleague of Goldstein in the clinic, also a Jew and a distinguished Gestalt psychologist, signed the doctoral thesis of Laura Perls in 1932 (Shane, 1993, pp. 2 and 6). This was the milieu in which they worked. Then came theatsu, the dispersion of the Jews under the onslaught of the Nazi terror. It was against this background of war, genocide, physical upheaval, and disrupted intellectual community that, nearly two decades later, a small group of concerned people in the United States came forward with the manuscript of Gestalt Therapy and with it a practice that would, within a decade, become a mainspring of the human potential movement and a basic model affecting a whole cohort of new therapies.

So, just as the seed-ground of Gestalt therapy was a world of totalitarian terror, of war and of the widespread desecration of the human body, so the emerging Gestalt therapy of those post-war years embraced that desecrated body and based itself on the immediacy of lived body experience. Just as we can have ‘pathologies of the modern self’ so we can have therapies to meet these pathologies. It seems to me that the founders of Gestalt psychotherapy focused in themes that time and we may call those words of the young

Why Gestalt Therapy?

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A philosophy congenial
Des Kennedy

The Lived Body

therapy focused in themselves the wounds of the world at
the time and we may legitimately apply to Gestalt therapy
those words of the young poet Holderlin:

Where danger is, grows
the saving power also.'

Why Gestalt Therapy Needs an Undergirding Foundation

A therapy that lacks a foundation does not bear
thinking about: it crumbles when questioned. However
in it may be, it needs a foundation, stable roots in
the earth like a big tree to withstand the winds of fashion
and fad that blow about it.

Reflection upon the foundation makes the implicit
explicit; it puts before our faces what may otherwise be
going on behind our backs. A founding philosophy also
has another function – to be supportive and to exercise a
unifying influence: a platform of agreement amongst
the members so that we share an understanding of what our
basic concepts mean, so that research becomes part of its
organic growth, and is sufficiently supported to allow
students to explore difficult questions rather than just
stall data to show something that is obvious anyway.
For instance, when has any researcher embarked upon the
question: 'What is it to be a human person – in the light of
Gestalt therapy theory?'

To announce a priori that every Gestaltist would answer
that question in a completely different way, as if we each
of us was possessed of some private truth, is itself to
propose as a basic underlying philosophy of Gestalt
therapy a principle of disunity. And indeed, such a
position-endorses the trenchant criticism of the present
situation made by Jean-Marie Robine.

I'm bored with these situations in which time after
time, we have a bit of Gestalt and Organization, a
slice of Kuhnian Gestalt, a drop of Borderline and
Narcissistic disorders, etc., and nothing worked
through far enough to make Gestalt Therapy become
strong and consistent. I feel very concerned and
anxious, after teaching in ten countries, to notice
that Gestalt Therapy is more and more 'unlike'
according to the countries, and that even the basic concepts are
not understood in the same way here and there.
We use, more or less, a common vocabulary but beyond
this we cannot really understand each other. I deeply
accept the differences and consider them as
challenging for all of us, but I find it absolutely
crucial to speak about the differences and to explore
and search for a common ground. (2001)

A philosophy congenial to Gestalt therapy carries

around with it an atmosphere of cohesion within which
the dispersed fragments of our practice fit together. I do
not hear many people in the Gestalt community screaming
out for the articulation of such a philosophy; but
remember that we do not scream for stable ground under
our feet until we get seasick. The claim of Gestalt therapy
for acceptance in the academic community is not merely
that it is effective but that its undergirding theory is rooted
in the phenomenological analysis of experience. There are
signs that some Gestalt theoreticians are no longer happy
with the undergirding philosophical support of the
originating text. A philosophy congenial to Gestalt
therapy will support a middle way between the human
person as a spiritual being (Descartes for instance) and
the human person as just another thing in the world (Locke,
for instance; cf. PnP p. 350). I am proposing that such a
philosophy is at hand to us in the writings of Maurice

The Lived Body as 'Situation' – Correlate of the
World's Cohesion

Here I am using 'situation' in the technical sense which
Merleau-Ponty gives to it: '- the ultimate unity of man
with his surroundings' (Mullin, 1979, p. 7). He sees the
human being as intimately and essentially involved in the
world: 'being-in-the-world' (PhP p. 78; F92). For him the
human person is inconceivable apart from the world. When
I say that the lived body is the 'basis of situation' I
mean that the world unfolds itself to me only as a

correlate of my body. In other words, it is precisely the
experience of my own cohesion that permits me to
experience the unity of things – namely a world, a
meaningful whole, a gestalt. In fact, we could say that the
unity I experience in things is a function of the lived-
through unity that I experience in myself.

The thing and the world are given to me along
with the parts of my body... in a living connection
comparable or rather identical with that existing
between the parts of my body itself (Merleau-Ponty,
loc. cit., p. 205; F237).

This thrust towards unity, towards the gestalt, is at the
very core of our every act of perception; at the same time,
it is a movement towards embodiment. Just as a baby puts
everything into its mouth and so makes it part of itself,
similarly our deep intentionality is to make things part of
our body and so make them actual. I can lie in bed and
think what a wonderful thing it would be to go for an early
morning bicycle ride. Only the movement of my body can
turn that idea into reality. My lived body is the great
actualiser, the great unifier. It transforms ideas into
things' (PnP p. 164; F192). Knowledge is inert until it is
taken up into actuality by the body, that is, until it is embodied in space and time. Space and time are not inventions of my thinking; they are the inseparable companions of my body arising out of the disposition of my limbs, the pulsing of my life and my rootedness in the world. Space and time are actualised by my bodily presence which yields a situation:

I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time: I belong to them; my body combines with them and includes them. (Plato p. 140; F1(3-4)

Perception happens only in a situation and cognition depends on perception as a house depends on the ground upon which it is built. In actuality they nest in one another and are inseparable. Cognition is my reflection upon actual perception. The act of perception loses itself in the object just as light loses itself in the object. When I look out of the window I see the garden, not the light by which I see it. To reduce perception to cognition is to assert that a figure can arise without a horizon. The unity of such a situation, its gestalt quality, comes from the lived body of the perceiver. This is why, as I move, the whole world adjusts itself to my movement and retains its unity. As I walk out of the door into the garden the new place in which I find myself is held in unity with the place I came from – because I have not left my body behind me in the other place. As I gaze at a flower in the garden it is as if all the rest of the garden, at my nod, is supporting this gaze by staying in the background. My lived body is a bringer of unity.

The basic experience of myself is that I am all there in one cohesion of life, so that I am never in doubt about the disposition of any of my limbs; there is this unspoken ‘dialogue’ of my body with itself as it is touched by the world. Indeed, this is the way Merleau-Ponty characterises the self: ‘A single cohesion of life, a single temporality that progressively explicated itself from its birth and confirms it in each present’ (1975 p. 407; F466) (translation as in Mallin, 1979, p. 58). I notice also that the cohesion of my body is most experienced in movement. (I shall elaborate more upon this when we come to discuss transcendence.) Kepner points out how movement in Gestalt therapy is not so much ‘to make something happen as to notice what does happen, and so takes into account the critical phenomenon of ownership, or its absence...’ (1987, p. 187). Movement, therefore, brings awareness of the whole situation. I notice, furthermore, that the movement of my limbs is not ordinarily decided independently by them but ‘works downwards from the whole to the parts’ (PHP p. 99; F115). If I lift something the whole of my body follows that lifting. This unity, which we take for granted and which we all the time can experience is, as I said earlier, the experience of my body in touch with being-touched by the world, which is an experience of my existence. This is ‘being-in-the-world’.

So, it is our experienced bodily unity to which we refer for meaning when we deal with any expression of distance, height, size, or number. The meaning of such expressions as ‘light years’ or ‘millions of pounds’ or ‘contact’ or ‘closeness’ is to be found only in terms of our bodies. The union between my body and the world, I think, more adequately described by the image of coins than by that of marriage which can exist as a formality.

The Lived Body Carries my Story and my Relationships

There is an expression much in use today intended to encourage and comfort people who have been traumatised. They are told: ‘You must move on into life!’ This sentiment was captured in a cartoon in Private Eye (2001). It depicts the eleven apostles grouped around the Crucified. One of them (presumably Peter) is on a little pulpit and urges them: ‘It’s time to put this behind us and move on’. The difficulty about such well-intentioned exhortation is that we are each of us stuck with our history, which is our lived body. My lived body carries the wrinkled story of my life. In fact, we could go further and say, my lived body is my history. Just as there is no ‘me’ apart from the world, neither is there a ‘me’ apart from my history. My ‘today’ leans on my ‘yesterday’ for its actuality. Gestalt therapy is not concerned to reconstruct the past as past (like for a documentary). The past is always present in the ‘now’ and I come to psychotherapy and become a part of it.

The person abandoned in hospital at three years of age may find sixty years later, that as the approach of a doctor, nurse or hospital, his blood pressure soars. In phenomenological terms we can see this experience as manifesting a breakdown in the dynamic structure of his being-in-the-world. Impersonal time in its passage may carry away with it the sharpness of the memory of loss, but not the breakdown in the structure which, without any personal consultation with the man, settles down in his body – in his heart and lungs and bones and so on. This view has clinical implications for dealing with post-traumatic stress.

The lived body is the temple that enshrines the deepest longings of my heart, like that yearning to belong and to feel special. This is the desire for validation of my existence that is embodied in the world. People are unable to carry a relationship, what Stern calls ‘the evoked companion’, and this inability is experienced as isolation (1985, p. 111 et passim). My lived body is at once a place of poetry and place of trauma. Annihilation voice are all The feel of a hard fro evoke the comforting and the leader’s anxiety and terror res. Because it is only if we perceive another like him to share that with an other. Just as being belonging, so we live element of belonging ferocious passion for another, which gives the truth that makes us free only a being of the now but a confirmation that this is to be found on body. We have an existential situations and the year Brian Frield’s play, P Here, young Gary O’ T here – years for a liv fles like a refuge from the narrow-minded cor of Philadelphia and Please, please, he imp ago in that little blue there was this great ha have felt it too...’ What is a puzzling grant: ‘A b My history and uni body: in my style of a jumble of feelings 130; F151) and memoirs cannot validate find another as an exte who can carry this his Love is the comple ment, repetition people hope for when th this dependence, not as an extension of that which I am given to myself. This understanding of the most primordial and given-to-myself as end my eyes meet the eyes c me what I delivered to embodied existence. Th something to be unders (italics) is at once my f basis: the point - subsequent experiences. Let us look a little
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place of trauma. Anniversaries, odours, postures, glances, tones of voice are all faithfully stored in my lived body. The feel of a hard frost and the smell of a wood fire can evoke the comforting memory of a childhood Christmas; and the leaden skies of winter may bring on a sense of anxiety and terror associated with parental drunkenness. Because it is only through my lived body that I can perceive another like myself, our deepest heart’s desire is to share that with another – and thereby find myself validated. Just as fish live in water as the element of their belonging, so we live in the Logos, the utterance, as our element of belonging; and we hunger and thirst with ferocious passion for that articulation, in the eyes of another, which gives us back, us to ourselves. This is the truth that makes us free. Yet the truth that we seek is not only a being of the mind, some propositional utterance, but a confirmation that we ‘stand out’, that we matter, and this is to be found only in the reciprocity of body with body. We have an example of this alteness to the truth of situations and the yearning for acknowledgment of this in Brian Friel’s play, Philadelphia Here I Come (1965). Here, young Gary O’Donnell – in the solitude of his own heart – years for a living word from his father before he flies like a refugee from the deadliness of his village and the narrow-minded constraints of his country to the lights of Philadelphia and the freedom of the New World. Please, please, he implores the old man, remember long ago in that little blue boat, ‘between us at that moment there was this great happiness, this great joy – you must have felt it too...’ What he gets instead from the old man, is a puzzled grunt: ‘A boat? Eh?’

My history and uniqueness are revealed in my lived body: in my style of walking and sitting and looking, in that jumble of feelings, in the ‘acquired worlds’ (PhP p. 130; F151) and memories that haunt my dreams. This history cannot validate itself. We require in addition to find another as an extension and completion of ourselves who can carry this history. None of us can do this for ourselves. Love is the experience of such extension and completion, reciprocated and respected. This is what people hope for when they come to therapy. We can view this dependence, not as something weak or shameful but as an extension of that most basic fact of our existence – that I am given to myself as something to be understood. This understanding of myself is, in fact, the unfolding of the most primordial and non-specific experience of being given-to-myself as embodied: it becomes specific to me as my eyes meet the eyes of another and he/she gives back to me what I delivered to him/her in the first place – my embodied existence. That ‘I have been given to myself as something to be understood’ (PhP p. 360; F413, original italics) is at once my ontological and epistemological foundation: the point of departure for meaning in all subsequent experiences.

Let us look a little closer at the explication of this ontological foundation in reciprocity with another; from the point of view of a therapist. The intention of another arises in my body a corresponding intention. If someone waves to me, my inclination is to wave back. As therapist I perceive my own intentions in my own body, and the body of my client in my body also; and thereby I perceive the intentions of my client in my own body. I perceive in my own body the hesitation and near panic of the client after the manner in which such emotions affect me. This does not arise altogether from inferential knowledge; I know it as I know when my body is being touched. And just as I know her in my body she knows me in hers. Our embodiment enables us to be present to one another. There is no escaping our embodiment. Even a client who ‘goes absent’ during therapy into a regressive condition, is still embodied. What a person departs from in dissociation is a situation, that is, from dialogue with the world as it comes to him here and now.

My Lived Body is Who I Am and the Locus of -Therapy

‘If you want to play games go to a psychoanalyst and lie there on his couch for years, decades and centuries’ (Perls, F., 1971, p. 221, cf. PhP p. 47; F83). Perls would have endorsed that saying of Merleau-Ponty that ‘The world is not what I think but what I live through’ (PhP pp. xvi-xvii; F3x). It is only in the ‘living through’ that I show myself. And how else can I show myself if not through my body? So, when a client goes ‘absent’ there is no immediacy; because our bodies are no longer in touch. Because I find myself embodied only in the body of another, the reciprocal constitution of a world stops. Yet this self that I find in the gaze of another is not entirely clear to me, because it trails a world which entirely surpasses me (PhP p. 352; F404).

When we say ‘I am given to myself’, it is ‘the other’ who gives me to myself. Then we start talking to ourselves. This is thinking, which is always a preparation for talking. But ‘who is thinking?’ The answer has to be: the embodied subject – because only an embodied subject can come to the experience of my existence: but this experience of my existence only comes to me gift-wrapped in an experience of the world. I know myself only in terms of the world.

... my body is the pivot of the world.’ (PhP p. 82; F97)

People of a schizoid orientation may sometimes be angry and impatient with themselves for their inability to

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h/being-touched of my existence.

we refer to expression of meaning of such is of pounds’ or by in terms of our world the is I image of coitus as a normality.

oday intended to have been come on into life! In Private Eye jumped around the ter is on a little his behind us and well-intentioned stuck with our body carries the aged go further and there is no ‘me’ ‘me’ apart from yesterday’s for its ed to reconstruct story. The past is to psychotherapy that refuses to future. A person may find sixty doctor, nurse or homoeosophical s manifesting a his being-in-the-story carry away loss, but not the soul any personal in his body – in.

this view has a post-traumatic place of the deepest to belong and to alidation of the ng place of that states my human ry a relationship, union’, and this (1985, p. 111 et of poetry and a
make ‘contact’ and endure this affirmation of self from the gaze of another. They may say: ‘I notice how other people can go out from themselves and really meet others; when I do that it is just sham. When I look inside myself there is no one at home.’ The abyss they meet is one of absence: no loving human face looks back at them, because it is the very structure of our being to find ourselves only in another:

... the 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 before us. (PhP p. 264; F305)

Grounding

The gaze of another restores us to ourselves and this is called grounding. This is the only and necessary foundation of our stability and certainty. Gestalt therapy operates through grounding; that is to say, it puts a person in touch with his or her primalordial reality, which is of belonging and beauty, but clouded in obscurity and mystery like God on Mount Sinai, and is something I live through rather than something I just think about. I see this living through our experience which enables us to ‘make direct contact with Being and truth’ (Malinn, 1979, p. 59, italics mine) as the essential work of Gestalt therapy.

By ‘centred in the lived body’ I mean more than just experiencing the tingling in my fingers or the change in my breathing: it involves my immersion also in that immense and anonymous world, originally given to me, from which my sensation proceeds; which extends beyond my own subjective concepts and which underwrites and comforts ‘thickness’ and substance upon my every sensation.

Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some primal acquisition, which prevents my experience from being clear of itself. (PhP p. 216; F250, original italics)

Sensation will not necessarily ‘ground’ a person. Some athletes and dancers can remain quite ungrounded in their everyday lives despite their heightened sensation. The tide of sensation must bear me beyond itself to a shore of meaning. I need to allow my experiencing sensation to become for me the modality of a general existence of a person in contact with the world which is the ground of all grounding.

In this way a person is in touch with ‘the primalordial certainty of being in contact with being itself’ (PhP p. 355; F408). This is beautifully described by Dostoyevsky in the story of Alyosha in his novel The Brothers Karamazov. He tells how the young monk rushed from the room where he had been keeping vigil by the corpse of his beloved Fr Zosima and ran out into the starry night. ‘Alyosha stood, gazed and suddenly threw himself down flat upon the earth... he kissed it weeping, sobbing and drenching it with his tears, and vowed frenziedly to love it, to love it for ever and ever...’ (1970, p. 427).

Such is the power of allowing the truth of primalordial belonging to the earth to possess us. That visitation was for Alyosha a revelation. He met himself not as having a body but as being a body. This brings to mind Laura Perls’ expression about the body in Gestalt therapy: ‘it’s not the use of the body... The point is to be a body’ (Perls, L., 1992, p. 210, italics mine). Fritz uses the very same expression later: ‘If we say we have an organism or we have a body, we introduce a split - as if there’s an I that is in possession of the body or the organism. We are a body...’ (Perls, F., 1971, p. 6, original italics).

On the other hand, of course, it is true to say I can experience myself as having a body. This is what happens when I massage my stiff knee with embrocation. My body then becomes an object to me; just as I can objectify others, so, also, I can objectify myself. If I remain at that level and inhibit the emergence of a world supporting that sensation then I am not adequately grounded. Such inhibition can become a way of life for people, and Perls’ criticism is aimed at such habitual distancing from the body. It was Laura who made the body the centre of Gestalt practice; it was she who first sat face to face with the client. There was a protacted period of fifteen years leading up to the publication of Gestalt Therapy during which Laura (and Fritz too) were coming under the influence of Elsa Gindler, a heroic and inspired therapist and teacher of the body (Gregory, 2001).

However much people might like to reduce me to an intricate network of electro-chemical responses, I experience myself quite differently from all that. The ultimate base from which I launch all the projects of my life is not some electro-chemical platform. My most profound reality is my awareness that ‘I am given to myself’; my lived body is the gift of me to myself, because my lived body is always and ever, being-in-the-world. This is the floor of my being from which I cannot fall off. And this perception abides with me always and undergirds every breath of me, and yet, such is the ambiguity of my being, I can lose sight of it during the course of my life.

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, original italics)

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I find myself gift: extraordinary powers: capture my experience of excitement, of heart the weight of the world so that I walk upright; a world of stuff and are a world which, in turn, is at once the ever-present judge of the reality and experience. Focus on epicentre of our experien
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I find myself gifted with my body and all its extraordinary powers: no flow of words can adequately capture my experience of breathing, of eating, of loving, of excitement, of hearing, of moving, of seeing, of feeling the weight of the world under my feet, of my orientation—so that I walk upright; all these fit me out for insertion into a world of stuff and are necessary if I am to participate in a world which, in turn, gives itself to me. My lived body is at once the ever-present referent for meaning and the judge of the reality and genuineness of every subsequent experience. Focus on the lived body places us at the epicentre of our experience.

The Lived Body as Transcendent

It is the characteristic of my lived body not only to transform an idea into a situation but to transform that very situation. Think of what you do when you move into a new flat. You change it and decorate it all to suit you. Everything changes in the presence of the lived body: think of how the whole situation is changed when your friend joins you for lunch. My body is not just a collection of processes, ‘defined once and for all’; it is not our right to say my body is in a place or space, since my body itself makes a place to be what it is. 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, original italics).

We transform situations because we are aware and we can move. It was a great wisdom on the part of Yontef (1993) when he said that Gestalt is a therapy of awareness and brings with it a whole technology of awareness. I would respectfully suggest that we add to this and say ‘of awareness and mobility’; this would enrich our notion of awareness/consciousness with embodiment, which always involves ‘a task to be done’. ‘Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of “I think” but “I can”’ (PhP, p. 137; F160). Once I allow myself to become aware of something and follow the intentionality that is part of every awareness, I create a situation and it is the characteristic of the lived body to take up and transform every situation. You will recognize in this a description of the therapeutic process in Gestalt therapy. For instance, a man becomes aware of an emergent alcohol problem. It is only if the follows through on the nascent movement of his body which accompanies this, that he begins to change his life. This movement is called transcendence.

Linking awareness and mobility serves to forestall any suggestion that the awareness in Gestalt therapy is a Kantian constituting awareness—of which we find some hints in Wheeler (2000, p. 86) and Sapriel (1998, p. 41). By making awareness the centrepiece of Gestalt therapy, Yontef was implicitly saying that Gestalt is an existential therapy of transcendence: because, if I say that my lived body and the world together form a system, and acknowledge at the same time that my body is not just another part of the world like a rock or a tree, I am saying that my lived body is transcendent in regard to the world. If I was not transcendent, there is no way I could look at the sea and find it awe-inspiring and beautiful. There is, in fact, no other way I can be present to the world except in a relationship of active transcendence’ (PhP, p. 430; F491). That is in the very structure of my ‘inference of the world’ (PhP, p. 405; F464). In fact we can go along with Madison (1981, p. 46) and say that this capacity to transform the world, is definitive of human being.

Awareness, Motility, Transcendence

Our understanding of Gestalt therapy theory will be greatly enhanced if, as well as awareness; we put our bodily motility at the centre of our therapy theory. The central place of motility is not new to the practice of Gestalt therapy. Every chapter in Gestalt Therapy promotes it. The eighteen ‘Experiments’ all involve movement—not forgetting that breathing and language—the most transcendent of all human actions—are also movements. Movement is an essential aspect of therapy and implicit in Yontef’s idea of how Gestalt therapy ‘works’ (1993, p. 150): Kempner (1987, p. 155) explicitly mentions movement as an essential in Gestalt therapy. It is through motility that we embody the operative intentionality in our movement towards the world. It is precisely this that we invoke in Gestalt therapy when we embark upon ‘experiments’. These are a direct appeal to the body’s power of transcendence towards the world. This means that the body in its relation of circularity with the world—which in Gestalt therapy we call ‘dialogue’—may take up any being in the world and, with a kind of Midas touch, transform it into a human thing. So, if I invite a client to face her mother and father (represented by two chairs with cushions) with me beside her, the ‘intentional arc’ of her body as she chooses to move with me into the inner space for the experiment, may transcend her blocking introjects and she will be in contact with very basic personal events of the field. This contact may show itself in powerful emotions and open the way to a new view of her situation. I have discussed the level at which this contact takes place and how it differs from everyday thinking in previous writing (Kennedy, 2003). When we move to help our clients become more aware of their situation we are moving them to transcend themselves. Gestalt does not operate through catharsis but through awareness/consciousness which is itself transcendence; that is to say, I have only one act of existence which articulates itself in my lived body; when my existence transcends itself, so that I live through something—such as the ‘meeting’ with my parents in the ‘experiment’—then I undergo a transformation—I have effectively
encompassed a situation within the reach of my body – through perception. This is why Yontef can say ‘... [his] awareness is always accompanied by Gestalt formation... [which] is in itself an integration of a problem’ (Yontef, 1993, p. 183). And Merleau-Ponty:

Consciousness is transcendence through and through, not transcendence undergone... but active transcendence. The consciousness I have of seeing or feeling is no passive noting of some psychic event hermatically sealed upon itself, an event leaving me in doubt about the reality of the thing seen or felt... It is the actual effecting of vision. (Pp. 376; F431)

Conclusion

When we consider Gestalt therapy theory in its depth, it leads us to wonder at the awesome community that is myself, the world and other people. This is the day that is given to us, it is our time for becoming, it is our time for 'singing the world'. In that consideration we glimpse a mysterious presentation of time (which Merleau-Ponty sees as the basis of subjectivity); so that my little 'while', my history, becomes not something that I need to forget or simply survive, but gathered up, gracefully articulated and owned by me in my lived body. And look! This body is me, a non-entity in terms of world-history, yet in terms of the everyday unfolding of that history a unique phenomenon – never before and never again. Unique also in that my touch, my gaze, can miraculously transform and change the course of a human life. And without our presence, world-history, for all its vastness, awaits meaning. Such considerations lead us to view a human being as 'one to whom the vast and uncontrollable infinitude of reality is present as mystery' (Rahner, 1984, p. 35). When I take on this view and it becomes central to my existence, it becomes a real philosophy, essentially practical, and it enters into my touch, into the fabric of my everyday life. My philosophy becomes for me not just a supporting theory but 'a way of life' (Hadot, 2001). I am increasingly persuaded that it is precisely in this direction that the future of Gestalt therapy lies. But that is a discussion for another day.

Notes

1. Following the practice of the commentators, I shall henceforth reference Phenomenology of Perception (1986) by the abbreviation Pp followed by the page reference. The 'F' refers to the page in the original, Phénoménologie de la Perception (1945). I use Colin Smith's translation throughout.
2. The philosopher expresses this and elaborates upon it in the four page introduction to Part Two of Phenomenology of Perception (pp. 203-7; F235-240): 'the theory of the body is already a theory of perception'.
3. In this view I am very persuaded by the writings of R. Romanyshyn (1987 and 1994). Both Levin, D. M. (1987, p. 54) and Romanyshyn (1994, p. 32) follow Heidegger in seeing 'the fundamental event of our age... as the conquest of the world as picture'... reducing everything to the kind of body that can be positioned within "our" control. In order to live in such a world we have to abandon the lived body to a large extent.
5. Here I use 'congenial' in the sense of 'having the same nature as' or 'being in harmony with'.
7. I have in mind V. Ramachandran (2003, p. 4). '... all the richness of our mental life, all our feelings, our emotions... is [sic] simply the activity of these little specks of jelly in our heads... There is nothing else.'

References

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