Phenomenology in Husserl and in Gestalt therapy
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Abstract: There is some confusion among many Gestalt therapists as to the nature of the phenomenological method. The purpose of this essay is to take a fresh look at Husserl's mature understanding of his method, and to show that the method Gestalt therapists actually use in working with clients—in contrast to how it is often discussed in Gestalt circles—is a fairly pure application of it. The difference is that while Husserl was in search of pure universal essences for the sake of knowledge itself, a Gestalt therapist seeks an increasingly exquisite understanding of the living of a unique and singular individual person, and does so in the service of human change.

Key words: phenomenology, phenomenology, appearance, experience, intentionality, hermeneutic, being as intelligibility, pure essences, bracketing, description, horizontalisation, noesis, noema, reductions, predelineated, intelligible ground, domain, dialogue, experiment, personal logic.

Phenomenalism and phenomenology

A few years ago I attended a meeting where a colleague gave a paper which he called ‘A Phenomenological Theory of Personality’. Essentially, it was a description of the sensory and thought processes by which someone who was hungry went about satisfying that hunger, thus returning to the state of physical equilibrium in which the feelings of hunger were gone. When he finished someone in the group asked: ‘You’ve given us a phenomenon description of the person’s experience, but where is the “-ology”?’. The presenter seemed not to understand the question.

This situation points up a common confusion among many Gestalt therapists. Its limitation is that a mere description does not bring about understanding of either the relationships that experience has to other experiences, or how and why a given experience is just as it is at that particular time. A phenomenological approach to experience, on the other hand, tracks the logic of what is revealed in experience, thus giving us insight into its ground and relationships, and thus begins to help us understand the ‘how and why’.

But isn’t this statement counter to the three commonly held rules that define a phenomenological approach (Spinelli, 1989)? Aren’t we supposed to (1) bracket all assumptions about what is revealed, including especially those pertaining to the existence of the origins of those revelations? Must we not content ourselves with (2) uninterpreted descriptions of what is immediately experienced, focusing upon the content of the revelation itself, not slanting our perceptions with interpretive terms such as ‘nagging’, ‘blaming’, ‘bribing’, and the like? And aren’t we cautioned to (3) make no pre-judgments about what elements of experience might be more significant than others? These three requirements—of bracketing, description, and horizontalisation—seem to limit us to phenomenalism, not phenomenology. And yet neither Husserl nor practitioners of phenomenological therapies such as Gestalt adhere strictly to any one of these rules. Clearly, then, the real import of these rules needs some interpretation.

The aim of this paper is to take a fresh look at Husserl’s own mature understanding of his method— as set forth primarily in his Cartesian Meditations—and its implications for the practice of Gestalt therapy. In particular, I want to show that phenomenology in Gestalt therapy is an existential version of Husserl’s method. I think there is some confusion as to what Husserl’s method actually is, and thus approaches (such as Yalom, 1981; May, 1969; and others) that deal primarily with ‘existential issues’ such as guilt, death, etc. in open and descriptive ways are not really using Husserl’s method. I will first present Husserl’s mature position in order to provide the foundation for this claim.

The issues are best understood when seen in their historical context. The eighteenth century philosopher David Hume (1739/1958) showed that an analysis of
the content of immediate experience reveals only temporal and spatial relationships. Causal connections, substance, and other alleged internal relationships are nowhere to be found there, i.e. in the content of immediate experience. Thus our knowledge of the world can legitimately go no further than a record of spatial contiguity and temporal sequentiality. In response, Kant (1781/1958) argued that the human mind, by its very nature, orders its experience, that we necessarily think in terms of substances enduring through change and reciprocally causing each other’s behaviour, to name only a few forms of order. In Kant’s view, things (things-in-themselves, noumena) as they actually exist present themselves to us and we re-present these revelations to ourselves in experience as phenomena; experience itself is only of appearances, of phenomenal reality. Whether or to what extent these appearances resemble the things as they are in themselves, in noumenal reality, we can never know.

Both Kant and Husserl were concerned with principles of order in experience beyond mere continuity in space and temporal sequentiality. Kant developed a position which showed that the mind necessarily thinks about experience with certain categories of thought, having to do with quantity, quality, relation, and modality, thus providing the basis for the necessity of the form of perception and thought. Husserl, on the other hand, attempted to find a method that would guarantee the necessity and apodictic certainty of the content of perception and thought as well. Husserl believed his method could be used not only in mathematics but also in every branch of science, in psychology, and in philosophy, including questions pertaining to society and to values, and that by this means each of these could yield absolute and necessary truths.

Like most theorists, I do not believe this is an achievable goal. However, the method Husserl developed in his approach to the problem yields some very important methodological principles, some of whose implications have not yet received the important attention I believe they deserve. The following is an overview of his system, the actual (and often misunderstood) method that flows from it, and its implications for Gestalt therapy.

Phenomenology in Husserl

Husserl agrees with Kant that the orderliness of experience is grounded in the structure and dynamics of the mind. Indeed, all we ever know of this or any ‘world’ is phenomenological, appearances ordered by the mind and presented to itself in consciousness. But unlike Kant, Husserl regarded the idea of the thing-in-itself to be an unprovable and unnecessary hypothesis in a system that seeks to discover order in the world as we actually experience it. Moreover, since the thing-in-itself, by definition, transcends all possibility of our knowing it as it is in itself, it will always be an enduring source of doubt. Therefore, while Husserl does not take a position for or against the existence of the thing-in-itself, he tacitly places it outside of his system by bracketing all issues of existence or non-existence. Since all we can ever know of any world whatever is the world of appearances, all of our efforts at understanding must focus entirely upon the order that the mind provides in the world of appearances. Or, as Husserl puts it in the Cartesian Meditations (1973), ‘anything worldly necessarily acquires all the sense determining it, along with its existential status, exclusively from my experiencing, my objectivating, thinking, valuing, or doing, at particular times – notably the status of an evidently valid being is one it can acquire only from my evidences, my grounding acts’ (p. 26). We know nothing of something that does not appear in consciousness, and that excludes any knowledge of a possible thing-in-itself. That is why Husserl insists on bracketing all questions of the existence of anything beyond what appears in experience.

Moreover, by bracketing away every element of interpretation and focusing on discovering the meaning of what appears in experience itself, Husserl attempted to overcome the split between what is known and its ontological reality. However, given this precondition, his hope of arriving at the ontological reality of the things that appear in experience could be achieved only by understanding ‘being’ in cognitive, rather than in ‘existential’, terms.

Like Parmenides, Plato, and many others, Husserl believed that true knowledge is knowledge of being rather than existence; here ‘being’ is understood as identical with ‘intelligibility’; in this view, existence, per se, is unintelligible because it is so ragged, imprecise, and constantly changing; thus it is unknowable, i.e. unreal. By defining ‘being’ or ‘the real’ as ‘the rational’ or ‘the intelligible’, Husserl can then assert that since only ‘pure essences’ are completely intelligible they alone constitute what is meant by ‘being’. Therefore, pure knowledge of ‘being’ is possible only through reason, not through perception. While these essences inform what appears immanently in conscious experience, they do so in distorted ways. For Husserl, absolute knowledge—in both science and values—is nonetheless possible through the application of his phenomenological method, whereby the mind, employing reason and proceeding through the reductions, is able to purify the distortions of essences in immanent appearances. The method can enable the mind to peel away the distortions and bring to intuition the pure essences. In this way the mind is able to have contact with the system of pure essences, and thus with the ground of absolute truth.
For Husserl, the 'mind' or 'ego' must be thought of in two ways. The *phenomenal ego* is simply aware of what appears in experience, while the *transcendental ego* is capable of guiding the purification process (by means of the phenomenological method) that is involved in understanding these essences. Since the essences themselves are understood by Husserl as 'modes of consciousness', the process of thought about essences ultimately involves understanding the structure of the transcendental mind or ego. Having put aside questions about the existence of any kind of 'thing-in-itself', Husserl now grounds both experience and its rational order in the transcendental mind that each of us possesses, i.e. the mind that is capable of purified thought. Immanent experience serves only as a prompt and the occasion for the mind's systematic journey away from the raggedness and contingency of everyday experience, and to the realm of pure essences, achievable through rational thought. Existence itself is irrelevant to the nature of these essences: a perfect triangle or perfect justice exist as *thinkable thoughts*, apart from whether or not they exist in nature. In this regard, Lauer (1965) says:

"A thing, an event, an action, or a thought, is what it is whether or not it is. It is possible to know what something is without any reference at all to whether it is or not... [Essence] is the very intelligibility itself: essence and intelligibility are convertible, and existence as an impediment to intelligibility must be screened out, before any philosophical investigation can properly begin... True knowledge of reality, then, is the knowledge of the sense of, the signification of, things... [It] is to be found precisely in consciousness itself, where admittedly significance is concentrated." (p. 21)

**Role of intentionality in Husserl's method**

It is important in understanding Husserl to bear in mind that an intuition of pure essences always involves seeing any given essence in its intrinsic connections with other essences (meanings, or *cogitata*), i.e. in its contextual ground. Central to this understanding of Husserl's method for discovering 'the sense of, the signification of, things' is his concept of *intentionality*, a concept he learned from Brentano but which he greatly expanded.2 (The Latin root *intendere* means 'to stretch forth', and in Brentano intentionality simply means that the mind 'stretches forth' to the appearances of things in themselves, translating them into the objects of awareness; thus consciousness is always of an object. In Brentano this concept is essentially static, since it pertains to a *specific act of representation*, the mind's fundamental act in perception. In Husserl, intentionality becomes dynamic and more comprehensive, referring not only to what one is conscious of at a given moment, but also involving the mind's movement to other views of a given object and/or to its intrinsic meaning-relationships with other objects. This process of thought is a kind of *internal time*. This dynamic view is central to Husserl's understanding of his method. The importance of this view for Gestalt therapy and the dynamic character of its processes will be shown in what follows.

All sensory perception occurs from a given perspective, but the mind has the power to imagine other views from other perspectives, and it spontaneously synthesizes these into a whole. Prompted by experience of different views of any object or speculation about other views of, for example, a triangle, the mind readily moves to other possible views as it synthesizes these into a whole, thus arriving at a holistic concept of the triangle. The whole that results from this intentional analysis can be thought but it cannot be experienced in sensation. The other views are 'intended' by the view of a single triangle from a particular view. In his article on phenomenology in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1927), Husserl asserts, 'Consciousness of something is not an empty holding of something; every phenomenon has its own total form of intention [*intentionale Gesamtform*], but at the same time it has a structure, which in intentional analysis leads always again to components which are themselves also intentional' (p. 35). Ultimately, following out the totality of the intentions of 'triangle' would lead the mind to the complete principles of trigonometry and, ultimately, to the whole of mathematics. Intentionality does not, however, pertain only to sensory objects but to all of the mind's cognitions, whether scientific or pertaining to values. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl (1931/1973) points out that each conscious process means something, and it is this meaning (*cogitation*, the intention) that is the universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be conscious of something: as a *cogito* to bear within itself its *cogitatum* (p. 33). Reflection on the process permits us to focus upon the process of awareness as intentional, and frees us to 'explicate what can be found in it' (p. 34). This is the basis for the method's second reduction (the first reduction involves putting in brackets all questions of existence, while the third reduction involves regarding all elements of experience as potentially of equal significance) whereby one sets aside all interpretations of what appears and focuses strictly upon the content (*noema*) of what appears to consciousness and the manner or mode (*noesis*) by which it enters awareness. The phenomenological ego thus becomes a 'disinterested onlooker', allowing the manner of awareness to become 'accessible to description' (p. 35).2 This descriptive content, being purified of 'all interpretations that read into them more than is
genuinely seen', frees us from all prejudice. The objects of consciousness can then be seen 'solely as the intentional correlates of modes of consciousness of them' (p. 36).

Husserl asserts that the mind is capable of awareness of a vast number of contents; indeed consciousness is always actualising some of these thinkable thoughts, these potential awarenesses (1927, p. 44). The assumption that operates in this context is of the reality of the system of purely intelligible essences that constitutes every possible thinkable thought and awareness. This system constitutes the whole of a mind's potentiality; in fact, this is the very structure of every possible person's mind, even if no minds actually existed. The unique set of experiences each person has awakens, i.e. actualises, an ever-expanding set of these potentialities, but it is impossible for any single individual to actualise the whole system. There are all sorts of potentialities the ego never realises, but that it could realise if it oriented itself differently. These potentialities (the system of pure essences) are 'predelineated' (1973, p. 45). In other words, specific essences have direct and intrinsic relationships with a finite set of other essences; thus each essence has a finite set of meanings, i.e. possible relationships with other essences. But all essences have indirect relationships with each other, and together they form a single system of intelligibility. Mental development can thus be viewed as both limited and guided by this system: an individual fulfills himself as a mental being as he temporally/actually experiences more essences. Even though no individual mind can become aware of all possible essences, each person continuously synthesises his own actualised essences into an experiential and thinkable whole, thus creating his own 'map' of the world.

The search for truth, therefore, involves the application of the phenomenological method to immediate experience in order to discover the true intentional, or relational, context of the pure essences that are revealed in that experience. For Husserl, intentional analysis leads to an uncovering of the potential paths of thought that are implicit in a given experience. As the mind engages in this uncovering process it explicates and makes distinct 'what is consciously meant' by a given element in actual experience, and at the same time comes to an understanding of the intentional processes themselves. While the mind's tendency to 'intend-beyond-itself' is an essential characteristic of its activity, whether or not it engages in the uncovering process is neither automatic nor necessary, but is a matter of personal initiative or choice (1973, p. 46).

To put this another way, since meaning is found in the exploration of the relationship between the figure and the ground, in Husserl the process of purification of experience involves seeing accurately the intentional relationships of a given essence (a figure) to its intelligible ground. But this is always seen from the perspective of a given domain of knowledge (mathematics, physics, ethics, politics, etc.). This involves a contextual exploration of those relationships as they are revealed in experience, as opposed to the importation of meaning imposed on the facts of experience.

As experience grows over time the individual becomes aware of more of and more of the intentions (intrinsic relationships) of the essences that have been 'awakened' in him. From the outset each person organises his experiences into a whole of memories, beliefs, habitual patterns of behaviour, preferences, and feelings; and this experiential whole is filled with contingencies drawn from experience. Contingent experience is often filled with error and irrationality, seeking (imagining) 'connections between/among essences' that are false, and failing to see essential relationships that are true. While these intend each other by 'predelineated potentialities' whose structure limits how they can be actualised in experience, the limitations are not rigorous (1973, p. 45). The fact that they appear in time makes possible erroneous connections between kinds of things. All superstitions, for example, involve such false associations as black cats crossing one's path cause disasters, masturbation causes blindness, etc. Moreover, many accurate connections await scientific progress: it was not until the mid-20th century that scientists discovered the causal connection between strep throat and rheumatic fever and nephritis. Earlier hypotheses as to the causes of these two diseases involved erroneous connecting between things supposed to be their causes.

To summarise, Husserl intended the techniques of his method to be the means 'which would enable the subject to eliminate, both from consciousness and from its object, those elements of contingency which make doubt possible' (Lauer, 1958, p. 48). The method of reductions would lead to 'the gradual penetration into the purified essential residue ...' (p. 50). Ultimately, we would see that the intelligibility of experience – to be found in the system of pure essences in their predelineated relationships – is grounded in the very nature of the mind itself (here understood as the transcendental subject).

What drives the method?

Husserl agrees with Aristotle's (1960) dictum that knowledge begins with wonder, with the kind of curiosity that normally arises about the facts and events that appear in experience, and that it is this wonder that leads a person to seek an explanation for them. Both agree that experience itself must be repeatedly consulted in ways that lead to the discovery of the meaning of
experiential facts. This meaning (as figure) always involves grasping a pattern of relationships, (as ground, i.e. the system of intelligible essences) that is revealed in experience itself. Commenting on this point, Lauer (1989) says:

If I want to determine what something really is, I must turn to the experience in which the something is present to my consciousness; therein I will find an intentional structure, and that intentional structure properly analyzed will reveal to me all that can be revealed with regard to the object toward which my experience is oriented. This structure of intentionality is the fundamental structure of any phenomenon; it is present to my consciousness prior to any reflection upon it, but in order to know what the experience of it is and thus to know what is experienced, I must penetrate into all the intentions which make up its structure, and I must do so in such a way as completely to validate these intentions as intentions of this object and of no other. To the extent that one has grasped any object as distinguishable from any other, one has an 'essential' grasp of that object. (p. 42)

It is important to note that in this context phenomenology and field theory are essentially the same. Following the logic of what appears leads the knower to a grasp of the contextual ground of the essence that appears. In everyday experience, in science, and in Gestalt therapy, understanding requires a grasp of the affecting context or domain of influence of what happens. Thus our natural curiosity about our experiences leads us to ask questions about them. The more we know the more sophisticated our questions become, and we learn that the quest for knowledge requires that we learn how to ask increasingly sophisticated questions of nature. Specialized fields of knowledge generate specialized kinds of questions in the minds of specialists in those fields. It is a misunderstanding of Husserl's phenomenology to think, as some do, that phenomenology requires us to go to experience with a 'bare' mind, forgetting everything we know. On the contrary, without specific kinds of curiosity all data would be equally without interest, and we would be like Buridan's ass, who was thought to be dumbly suspended between two identical stacks of hay.

Husserl's method requires that we begin by setting aside our presuppositions about experience and approach it with 'fresh eyes', that we ourselves focus upon, and describe to ourselves, only the content and manner of what appears in our awareness. It also requires that we set aside our preconceptions about what kinds of data are more significant than other kinds, thus remaining open to the possibility that some factors will prove - upon examination - to be more significant than we might formerly have thought. The curiosity each person experiences - and thus the questions he asks about his experience - depends upon the ground of experience, understanding, and interest he brings to present experience. The geologist, the engineer, the historian, the sociologist, the psychologist, and the ethicist would all have different sets of questions about, say, the impact of Hurricane Katrina on America's Gulf Coast in 2005. Such a complex event has many dimensions of meaning, and thus the questions each of these specialists might ask are legitimate in their own fields and have important answers that do not necessarily overlap. In other words, most events that are not controlled in the laboratory involve a dimensional nexus of laws of nature or principles of order, and these are rarely if ever reducible to, say, the physical, the social, or the intrapsychic.

The point is that, as Lewin (1951) has famously pointed out, the interest of the questioner organises the field. And most fields simultaneously manifest numerous principles of order, each of which can be discovered by a person who brings to the study the relevant ground of knowledge and experience. Persons with differing grounds have differing interests, and therefore the questions they ask about their experiences differ. The phenomenological method requires that every questioner give primary attention 'to the facts themselves', seeking answers to these questions by a patient consulting of what is given in experience.

From the outset, Husserl understood that persons who are engaged in inquiries in the various specialised domains of knowledge can be thought of as progressively actualising many possible thinkable/aware-able essences that pertain to their own specialised domain. The predelineated connections among essences of these several domains can be thought of as providing horizons or limiting conditions for each of the varieties of inquiry. For example, the domain a mathematician might investigate would not include issues of, say, justice or intimacy. Thus the questions and curiosities that are likely to arise in the mind of a mathematician with respect to the objects within his domain are unlikely to arise in the mind of an ethicist concerned with issues of justice or a couple therapist concerned with interpersonal relationships. The ground of understanding and experience someone brings to experience gives rise to the kinds of curiosities he entertains and the kinds of answers he seeks. The same situation usually manifests a number of differing sets of intelligible principles and meanings, and it is a person's interest, arising from the ground he brings to the situation, that leads him to notice some of these, and to ignore the others.
The centrality of experience in Husserl, modern science, and Gestalt therapy

For Husserl, it is absolutely necessary that we repeatedly consult (by a variety of means) the immanent experience of appearances in order to discover precisely the patterns of interrelated essences that are revealed in that actual experience. It is only through experience that the real structure of these absolute and immutable essences can be discovered and understood. He says that abstract meanings do not constitute real knowledge; rather, any given meaning (essence = intelligibility) must be understood in its real relationships (its intentionality) with other meanings, and the only way in which we can discover such real relationships is by discovering how they are manifested in actual experience. Without the guidance of actual experience the mind is capable of building "castles in the air" by connecting all sorts of essences with each other, many of which connections are simply false.

Modern science shares with Husserl the desire to understand the principles of order that govern things and events in the experienced world. Yet unlike Husserl, no one in contemporary science believes science is capable of discovering a system of absolute and immutable truths. Rather, scientists employ explanatory models that comprehensively and consistently make sense of what is experienced. A given model no doubt satisfies scientists' aesthetic sense and their desire to understand, but perhaps its primary value is that it increases science's powers of prediction and control, and leads to new hypotheses, experiments and/or observations. Ultimately, the truth status of any given scientific model is its pragmatic value in explaining and controlling aspects of nature. In that sense its truth has only the status of a very complex 'working hypothesis'. That this is so is shown by the fact that, from time to time, a conceptual model is replaced by another model that better explains those anomalous facts that the old reigning paradigm explains poorly or cannot explain at all (Kuhn, 1962).

Even though modern empirical science does not aspire to discover absolute truths as it seeks to understand the intrinsic system of ordering principles that govern the world of experience, science employs a modified version of Husserl's method: it explores the regular (intelligible) relationships among events; and the touchstone of its investigations is that all concepts about the objects of investigation must be confirmed (or disconfirmed) by experiential data of some kind, i.e. either by direct observation or by means of instruments of various kinds. In science the data themselves (ideally) trump thought about the data, just as in Husserl's method observation of "the facts themselves" takes precedence over our thoughts about how they 'should be'.

Gestalt therapy is like science in that its quest for truth is primarily practical, even though it is also true that many therapists find Gestalt theory aesthetically and intellectually satisfying. However, unlike science and in contrast to Husserl's aim, the Gestalt therapist's quest for understanding in the actual work of therapy moves in exactly the opposite direction from either Husserl or science: away from what is universally true, and toward an increasingly exquisite understanding of this-here-now, unique, singular individual. In this context we do not want to know for the sake of knowledge itself but for the sake of helping the individual client live with greater awareness, and more choicefully as he lives through time and circumstances. In Husserl's method the inquirer must bracket questions concerning the transphenomenal existence of the objects he investigates; analogously, the Gestalt therapist must bracket the question of "is this true?" as she listens to the client's story. As she works with a given client, she entertains a series of working hypotheses about what is happening and what it means for this particular client. Each of these is held and expanded, or modified or rejected, strictly on the basis of what the client himself reveals in their ongoing work together. As is the case in both Husserl and science, in Gestalt therapy the ultimate arbiter of truth is experience. In Gestalt therapy it is the therapist's experience of the actual self-revelation of the person himself that trumps any thoughts she entertains about him.

The authors of Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality (1951) say that what is distinctive about Gestalt therapy is the fact that the Gestalt therapist intends to make contact with the actual living of the client in the here and now, to become aware of — and to experiment with — that unique person's rhythms and patterns of living (pp. 15-16, 23-24). Every person necessarily assimilates what he experiences; this is true not only of the food that is ingested but of whatever happens in the events of his life. We constantly create and recreate an internal whole of our experience, a kind of dynamic system of memories, cognitions and beliefs, feelings, habitual patterns of behaviour, innate and acquired preferences, and so on. In this way each of us spontaneously and necessarily makes a kind of rough and ready sense of what happens in our life. This informs each person about the kind of place the world is he lives in. In other words, each person creates and constantly recreates his own model of the world that tells him about what is possible/impossible in that world, what to expect from other people, how he must act to get along, how others will see him and treat him, and so on.

Every person's present living is patterned by how he has assimilated his experiences, and this dynamic system of assimilation provides the ground that influ-
iences his cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to present experience. Thus the therapeutic task of the Gestalt therapist is to find ways to come into contact with each client's dynamic organisation in order to help that person become more aware of the how of his living.  

The Gestalt therapist comes to the meeting with her clients with a personal ground of experience, understanding, and skill which feeds her curiosity about what each client reveals—both verbally and non-verbally—as the sessions go on. The therapist responds internally to the client's self-revelation with, for example, 'I wonder what that's about?'; 'What would happen if he said it louder or whispered it?'; 'What would he feel if she sat silently for a time instead of talking at such a rapid pace?'; 'I wonder if this is a familiar experience for him, or not?'; and so on. From the therapist's ground, and prompted by her curiosity, she asks for concrete and specific details in the client's story, and frequently inquires into what the client is feeling physically and emotionally as he tells his story. In this way she develops a deeper understanding of the client's situation and of his living in it.

Out of this same personal ground the therapist suggests paths of deeper exploration of the client's story, as well as a variety of experiments that serve to refract the client's experience into a number of perspectives and/or lead to his trying out new behaviours. What we are attempting to do is to 'track the logic' of what the client reveals to us phenomenologically—both verbally and non-verbally—and by means of this tracking to tease out the connections of what is revealed in the here and now with other internalised experiences, beliefs, and habitual patterns of response. As the dynamic structure of the client's inner living increasingly stands out in relief, it becomes ever more available for the therapist and client to explore together dialogically and with a variety of experiments. Through these processes changes in the client's inner life—and thus in his actual behaviour—become more likely to occur. If, however, after having discovered more about himself through therapy, the person then chooses to remain as he is, he does so with greater self acceptance—and his inner life has changed nonetheless.

The existential character of Gestalt therapy's hermeneutic and its phenomenology

There are, essentially, two primary types of hermeneutical (interpretive) approaches in psychotherapy, and they are very different from each other. The Gestalt hermeneutic (as well as that of other humanistic therapies) is essentially emergent, discovering the meaning of the client's experience by means of questioning and experimenting with what the client reveals of himself verbally and non-verbally. In contrast, the hermeneutic of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) and that of classical forms of psychoanalysis is imposition. The therapist in this latter approach listens for patterns and clues that permit her to place the client in a diagnostic category which, in turn, dictates certain forms of treatment. Employing the emergent approach a therapist inadvertently entertains series of hypotheses as to the meaning and significance of certain elements of a client's story; yet she regards such hypotheses as having only heuristic value, i.e. as suggesting directions of exploration and specific experiments. Thus they are held only lightly, being set aside as exploration of the details of the story come to light, and/or as the therapist's further experience with the client suggests other possible hypotheses. This repeated deference to experience is a cardinal feature of Husserl's method, and it is fundamental to the processes of Gestalt therapy.

More specifically, a Gestalt therapist is interested in discovering the meaning for an individual client of a given gesture, breathing pattern, tone of voice, choice of words, operant assumption, emotional or behavioural response, by seeing it in relation to the assimilated ground of that individual person's living. The therapist must put aside all preconceptions about what words and gestures mean and seek to discover, by means of the therapeutic process, what these mean in this client's life. The logical tracking of a specific figure that occurs in the therapeutic process permits both client and therapist to see it in its relationships with the person's assimilated ground. Experience and theory teach the therapist that many meanings are possible when, for example, a given client speaks with a 'breathy and disembodied voice', or a young woman wraps her arms around herself whenever she speaks of her boyfriend, or a man moves his leg up and down rather rapidly when he talks about his father. The same gesture, in other words, is compatible with several different meanings. The non-verbal self-revelations thus provide several possible working hypotheses about what these gestures might mean for this here-now person.

But only further exploration and experimentation can answer 'What does this mean?' for this particular individual and at this time and place.

The following two accounts of actual therapeutic processes illustrate how the method can be used to gain access to important aspects of a client's living organisation by beginning with some specific element in present experience and tracking its logic to its existential ground. I once worked with a young woman who believed she had been molested as a child, but she had no memory of it. It troubled her
greatly that this feeling persisted without a verifying memory, and it continued to have a serious effect on her sexual relationship with her husband. She wondered if she might have a serious mental illness. One day as our session began I noticed she was twisting a lock of her hair that had fallen down from where it was pinned up. I said, 'I notice you're twisting your hair.' She replied, 'Yes, I do that a lot. I've done it most of my life, especially when I was a child.' I said, 'What's it like to do that?' to which she said, 'I think I'm comforting myself, which I did a lot as a child.' How about telling me about when you did that when you were a child.'

'Well, my parents were divorced and my mother had a lot of boyfriends that were in and out of the house.'

All of a sudden she told me she felt that she was five-years-old. I asked her to tell me where she was and what was happening. She said 'I'm in my bedroom, and I see my father coming into my room.' I asked, 'What's happening?' 'He's touching me, and I hate it.' 'What do you want to say to him?' 'Get away from me you bastard. Get away from me. I hate you!' I asked her to tell him how she was affected by what he had done, and to say anything else she wanted to say. Afterwards she came back from that earlier time, and then she said, 'No wonder I always feel so creepy when I have to have anything to do with him. I can't stand him, and I hate it when I have to be around him!' This experience greatly facilitated our continuing work together, in that she no longer had to fear that she was mentally ill in the absence of the memory of abuse; and given the retrieved memory, we could then address more effectively a number of important issues related to her father and his parents.

At another time I was giving a training workshop in Australia when a man in the group said he wanted to talk with his father. He stated that he and his father had never got along when he was young, that he had hated his father for his cruelty, and he had left home as soon as he was able. He further said that for a number of years he was deeply involved in the drug scene, having been addicted to heroin and other hard drugs. He had finally given up doing drugs and was leading a healthy life, even preparing to become a counsellor in order to help others. He told the group that his father had recently died and that in the months prior to his father's death he and the father had been reconciled. He said it had been wonderful to be close to him for the first time in his life. He told me that he did not want to express any of the old anger he had felt toward his father, that he only wanted to speak to his father in a positive way about the love he now felt for him.

As he told me this I noticed that after about every third or fourth word he coughed a bit. While I was perfectly willing to help him speak to his father in a positive way, I began to wonder as he spoke whether he had something else he wanted or needed to 'cough up'. So I suggested an experiment. I asked him to try exhaling strongly from the pit of his stomach and through his mouth; I demonstrated what I meant, then did it with him. Next I asked him to put some sound with the exhalations, again demonstrating and accompanying him in the experiment. Then I asked him to turn to the person he had chosen from the group to play his father and to make that same sound to his father. Finally I asked him to put words to the sound.

The following is some of what he said: 'You son of a bitch! You missed me, you never knew who I was! I wanted you to love me, but all I ever got from you was indifference and abuse. Because of you I almost threw my life away, but I've pulled myself up from where I was, and now I have a wonderful life.' After a few more expressions of hurt and anger he continued, 'But I'm so glad we were finally reconciled, and that we had the time together after you got sick. I think we finally really saw each other, and I could feel your love and let you know that I love you too.'

The reality in this case was that in spite of the fact that this man had recently been reconciled with his father and now had loving feelings for him, he had not finished with the years of anger and hurt he had been living with. The cough prompted me to wonder if the anger might be expressing itself in the cough, so I decided to check it out by means of the experiment. In fact he was holding feelings of both anger and love, but he was trying to deny the anger. However, it was pressing to be expressed. He was currently experiencing the positive feelings he had begun to feel during the last months of his father's life, but the unfinished business from the past remained unresolved, which was also true: he had been hurt by his father and had spent many years being angry with him, and this had been very costly to his life. At the end of the work this person's eyes were very shiny and he looked much younger than before. He said he felt a great sense of relief and release.

These are examples of how the Gestalt therapist makes contact with the actual living of the person. The client's experience in the therapy is of someone, the therapist, who is really present and who has a caring curiosity to know him as he feels himself to be, someone whose mind and heart remain open to knowing him more fully and understanding him more deeply as the unique and singular person he is.

To summarise, as the therapeutic process goes on over time, the therapist internally experiences fragments of theory, a series of hunches and working hypotheses, all the while increasing her actual experience with the client and learning more about how the client's inner life is organised. But no meanings we may bring to immediate experience are to be allowed to outstrip the actual ways in which the client reveals himself.
Further, what may seem to be of great importance early in the process of therapy — say, a tic, or a report of incest — may turn out to be of relatively little importance in the client’s present functioning.

The Gestalt therapist agrees with Husserl’s dictum: the truth can be found only by consulting ‘the things themselves’ as they reveal themselves in experience. And those ‘things themselves’ that we consult come to light in any and all of the interactions a person has with environmental, intrapsychic, and personal others. We are concerned not only with the larger issues of authenticity, death, guilt, choice and responsibility, and the search for meaning, but also with how a person goes about resolving any of the problems of his life, large or small: finding a way to pay the rent, repair the car, choosing a vacation, buying a house, changing careers, breaking bad news to a friend, ending a relationship — in short, the work of a Gestalt therapist is concerned with how this particular person lives his life through specific times and circumstances. By our willingness to work with our clients on any and all of the problematic issues in their lives, we are able to gain access to all of the therapeutically significant issues as they come to light through the processes of therapy: unfinished business, blind spots, conflict styles and patterns, internal conflicts between values and/or between alternative possibilities, the person’s map of the world, problems of moving from thought to action, habitual patterns of response, and so on. As these come into awareness and become available for therapeutic work, therapist and client together learn more about how the client’s living is organised, and about his resistances to change. The therapeutic work between therapist and client that addresses the person’s actual living is the key to that person’s learning how to live in new ways, ways that are growthful and bring satisfaction.

The principles that guide Gestalt therapeutic processes thus constitute an existential hermeneutic, the process of discovering and understanding the unique truths of the living of an existing human being. And, further, it is because Gestalt therapy is concerned with any of the problematic ways in which individual human beings live their lives — and through its processes is able to discover and work with the ground in their present living of these ways — that I have come to believe that Gestalt therapy is perhaps the purest form of existential phenomenology.

Conclusion

By confining his system to what appears in experience and then excluding existence-beyond-appearances as a proper — or even a possible — object of knowing, Husserl’s position cannot then consistently account for either the reality of the conscious mind itself (as perceiving subject who does not appear) or for the reality of other minds, who also (as subjects) do not appear. Moreover, by bracketing all questions about the existence of things-in-themselves, Husserl’s position also cannot explain why or when we have exactly the experiences we actually do have. Nevertheless, Husserl’s real legacy is not his philosophical system but his method, and his insistence that anyone wishing to understand the facts of experience and to know the truth must put aside their preconceptions about what something means and, using his method, investigate the thing in question on its own terms. For Husserl, that involves seeing a concept’s logical relations with other terms — exploring its complex web of implied (intentional) conceptual relationships with other meanings — in order to understand fully the meaning of a single term. So, for example, in Plato an understanding of the ideal meaning of ‘justice’ involves also understanding courage, temperance, human nature, the nature of society, mathematics, and, ultimately, the whole structure of essences crowned by the Good.

The phenomenological method, then, as Husserl himself understood it, is one that advises anyone seeking truth — in any domain — to go ‘to the facts themselves’: the truth is to be found in the patterned relationships of what is revealed in immediate experience. But the inquiring mind must clear itself of all thoughts about ‘what must be so’ and the belief that ‘these are the important facts’, and thus be open to whatever and however the facts reveal themselves. Of course, every inquirer into any domain — whether in science, history, philosophy, or psychotherapy — brings to the inquiry a ground of learning and experience, and as the facts of his experience in the domain of his interest reveal themselves, the inquirer’s curiosity is piqued and this prompts him to ask a variety of questions about the meaning of those facts. The nature of the curiosity and the questions it generates depend entirely upon the ground of learning and experience the inquirer brings to the investigation. But that ground must not provide the answers — only experience can provide them. Moreover, each domain has its own particular methods of going about answering these questions. However, what they all have in common is that the facts of experience themselves are of primary importance, and these alone must guide the interpretation of what they mean.

This is the phenomenological method that informs the processes of Gestalt therapy. Yet, in contrast to Husserl and to empirical scientists — all of whom seek to discover universal truths that can be shared with others — the Gestalt therapist’s curiosity and the questions it raises aim at the singular truths about a uniquely existing human being. Husserl believed his method would enable the inquirer to come to an understanding
of absolute truth, those unchanging essences that structure the mind’s functions and determine any possible world that can be experienced. Scientists seek, by means of their conceptual models and methods of observation and experimentation, to come ever closer to understanding those laws that govern this existing world of change. In contrast, the Gestalt therapist is committed to knowing and having ever more exquisite and intimate contact with the ever-changing organisation of this here-now person’s living. The phenomenological method used by Gestalt therapists begins with the obvious manifestations of a person’s living, and tracks the uniquely personal logic of these manifestations, so that those relational patterns of the dynamic internal structure – that influence how this client actually lives through time and circumstances – can be coaxed into the open. In other words, the Gestalt therapist endeavours to meet each person in the present and to have contact with him in ways that lead to the discovery with him of the unique organisation of the world he has created.

As a Gestalt therapist and a client explore dialogically that person’s own unique assimilation of memories, learnings, preferences, and patterns of living, several kinds of things are likely to happen. The processes of therapy can heal the dysfunctions in the person’s living, and can open up many new possibilities for the individual to change. The therapy can also aid him in developing the courage to live more choicefully. Further, in his relationship with the therapist the person has had the lived experience of being known and appreciated by another human being as the real person he feels himself to be. I believe this is every person’s deepest longing, the experience of ‘true home’. Sadly, it is a longing that is seldom satisfied. Yet in the therapeutic process therapist and client, together, discover a measure of the truth of who this unique person – this singular thou – really is and is becoming. But as with all things unique, it is a truth that the two of them can live but can never fully verbalise, not even to each other. Perhaps it is, ultimately, this shared journey that is the most healing experience of all.

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**Notes**

1. I am here dealing with the historical versions of this issue. A later phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty (1969) takes a different position, but such differences among later phenomenologists are beyond the scope of the present paper.

2. In his book on phenomenology, Spinelli (1989) seems unaware of the vast difference between Brentano’s and Husserl’s understanding of intentionality. Brentano’s concept would not provide a method for discovering the meaning of a given experience, while the discovery of the relationship between what appears and its ground – thereby discovering the meaning or sense of the experience – is fundamental to Husserl’s method. I intend to show that the phenomenological method that most Gestalt therapists actually use – in contrast to how it is often talked about (Resnick, 1995) – is derived from Husserl, in particular from his concept of intentionality.

3. The inquirer is open to whatever is revealed in experience; he has no preconceived agenda as to what ‘must’ be so – in that sense he is a ‘disinterested observer’. However, given the ground he brings to experience, what does appear piques his curiosity, raises questions that lead him to begin to track the logic of the experience in a certain way. Yet, by continually consulting experience (a point to be developed in a later section) his curiosity does not determine what he will discover along that way.

4. Book One of Plato’s Republic is an excellent example of the phenomenological method. Various answers to the question ‘what is justice?’ are proposed, but they are either rejected or modified as other truths of experience are brought to bear upon them. The relationships of ‘justice’ to other ‘arts’ and to ‘truth and falsehood’ begin to emerge in the discussion. The remainder of the Republic departs from the method as Plato uses the occasion to set forth his own philosophical position as he develops what he sees as the implications for other essences/forms – including wisdom, courage, human nature, the nature of society, the State, and many others – of the abstract or ‘pure’ definition of justice arrived at at the end of Book One.

5. The concept of ‘dynamic organisation’ has obvious similarities to Gordon Wheeler’s notion of ‘structured ground’ (Wheeler, 1991). It is clear that each person’s actual living is not a ‘homogeneous soup’ but is somehow organised, even if this organisation is intrinsically mutable and in many ways constantly changing as experience goes on. I agree with Wheeler’s statement that, in our ongoing interactions with the environment, ‘The process . . . [is] a self-directing feedback loop . . . Thus our conditioning, neuroses, values (introjected or otherwise), commitments, overall goals may be laid down in a relatively stable fashion, and may well determine subsequent experience to a point, but that experience in turn will then act upon all those prior determinants, dynamically and reciprocally, as the process goes along. Which is to say, with Lewin, that it is the new dynamic organization of all these things at each moment that is the “cause” of present behavior’ (p. 62).

However, I disagree with Wheeler’s subsequent criticism of what he considers an overemphasis in Gestalt therapy on a client’s figures, to the neglect of the ‘ground conditions’ that influence and help to explain the forming figures in the person’s experience through time and circumstances (pp. 63ff). Gestalt therapists actually do begin with how a client’s living manifests itself in his present self-revelation, not only by what he says verbally, but also in his gestures, voice quality, breathing, posture, and any number of other non-verbal behaviours. These manifestations of the person’s living present themselves as a given person deals with specific energised figures in the here and now, and this shows what is important to the person in the present moment and in his present situation. One of the fundamental features of Gestalt therapeutic processes is that we do not begin by attempting to work directly with the ground. Rather, we track the personal logic of what the client reveals in
the present moments of his living as he responds to those figures that stir up his excitement and mobilise his energies. Attempting to deal directly with the ground would lead us back to the kinds of abstractions that come from the client's intellectualising of his story, and would be a turning away from Gestalt therapy's holistic approach to human change.

To put this another way, using the Gestalt version of Husserl's phenomenological method, we begin with what the client reveals in present experience in order to discover its personal meaning in the individual's structuring ground — constantly checking and re-checking present experience as the guide to the process itself. In that way we move in therapy to how the person's ground is currently organised, and thus gain access to how the person's living is revealed in the here and now. In this way, we avoid 'building (intellectual) castles in the air' but work instead with the person's actual living.

The value of these awarenesses is that they become accessible to the therapeutic process which, in turn, can bring about a healing of the splits and blocks that have developed in the client's living and that influence many of his responses.

As the therapist deals with a client's energised figure she is actually dealing with the problem he is presently attempting to solve. It is in this process that conflicting values and purposes in the ground come to light, that the therapist begins to understand and work with the difficulties in his 'map of the world', problems of moving from thought to action, dysfunctional distortions of contact, and so on. In other words, by exploring with the client the emergent and energised figure the therapist is able to track the logic of the client's present process to its assimilated ground. Changes in that ground thus become possible, and thus the client is able to entertain a greater range of possibilities, and to grow in courage as he experiments with new ways to be in the world.

6. I have argued elsewhere (Crocker, 1999) that specific verbal or non-verbal manifestations of a person's living can be regarded metaphorically as a kind of hologram, a specific whole that in some sense embodies the ordered whole of that living. The phenomenological method permits us to begin with a specific revelation and thereby to gain access to the whole.

References


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