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## **“Tiger! Tiger! Burning Bright” – Aesthetic Values as Clinical Values in Gestalt Therapy**

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“‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’, that is all Ye know on earth, and all Ye need to know.” John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

“If you are in the now, you are creative, you are inventive.” Frederick Perls (1969) *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, p.3

### **I. Introduction**

The aesthetic<sup>1</sup> is central to Gestalt therapy. Its particular organization of sensation includes – without being limited to – the experience of beauty itself. This same aesthetic attitude that creates art and appreciates beauty accounts for life’s harmonies and rhythms. Aesthetic qualities animate the life-work of an artist as well as the quotidian events of ordinary life. The theory and practice of Gestalt therapy is infused with these qualities. It is no accident that the first and most comprehensive elaboration of Gestalt therapy theory was written by Paul Goodman, whose efforts in creative literature (fiction and poetry) were as ambitious as his works in psychology and social theory. His collaboration with Frederick Perls is the coming together of European psychoanalysis, phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, and existentialism with the American pragmatism of William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey (Richard Kitzler, “Three Lectures,” article in preparation).

Creativity is intrinsic to Gestalt therapy’s focus on novelty, excitement, and the finding, making, discovering, and inventing of contacting. It is the functioning of organism-environment.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this focus links Gestalt therapy with biology since creativity factors centrally in natural selection. Gestalt therapy takes the process of development from evolutionary biology, where development is a co-

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<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic: Etymology: German *ästhetisch*, from New Latin *aestheticus*, from Greek *aisthetikos* of sense perception, from *aisthanesthai* to perceive (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). This chapter is a continuation of work initiated by the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and

<sup>2</sup> I change the original “organism/environment” of Goodman to “organism-environment.” Goodman’s compound word punctuation is an either/or formulation, and this is inconsistent with our holistic theory.

creative interaction among genes, organism, and other environment, enabling maximally successful adaptations to diverse conditions (Dewey, 1910, 1934, 1958; Oyama, 2000a, b; Lewontin, 2000). Through creativity, organisms invent diversity, which allows for natural selection among populations. Contact, which is the awareness process itself, is the *experience* of natural selection within the life-spans of aware organisms. Self is the artist of the human organism and, as the vital synthesis of contactings, it is experience of life itself. The aesthetic emerges from within sensible experience as the sight, sound, touch, and even smell of life. It divides the living from the dead.

This chapter will examine the centrality of aesthetics in Gestalt therapy's ideas of contact-boundary, contact, self, and creative-adjustment.<sup>3</sup> This convergence of aesthetic values with therapeutic values is one of Gestalt therapy's most unique attributes as a method of psychotherapy. This attitude in Gestalt therapy's clinical approach is its radical power.

## **II. Contact-Boundary, Contact, Self, Creative Adjustment: The Heart of Gestalt Therapy**

### **A. Contact-Boundary**

"Experience occurs at the boundary between organism and its environment, primarily the skin surface and the other organs of sensory and motor response. Experience is the function of this boundary, and psychologically what is real are the "whole" configurations of this functioning, some meaning achieved, some action completed" (Perls F et al., 1951, p. 277).

With this often-quoted passage from *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (hereinafter referred to as PHG), Gestalt therapy attempts to settle one of the central questions in Western philosophy: the relationship of mind and matter.

A brief summary of this important philosophical concern may begin in the 17th century. We can attribute the philosophical basis for common separation of the world into the mental and material, the mind and the body, to René Descartes (1596–1650). Matter is extended in space; it has physical, measurable characteristics. The mind, on the other hand, is the realm of consciousness and soul separate from yet linked to the material world. John Locke (1632–1704) continued this distinction and further identified the primary and secondary qualities of objects, noting what he thought to be intrinsic qualities and those dependent on perception. To Locke, mind is a passive *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, whose content is entirely the result of sense perception. David Hume (1711–1776) approached the mind/body dualism and, with the sharp logic of his empiricism, severed any way of being certain that our senses could be a reliable indicator of the external world.

<sup>3</sup>I likewise change the original “creative adjustment” to “creative-adjustment.” This compound word now conveys the wholeness of creative-adjustment. “Creative” is not an adjectival modifier of “adjustment,” but is intrinsic to it.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) examined this dualism and considered the function of the human mind in great detail; he formulated the synthetic unity of apperception and suggested that human cognition functions by organizing knowledge into categories prior to any experience. Kant opened the way for Idealism, which dominated much of 19th-century thought; at its extreme, it ignored the role of experience. In the United States, drawing on European developments in philosophy and science, William James (1842–1910) appraised this formidable gap between cognition and the material world and re-grounded experience in sensation; he defined perception as the activity of the organism. Consciousness is no longer a “thing” separate from the perceived world, but a material and sensible process: the *psychical* is *physical*. James, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), and Dewey (1859–1952) re-embedded human experience in biology and began to adapt Darwinian discoveries into human development (Mead, 1936; Dewey, 1910). Perception is the activity of the aware organism’s “passage” or process (Mead, 1934). Self is created by social acts; the “we” precedes the “I,” and remains implicit in it. Life is effervescent with excitement, an *élan vital* (Henri Bergson, 1859–1941). Experiencing, moreover, is an aesthetic process of organism and environment in co-creative poise with grace, harmony, and rhythm (Dewey, 1934). Experience is a whole process indivisible of mind, body, feeling, sensation, emotion, thought and motion – a unitary process of contacting at the contact-boundary, the phenomenal location of experience, of the emergence of figure/ground,

Gestalt therapy is the psychotherapy of this whole process. “Mind, body, and the external world” (PHG, p. 255) unite as wholes of experience in contacting. This is a creative interaction of organism-environment: this interaction creates experience while it is simultaneously further creating experience. The individual emerges from his or her social context or field, much as a sculptured human is formed from a block of marble. As psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy looks to this process and evaluates it by reference to this emerging figure’s experienced and observed attributes. Fixities, lack of grace, and dullness, for example, are evidence of interruptions in contacting, losses of ego functioning, and disturbances of self-functioning that diminish creativity. It is the fluid process of assimilating the novel that sustains the organism and field (*ibid.*, p. 234). This process presents with aesthetic qualities. It is inherent to contact, self, and creative-adjustment.

## **B. Contact**

Contact is the process by which a figure emerges from the organism-environment background (*ibid.* p. 231). Whenever the term “figure” is used in this chapter, it

should be understood that it is a shortcut for saying “The process of the dynamic relationship of figure and ground.” This “figure” emerges through a process where sensations re-configure and become perceptions and, depending on the circumstances, reconfigure into further motivations and actions. Each minute-by-minute detail of contacting contains a developing aesthetic as a *felt* and *sensed* organizing of experience. The qualities of this aesthetic will be discussed below (III.C.). This is *creative* activity at the boundary of organism and environment. It is a fluid synthesis of organism and environment with a unity of sensory, motor, and affective elements. Where a creative artist manipulates the art medium into an artwork, anyone in ordinary contact manipulates and restructures organism-environment into meaningful wholes of experience (PHG, 1951; Dewey, 1934, 1958).

### **C. Self**

Self is the structure built by the contingencies of organism-environment, assembled, as it were, for the function or teleological end of contacting (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2001). It is the nexus of organism-environment, and it is a synthetic unity with its own aesthetic. From the organism, self draws on interoceptions (e.g., thirst, hunger, pain) and proprioceptions (e.g., spatial orientation, somatic sensations); from the environment it draws on exteroceptions (e.g., touch, sight, hearing) and the raw material for physical needs. It is the artist of life (Bloom, 1997, “Self: Structuring/Functioning,” unpublished manuscript). When circumstances require more deliberateness on the part of the organism to meet its needs, more self is created at the contact-boundary. It is co-created by the organism and environment at their meeting. In sleep, then, there is minimal self, whereas there is more self in any activity that requires concentration, imagination, deliberateness, or effort. Self is an ever-changing creatively developing function of organism-environment with the aesthetic qualities of contact: rhythm, grace, fluidity, vitality, harmony, vividness, cohesiveness. A list of these qualities could continue through the rich vocabulary that describes the ripeness of life. Within self are its partial structures that orient the organism, enable the environment to be manipulated, and facilitate novelty, yet provide continuity and support: id functioning, ego function, and personality function. For example, a person whose self-functioning contains disturbances may approach eating with hesitations, self-recriminations, and disharmonious appetite leading to binging and/or anorexia. The aesthetic qualities of this self, then, would be quite different from the fluid organization of self in harmony with the opportunities and needs of organism-environment (see III.C., below).

### **D. Creative-Adjustment**

The final concept to consider from the aesthetic perspective is creative-adjustment.

This process equilibrates the tensions of organism-environment at the contact-boundary. A person experiences an urge or appetite and satisfies it. Or a person writes an article on the aesthetic in Gestalt therapy and spends many hours organizing ideas into words and rearranges text on the recalcitrant blank screen on his computer; starts and stops; stands and sits; and finishes the work with an exhale of relief. In both examples, either a simple or a complex result is achieved in their creatively-adjusting to different circumstantial constraints. This is contact creatively transforming the organism-environment field (PHG, p. 406). Overall, it is how the world is known and lived-in.

If natural selection is the biological process that provokes species into creating solutions to challenges to its existence, then creative-adjustment is the means by which people overcome obstacles and adapt as successfully as possible to life's vagaries. Creative-adjustment means neither spontaneous discharge of animal impulses nor automatic resignation to demands of the field, but balances in between. Creativity without adjustment is superficial; adjustment without creativity is lifeless. Neurotic adjustment is an habitual imbalance in the equilibrium of creative-adjustment, leading to diminution of contact's vitality. The more creative solutions a person invents for any particular circumstance, the more adept a person is at the art of living. Perhaps the common experience that motivates people to seek psychotherapy is their sense that their choices are limited, that they are in a constriction-filled situation. It may be a dark mood that does not abate or a love relationship that persistently brings distress. Or it may be a sense that the tasks of the world demand responses that the person is unable to make. In each situation there is a limitation in the person's capacity to respond creatively: either to see fully the opportunities that are present or to fashion new possibilities from what is actually available. In each case the personal aesthetic of each person is an experience of imbalance, tension, and disharmony. It is artist's block.

### **III. Aesthetic Values as Clinical Values**

#### **A. Psychopathology and Qualities of Contacting**

The *Weltanschauung* of Gestalt therapy is life as creative process. The aesthetic liveliness of contactful experience has describable attributes, which are indicators of the state of the organism-environment. Yet, there are formidable obstacles to a theory of psychopathology within Gestalt therapy. A therapy whose model for optimal functioning specifies the richness of creative responses must avoid a priori limitations to such responses. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of even in Gestalt therapy philosophy. A system of psychopathology is inherently perilous, since it invariably implies norms of emotional health and wellness subject to cultural bias and introjection. But, Gestalt therapy looks to the

authority of the experienced field itself, rather than societal norms; it invites each person to evaluate his own experience with his own criteria. “Organismic self-regulation” is the wisdom inherent to contacting. “*Natura sanat, non medicus,*” nature heals, not the physician (Goodman, 1977).

Rather than a psychopathology using psychodynamic formulations and character types, then, Gestalt therapy psychopathology is a “kind of art criticism.” When PHG introduces character types, it notes that rather than being fixed forms they are more like genres in literature – more like the categories of farce and tragedy in Shakespearean drama (p. 449). Within these “character genres,” there are many diverse possibilities and combinations, so that the very meaning of the genre is transformed in each unique whole: “In *applying* any typology (...) one experiences the absurdity that none of the types fits any particular person. (...) It is the nature of the creative – and in so far as the patient has any vitality he is creative – to make its own con-crete uniqueness by reconciling apparent incompatibilities and altering their meaning” (ibid.). The therapy itself is simply to “help the patient develop his creative identity by his ordered passage from ‘character’ to ‘character’” (ibid.): that is, from figure to figure, always created from the potentialities of the organism and the possibilities of the environment. “Most important of all,” writes PHG, “the achievement of a strong [that is, vivid] gestalt is itself the cure, for the figure of contact is not a sign of, but is itself the creative integration of experience” (p. 232).

Gestalt diagnosis is an hypothesis about contact, containing an experiment that enables its own evaluation; diagnosis and therapy are identical. For example: “I notice that when you say the word ‘mother,’ your voice drops, and I lean forward in my chair. Would you say your sentence again and notice how it sounds to you? What do you experience?” The diagnosis is the “noticing that,” which is itself the beginning of the experiment, the therapeutic intervention. As the experiment continues, it informs the developing diagnosis and enables further experiment. Thus, diagnosis becomes experiment, which then becomes further diagnosis, and so on, in a graceful rhythm of contact.

Sometimes PHG describes “good” and “bad” contact. This use may have derived from Gestalt psychology’s use of the term “good gestalt,” and has unfortunate connotations of either/or possibilities (see, also, III.D., below). Further, to speak of contact as “good” or “bad,” “weak” or “strong,” or most commonly, “in contact” and “out of contact” is merely to be descriptive, without advancing a useful mode for the evaluation of contacting. It is far better to evaluate contact with reference to finer distinctions, such as grace, fluidity, clarity, brightness, balance, and rhythm. These are aesthetic qualities to describe a creative process and can be employed with all the powers of their own aesthetic. To refer to an artwork as “bad” does not open a discussion of its qualities; rather, it closes the door to any

meaningful evaluation. However, to describe its aesthetic attributes is to engage with it creatively. If a person declares her experience of contact is “bad,” she says very little about her experience. However, if she describes how cold are her fingers, how tight her lips, how constricted her breath, and how lifeless the spring day seems to her – a catalog of her aesthetic sensibilities – already she would be opening to a new experience. This would be Gestalt therapy.

When contact is fluid and flexible, when the emerging figure is bright and graceful, Gestalt therapy suggests there is little interruption in contacting and all is well in the world. However, where the emerging figures are dull, indistinct, or diffuse, and contacting is weak, there is reason to suspect trouble. This could be the result of deliberate inhibitions by someone aware of environmental restraints as, for instance, a person may suppress a spontaneous giggle at a funeral. Or it may be the result of unaware habitual interruptions that are the characteristics of neurotic functioning and which contain losses of ego functioning and disturbances of self functioning. The difference between neurosis and vitality is that when obstacles are encountered in the latter, there is continuing creativity and, in the former, there is confusion and lack of sensitivity (ibid., p. 465). Psychopathology, then, is a fluid concept based on experienced interruptions and flows in the stream of contacting.

## **B. Intrinsic vs. Comparative Evaluation**

PHG distinguishes two modes for evaluating experience: intrinsic and comparative. In comparative evaluation, the qualities of gestalt forming are contrasted to some standard extrinsic to the act itself. But if what is being evaluated is the experience of contact; how can one compare one’s own sense of grace, for example, with another’s? This splits whole experiences into fragments and declares some abstraction to be a fixed standard. It is an irresistible invitation to competition and neurotic conflict. Rather, PHG proposes the intrinsic mode of evaluating, where the standard emerges in the on-going act itself (p. 288): by its “gestalt qualities” and by achievement of its end (the “end directedness of process”). An experience evaluates itself – affirms itself, as it were – by the authority of the attributes that emerge within it as a function of the organism-environment field.

Intrinsic evaluation looks to the qualities within the experience itself or “gestalt qualities.” It is axiomatic that Gestalt therapy derives from Gestalt psychology. Paul Goodman, Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and all those who followed them, described the Gestalt psychological principles they drew upon: “the relation of figure and background; the importance of interpreting the coherence or split of a figure in terms of the total context of the actual situation (...) the active organizing force of meaningful wholes” (ibid., p. 237). The whole is more than the sum of its

parts. Parts can only be understood as they relate to other parts comprising the whole. There is a tendency for parts to organize into the simplest whole, which is a dynamic equilibration of the tensions of the field (Prägnanz) Unfinished situations persist as tensions in the field. All these are important and useful aspects of Gestalt therapy. Nevertheless, the Gestalt psychologists refused to be associated with Gestalt therapy and quarreled with the application of their perceptual and cognitive hypotheses to personality, psychopathology, and psychotherapy (Henle, 1986). Furthermore, Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology are fundamentally different. Gestalt therapy is adamantly an holistic approach – the sensory-motor-affective unity of contacting is bedrock; Gestalt psychology, on the other hand, is dualistic. Gestalt psychology is based on the mind-body split of isomorphic parallelism – events in experience are structurally identical to but separate from corresponding brain physiology (ibid.).

### C. “Gestalt” Qualities or Aesthetic Criterion?

#### 1. “Gestalt” Therapy?

If the above-mentioned “gestalt” qualities are also seen as aesthetic evaluations of figure forming, then this conflict with the Gestalt psychologists can be side-stepped. Much of what Gestalt therapy drew from Gestalt psychology can also be carried by the work of James, Mead, and Dewey (Kitzler R, “Three Lectures,” unpublished manuscript). These social scientists and philosophers started their important work 50 years before the Gestalt psychologists and continued actively writing (on Dewey’s part) through 1950, first as a response to the challenges of modern science; indeed, much of the Gestalt psychologists’ work overlaps with their earlier insights. Laura Perls studied with the Gestalt psychologists Max Wertheimer and Adhemar Gelb in Frankfurt. This is the *only direct* connection that is reported between the founders of Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology. Yet Laura Perls objected to using “Gestalt” as a name for her “new” modality, since she thought it had almost nothing in common with Gestalt psychology (Barlow, 1981, p.37). In Rosenfeld’s “An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy” (1978), L. Perls says: “Mainly Gestalt is an *aesthetic concept*, but Kohler [sic] used it in connection with field theory” (p. 26, emphasis added).

She would have chosen “existential psychotherapy,” but this name was already being used by others (Perls L, 1987). The founders wanted to grab the public’s attention. They chose the name “Gestalt therapy” to herald a break from orthodox psychoanalysis. Moreover, Gestalt psychology still had a revolutionary reputation at the time they used its name. It is unclear, though, how widely read Fritz Perls or Paul Goodman were in Gestalt psychology. “The concept of the organism-as-a-whole,” wrote F. Perls, “is the center of the gestalt-psychological approach which is superseding the mechanistic association psychology” (1948). Is this really the



center of their approach? In his first book, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, Perls hardly mentions Gestalt psychology at all; he gives more weight to a variety of other influences, such as Friedländer's idea of "creative indifference" (Perls, 1947). Fritz Perls often referred to his work with Kurt Goldstein in Germany: "Goldstein broke with the rigid concept of the reflex arc. According to him, both kinds of nerves, sensory and the motor, stretch from the organism to the environment" (Perls F, 1948, p. 569). But in 1896, at least 20 years before Goldstein, Dewey, of course, analyzed the reflex arc as a whole phenomenon (Dewey, 1896). Goldstein was not a Gestalt psychologist. Although Goldstein worked closely with Gelb and was certainly influenced by other Gestalt psychologists, he distinguished his own work from theirs (Goldstein, 1995). He was a neuro-psychiatrist and referred to his work as organismic, not Gestalt.

The Gestalt psychology in Gestalt therapy comes filtered through Goldstein's organismic lens.

Paul Goodman studied for his doctoral degree at the University of Chicago when that institution had been a center for American pragmatism. Goodman directly credits James and Dewey as significantly influential sources for his own work (Goodman, 1972; Stoehr, 1994). The most affecting passages in all of Goodman are his lyrical descriptions of experience. By contrast, his applications of Gestalt psychology's ideas seem to lack conviction, as if they were by rote. The degree to which Gestalt therapy and American pragmatism are related is a topic whose richness deserves deeper study, and yet which falls outside the purview of this chapter. The nearly seamless flow of development from American pragmatism to the theory of Gestalt therapy warrants the assertion that they provide an adequate ground on which Gestalt therapy's intrinsic evaluation and aesthetic criterion may stand.

However, this is not a search for the "true" forbears of Gestalt therapy, so much as an examination of the broadest foundation from which Gestalt therapy developed. The intellectual river that brought forth Gestalt therapy has multiple overlapping tributaries. Gestalt therapy comes from the same European stream from which Gestalt psychology, Kurt Goldstein's theory of the organism, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, Martin Heidegger's existentialism, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics flow. Indeed, the American pragmatists themselves were familiar with the Europeans Johann Fichte, Wilhelm Wundt, Ernst Mach, Franz Brentano, and Henri Bergson (Thayer, 1981; James, 1893).

## *2. Aesthetic Criterion and Pragmatism*

John Dewey's writings on aesthetics, for example, show his influence on Gestalt therapy. Dewey examined the aesthetic experience as part of ordinary human experience and sought to recover the continuity of esthetic experience with normal

processes of living” (Dewey, 1934, p. 10). “Biological commonplaces” of experience “reach to the roots of the esthetic” (ibid., p. 14). The aesthetic of ordinary experience is the harmony and rhythm of all life and not only the domain of the artist (ibid., p. 16). An experience is aesthetic “in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears” (ibid., p. 249). This is, of course, contacting. Again, Dewey: “For only when an organism shares in the ordered relations of its environment does it secure the stability essential to loving. And when the participation comes after a phase of disruption and conflict, it bears within itself the germs of a consummation akin to the esthetic” (ibid., p. 18). “Order is not imposed from without,” writes Dewey, “but is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another” (ibid., p. 14). Experience is understood by reason, imagination, and aesthetic perception (Dewey, 1958; Diggins, 1994, p. 319). In the interaction of organism and environment, there are “rhythmic beats of want and fulfillment, pulses of doing and being withheld from doing” (Dewey, 1934, p. 16). Here is organism-environment; here is contact and withdrawal in a flow of process with intrinsic aesthetic qualities.

Gestalt therapy looks to the observable and experienceable interruptions in contact as evidence of neurotic functioning. At these moments, losses of ego functioning and disturbances of self functioning appear as disturbances in the flow of contact making and withdrawal (PHG; Isadore From, personal communication).

Interruptions are synonymous with Dewey’s aesthetic evaluation of “breaks in the harmony and rhythm” of organism-environment (1934). These interruptions are felt. They are sensed, or sensible, by the patient *and* the therapist. These are not hypotheses or abstractions – they are *sensed* actualities affecting the stream of contacting. This is the aesthetic criterion as a clinical value. It is not that this fluid experiential stream is equivalent to the inspired process that produces works of art. Obviously, not every experience is comparable to an artistic masterpiece. But ordinary experience and extraordinary creations share a common source: the creative impulse with the aesthetic qualities of harmony, rhythm, cohesion, vividness, and so on. A toddler, for example, is no ballerina when she stumbles and falters as she creatively-adjusts her maturing capacities to challenging environmental obstacles; but there is, nevertheless, a harmony and rhythm to her contacting (Frank, 2001).

#### **D. Aesthetic Criterion as “Gestalt Ethics”**

The aesthetic criterion provides a basis for psychotherapy, but does this provide a basis for other values? Can there be an ethics of Gestalt therapy? This question is being posed in contemporary Gestalt therapy literature (Wheeler, 1992; Lee, 2002). Since it also questions the efficacy of Gestalt therapy’s intrinsic and

aesthetic values, it is worthy of a reply. Psychotherapies are always dragged into the ethical arena. To the extent that they purport that there are values of normal and healthy functioning, it is inevitable that they would contribute to those who question the common good and wonder how best to behave toward one another. Certainly, psychoanalysis readily migrated into this, and with its emphasis on maturity, delay of gratification, Oedipal rivalry, and adjustment to society, it became the principal modality supporting a culture of conformity and competition (Lichtenberg, 1969). Gestalt therapy began as a reply to psychoanalytic hegemony, but it was misused as a free-for-all ethos in the late 20th century (Bloom D, "A View from the Manhattan Skyline: Up-dating and Comparing Gestalt Therapy," submitted article) that is currently being reconsidered. A new "Gestalt ethics" is now proposed where figure and ground are reconnected and evaluation becomes an assessment of a person's relatedness to others (Wheeler, 1991, 1992; Lee, 2002; Yontef, 2001). There is nothing wrong in this reemphasis on core Gestalt therapy theory to correct previous misunderstanding. Yet, this impulse to assert a Gestalt ethics may turn Gestalt therapy's model of human functioning into a tool for comparative evaluation, if it locates ethical authority outside the process of figure forming, such as with an assessment of intersubjective relatedness.

Gestalt therapy attends to the forming of the figure, rather than the figure formed (PHG, p. 231). Content is thus of secondary import. Rather, what *is* crucial is the elasticity of how content is found and made. So long as this fluidity is maintained, discovery is supported and encouraged. This is Gestalt therapy's evaluation. Values can be wisdom's best fruits. Ethics as a mode for evaluating the formed figure is indispensable. It is a part of the social compact and assures civil safety. But ethics is not psychotherapy. A just society may be the foundation for optimum fulfillment; it may also be one of the conditions for increased fluidity in contact and one of its consequences. But this, like growth itself (ibid., p. 428), is a by-product of psychotherapy. Ethics is both a concern for just ends and a way to ensure its means. But ethical weather patterns are fickle; the climate for approved and condemned behaviors is always changing. The quest for a "preferred" or even a "just" figure impairs the free play of figure formation. Rather, the ethics of Gestalt therapy is intrinsic to the contact process: it is the self-justifying light of the emerging figure.

Moreover, the aesthetic criterion assures that valuation will be fluid and experiential and that it will be always changing as a function of a developing field. The aesthetic criterion is an ethical criterion only insofar as it is an alert to interruption in this process of human discovering, contacting. If this alert is sounded, Gestalt therapy proposes, there will indeed be a disruption in the relationship of figure to ground. But this is available as a *direct* experience, not as an opinion of the clinician evaluating from an abstract ethical construct. Further,

this is an experience of the therapist that is offered to the patient as an experiment: “When you do ‘A,’ I experience ‘B.’ What is your experience?” The moments of experience are always reciprocal, since they are of the contact-boundary. Clarity, grace, vividness, harmony, fluidity – these comprise the aesthetic ground for evaluating human vitality. This is Gestalt therapy’s radical attribute:

“In its trials and conflicts the self is coming to be in *a way that did not exist before*. In contactful experience the ‘I’, alienating its safe structures, risks this leap and identifies with the growing self, gives it its services and knowledge, and at the moment of achievement stands out of the way” (ibid., p. 466, emphasis added).

Utopian dreams are woven into PHG. They are of an harmonious world flowing with natural grace. What if contactful experience, for example, culminates in murder? Brutality implies the treatment of another person as an object. This is evidence of an interruption in contact – a splitting-off of one aspect of a whole from an other, and an attempt to annihilate it (ibid., p. 340), probably through retroflection, projection, and egotism. This would be sensed and experienced in the qualities of the forming figure. But some acts, though passing muster when the aesthetic criterion is employed may nevertheless be judged wrong and condemned. Society criminalizes objectionable behavior, yet sometimes later withdraws its sanction. For example, adultery was once a capital offense; it was once illegal to teach evolution, purchase contraceptives, or perform an abortion. The intrinsic evaluation of the aesthetic criterion does not beg this question, but lies outside it. It leaves the non-psychotherapeutic question of approved and condemned acts – comparative evaluations of the formed figure – to others.

#### **IV. Clinical Aesthetic in Practice**

Human vitality is its capacity to creatively-adjust to the contingencies of experience. The neurotic is the failed artist (Rank, 1932) for whom a lusterless neurosis takes the place of artistic achievement. Yet the creativity of the person is coiled and alive within the structure of any instance of contact interruption and is available in psychotherapy. A current symptom was a creative-adjustment to past contingencies that persists as a creative activity that maintains a fixed gestalt despite changed circumstances. In its finest distillation of theory and practice, Gestalt therapy focuses on a single moment in the stream of experience, and especially on its sensible aspects. Sensation is the portal of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell from which the aesthetic criterion emerges. In this section, a moment is abstracted from context so as to elucidate this point: that within all process there is a creative pulse in creative-adjustment and that even within apparent neurotic fixities there are vital kernels of contact. The therapy is support of this creativity, so the interruptions of contacting may become aware. The powers of the person then may become engaged in finding and making, discovering, and inventing a new figure. The unaware now aware is assimilated.

## A. A Clinical Example

Roger complains of dull headaches and lack of interest in life. He wonders if he is depressed. The therapist notices that Roger's face seems frozen and appears disconnected from the rest of him. He asks Roger to sense his face and attend to how his facial muscles change, how he is holding or releasing his expression. The therapist asks him to exaggerate and play with this contracting and releasing of his face. Roger appears to alternate among a variety of masks: frowning, open amazement, tight disapproval, and childlike awe:

“What do you notice, Roger?” “Well, I feel excited and sort of out of breath. I seem to have gone all over the place.” They sit quietly as they attend to the rhythm of their breathing. Roger's face seems softer. “Can you feel your face now?” Tears well-up in his eyes. “I feel sad.” Roger begins to weep. After a while, he looks to the therapist and says, “I forget how many of my friends are dead. I miss them.” His face is flushed, and his eyes are warm.

Roger's fixed mask is his creative-adjustment to the magnitude of his losses. It holds his sadness and his joy within its tightness, crafted in the workshop of his personality to shield him from overwhelming grief. The interplay of grief, awe, anguish, and joy emerged when he experimented with this mask; but they were always there. How else could he have known that he lacked interest in life? These unaware feelings were held together in the muscular tension displayed by his facial mask. They were his dull headaches; the ache was their vitality constricted into pain. Most likely, other aspects of Roger, including his breathing pattern, carriage, and gait would offer the same announcement of interrupted contact through their lack of harmony or stiffness. The therapist chose what was most evident to him as he experienced Roger at that moment in that session. This choice was a creation of the therapist-patient field, which is the meeting of two apparently individual perspectives. The first experiment arose from the therapist's sense that Roger's facial expression was rigid and out of harmony with what he was saying. The experiment led to a release of excitement that became ground for the second experiment: “Can you feel your face now?” And this then led to Roger's awareness of his grief. The sequence of experiment-to-experience-to-further-experiment flowed with its own rhythm. In this example, the therapist's vitality reached out to the patient and enabled new figures to emerge, which included previously interrupted feelings.

Roger's frozen mask was a reaction formation, since it was how his intense feelings were maintained in unawareness. Instead of liveliness or sadness, he was fixed and frozen – as if feeling-less. This posture protected him from feelings that were once overwhelming and thus once an adequate and creative solution to that risk. The reaction formation masked the repression of the original impulse,

permitting any anxiety occasioned by the emergence of the inhibited impulses to be avoided (PHG, p. 444). Such a creative-adjustment is a neurotic's form of art. Yet, unlike the work of a true artist, this creation served to drain vitality from Roger and, applying the aesthetic criterion, left him with dull, brittle, and diffuse figures – all of which he experienced.

## V. Conclusion

*“Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright In the forests of the night What immortal hand or eye Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”* William Blake, “The Tiger”

Contacting, the aware life process, is the organism as artist shaping raw sensation into meaningful forms. It is the consummation of creation. This is nature alive. Figures and grounds develop and proceed with a rhythm and harmony specific to the organism-environment, their field of existence. These forms of experience glisten with intrinsic qualities, sound their own vitality, and declare their own authority through the aesthetic criterion.

Gestalt therapy understands human experience to be imbued with creative life and provides a method for the fullest expression of its vitality. Contact-boundary, contact, self, and creative-adjustment are constituents of this aesthetic method. By looking to the forming of experience itself and its intrinsic qualities, Gestalt therapy avoids the imposition of static values or prescriptions onto life. Its clinical values are aesthetic values; its attention is on sensible experience. Gestalt therapy holds fast to the notion that individual experience is a process unfolding within a fluid field. Its aesthetic qualities are attributes of human beings, who are finding and making their way through an evolving world. As William Blake expressed it, life burns brightly with “fearful symmetry.” “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” John Keats so simply declared. The grace of the aesthetic is the harmony of contacting and the wisdom of the organism. This *is* all we know on earth and all we need to know.

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