

What Lies Beyond the Field?

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By now, you have heard a great deal about the field, the self, the between, contact, and relationship from the previous speakers. Of course I will draw on those concepts, but since I am the last to address you, I am going to wander off the path a little in order to talk about a subject that has long been of interest to me. I intend to concentrate on the radical implications for theory and practice that follow from the substitution in Gestalt therapy of an aesthetic model of health and pathology for the scientific approach that has dominated most other therapies. My emphasis is going to be not only on contact but on the artfulness and creativity involved in *making* contact. All arts and crafts depend on the human urge to make something, which even so sex-struck a writer as D. H. Lawrence thought was more basic than our drive to couple with another person. We then judge what is made by criteria such as its gracefulness, its liveliness and inherent interest, its scope and fluidity, and its satisfying economy of form. That such qualities are the measure of healthy functioning in Gestalt therapy may be the most distinctive thing about it.

The starting point in Gestalt therapy is experience. However, the definition of experience in Gestalt therapy is unique in two respects. In the first place, it is said to occur at the contact boundary between the individual and his or her world, so that what we usually consider the subjectivity of experience is not simply relegated to inner life. Secon-

dly, it does not just happen; it has to be made—and made again and again at each moment. Thus experience is a human creation. If this sounds like a road to a philosophical idealism, in which nothing exists but mind, that is not at all the case. The meetings out of which experience is composed take place in a field, and the conception of the field in Gestalt therapy is precisely a reminder that you can't make something out of nothing. If experience is not given, something has to be, and we call this something the field, a set of conditions that precedes both individual and world. In what sense, then, can the field be said to exist?

For me, the most useful way to think about it is to say that the field hovers somewhere between nothing and something. This is not an easy topic to discuss, but I have found some help in the work of the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, who defines the field as a “structure of possibilities” out of which a world as other can emerge for each subject. In other words, the field in Gestalt therapy, as in physics, can be considered pure potentiality. It exists not as objects exist, but as the possibility of coming into being. If the field is conceived in this way, then one's experience of both self and other appears at first as little more than a dimly lit glimmer barely perceived in an indefinite landscape. Neither self nor other take on full existence until the creative, form-giving work has been done of making both actual.

Two comments, drawn not from Gestalt therapy theory but from two literary figures, will give more color to what I am saying. The nineteenth-century American philosopher and diarist Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.” And a modern French poet and painter Henri Michaux puts it even more strongly in his strange account of a trip to Ecuador: “The world is not round, not yet. We have to make it round.”

It is exactly at the point of transforming possibility into actuality that aesthetic values become important for both theory and therapy. One can get a closely-knit description of how this comes about in the well-known opening passage of Paul Goodmans's volume of “Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality.” Good-

man has no difficulty here discovering aesthetic values emerging directly from a phenomenological description of everyday experience. For him the phenomenological and the aesthetic are essential aspects of each other. To illustrate this, he gives the example of seeing, which he characterizes as an oval field of vision that is “close up against your eyes.” The experience of seeing is neither more nor less than this oval, and it has very specific properties: “Notice then, how in this oval field, the objects begin to have esthetic relations, of space and colour value.” Goodman’s analysis of hearing is similar: “And so you may experience it with the sounds ‘out there’: their root of reality is at the boundary of contact, and at that boundary they are experienced in unified structures.”

Already in the first few sentences setting forth the first theory of Gestalt therapy. Goodman has made a radical shift in theory. He wastes no time leaving behind the explanatory method of natural science (which might propose that seeing is caused by external objects stimulating the optic nerves). His concentration on the oval of vision is a phenomenological reduction that does not concern itself with either an external world or with the rods and cones and optic nerves. Instead, he turns from questions of cause and effect to questions of artistic quality.

As you focus on this oval, Goodman says, the objects begin to take on aesthetic properties, which implies that they didn’t have them initially. They begin to have these properties only insofar as you give your attention to your seeing or your hearing, such that your seeing and hearing become active awareness, not merely passive reception. In other words, in seeing you become all eyes, in hearing all ears. The self, you could say, is in the looking and listening. Indeed, at such moments of engagement the self is nothing but the looking and listening. Something not just given has been created in this process. What it is can best be understood neither as internal nor “out there” (which Goodman puts in quote marks, like a good phenomenologist), but in aesthetic terms of value, structure, color, and form.

Goodman equates experience such as seeing and hearing with a reality that consists of continual change, perceived as a flux of unified

structures. We call those structures *gestalts*, of course, and that they have unity, value, and form is what Goodman means by aesthetic relations. The unique contribution of Gestalt therapy resides not only in its conception of the field, not only in its focus on the relational, but in its original idea that our sense of reality--what we call our experience—is given structure and form at the meeting place between the organism and the novelty of the world. Whatever else it might be, the activity of gestalt formation at the contact boundary is aesthetic, so that we can regard reality—which we call our experience--in the same way that we look at and evaluate a work of art.

All of this reminds us of how much complexity goes the notion of the present moment. It is interesting to think about this, because Gestalt therapy bases its work on the present moment. Yet there are complicated questions about whether the present exists other than as a linguistic construction. William James, an American philosopher who influenced Paul Goodman, wrote, “The literally present moment is a purely verbal supposition, not a position. The only present even realized concretely being the passing moment in which the dying rearward of time and its dawning future forever mix their lights.” This is from his book called “A Pluralistic Universe.” The present moment cannot be pinned down any more than a subatomic particle can—both leave behind a trail giving evidence that they were there. So what do we mean when we ask a client, “what is your present experience?” It’s important to be sensitive to this issue because the present moment is elusive and mysterious at best.

Indeed, that Gestalt therapy concentrates on something called present experience represents a significant change, a relatively recent one, in how experience is understood. In ancient Greece, the concept of experience implied not passing sensations or perceptions, but an established body of knowledge made up of past cases, useful observations, life histories, arts and skills. Experience was almost equivalent to culture. An individual could draw on it, whether from individual or social sources, as a guide to making judgments and carrying out tasks. We still often employ the word with this meaning, as when we say, “I need a referral to an experienced therapist,” which implies a mix of

personal experience with training in a collective body of knowledge, or “Where can I find a carpenter with experience in making Victorian moldings?,” which means one that knows past techniques as well as present ones. The word experience here conveys a sense of acquired and assimilated arts and skills, techniques and wisdom. In other words, it is something complete, a finished product, which can be made available, transmitted, and put to use. The primacy of completed experience still dominates in ordinary conversation. We might say, “I had an experience last week that I want to tell you about.” Or, we might look forward to its completion in the future, in a comment such as “This will have been an important experience for me.” But it would seem very odd to say, “Please don’t bother me, I’m in the middle of an important experience.”

Obviously we mean something different when we talk about present experience, which we do as a matter of course, in Gestalt therapy. Our new twist on an old traditional concept derives, I suspect, from those modern philosophical movements, such as existentialism and phenomenology, which have influenced Gestalt therapy. Existential phenomenology places the person inside his or her world as an experiencing subject and makes this the starting point of philosophical inquiry, just as we make it the starting point of clinical work. Before such developments, it would not have made much sense to ask someone, “What are you experiencing?” (as we tend to ask our clients every five minutes). I think, though, that we now take the meaningfulness of this question too much for granted. It is a question we often use when we run out of ideas in a therapy session, and often enough the client has no idea what it means. For this reason alone it is worthwhile to preserve, even in present-oriented Gestalt therapy, the ancient and traditional sense that experience is a creation that includes values, choice, and meaning. What we add is that it includes them in the very process of being created.

The very definition of the self in “Gestalt Therapy” is based on Goodman’s joining of the phenomenological and the aesthetic. The relevant passage is another well-known one near the beginning of the book: “The self is the contact boundary at work. Its activity is forming

of figures and grounds. The self is precisely the integrator; it is the artist of life.” Clear the idea of the self as the artist of life is much more than a suggestive metaphor for Goodman. It is a description of the part that the self plays in giving form and value to experience, as though it plays an artistically creative part in each moment of lived experience. This is an extraordinary idea, and one might wonder how Gestalt therapy came by it during an era when psychoanalysis reigned supreme, giving rise to a view of art as a product of unconscious fantasies and wishes.

Part of the answer no doubt comes from the fact that the founders of Gestalt therapy were all involved in the arts to some degree one way or another. Before he went to medical school Fritz Perls was trained by Max Reinhardt, one of the great directors of German theatre. Laura Perls was thoroughly absorbed in music and dance, and she imported ideas from those pursuits into her work with the body. Paul Goodman was a novelist, a playwright, and a very good poet. His literary works were published throughout his career alongside his formidable books of social and cultural criticism. Isadore From was not directly involved in the arts, but neither did he have formal training as a psychologist or psychiatrist. In college he studied philosophy. He was also deeply interested in literature. He once told me that he had learned at least as much, if not more, about human conduct from reading Proust and Henry James as he did from reading Freud. Thus strong interest and involvement with various arts accompanied the founding of Gestalt therapy.

How does this innovative aesthetic perspective influence practical clinical work in Gestalt therapy? Since the aesthetic basis of Gestalt therapy arises directly from an understanding of contact as a meeting between self and other that have to be made anew each time, then the job of the therapist is to pay attention to how it is made in the therapy session itself. Isadore From, one of the founding teachers of Gestalt therapy and perhaps its most consistent theoretical voice, always insisted on this point. Contact, he would say, is not a state that you are either in or out of; it is an activity. It behaves more like a verb than a noun, so it would be more accurate to speak of contacting. For example, he emphasized that one must work in therapy not with *memories*,

as though the past is carried into the present situation of the therapy session like a fixed mental object, but with *remembering*, a present activity, in which the past is remade once again. To remember suggests a work of reassembling the members or parts of an old experience into a new whole. This is a distinction that is absolutely crucial to Gestalt therapy, not only because it makes process rather than products the priority but because it brings out that remembering is not a repetition but the creation of something new. In a similar vein, From was less concerned with labeling projections or introjects than with attending to the process of projecting or introjecting as activities that are taking place now.

The troubled client is as much an artist as the healthy person. He or she just happens to be busy at work producing illness instead of health. The aesthetic perspective in Gestalt therapy has considerable diagnostic utility. One of the most telling things you can say about neurosis is that it is bad art. Like paintings that we want to walk away from, it is repetitious, stereotypical, badly designed, and inappropriate. Above all, it is monotonous and boring. The more serious the degree of disturbance, the more monotonous the creation. The obsessive-compulsive narrative never moves forward. It goes over the same ground or performs the same activity again and again. The paranoid turns every situation, even a love story, into an espionage film or film noir about menace and betrayal. For the hysteric personality, every situation is a continual climax--the most wonderful or most terrible thing that ever happened--until the exhausted audience begs for an intermission.

Let me illustrate this approach in more detail by using the paranoid personality as an example of how the principle that the self is the artist of life figures even in pathological character formation. What kind of artist is the paranoid? Actually, a highly imaginative one. The American sociologist and anthropologist Ernest Becker, in his book "Angel in Armor," suggested that paranoia is the poetry of a person who is standing on a very narrow pillar feeling frighteningly small and insecure. From this precarious, inadequately supported position, the paranoid looks out on a world that seems overwhelmingly large and tries to make meaningful sense of his painful condition by applying the creative powers of the human imagination. Dramatic,

often brilliantly constructed plots around themes of danger, threat, conspiracy, and betrayal are the result. In other words, paranoia is the poetry of impotence.

From another angle, paranoia is a possible outcome whenever one experiences a chasm or gulf between oneself and others. This is especially the case when the gulf persists despite a demand from the others or a longing in oneself to become part of a “we.” Of course, the gulf is self-imposed: No matter how powerful the demand or longing, the paranoid person has to keep himself apart from the group because he feels too small and helpless to maintain his individuality if he joins it. There is an intriguing article on paranoia in W. D. Ellis’ “Sourcebook of Gestalt Psychology,” the book which Goodman used for his borrowings from classic Gestalt psychology. This article (“An Approach to a Gestalt Theory of Paranoic Phenomena” by Heinrich Schulte) defines the anxiety that gives rise to paranoia as “we-crippledness.” The we-crippled paranoid, unable to join yet longing to do so, feels at once beside the group and outside it, according to Schulte. To be at the same time beside (which is to say, near to) and outside (still far from) the group is not a place one can tolerate without justifying one’s existence there. There seems to be a basic human need to justify one’s situation to oneself, and this is where the imaginative artistry of the paranoid comes into the picture.

It is well-established that paranoids are experts at projecting, which involves treating fantasies as though they are realities coming from the environment. The gulf itself forms an empty space—a blank interval in the continuum of contact—that can be filled with projections. The paranoid person uses projecting to invent an alternative way of belonging to the group without joining it. In effect, he writes a novel or a play in which he is the main character, such that everything going on in the group refers to him. If he sees some members of the group talking privately, it means they are conspiring against him. If they invite him to a social function, it is because they are planning to use him. If they don’t invite him, they are trying to get rid of him. The group in question might be as small as one other person. If his wife receives a letter with no return address, it must be from her lover.

Or the group might be as large as the whole of society. If there is a car with two men sitting inside it parked in front of his house, they must be waiting for him to leave so they can break in and burglarize it. Sometimes, of course, the paranoid is correct and has good reason to be paranoid. It's not that the projections are automatically false, it's that the paranoid feels and lives as though they are always true. He not only make something of his perceptions, he makes too much of them. Everything the group does is a drama or a plot set in motion in order to victimize him. And this is how he comes to feel a sense of importance and belonging—he is connected, however, negatively, to everything that is going on. This may be a miserable state, but there is at least the illusion that the gulf has been bridged and that a terrible way of life can be explained.

It is often said that Gestalt therapy is a non-judgmental therapy. I disagree. Every human encounter involves judgments about value and meaning, interest and boredom, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and the like. The Gestalt therapist and the client are busy collaborating in making judgments all the time—judgments, for example, about what works and what doesn't in the client's life, especially insofar as the client's moment to moment stagings of his or her life can be brought to light, explored and experimented with in the therapy session itself. The kind of judgments that Gestalt therapy opposes in traditional therapies are the ones that impose overly abstract and universal views of reality--especially with regard to right and wrong, health and sickness--on the client. The aesthetic orientation of Gestalt therapy is not against science but it turns away from those "scientific" (cause and effect) explanations or interpretations that try to fit human conduct into fixed categories, norms of health, models of predictability, and so forth.

Gestalt therapists work (or ought to) like good art or literary critics. A good critic does not attack a work of art with general prescriptions, as if to say, "my expert knowledge of you is better than your clouded knowledge of yourself." Good Gestalt therapists pay close attention to how a client is typically drawing on and building something from his or her resources and opportunities. Then they might offer possibilities (often through collaborative experiments) for

the client to create something more fulfilling from those resources and opportunities. As From once put it, the aim is to help clients make poetry out of their talking, dancing out of their walking. The accent here is on the fact that the talking and walking and, therefore, the poetry and dancing belong to the clients. If it is merely a case of the therapist transmitting ideas about what makes good poetry and dance, then therapy is nothing more than another enforced introjection, another neurotic loss of contact. Our clients (and ourselves) already possess an ample supply of these taken in from parents, teachers, priests, and other authorities. From's remark brings out unmistakably the aesthetic emphasis in Gestalt therapy and in addition makes it clear that the client, not the therapist, is the artist who matters.