

Present – Centeredness in Gestalt Therapy

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If we want to list the implicit moral injunctions of Gestalt therapy, the list may be longer or shorter according to the level of generality or particularity of our analysis. Without claiming to be systematic or thorough, here are some that may give an impressionistic notion of the style of life entailed:

1. Live now. Be concerned with the present rather than with past or future.
2. Live here. Deal with what is present rather than with what is absent.
3. Stop imagining. Experience the real.
4. Stop unnecessary thinking. Rather, taste and see.
5. Express rather than manipulate, explain, justify, or judge.
6. Give in to unpleasantness and pain just as to pleasure. Do not restrict your awareness.
7. Accept no *should* or *ought* other than your own. Adore no graven image.
8. Take full responsibility for your actions, feelings, and thoughts.
9. Surrender to being as you are.

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The paradox that such injunctions may be part of a moral philosophy that precisely recommends giving up injunctions may be resolved if we look at them as statements of truth rather than duty. Responsibility, for instance, is not a *must*, but an unavoidable fact: we *are* the responsible doers of whatever we do. Our only alternatives are to acknowledge such responsibility or deny it. All that Gestalt therapy is saying is that by accepting the truth (which amounts to a non-undoing rather than a doing) we are better off - awareness cures. Of course, it cures us of our lies.

I think that the specific injunctions of Gestalt therapy may in turn be subsumed under more general principles. I would propose the following three:

1. Valuation of actuality: temporal (present versus past or future), spatial (present versus absent), and substantial (act versus symbol).
2. Valuation of awareness and the acceptance of experience.
3. Valuation of wholeness, or responsibility....

In the following pages I will consider in some detail one of the aspects of actuality, in itself one aspect of the philosophy of life of Gestalt therapy. In choosing *living-in-the-moment* as a theme, I am not implying that this is more important than the issues of consciousness or responsibility, but only limiting the scope of this paper to the subject on which I feel most inclined to write at the moment. I think, too, that whatever the point of departure, the content will be somewhat similar, for the three issues are only superficially distinct. On close examination we may discover, for instance, that the question of actuality is not only related to the valuation of present tense and present locus, but also to the valuing of concrete reality, sensing and feeling rather than thinking and imagining, to awareness, and to self-determination. More specifically, I hope that the following pages will show that the willingness to live in the moment is inseparable from the question of openness to experience, trust in the workings of reality, discrimination between reality and fantasy, surrender of control and acceptance of potential frustration, a hedonistic outlook, and awareness of potential death. All these issues are facets of a single experience of being-in-the-world, and looking at such an experience from the perspective of present-centeredness rather than other conceptual vantage points amounts to an arbitrary choice....

PRESENT-CENTEREDNESS AS TECHNIQUE

There are at least two ways in which present-centeredness is reflected in the technical repertoire of Gestalt therapy. One is the outspoken request to the patient to attend to and express what enters his present field of awareness. This will most often be coupled with the instruction to suspend reasoning in favor of pure self-observation. The second is the *presentification* of the past or future (or fantasy in general). This may take the form of an inward attempt to identify with or relive past events or, most often, a reenacting of the scenes with gestural and postural participation as well as verbal exchanges, as in psychodrama.

Both techniques have antecedents in spiritual disciplines older than psychotherapy, and it could not be otherwise, given their importance. Presentification is found in the history of drama, magic, and ritual, and in the enacting of dreams among some primitive people. Dwelling in the present is the cornerstone of some forms of meditation. Yet both presentification and dwelling in the present find in Gestalt therapy a distinctive embodiment and form of utilization that deserve discussion at length. In the following pages I will concentrate on the approach called *the exercise of the continuum of awareness*. Since it is very much like a meditation translated into words, and its role in Gestalt therapy is comparable to that of free-association in psychoanalysis, I will deal with it mostly in comparative terms.

Gestalt Therapy and Meditation

The practice of attention to present experience has had a place in several traditions of spiritual discipline. In Buddhism it is a corollary of "right-mindfulness," one of the factors in the "Noble Eightfold Path." An aspect of right-mindfulness is the practice of "bare attention":

Bare Attention is concerned only with the *present*. It teaches what so many have forgotten: to live with full awareness in the Here and Now. It teaches us to face the present without trying to escape into thoughts about the past or the future. Past and future are, for average consciousness, not objects of observation, but of reflection. And, in ordinary life, the past and the future are taken but rarely as

objects of truly wise reflection, but are mostly just objects of day-dreaming and vain imaginings which are the main foes of Right Mindfulness, Right Understanding and Right Action as well. Bare Attention, keeping faithfully to its post of observation, watches calmly and without attachment the unceasing march of time; it waits quietly for the things of the future to appear before its eyes, thus to turn into present objects and to vanish again into the past. How much energy has been wasted by useless thoughts of the past: by longing idly for bygone days, by vain regrets and repentance, and by the senseless and garrulous repetition, in word or thought, of all the banalities of the past! Of equal futility is much of the thought given to the future: vain hopes, fantastic plans and empty dreams, ungrounded fears and useless worries. All this is again a cause of avoidable sorrow and disappointment which can be eliminated by Bare Attention (Nyaponika Thera, 1962, p. 41).

Past and future do not qualify as "bare objects" in that they are in the nature of imagining, but are also to be avoided because dwelling in them entails a loss of freedom: illusion ensnares us in its recurrence. As Nyaponika Thera (1962, p. 41) says:

Right Mindfulness recovers for man the lost pearl of his freedom, snatching it from the jaws of the dragon Time. Right Mindfulness cuts man loose from the fetters of the past which he foolishly tries even to reinforce by looking back to it too frequently, with eyes of longing, resentment or regret. Right Mindfulness stops man from chaining himself even now, through the imaginations of his fears and hopes, to anticipated events of the future. Thus Right Mindfulness restores to man a freedom that is to be found only in the present.

The most important practice related to the view in the quotation above is that form of meditation the Chinese call *we-hsin* (or idealessness), which consists, as Watts (1950, p. 176) puts it, in the ability to retain one's normal and everyday consciousness and at the same time let go of it.

That is to say, one begins to take an objective view of the stream of thoughts, impressions, feelings, and experiences which constantly flows through the mind. Instead of trying to control and interfere with it, one simply lets it flow as it pleases. But whereas consciousness normally lets itself be carried away by the flow, in this case the important thing is to *watch* the flow without being carried away ... one simply accepts experiences as they come without interfering with them on the one hand or identifying oneself with them on the other. One does not judge them, form theories about them, try to control them, or attempt to change their nature in any way; one lets them be free to be just exactly what they are. "The perfect man," said Chuang tzu, "employs his mind as a mirror; it grasps nothing, it refuses nothing, it receives but does not keep." This must be quite clearly distinguished from mere empty-mindedness on the one hand, and from ordinary undisciplined mind-wandering on the other.

The practice of attention to the present in the context of Gestalt therapy is very much like verbalized meditation. Moreover it is a meditation carried into the interpersonal situation as an act of self-disclosure. This permits a monitoring of the exercise by the therapist (which may be indispensable to the inexperienced) and may also add significance to the contents of awareness.

I would not doubt that the search for words and the act of reporting can interfere with certain states of mind; yet the act of expression also adds to the exercise in awareness, beyond its being merely a means of information for the therapist's intervention. At least the following advantages of communicated awareness over silent meditation may be listed:

- 1 - The act of expression is a challenge to the sharpness of awareness. It is not quite true to say that we know something but cannot put it into words. Of course, words are mere words and we can

never *put* anything into words; yet, within limits, clarity of perception goes together with the ability to express, an artist being a master in awareness rather than a skilled patternmaker. And in art, as in psychotherapy, the task of having to communicate something involves having to really look at it rather than dreaming about looking.

2. The presence of a witness usually entails an enhancement both of attention and of the meaningfulness of that which is observed. I think too that the more aware an observer is, the more our own attention is sharpened by his mere presence, as if consciousness were contagious or one person could not as easily avoid seeing what is exposed to the gaze of another.

3. The contents of consciousness in an interpersonal setting will naturally tend to be that of the interpersonal relationship, whereas the solitary meditator focused on the here and now will systematically fail to find such contents in his field of awareness. Since it is mainly the patterns of relating and the self-image in the process of relating that are disturbed in psychopathological conditions, this factor looms large in making the here-and-now exercise a therapy when in the I-thou setting.

4. The interpersonal situation makes present-centeredness more difficult, for it elicits projection, avoidance, and self-delusion in general. For instance, what for the solitary meditator may be a series of observations of physical states may, in the context of communication, become embedded in a feeling of anxiety about the therapist's eventual boredom, or in an assumption that such observations are trivial, or that they show the patient's essential barrenness. The elicitation of such feelings and fantasies is important.

a. If present-centeredness is a desirable way of living which is usually marred by the vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships, the challenge of contact entails the ideal *training* situation. I would like to invite the thought that the practice of living in the moment is truly an *exercise* and not merely an occasion for self-insight. Just as in behavior therapy, this is a process of desensitization in the course of which a person becomes free of the central conditioning of avoiding experience, and he learns that there is nothing to fear.

b. Related to the above is the fact that it is precisely the awareness of the difficulties in present-centeredness that can provide the first step toward overcoming them. Experiencing the compulsive quality of brooding or planning may be inseparable from an appreciation of the alternative to them, and of a true understanding of the distinction between these states of mind and present-centeredness.

5. The therapeutic context allows for a monitoring of the process of self-observation, whereby the therapist brings the patient back to the present when he has been distracted from it (that is, from himself). There are two main ways of doing this. The simplest (aside from merely reminding him of the task) is to call his attention to what he is doing unawares, by directing his attention to aspects of his behavior that seem to be automatic response patterns or to clash with his intentional actions. Simply being mirror to him may serve to bring into focus his relationship to himself and his actions in general:

P.: I don't know what to say now....

T.: I notice that you are looking away from me.

P.: (Giggle.)

T.: And now you cover up your face.

P.: You make me feel so awful!

T.: And now you cover up your face with both hands.

P.: Stop! This is unbearable!

T.: What do you feel now?

P.: I feel so embarrassed! Don't look at me!

T.: Please stay with that embarrassment.

P.: I have been living with it all my life! I am ashamed of everything I do! It is as if I don't even feel that I have the right to exist!

An alternative to this process of simply reflecting the patient's behavior is that of regarding the occasions of failure in present-centeredness as cues to the patient's difficulties (or rather, living samples thereof), just as in psychoanalysis the failure to free-associate is the target of interpretation. Instead of interpretation, in Gestalt therapy we have explicitation: the request that the patient himself become aware of and express the experience underlying his presentavoiding behavior. One of the assumptions in Gestalt therapy is that *present-centeredness is natural*: at depth, living in the moment is what we want most, and therefore deviations from the present are in the nature of an avoidance or a compulsive sacrifice rather than random alternatives. Even if this assumption were not true of human communication in general, it is made true in Gestalt therapy by the request that the patient stay in the present. Under such a structure, deviations may be understood as failures, as a sabotaging of the intent, or as distrust in the whole approach and/or the psychotherapist.

In practice, therefore, the therapist will not only coach the patient into persistent attention to his ongoing experience, but will especially encourage him to become aware and to express his experience at the point of failing at the task....

The Continuum of Awareness and Asceticism

It may be a psychological truth that a person can hardly attain present-centeredness while remembering, before having known the taste of it in the easier situation of reminiscence-deprivation. The same may be parenthetically said on the matter of contacting one's experience while thinking. Ordinarily, thinking dispels the awareness of the self-in-the-activity-as-thinker and the feelings constituting the ground of the thinking-motivation, just as the sun during the daytime prevents our seeing the stars. The experience of thinking and not being lost in thought (that is, caught up in the exclusive awareness of the figure in the totality of figureground) is a condition that can be brought about most easily by contacting such experience-ground in moments of thoughtlessness. In this the

Gestalt therapy techniques of suspending reminiscence, anticipation, and thinking fall in with the implicit philosophy of asceticism in general: certain deprivations are undergone in order to contact what is currently hidden by the psychological activity involved in the renounced situations. This deprivation of sleep, talking, social communication, comfort, food, or sex is supposed to facilitate the access to unusual states of consciousness but is not an end or ideal in itself.

The practice of attention to the stream of life relates to asceticism in that it not only entails a voluntary suspension of ego-gratification, but also presents the person with the difficulty of functioning in a way that runs counter to habit. Since the only action allowed by the exercise is that of communicating the contents of awareness, this precludes the operation of "character" (that is, the organization of copying mechanisms) and even *doing* as such....

PRESENT-CENTEREDNESS AS PRESCRIPTION

Not all that is of value as a psychological exercise need automatically be a good prescription for living. Free association may be a useful exercise, but not necessarily the best approach to conversation, just as the headstand in Hatha Yoga need not be the best posture to be in most of the time. To a greater or lesser extent, techniques have a potential for being carried into ordinary life, thus making of life the occasion for a growth endeavor. Yet it is not only the specific value of a certain approach that makes it appropriate as a prescription, but its compatibility with other desirable purposes in life; the degree of clash that it will bring about with the existing social structure and, especially, its compatibility with a conception of the good society. Thus the abreaction of hostility in a situation of no constraints can be of value in psychotherapy, but is this approach the one that would maximize sanity and well-being in a community? I think that opinions on the matter would be divided. They would be divided even on the question of truth. Whereas aggression tends to be socially reprovved and the commandment states, "Thou shalt not kill", truth is commonly regarded as virtue, and lying a sin. One might therefore expect that the technique of self-disclosure, valuable in the context of psychotherapy, would be immediately applicable to life. Given the ordinary condition of humanity, though, truth has been and may continue to be not only uncomfortable or inconvenient but dangerous. The example of Socrates, Jesus Christ, or the heretics at the time of the Inquisition, point out that an unconditional embracing of truth may mean the acceptance of martyrdom, for which I am sure the average human being is not ready. The desire to turn feelings into prescriptions in cases where society did not make such a project feasible has been one of the implicit or explicit rationales in the creation of special communities among those who share the goal of living for the inner quest. In such groups, sometimes veiled by secrecy, man has sought to live according to principles not compatible with other than a monastic, therapeutic, or otherwise special setting.

Humanistic Hedonism

Living in the moment, in contrast to other techniques, seems a perfectly appropriate prescription for life. Moreover, it appears to be more in the nature of a technicalization of a life formula than the prescribing of a technique. The idea of prescription may evoke images such as that of the bad-smelling tonic that children were frequently compelled to take "for their own good," before the time of gelatin capsules and flavor chemistry. This is part of a dualistic frame of mind in which "the good things" seem different from the "things for our good," and the goal of self-perfecting seems

something other than "merely living."

This is not what the classic injunctions of present-centeredness convey. Take, for instance, King Solomon's "A man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry [Eccles. 15]." The character of this quotation, like that of most statements that stress the value of actuality, is hedonistic. And it could not be otherwise, for if the value of the present is *not* going to be for a future, it must be *intrinsic*: the present must contain its own reward.

In our times the hedonistic outlook seems to be divorced from and to run counter to religious feeling (just as to "prescription orientation" in general). Insofar as "body" and "mind" are regarded as incompatible sources of value, idealism and spirituality tend to be associated with a grim asceticism, while the defense of pleasure is most often undertaken by the cynically practical, tough-minded, and hard-nosed "realists." This does not seem to have always been so, and we know that there was a time when religious feasts were real festivals. So, when we read Solomon's words in the Old Testament, we should not superimpose on them our present body-mind split, or the tough-mindedness with which those words are often repeated. Behind them was an outlook according to which living life and living it now was a holy action, a way in accordance with God's will.

Rarely do we find this balance of transcendence and immanence in Western thought, with the exception of remarkable individuals that seem to be marginal to the spirit of the times - heretics to the religious, or madmen to the common folk. William Blake, for instance, was such a man in claiming that "eternity is in love with the productions of time."

Even in psychoanalysis, which in practice has done much for mankind's *id*, the "pleasure principle" is looked upon as a childishness and a nuisance that the "mature," reality-oriented ego must hold in check.

Contrariwise, Gestalt therapy sees a much stronger link between pleasure and goodness, so that its philosophy may be called hedonistic in the same sense as the good old hedonisms before the Christian era. I would like to suggest the notion of humanistic hedonism, which does not necessarily entail a theistic outlook and yet seems to distinguish this approach from the egoistic hedonism of Hobbes, the utilitarian hedonism of J. S. Mill, and that of the ordinary pleasure seeker. (If at this point the reader wonders how Gestalt therapy can be called ascetic and hedonistic at the same time, let him remember that in Epicurus's view the most pleasurable life was one devoted to philosophical reflection while on a simple diet of bread, milk, and cheese.) ...

PRESENT-CENTEREDNESS AS IDEAL

Der den Augenblick ergreift/Das ist der rechte Mann.
He who seizes the moment is the right man.

Goethe

The word *ideal* needs clarification. Ideals are frequently understood with a connotation of duty and/or intrinsic goodness that is foreign to the philosophy of Gestalt therapy. If we deprive an ideal of its quality of *should* or *ought*, it remains as either a statement of the desirable way to an end - that is, a prescription - or else a "rightness." By this I mean an expression of goodness rather than a means or an injunction: a sign or symptom of an optimal condition of life. This is the sense in which

we may speak of ideals in Taoism, for instance, in spite of its being a philosophy of nonseeking. In spite of its noninjunctive style, the Tao Te Ching is always elaborating on the qualities of the sage: "For this reason the sage is concerned with the belly and not the eyes. The sage is free from the disease because he recognizes the disease to be disease. . . . The sage knows without going about . . . accomplishes without any action," and so on. In the same sense, present-centeredness is regarded as an ideal in statements such as: "*Now* is the watchword of the wise."

Some recipes for better living are means to an end that differ from such an end in quality, but this is not true of present-centeredness. Here, as in Gestalt therapy in general, *the means to an end is a shifting to the end state right away*: the way to happiness is that of starting to be happy right away; the way to wisdom that of relinquishing foolishness at this very moment - just as the way to swim is the practice of swimming. The prescription of living in the now is the consequence of the fact that we are living in the now; this is something that the sane person *knows*, but the neurotic does not realize while enmeshed in a dreamlike pseudo-existence.

In Buddhism the now is not merely a spiritual exercise but the condition of the wise. In a passage of the *Pali Canon*, Buddha first utters the prescription:

Do not hark back to things that passed,
And for the future cherish no fond hopes:
The past was left behind by thee,
The future state has not yet come.

and then the ideal:

But who with vision clear can see
The present which is here and now
Such wise one should aspire to win
What never can be lost nor shaken.

Whereas the Buddhist version of the now injunction stresses the illusoriness of the alternatives, the Christian view stresses the trust and surrender entailed by present-centeredness. When Jesus says, "Take, therefore, no thought of the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought of the things of itself," giving the example of the lilies of the fields [Matt. 6], he is not only saying, "Don't act upon catastrophic expectations," but more positively, "Trust!" While the Christian version is framed in a theistic map of the universe, and trust means trust in the heavenly Father, the attitude is the same as that regarded as the ideal in Gestalt therapy, which may be rendered as trust in one's own capacities for coping with the now as it comes. The ideal of present-centeredness is one of experiencing rather than manipulating, of being open to and accepting experience rather than dwelling in, and being defensive in the face of, possibility. Such attitudes bespeak two basic assumptions in the *Weltanschauung* of Gestalt therapy: *things at this moment are the only way that they can be*; and *behold, the world is very good!*

If the present cannot be other than it is, the wise will surrender to it. Furthermore if the world is good, why not, as Seneca puts it, "gladly take the gifts of the present hour and leave vexing thoughts." To say of anything that it is good is, of course, a statement alien to Gestalt therapy, which holds that things can only be good to us. Whether they are depends on us and what we do

with our circumstances.

Our current perception of existence is full of pain, helplessness, and victimization. As Edmund Burke remarked over two centuries ago: "To complain of the age we live in, to murmur of the present possessors of power, to lament the past, to conceive of extravagant hopes of the future are the common disposition of the greatest part of mankind." In the view of Gestalt therapy, however, such complaints and lamentations are no more than a bad game we play with ourselves -- one more aspect of rejecting the potential bliss of now. At depth, we are where we want to be, we are doing what we want to do, even when it amounts to apparent tragedy. If we can discover our freedom within our slavery, we can also discover our essential joy under the cover of victimization.

The whole process of estrangement from reality, as reality is given in the eternal now, may be conceived as one of *not trusting* the goodness of the outcome, of *imagining* a catastrophic experience or, at best, an emptiness for which we compensate by creating a paradise of ideals, future expectations, or past glories. From such "idols" we keep looking down on present reality, which never quite matches our constructs and therefore never looks perfect enough. This is how the question of present-centeredness ties in with accepting experience rather than being judgmental.

As Emerson said,

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today. There is not time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence ... but man postpones and remembers. He cannot be happy and strong until he, too, lives with nature in the present, above time.

Searching for the ideal rose, we don't see that each rose is the utmost perfection of itself. For fear of not finding the rose we seek, we hang on to the concept of "rose" and never learn that "a rose is a rose is a rose." Our greed and impatience do not permit us to let go of the substitute through which we enjoy the reflection of reality in the form of promise or possibility, and by which we are at the same time cut off from present enjoyment. The intuition of Paradise Lost and the Promised Land is better than total anesthesia, but short of the realization that they are right here. Omar Khayyám knew well:

Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough,
A flask of wine, a book of verse - and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness -
And wilderness is Paradise now.

"How sweet is mortal sovereignty!" think some,
Others, "How blest the Paradise to come!"
Ah, take the cash in hand and waive the rest;
Nor heed the music of a *distant* drum!

Rubáiyát