

THE EMERGENT SELF

An Existential-Gestalt Approach



Peter Philippon

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*On behalf of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy
by*

Peter Philippson

KARNAC

First published in 2009 by
Karnac Books Ltd
118 Finchley Road
London NW3 5HT

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A.C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-85575-525-3

Edited, designed, and produced by Sheffield Typesetting
www.sheffieldtypesetting.com
e-mail: admin@sheffieldtypesetting.com

www.karnacbooks.com

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In a book such as this, there are always many people who were invaluable in its emergence. I have been lucky in being surrounded by people who have shown me love, support and challenging ideas.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my wife Mary, who has had to put up with a distracted husband caught up with ideas rather than being available, and has always been encouraging; and my son Jeffrey, who is the physicist in the family (as well as being a DJ and hairstylist), and has been available to discuss my more outrageous physics ideas (however, the mistakes are all mine!).

Next I want to thank my colleagues at Manchester Gestalt Centre, Elizabeth Jackson, Shirley Summers, Danny Porter and Joy Appleby, who have supported me with encouragement and good coffee.

Many of these ideas grew in discussion, particularly with colleagues in the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, Dan Bloom and Susan Gregory, and on the Gestalt-L list, Dan Bloom (again!), Phil Brownell, Sylvia Fleming Crocker and Seán Gaffney being the most significant.

Another source has been my discussions with my colleagues in Gestalt Therapy International Network: Gary Yontef, Michael Vincent

Miller, Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, Frank-M. Staemmler, Philip Lichtenberg, Jean-Marie Robine and Lilian Frazao.

I would like to remember with appreciation my original Gestalt trainer, the late Petruska Clarkson, who encouraged me to think and write as well as feel.

And last but not least, all my clients, supervisees and trainees over 21 years, in this country and abroad, who continue to teach me as I engage with them.

Peter Philippon, 21 November, 2007

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Self and Other

Now the “self” cannot be understood other than through the field, just like day cannot be understood other than by contrast with night. If there were eternal day, eternal lightness, not only would you not have the concept of a “day”, you would not even have the awareness of a “day” because there is nothing to be aware of, there is no differentiation. So, the “self” is to be found in the contrast with the otherness. There is a boundary between the self and the other, and this boundary is the essence of psychology. (Perls, 1978)

If there is no other, there is no I. If there is no I, there is no one to perceive. (Chuang Tsu, 1974, p. 25)

Who am I?

For over 2,000 years, people have been struggling with questions concerning the nature of our being. What is the nature of *self*, or *mind*, or *consciousness*? What is the relationship between these and body? Are they two separate kinds of things (*dualism*) or aspects of one thing (*holism*)? Is there a difference between people and animals,

and what is it? What happens when we die—is there some form in which we continue to exist, even after death? Do we have free will, and if we do, how can this emerge in a scientifically lawful universe?

In particular, people who work with the *psyche* or self—psychotherapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors of various schools—will, either explicitly or implicitly, have a sense of the kind of self they are working with. Is it a self that self-actualizes or self-regulates and needs attunement or relationship; or a self that behaviourally responds to stimuli; or a self that builds psychodynamically out of the meeting between desire and taboo? Does the self explored through therapy include or exclude the physical, the relational, social, or cultural context, the creativity of the client?

This book tracks a particular understanding of self, philosophically, from research evidence and in its implications for psychotherapy. At each step, I will include first the theory I am working from, then the clinical implications of the theory, followed by some links to the philosophical outlook inherent in the theory, and finally a more extended case example. I will first of all give a brief statement of the approach I am taking, and then take some time to frame it in a brief discussion of the state of the debate. I hope that, in doing this, I will be able to clarify my approach, in a field where there are many different but similar-seeming theories.

Emergent self

There are two kinds of words. Some, like “chair” and “computer” describe *things*. You can point to them, touch them, see them, use them. Of course, pointing to, touching, seeing and using are all relationships, and without these relationships we can have no sense of the things. But everyone without sensory impairment can see, touch, etc. a computer and give a similar description of what they experience.

The other kind of word is a comparison word. “Big” and “small” are examples of this. They have no meaning at all except in relation to their polar opposites. I am big compared to an ant, small compared to a mountain. If I say to you “I am big” you would need to know what comparison I am making before you can agree or disagree with me.

The theory of emergent or relational self that I espouse says that “self” is the second kind of word, a comparison with “other”. With

no other, there would be no self, and *vice versa*. It is always to this comparison that we are pointing when we speak of self. Thus self is not a “thing” or a given, but an emergence in a given situation.

This approach to selfhood was central to the theory of Gestalt Therapy, as first expounded in the early 1950s by Friedrich (Fritz) and Lore (Laura) Perls and Paul Goodman. Fritz Perls later moved away from the centrality of this theory in his “guru” days in California, but it is the original theory that is now being rediscovered by philosophers of mind and researchers in neuropsychology and child development, as well as psychotherapists of many different schools (often without attribution). It is a way of thinking that is quite different from how we generally view self as a kind of “essence” of ourselves, and raises quite different questions. So for exponents of an essential self, the question is “How can self change through an interaction with a therapist?” For those who see self as relational, the answer to that is obvious (self always changes in relation to an other), and the question is rather “How do we have a sense of continuing self?”

In this book, I will be taking the view that the continuing self is partly an illusion, partly a construct, and that we in fact have to work to stay the same in the face of all the different possibilities the world offers us. We do this for two reasons. First of all, continuity allows deeper contact: friendships, loving relationships with partners and families. Secondly, and balancing this, the predictable is less anxiety-producing, and we avoid this existential anxiety by acting in a stereotyped way and avoiding some of the depths of contact. This dual nature of continuing self, in one context deepening contact and in another context avoiding contact, has an important place in my understanding of psychotherapy.

My view is that people in the West are predisposed towards a view of self as “essence” through our cultural inheritance, although there are philosophers and researchers in the West too who point towards a different paradigm. So my next task is to give an overview of the field in thinking about selfhood.

The West

In Western culture, we tend to be the children of *Plato* (427–347 BCE). For Plato, Self is an example of the *Forms*, the perfect essences of which the world we see is merely an imperfect image. So the Self is

the perfect, immortal and real essence of the person that shows itself in the imperfect world at times, and returns to pure essence at death. This view became part of the Christian religion, arguably due to the influence of Greek thought on Paul, whereas the earlier orthodoxy was that the faithful person would be physically resurrected at the Second Coming of Christ rather than being a “spiritual” person in heaven. In any case, this Platonic Christianity reinforced a cultural view of the individual as an immortal, perfect soul inhabiting a body which is a source of sin and imperfection.

The concept of *mind/body dualism* was given a somewhat different twist by *Descartes* (1596–1650), who saw mind and body as two different “things” (*res*). For him, the body was not a pale copy of an essence or soul, but something different. While his thought made the final “break” between the two (at least imperfect mirroring is some kind of relationship), he essentially left open the question of how mind and body could influence each other. This continues to be the thorny question for those who hold a dualistic view of the human being.

The other aspect of Descartes’ thought which is well-known is his *cogito*: “I think, therefore I am”. The more I doubt my existence, Descartes says, the more I affirm my existence as the one that doubts. This is an important argument for this book, in two ways. First of all, it is fallacious in an interesting way. The first part “I think” already contains an “I” who is thinking rather than just saying “There is thinking going on”, so the conclusion of the existence of “I” is a tautology. In Western thought and language, every verb has a subject, so our mindset prevents our seeing the fallacy. In Eastern thought and language, doing does not necessarily require an individual doer, so the fallacy would be much more visible. Descartes teaches us how easily we can be trapped by culture and language into thinking something is obvious that in fact is not.

Secondly, the argument can be rescued, has been used in a different form by the phenomenological philosopher *Husserl*, and will be used in a different form in this book.

The East

In much Eastern thought, the verb is the beginning, and the self grows from it. So when a monk asked Joshu (778–897), the great Zen master, “What is my Self?”, Joshu replied “Have you finished your morning

gruel?" The monk said he had. Joshu said "Then wash your bowl." It is in the immediacy of the acting, not in the thinking about acting, that self arises. The meditative method in Zen Buddhism involves sitting (or walking), not allowing any thoughts to stick in the mind. However, the Rinzai Zen Masters emphasise that this voidness is not meant to be the aim of the meditation, and the Zen Master Bassui (b. 1327) called this aimed-for voidness the "deep pit of pseudo-emancipation" and enjoined his hearers to redouble their efforts at that point. For as soon as there is an achievement of this first level of enlightenment, there is the pride of achievement, not just the verb—the achieving. Notice that this is another example of the same logical problem that Descartes got into! As long as I work to stop the self/I being primary, I keep it primary, because it is the "I" that is working. We will later see how Husserl made exactly the same point, and in fact suggested pretty well the same methodology as the Rinzai monks.

The Eastern emphasis on the doing as primary links well to our next topic, existentialism, and will be a significant part of the thinking of this book.

Existentialism

This philosophical school arose as a reaction to the Platonic idea of the primacy of "essences". For the existentialist, as for the Zen Buddhist, existence and responsible engagement in the world are of central significance. But this has profound consequences, for it takes away a "safety net", where we can be sure of who we "essentially" are. Rather, we are ourselves as we engage and make our choices without any guarantees of what is right, or what will happen next. Not surprisingly, for most existentialists, *anxiety* is an inherent part of being in the world. Each act of will is an *actualization* of selfhood, and an act of separation (Sartre called it "negation") from the rest of the world, which will respond in a way we can never fully predict. It is important to notice that existentialist thinkers are not saying that we are essentially separate from the rest of the world. Paradoxically, if we were inherently ourselves, the act of choosing would be a less radical step, and the difficulty would be to explain how we can engage creatively in and with the world. Existentially, being oneself is an *act* of separation in order to make contact: Sartre calls this act negation, and Buber calls it "primary separation" ("urdistanz").

However, for the existentialists Kierkegaard and Sartre, we can avoid anxiety by acting *as if* it is not really us making the decisions, and go along with the crowd as if we had no choice to do this. Sartre (1978) calls this “bad faith”, and indeed he saw where this denial of responsibility leads in the Nazi occupation of his native France, his imprisonment and later membership of the Resistance.

Once again, this existential outlook is an important part of the approach in this book.

Phenomenology

The starting point for phenomenology is the understanding that our experience is never of the world as it is, but of the world as filtered through our senses and our understanding of the world. Yet we can do more than this. We can pay attention to our style of filtering, and, by “bracketing” for our bias, we can get a clearer sense of the world in its givenness.

I would like to explore this notion of bracketing or *époché* (putting in a pocket) further, since it has not always been fully understood. First of all, it doesn’t mean to ignore ourselves, but has an implication that we should know ourselves and our habitual colouring of our experiences. It doesn’t mean that we can get an “objective” view of the world, but that we can get a lot closer to a description that has relevance wider than to ourselves. An analogy here would be a method for making optical lenses. Any roughness in the grinding of the lens (and there has to be some!) results in a distortion of the image. So up until recently, scientists needing very accurate lenses have needed equipment that grind glass with great accuracy. However, there is another method. The distortions of any lens can be measured and stored on a computer. The image can then be put through the computer, and corrected for the stored inaccuracies. This method produces a high level of accuracy without the need for a very good lens.

The most important thing that I want to notice here, though, is that if, as quantum physics and relativity show, the form of the world is always relative to an observer (who is also part of that relative world, not outside it), there is a second level of co-creation which is not bias, and cannot be “corrected” for but can be observed (this is the role of Husserl’s “transcendental reduction” and Rinzai Zen’s insistence

on the dangers of staying at the level of “I have achieved enlightenment”). In the end, what can be pointed to after bracketing is *always* a field interaction rather than an observation of a fixed thing by a fixed “me”. This will be central to the approach of this book. As Husserl (1971/1927) put it in his article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

Phenomenological psychology in this manner undoubtedly must be established as an “eidetic phenomenology”; it is then exclusively directed toward the invariant essential forms. For instance, the phenomenology of perception of bodies will not be (simply) a report on the factually occurring perceptions or those to be expected; rather it will be the presentation of invariant structural systems without which perception of a body and a synthetically concordant multiplicity of perceptions of one and the same body as such would be unthinkable.

Existentialism, phenomenology and individualism

There has recently been some criticism of Existentialism from a perspective that tries to counter the “individualism” of Western thinking, and sees Sartre and Existentialism generally as “individualistic” (see for example Wheeler, 2000). But, as I have described above, this is to misunderstand the basis of the Existential approach. The choosing makes the individual, rather than the individual making the choice! From this perspective (shades of Descartes here), the more someone asserts an attitude of anti-individualism, the more they are asserting their individuality and their choiceful independence from the rest of the universe. But notice the difference. There is still a circularity, but, where Descartes’ is the circularity of fallacious reasoning, this is the circularity of a feedback loop. To explain this further, I will have to introduce one of my main themes...

Emergence and complexity

In the twentieth century, something quite strange and unexpected was discovered by scientists and mathematicians working in many different fields. At root it was not a discovery about the world at all, but about mathematics, and, in particular, about the properties of *non-linear equations*, that is equations describing systems that have

feedback loops. A simple example of such a system is a car engine, where the pistons moving pull in the explosive gases that then make the piston move. A more complex example is population growth. If the environment is good for a species, the population grows, which then can affect the availability of resources like food, so population falls again, which makes food more available again...

What is significant for this book is that mathematicians discovered that out of comparatively simple non-linear equations can emerge ordered behaviour of great complexity and beauty, which Stuart Kauffman has called “order for free”. So to take the simple example of the car, the *running of the engine* emerges from the whole cycle of pistons, cylinders, fuel, sparking, etc. Although entropy (disorder) is increasing in the universe as a whole, such “dissipative structures” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) can locally produce greater order, dissipating the entropy to the outside of the area. The form of that order is also significant for our purpose. If we take the example of weather systems, these can be classified into recognisable patterns. However, within each pattern there is a good deal of variation, and it only takes a tiny variation at one moment to pull the pattern into a very different configuration. In the same way, a self-pattern can have a recognisable shape, while still allowing for variation in mood and style in different circumstances, and the capacity to be pushed into a different shape by force of circumstances such as illness, falling in love, birth of a child, bereavement or other significant events. The patterns formed by these non-linear systems capture the mixture of predictability and unpredictability of self very accurately.

Philosophy of Mind

Modern philosophy of mind has somewhat divided into two camps. For the religiously-inspired “Intelligent Design” camp, consciousness was designed by a greater power, a God-figure. The argument goes that a human being is too complex to have just arrived, and there must be some designer. If we find a watch on the road, we would assume it didn’t just appear, but that there was a watchmaker who made it. In fact, this is a patently ridiculous argument. If we found a watchmaker on the road, we would also expect him or her, much more complex than a watch, to have come from somewhere! So the argument, like every similar religious argument, explains nothing

really, but provides a single “prime cause” that one isn’t even supposed to (or allowed to) explain. This is not to deride those who have a faith in God, but to challenge those who try to persuade us that the existence of God is proved in some scientific way by the complexity of the world. The underlying assumption is that a complex system can only be produced by something more complex. However, what the complexity theorists we looked at above have shown is that complex behaviour can emerge from something less complex.

The other camp is the materialistic/evolutionary approach, whose prime exponents are John Searle and Daniel Dennett. According to Searle (in Gulick [Ed.], 1992): “Once you get rid of the traditional oppositions, it is not a very big step to see that the so-called ‘mental’ properties are both caused by the behaviour of lower level elements in the brain and at the same time just are higher level features of the entire brain system” (p. 141). This “materialist” approach to the mind has a major advantage over the “intelligent design” approach: it is actually an explanation and one with a great deal of evidence behind it as we discover more about the functioning of the brain.

However, this is not the position I am taking. For me, the primary function of consciousness is about engagement and experiencing in the world, and this involves much more than the activities of the individual brain. Consciousness is *intentional*, that is directed towards some object. If I pinch you or hug you, or you hear some music that affects you, this will affect your conscious state (certainly mediated by the brain, but initiated by the environment), so it does not make sense for me to name neurological processes alone as the causative elements in consciousness. So I would say rather that conscious states are emergent from lower level processes involving many aspects of our functioning, our environment, and also the quantum field of which all of this is a part. An analogy would be the internet, which could be said to arise from the processes between computers. However, those processes would have no meaning except in relation to the people using it, developing it, adding content to it and communicating through it.

Self Psychology

The nature and development of the self has been an important debate within psychoanalysis. This is too large a topic to deal with here, and I refer the reader to the many texts available on the subject, especially

the excellent “Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory” (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

I do want to single out the strand of Self Psychology (Kohut, 1977) and its offshoot, Intersubjectivity Theory (Stolorow, Atwood & Brandchaft [Eds.], 1994), because it in some ways parallels the position I am taking, but ends up somewhere rather different.

To quote Kohut (1977, p. 100):

At the moment when the mother sees her baby for the first time and is also in contact with him (through tactile, olfactory, and proprioceptive channels as she feeds, carries, bathes him), a process that lays down a person’s self has its virtual beginning—it continues throughout childhood and to a lesser extent later in life.

The relational emphasis is evident here. The difference is that my emphasis is on individuation as an act of courage (though to be sure supported by an environment which accepts difference), and the Self Psychology emphasis on self growing from a matrix of attunement and support.

Neuropsychology and developmental research

Another major strand in the development of theories of self and consciousness is the expansion of neuroscientists’ ability to scan the brains of human beings and develop our knowledge of what is specific to human brain functioning, beyond extrapolations to animal experiments. Major figures in this research are Antonio Damasio, V. S. Ramachandran, Daniel Stern and Allan Schore. The last two also combine this research with studies of infant development. How does the infant develop into a child and then an adult, and what brain mechanisms are involved in this development?

These authors have different emphases, but agree on a central issue, which is that, while brain studies are vital, consciousness and selfhood grows in a *relational* context, and are not just brain events. So, to quote Stern (2003, p. 23):

It’s very clear that human beings are constructed to read other people’s minds... Our nervous system is constructed to do that... The conclusion...is that our minds are not so independ-

ent. Indeed, they are very interdependent. Our minds are not separate or isolated, and we are not the only owners of our own mind... Minds get created by virtue of being in constant interaction and dialogue with other minds, so that the whole idea of a “one person psychology” ought not to exist, or at least it must be incomplete.

I will return to this research in more detail later on, but want to point out now that it provides very strong evidence for the approach I am taking in this book, and also provides us with useful terms (like Stern’s term “the intersubjective matrix”) with which to discuss emergent, relational selfhood.

Conclusion

I want to close this chapter by calling attention to the many varied groupings of people who have approached this subject of selfhood and consciousness: philosophers, religious thinkers, scientists, psychologists and psychotherapists. It is an important field of discussion, and it is exciting that we now have a developing consensus among people of many different disciplines for an emergent-relational approach.

CHAPTER TWO

Complexity and Emergence

2.1 *Theory*

Setting the scene

My sense of myself is as one who engages in the world, making choices within a range of possibilities afforded by that world and by my capacities in the situation I find myself in. I can both act spontaneously and without self-consciousness *as* an embodied self, and I can also observe my body as if from outside it, and adjust it by anything from holding my breath to diet to surgery.

And yet my actions occur in a world of matter, governed by scientific laws on all levels from physics and chemistry to quantum physics, at which level any sense of a body or person separate from the whole field breaks down. Does choice have any real meaning or is it an illusion? For if I am, in any real sense of the word, making choices, this implies an unpredictability at some fundamental level in the universe. The image I have is of moments of standing at a crossroads, seeing a choice of paths and being clear that my life would turn out differently depending on which path I take. Furthermore, as in the film *Sliding Doors*, I have no way to predict what lies further down each path, but I can have a sense of making a choice that seems

to move in the direction I want. My intuition is that I am not in reality constrained to take the path I take because that is what fits with what the universe determines. My choosing does make a difference, and of course not just to me.

If this is right, then we need an account of the coexistence of order and disorder, predictability and unpredictability, not just in our lives but as a fundamental fact of the universe. For choice is not merely randomness, but a coherent decision made with a sense of motion through a fairly ordered world where actions have consequences. If the world is too ordered, there is no place for us to choose. If it is too disordered, choosing becomes mere randomness.

So the question is whether and how sufficient order can emerge from disorder to account for the world as we experience it, and so that our intuition of choicefulness or ability to make choices can be meaningful.

Randomness in the field

The potentiality for order to arise from disorder at a very fundamental level is seen in the *Casimir effect*. The underlying principle of this effect is that the quantum vacuum is not empty. Rather, it is an arena of bustling movement where “virtual particles” appear and disappear at random, leaving signs of their temporary presence through their interactions. If two conducting plates are placed a short distance apart in a vacuum, this limits the wavelength and does not allow the virtual particles to form, whereas they can form on the open sides of the plates, producing a measurable pressure on the plates pushing them towards each other.

This is an example of how randomness can lead to a coherent effect if the context is right, at a very fundamental level of the universe. It also, for me, provides an insight into just how energetic, lively and wild the universe is. Just as we can build a settlement in a wilderness which supplies it with raw materials but also with surprises like forest fires and foraging animals, our area of matter and solidity rides on a vacuum full of random activity.

Complexity

I want to continue my account by drawing attention to a common intuition which is in fact inaccurate, and which leads us to see the world in skewed ways.

This intuition is that *complex effects can only come from even more complex causes*. That is, the universe, life, consciousness and selfhood are such amazing and complex entities that there has to be an even more complex cause: god, soul, intelligent designers. Now this is quite a reasonable intuition on the face of it. The Second Law of Thermodynamics says that the universe is “running down”, progressively moving from order to disorder, from more concentrated and ordered energy to more dispersed and ineffective energy. Batteries run down, suns go cold, things decay. Eventually the universe will end up (according to thermodynamics) at a uniform temperature just above absolute zero, and no further interactions will be able to happen.

But think of the new lives starting every day, binding atoms that came to existence in the nuclear processes of stars, the evolution of ever more complex life and the development of civilisations. No wonder people came to a belief that life was an expression of a realm completely outside the physical. Think also of complex weather patterns that develop, driven by simple convection of heat, gravity and the rotation of the earth.

One of my favourite examples is a car engine. Each bit of the engine does only simple things: valves open and close, petrol explodes, spark plugs spark. Now look at what those simple bits produce when put together: the complex running of the engine that involves all these parts in a cyclic interaction, where the connection of each bit to the whole is as important as its individual function (in fact more important: the individual parts can be replaced and the function remains). The “rules” for the functioning car engine are different from the rules of any of the bits, though they do not violate them. What is more, the engine has a state of “life” and a state of “death”, and the transition between these two states doesn’t need to involve any change in functioning of any of the parts. All this is powered by the breaking down of petrol into simpler molecules, and dispersal of the heat towards general warming.

To give a general description of what has happened, systems built up out of simple units or processes develop much more complex functioning through the interaction of the units. Something new develops, using energy taken from outside the system.

It turns out that this localised creation of a new spontaneous order (at the cost of greater disorder dissipated to the outside) actually

happens in many different spheres, and that what sustains it is not so much properties of physics as properties of mathematical systems. If you have systems with *feedback loops* so that the parts of the system mutually influence each other, you are quite likely to find a new and more complex order emerging. This is the theory of *dissipative structures*, for which Prigogine (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) received the Nobel Prize.

Such self-organizing structures are ubiquitous in nature, said Prigogine. A laser is a self-organizing system in which particles of light, photons, can spontaneously group themselves into a single powerful beam that has every photon moving in lockstep. A hurricane is a self-organizing system powered by the steady stream of energy coming in from the sun, which drives the winds and draws rainwater from the oceans. A living cell—although much too complicated to analyze mathematically—is a self-organizing system that survives by taking in energy in the form of food and excreting energy in the form of heat and waste. (Waldrop, 1993, pp. 32–33)

Stuart Kauffman (Kauffman, 1995), experimenting with randomly interconnected light-bulbs, discovered that they rapidly came to an orderly pattern of turning on and off, and named this phenomenon “*order for free*”.

Having decided to take the plunge into computers, Kauffman vowed to go all out: he would simulate a network with 100 genes... [So] the number of states in a network of 100 genes... turns out to be almost exactly equal to one million trillion trillion: 1 followed by 30 zeros... And exactly as he had expected, it showed his network quickly settling into orderly states, with most of the genes frozen on or off and the rest cycling through a handful of configurations. (Waldrop, 1992, p. 111)

The form of the order that emerged was not predictable from the way he connected them, and a small change in the rules of interconnection changed the form. Notice that the underlying laws that he was exploring were not to do with the physics of light-bulbs, but with the mathematical properties of non-linear systems.

What does this mean for consciousness?

Before these insights, the only possibilities were either that consciousness was a separate form of existence to matter, a “ghost in the machine”; or that it was reducible to matter and thus mechanistic. With this new understanding, we can say that consciousness is *emergent* from matter, that matter can self-organise into the more complex process of consciousness, and come alive. Given that gene expression in DNA and neural firing in the brains of humans and other animals with a central nervous system are both, like Kauffman’s light bulbs, connected arrays of on-off events, this is highly significant for the way patterns of consciousness arises.

Any theory of consciousness has to deal with two concepts: *predictability* and *unpredictability*. Our intuition of ourselves in the universe is a combination of both of these properties. The universe is predictable enough to be engaged with, so that I know my chair is likely to continue to hold me, the computer will not suddenly vanish, the people I arranged to meet this evening are likely to turn up. Yet it is unpredictable enough that the chair might break, the computer might stop working, and people might choose not to turn up.

If the universe is mechanistic, our intuition is right about predictability and wrong about unpredictability. The laws of matter directly cause what we do. Our sense of being able to make choices that affect the future of the world is an illusion, and the world will go the way it has been set to go by unchangeable physical laws. In another version of cause and effect, many religious viewpoints hold that the physical laws can be set aside by a separate, spiritual world, so that the world can be changed by spirit, with the possibility of miracles, mind over matter (including spirit being able to move a human body around choicefully), or a god intervening to end the universe. “Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20, New American Bible). Now the world of matter can be predictably affected by our minds (if we have enough faith). Some people wrongly believe that this is what quantum physics says.

While neither of these viewpoints can be disproved, I prefer to stay with our intuition. The dissipative, order-for-free structures

of Prigogine and Kauffman are able to be both orderly and open to change. The universe is able to be inherently physically non-deterministic, while its mathematics allows for the emergence of order. The chaos theory people have the concept of an *attractor*:

Most complex systems exhibit what mathematicians call attractors, states to which the system eventually settles, depending on the properties of the system. Imagine floating in a rough and dangerous sea, one swirling around rocks and inlets. Whirlpools become established, depending on the topography of the seabed and the flow of water. Eventually you will be drawn into one of these vortexes. There you stay until some major perturbation, or change in the flow of water, pushes you out, only to be sucked into another. This, crudely, is how one might view a dynamical system with multiple attractors: such as cultural evolution, with attractors equivalent to bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. (Lewin, 1993, pp. 20–21)

This idea of the fairly predictable nature of a dynamic non-linear system being a temporary resting-place, but with the possibility of moving through a chaotic region to a new part of the attractor, is a very clear statement of this approach to the self and psychotherapy. Self is an attractor involving the whole field, not just the individual. The individual's activity stabilises in a particular part of the attractor if the surrounding environment is not too challenging. The role of therapy is to provide the perturbation that can allow a move to another part of the attractor, in which experience of both self and other will inevitably be different.

This approach leads to a picture where we can explore self and consciousness in all aspects of its emergent complexity: physical, social, mental and relational. We do not have to appeal to a mysterious quality of spirit, understood as a separate sphere of existence from matter. We can view problems as able to come from both the physical structure and the emergent process, and we can view therapy as needing to participate on all these levels as well. I now want to present this picture as I understand it, and show how it links to psychotherapy.

Three boundaries of self emergence

I view selfhood as composed of three interacting boundaries. Here I mean “boundary” in a very specific sense. Our usual image is of a wall separating two areas, so there are three different “bits”: the two areas and the wall. In my image, which comes from Gestalt Therapy, the boundary is a process that separates two areas (using spatial language for what is not just a spatial process) so that the activity on one side is qualitatively different to that on the other side. The boundary both maintains the separation, and allows interchange between the two processes (which are therefore really only one process). The boundary thus *creates* the regions, rather than, like the wall, marking pre-existing regions.

An example of this, very pertinent to our purpose here, is of a cell in the human body. The cell boundary defines the cell, and consists of the interchanges that allow the cell to function in its environment, and to maintain its separate process from that environment. But one cannot really understand a cell isolated from the environment, without which it could not live or carry out its functions. Furthermore, it is the *interaction* of the cells that forms the human being, not the individual cells. So stem cells can produce cells that fit into the organisation of a human being in a way very analogous to the production of a new component to fit a car.

These are the boundaries that I understand as forming self.

1. Organism/environment: it/not-it (Id boundary)

This is the physical root of our existence. There is a boundary between the human body and its environment, most obviously the skin, that organises the interactions that make us live: inhalation and exhalation, heat exchange, eating and excreting, shedding and new growth of skin. But this boundary has one extra function: it is sensitive, and registers events in another part of the organism (the brain): touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Neuropsychology researchers have recently discovered that this process of registering can also carry out much more complex functions of mirroring the actions and intentions of others, and I will write about this later. We can call this registering *experience*. Notice that, looked at this way, it is not yet “my experience”, the experience doesn’t belong just to the human being, but to the human being/environment boundary.

Thus we avoid Descartes' trap of assuming there has to be a previously-existing "I" to receive the experience.

In terms of selfhood, we can say that the *function* of this boundary is experience. If there were no physical boundary where experience, a rubbing up against a sensitive boundary, could occur, there would be nothing on which we could base an intuition of selfhood or otherness.

2. *Self/other: I/not-I (the Ego boundary)*

As I wrote in Chapter One, Gestalt Therapy does not view "self" as a meaningful term on its own, but only as a co-creation with "other". We can now see better how this happens. We as organisms have functions for focusing our attention, identifying with a figure and alienating a (back)ground. This is an active choosing process, as opposed to the passive experiencing process of the physical boundary. And the identification/alienation process extends in human beings to an identification of "I" as the one experiencing and an alienation of "other" as what is experienced, or, better, as the "what" that my senses register. This double use of identification and alienation is of vital importance: *I become myself in relation to the other that I now make figural*. The world of process, including physical-me, gives rise to a coherent world, not including me, of things experienced by myself. And I am active in producing and orienting that world, which then reflexively affects the I: this is the non-linearity that produces greater complexity.

The function of this second boundary is *contact*, a very different process from that of experiencing. As I wrote above, it is active, chosen, differentiated. Through contact, I can purposefully impact and alter the world. I can do what human beings have always done, both constructively and destructively: destroy and build, remodel and disrupt the field processes that underlie the first boundary. With other human beings, who are doing the same thing in relation to me, we can make another non-linear emergent activity where I act on you as you act on me. This emergent activity of mutual contacting is again at a higher level of complexity: together we create a dance, a group, a society.

The Chinese Taoist sage Lao Tsu (1973) wrote about the distinction between these two boundaries two millennia ago:

*Ever desireless, one can see the mystery,
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations. (Chapter 1)*

3. *Personality boundary: me/not-me*

The first two boundaries are very clearly creations in the moment, and, as I have written in Chapter One, the theory also needs to account for the human sense of self-continuity. This is the primary function of the third boundary. At this boundary, I identify with particular parts of my possibilities, and alienate others.

As far as we know, this is a purely human phenomenon, and is a central part of what we experience as consciousness. Fritz Perls, the major founder of Gestalt Therapy, spoke in a lecture (Perls, 1978) about an ape using a tool. It picks up a stick, and uses it to get termites out of a nest. However, said Perls, having done this, the ape throws down the tool, which becomes a stick again. Compare this with what humans do: we “tear” objects out of our environment, and perceive it as a tool forever (axe heads, buildings, hammers, computers). Perls called this activity “objectivization”, and added that it is this capacity that underlies language, “tearing” words out of the vocal continuum and giving them a fixed meaning.

The task of this third boundary is *autonomy*, and it is this aspect of self that is knowable by the person, and can be seen as *self-conscious*: the other two aspects are not knowable in this way. It is through the self-identifications of the personality boundary that I have values, make commitments, form ongoing relationships, and co-create a relatively stable environment that then itself contributes to the sense of myself as ongoing. It is how I explain to myself and potentially to others who I am. In terms of Perls’ view of objectivization, it is me “tearing myself out of the environment” and creating an object-self that I can hold up and use as “me”.

But here’s the rub: this personality boundary can be used in two distinct ways. It can be used to create a deeper ongoing contact, as between parent and child or in intimate relationships, or in study of a science or a hobby. None of us can achieve the depth of relationship that we need only through fleeting connections to others or to the world. We can also use the self-identifications of this boundary *defensively*: to stay in a familiar area that, even though it may be unpleasant, has the sense of safety through its familiarity. If it hurts, we know this pain, and that it is survivable. In fact, an implication of a process theory of self is that we have a drive to self-actualize, to form a functioning self using whatever resources the person’s situation has to offer. It is important to be aware that this is not the optimistic view of “self-actualization”

used by Maslow and Rogers, but is in line with its original neutral meaning in Goldstein (1939). If the only self-identification that is consistent with the feedback from the environment is that I am useless or bad, that will have to serve its purpose.

It is useful to use the concept of *experiment*: each moment of self-actualization is an experiment, engaging the self as currently actualized with the present situation, never being fully sure about the outcome. If my personality functioning is reasonably flexible, then I can deal creatively with the outcome of the experiment, both adapting the world to myself and myself to the world. If my personality functioning is rigid and defensive, I have to “rig the experiment”. So I adapt myself so that I only engage in ways that give me the self-reflection that I seek. If I see myself as being foolish for example, I will avoid engaging with situations where I will be reflected as wise, or engage in such a way that I will fail, or disbelieve approving responses from others.

Once again, the personality boundary reflexively influences the other two boundaries. It affects both what environments I physically engage in, what I allow to become figural and move towards contact with in that environment, and how I experience myself in relation to the otherness I contact. In this way, in the areas where personality is fixed (either to support or to defend against contact), we tend to engage in the world in such a way as to confirm that fixity. In this way, personality is another quality emergent from a non-linear process. In terms of attractors, we can see personality as the area of attractor, the whirlpool, in which we currently swim. We might be aware that the attractor has other possible areas, areas of our lives where we act differently, or, particularly in fixed defensive personality, we might “split off” our other possibilities in order to be able to face the world as we experience it. We then polarise ourselves and either stay in the familiar pole or flip between the poles. I will say more of this in Chapter Five.

2.2 *Clinical application*

Using the three boundaries in the initial assessment of a client

A good way to see these boundaries in action, and to understand the usefulness of the distinctions, is to apply them to a new client that I

am seeing for the first time. The way this person organises the three boundaries is usually readily observable, and can be used to orient the beginning of the therapy and the planning of the therapist-client interactions. Significantly, these observations are not based on the content of what the client brings, but the way she brings it, or, better, the way she brings (or doesn't bring) herself to the therapist and brings the therapist to herself. An important concept here and in other aspects of clinical work is the *experiment* that I have written about above.

The organism/environment boundary

The client is coming to a new situation: a new and different relationship, new physical surroundings. In order to be able to engage coherently with the newness, she needs to allow herself to be disengaged, experiencing and open to her physical responses in the situation but without engaging, and she needs to do this long enough to be able to get a sense of what is significant for her here and now, and how she wants to actualize herself in relation to that.

As a therapist, I also need to do this, being open to what this new relationship is for me. If I am fixed in my perspective, I cannot be open and responsive to the perspective of the client.

Some people find this non-attachment easy, and come across as relaxed and open to what may happen. Their eyes are at this stage comparatively unfocused, and I feel expansive and open to experiment with new possibilities. Others find it too anxiety-provoking and unpredictable. In the terms I am using here, they cling to an identifiable self and avoid new possibilities. The client who does this is less relaxed, in particular her eyes are always focused, looking for something, and I as therapist feel limited. She is focusing on what she habitually makes figural, for two reasons. First of all, she is trying to avoid the unfamiliar or unpredictable, her understanding from her prior experience being that it is too dangerous to risk. Secondly, there is actually no way to make a fresh figure without allowing the first moment of unattached openness to the present situation, and a stereotyped way of making figures is the only possibility. So different people will look for approval, for criticism, for sex, for money, or whatever.

Relationally, the client who avoids this first stage of contacting and self-actualization will be assigning the therapist a limited and familiar role in our interaction. Human beings are very adept at

picking up such assignments without any conscious awareness, and the therapist needs, through her own training and personal therapy, to be able to be aware of the “pull” and use it for information rather than just fitting in with the assignment. As a general therapeutic rule-of-thumb, if the therapist acts outside the allotted role, it brings the client up against the unpredictable and anxiety. This needs to be combined with the support of the therapist’s steadfast acceptance of the client, and patience while the client decides whether to allow closer contact with the therapist in an unfamiliar interaction. A major pitfall here is for the therapist, realising how difficult this moment is for the client, to be tentative, and therefore not sufficiently supportive of the client to stay with the uncertainty. Fritz Perls used the image of the therapist as midwife, and this seems very apt to me in this situation. Once the process has started, it goes at its own speed, and needs to be actively supported rather than pushed or slowed down, even when it becomes painful.

The self/other boundary

Some clients do the opposite of the previous process: they are happy with the indefiniteness of the first boundary, and their fears arise in the movement towards individuation and making choices. It is at this stage that the “I” is made actual, in the identification of self in relation to an identified other.

For some people, their experience of “being themselves” is of lack of support in the form of punishment or rejection. Their response is to stay vague, either constantly or when they don’t know what the other expects of them (as often happens in therapy). My observation as a therapist with people who do this is that their eyes are defocused, their movements and language are tentative, and they appear de-energised. They often support this vagueness through the use of drugs, or of certain kinds of meditation and spiritual practice. My experience in relation to them is that I could easily carry all the initiative in our interactions, and they are waiting to see what I do before showing anything themselves. Yet, even if I do take an initiative, it is unlikely to be helpful: the client will not act on it in a way that will increase her visibility.

This observation will orient me to go slowly, implicitly handing more responsibility back to the client, and discussing our interper-

sonal difficulty: the client will usually be coming with a sense of not knowing who she is, or of inability to make her own decisions which she wants help with, yet in her actions she is asking me to define the process we are involved in. I need to be able to say this from a position of curiosity rather than blame, reminding myself that, rather than being a problem for the therapy, it is the very heart of the reason the client is coming to therapy. The experiment now is in the client's response to my holding back from taking the initiative.

The personality boundary

In my awareness of the client's pattern round the first two boundaries, I will have already encountered some of the fixed patterns of the personality boundary. Other patterns will be fairly clear at the beginning of therapy, while some will become more obvious later on. I will recognise some of these from the self-descriptions of the client; others will be visible in my response to the client. Significant signposts could be a client's self-description: this is what I am like, or this is how people see me. Or it could be a fixed way I find myself reacting to the client: constantly engaging cognitively with a client who avoids emotion but is a lively thinker; constant liking of the client if she avoids being too separate or the possibility of conflict; or a constant edge of fear or dislike with a client who avoids the possibility of risking merger and intimacy with the therapist. (Of course, the assumption here is that it is not *my* fixed fear of separation or intimacy that underlies my ongoing experience. This is where my own personal therapy is a vital part of becoming a therapist in this approach.)

It is important to remember that fixed aspects of personality functioning are not in themselves problematic. They may be supports for relationships, holding values, functioning in community, bringing up children, engagement in a culture, earning money and other parts of a full human existence. Becoming a client and committing oneself to attend therapy sessions are themselves aspects of personality functioning. Such aspects would generally be easily made aware, and can be changed if the client decides, for example, that the therapy is not useful, the time or financial commitment is not practical, or other reasons. The aspects of personality functioning that cause problems are normally not available to the client's awareness, do not appear

changeable, and constrain the growth of relationship. So in those areas, I would experience stuckness in our ability to engage and an invitation to take a fixed role with the client. (Once again, I need to check that it is the client's stuckness and not mine.)

In some cases, the client might find her personality boundary too permeable. It might not provide enough structure to keep a job and earn a living, or to maintain a relationship, or to responsibly have a child. Such clients will find it difficult to sustain therapy, since the therapy relationship is part of personality functioning.

It is worthwhile emphasising that this is a distinction between the approach I am taking and a more cognitive or behavioural approach. These approaches would tend to work on altering the personality function, by adjusting either habitual actions or habitual thoughts. In the present approach, the focus is not the rightness or wrongness of any individual actions. There is an acknowledgement that people can validly take a consistent and fixed position, even if it causes them difficulties, if it is an autonomous, potentially aware decision rather than defensive, disowned and unaware. People have a right to self-sacrifice on religious, ethical, cultural or altruistic grounds (see Lasch, 1979).

Thus the unaware fixities of personality function are not explored at the level of personality. They point to a loss of contact and choicefulness, supported by disruptions at the first two boundaries. In the area of fixity, either there is an avoidance of openness to body or sensory experience at the first (id) boundary, or there is an avoidance of making a clear, owned, contactable figure at the second (ego) boundary (or both). The therapist's noticing of fixed personality alerts her to an exploration of these disruptions and the anxieties that underlie them. At the id boundary, the experiments can be about relaxation and breathing, or a stream of awareness of body and sensory experience. At the ego boundary, experiments can be about focusing, choosing, owning ("I feel anxious, I am avoiding looking at you, I don't want to see..."). The therapy relationship supports the exploration of the fears at the point of loss of contact.

2.3 Philosophy: Reflections on Husserl

As I have reflected on the philosophical implications of the approach I have been presenting here, I have found myself drawn towards

the writing and thinking of Edmund Husserl, the founder of the philosophical school of *phenomenology*. Husserl seems to be currently somewhat out of favour, with more interest going to the “existential phenomenology” of his student Heidegger. Husserl writes about “pure phenomenology” and “transcendental reduction” in a way that seems to many unnecessarily idealistic and speculative. Yet his are the insights that I have kept coming back to. In putting these ideas, I am aware that there is much controversy about what exactly Husserl meant at various stages of his writing, in which his emphasis changed over time. Rather than get into these disputes, I would rather say that this is where Husserl’s thinking takes me.

My understanding of Husserl is that he takes as his starting point Descartes’ *cogito* “I think, therefore I am” and its problems, and that his aim was to try to fix it. As I have already written, the problem with Descartes’ argument is that, in saying “I think”, there is already for him an “I” that is thinking, thus assuming what he is trying to prove. Yet there is an important intuition in the argument: there is *something* going on, and the more there is doubt, the more the presence of the doubt (a happening) affirms the universe as a place where events happen. That seems to me an unexceptionable argument.

Husserl speaks of the “natural attitude”, engaging as a person with self-knowledge in a known and continuous world of things. This is very much the same as the personality function or boundary. His next step is a *phenomenological reduction*: to temporarily put aside this everyday knowledge of the world, including any special significance we have learned to give to any aspect of it, and to attempt to describe it as closely as possible with what immediately appears to awareness. Let us see where this gets us, since this is the best-known and most widely accepted aspect of Husserl’s writings: and yet for our purposes there is a problem with it if it is separated from the context of Husserl’s further thoughts. There is a perfectly valid way of thinking about therapy based on this reduction. You bracket off the everyday meanings and understandings about yourself, your life and the things around you by directing your awareness. By doing this, new and maybe more useful ways of being in the world can appear. You can even (as many have done in the name of Gestalt Therapy) use techniques like putting a parent, partner or employer on an empty chair to play with different ways to approach difficult situations, or, by switching chairs, to experience the situation from

a different viewpoint. Or conversely, the therapist can bracket her theories about how to live in order to better understand the client's understanding.

But Husserl goes further. He argues that, in order to find certainty and "purity", we need to bracket off the "I" who is performing the phenomenological reduction. Otherwise, we are still in Descartes' trap, of assuming a self that has an existence prior to and separate from its actions. There is not, phenomenologically, a perceiving self separate from the perception. What this first bracketing *does* do is to focus our attention on happenings that occur beyond our meaning-making, to a universe where coherent experience occurs, where you reading my words, or me typing on the computer, points to a coherent enough universe that experience and meaning-making are possible. And also a universe in which an intuition of "I-ness" and "otherness" is possible. It is this level of coherence that is for me, and I think for Husserl, the firm ground. Husserl's claim to "purity" is that this is not an assumption: it is logically proved by his rescue of Descartes' argument, showing that happenings happen. Self rests on a world of relatively coherent happenings that can form the basis of experience. And this "transcendental ego" is precisely the way I understand the first (id) boundary out of which self emerges, a seed of phenomenological experiencing not yet owned by an "I".

This leads to two startling conclusions. First of all, if self/other arises out of the prior field, rather than, as Descartes claimed to prove, self being an independent sphere of existence, then its functions must be potentialities of the field from which we emerge, not something brought into it from outside. Secondly, if our intuition of having choice and will is accurate, they in particular must be potentialities of the whole field which are then emergent in personhood. The field from which we emerge cannot be governed by deterministic laws if our choosing is to mean anything real (I will say more about this in the next chapter). *People are the organs of choosing of and for the field.*

Application to psychotherapy

So is this just a philosophical argument, and irrelevant to psychotherapy? Certainly it is a much more complex version of phenomenology than that used by most people writing on the subject. Mostly

phenomenology is taken to mean that I as therapist bracket my own “natural attitude” in order to understand the client’s natural attitude better, a variant of Rogerian “reflecting back”. However, I don’t personally believe that the client is always the best person to interpret his own experience. Clients, in my experience of being both therapist and client, have areas where they are far more fixed and pathologising than all but the most doctrinaire therapists. At the very least the therapist needs to be encouraging the client to question his own certainties.

A human being has to face the dialectic of being both an individual and field-emergent in the moment. We have all been integrating our experiences in our own ways at least from birth. And the sum total of those experience/integration cycles (which of course continue) is a self process with some areas of fluidity and some areas of fixity. We stabilise the areas of fixity by limiting our varieties of contact and our capacities for sensory awareness to those regions where the fixity is unchallenged. This leaves us with reduced capacities for dealing with certain difficult situations, and, when these situations arise, we come face to face with our limitations. This is when we are most likely to come into therapy.

My understanding is that it is *precisely* at this time that it is most wrong to base the therapy on bracketing my own assumptions as a therapist in order to understand the different world of the other. That world is being challenged by the wider field, and my assumption is that a successful therapy will result in the client’s self process being more choiceful and fluid, capable of making contact in a wider variety of situations, and so the assumptions will become significantly different. So the only place we can go is to the second reduction of Husserl. The therapeutic method is the same as the one I discern in Husserl. By bracketing my assumptions of my client as I notice them, *and encouraging the client to do the same*, neither I nor the client reach an interpretation-free certainty, but we do reach a point where we can be uncertain together—“cultivating uncertainty”, as Frank-M. Staemmler (1997a) terms it. The only certainty for the client and me is that there is an event which is client-and-me, an event whose outcomes are not fixed, with which we can experiment. So part of that event could be that I see the client become more motionless, maybe chest moving less. I can then ask the client to focus on his/her chest experience, or to breathe out as slowly and fully as possible.

This would not be based on a theory that “the client isn’t breathing enough, so I’ll get him to breathe more”. Nor would I assume that this was just to do with the client. I would also be paying attention to my own breathing and tensions.

The assumption would be that this event would be part of an unaware fixity stabilising the “natural self-attitude” (fixed personality function, in PHG terms), and that bringing our awareness to it, or experimenting with doing something different, would lead to something new, on which a new self-other process can be based. And it need not be the client who does something different: there are times when I can act in an unfamiliar way and make the substratum of the fixity visible. A common example is the situation where I find it difficult not to maintain eye contact with a client, because he either stops speaking or becomes agitated each time I do. I can point this out to the client, and explain that, if I do not look away at times, I get into tunnel vision and actually stop seeing him properly. I could enquire what the client’s experience is when I look away. We could then explore this with me slowly moving my eyes towards or away from the client and the client becoming aware of the significance of this.

2.4 Case Examples

In this and subsequent case examples, the client material is a composite of many clients with material facts changed in order to protect confidentiality. I use a possibly unusual convention in that I give names to both therapist and client. By doing this, I want to emphasise the personhood of both of these, as it seems to me to fit with the theory better than a naming based on their roles. For similar reasons, I play about with the genders of the people I write about, assigning them at whim, rather than using a more indefinite masculine or forms such as “s/he”. Our living is highly affected by gender, and we (or at least I) tend to visualise the situation described differently depending on the genders of the characters concerned.

I will give two case examples: one involving something fairly close to what has come to be seen as the whole of Gestalt work, and one that may not look so familiar (though I would say that they are the same work). They are both examples where we can move to a new level, and it is important to realise that there may be longer or shorter periods of preparation and development of rela-

tionship and support before such movement happens. However, I have seen significant movement in first sessions, where the client has reasonable self-support, except possibly in a specific area of disturbance. I will write more about aspects of pace of therapy in the next chapter.

Example 1: Jane

Jane, a single woman in her thirties, is scared of mice, and is currently having difficulty sleeping if there are any little sounds in her bedroom in case it is mice.

Jane's voice is soft and pleasant, but her eyes are watchful, and she never fully relaxes as she sits.

Jane: So every time I hear a creak, I sit up and turn the light on in case it is a mouse.

Peter: Could you let yourself go further here, and take the scene further. There is a mouse in the bedroom — what does it do in relation to Jane?

J: It scuttles about, very fast and unpredictably. It might jump on my legs, or even my face. It has sharp teeth, it might bite me.

P: My assumption is that there is something of you in all the characters in this scene. Could you speak us through the image, but this time, speaking as the mouse?

J: [Looks startled] Oh... I don't know how to do that.

P: You could maybe start with "I am quick and unpredictable. I have sharp teeth".

J: [Hesitantly] I am quick and unpredictable. I have sharp teeth... I feel strange saying that.

P: Strange how?

J: It doesn't feel like me, but it's a bit exciting. [Wriggling]

P: Can you lean into that some more, play it up? Maybe pay attention to your teeth, gnash them.

J: That does feel exciting! I never paid attention to my teeth before, they ARE sharp!

P: So if Jane is over in that chair, how would you as the mouse be with her? Maybe you could stand up and move around her.

J: [Stands up, and then, hesitantly at first and then with more energy, darts backwards and forwards, poking the chair with “Jane” on it. Then she suddenly stops, looking somewhat shocked.] I recognise this. This is how my sister Anne teased me when we were kids. She would jump out at me and shout, or pinch me or something, then run away. I was always scared of coming close to her, looking out for where she was in case she was hiding.

We stand beside each other in silence for a time.

P: So if you speak to Anne now, with full awareness that you have sharp teeth, what do you say?

J: I hated you when you did that. You scared me. You were so much more confident than me, and could make me run away from you. But I have teeth too, and I can move fast too.

P: What would Anne say back now?

J: [As Anne] I’m glad you have teeth too, just frightening you like that got boring pretty quickly.

P: The other bit is that you could become aware that I too have teeth. So what is it like being with me, both having teeth.

We play with baring our teeth at each other, with quite a bit of laughter, and some growling. The following week, Jane reports that she has been sleeping a lot better and is much less preoccupied with mice. She also reports more pleasure in her food.

Commentary

This is a quite standard Gestalt way of working with phobias, and often achieves major changes quite quickly. The assumption is that the phobic object (the mouse, in this case) represents a disowned

aspect of the client that is then projected out onto the environment. Re-owning that aspect takes the sting out of the phobia, but more than that, it is often a re-owning of power. One thing we know is that the phobic object holds strong power for the client.

An important part of the work is when Jane recognises her sister as being the historical owner of the movements she fears from a mouse. So it would seem as if she is the mouse here, but that is not the case. The result of bullying would usually be that the bullied person identifies with the victim role and alienates the aspects she associates with the bully, including aggression (while the bully would reverse those aspects, and would strongly avoid showing weakness). The alienated role would be projected out onto the world, with a firm sense that "I don't want to be like that." In families with a very strict father, for example, there would very often be a "good child" and a "bad child". The good child looks at the beatings and shouting the bad child receives and affirms his role; the bad child looks at the restricted life of the good child, and thus affirms his role, preferring the freedom and the beatings. Both will find that this can become stereotyped and limiting behaviour, and yet both children are involved in the behaviour of each: what one does makes its sense in relation to the whole system of the other child and the parental strictness.

In a dialogue between the two poles, the act and function of polarization becomes aware and can be co-explored with the therapist. Thus the Gestalt technique called "two chair work" is actually three-position work, the therapist being the third position. What the therapist and client are engaging with is the leading function of self: the act of polarizing. This is being explored relationally. It would not be the same if there was no therapist present so that it was just an intrapsychic piece of work. Jane here showing her aggression and teeth in my presence would be far more meaningful, and make for much greater significance in her life, than Jane enacting this on her own without a witness. Relationally, one of the significant aspects of our interaction is that, when Jane owns her teeth, she does not find me afraid. I do not take the historical opposite polarity.

Relationally also, if Jane was someone who would currently unthinkingly comply with my suggestions, I would not be so free with my suggestions. There would be a way in which the relationship of my ownership of my authority while acknowledging the authority of her choicefulness is another strand of the same exploration.

Finally, though we do not enter this realm at this time, there are other possible aspects of the image. The fact that the fears arise in the bedroom, and that she fears touch on her legs, combined with the fact of her single state may (and, of course, may not) mean that there are issues of sexuality caught up here. I would not want to be any more definite at this stage, but it is likely that when we explore more our relating with each other as man and woman with teeth and power, this theme could emerge. I leave this thought with a comment that sexuality also has no meaning except in relation to another.

Example 2: Jim

Jim, a man in his forties living on his own, comes to see me, presenting difficulties in relating, a tendency to become angry with little provocation that keeps people at a distance. His voice is brusque and his words are somewhat suspicious as he speaks to me, yet his intonation has something of a constrained quality, since he breathes shallowly and holds his jaw tensely. When he is sitting down, he gives the impression that all his energy is in his upper body, especially his eyes that look fixedly at my face with tight focus. Meanwhile his legs are immobile, heels raised putting tension on his toe joints.

I am aware of my response being to reduce my own movement and breathe more shallowly, and therefore to reduce my physical experiencing. I wonder how much Jim can see with his eyes fixed the way they are, whether he has any sense of the body my head is on top of, or of the room in which we sit. I experience an image of a wall between us. I am aware of my part of it: am I physically safe with this man? I check this last out: he has got into occasional fights when he had been drinking heavily, but not otherwise. He agrees not to drink before appointments, and is aware that he is not to use violence towards me or property.

My initial thoughts on how to approach therapy with Jim are: His major self-process difficulty would seem to be at the first (id) boundary. He does not have enough confidence to allow himself to relax and let something new emerge, but rather restricts his sensory world by immobility and shallow breathing. He has limited vision with his eyes tightly focused on my face, and limited body sensation through his immobility. He looks at my face, yet I get a sense that he is searching for something rather than open to discovering

who I become for him. His personality function (the third boundary) would be quite fixed, but mainly because it provides security and fixed path to figure-formation as a replacement for his reduced capacity for making spontaneous figures. He could function reasonably decisively, even aggressively, at his ego boundary within the limited area he allows himself to engage with.

These considerations lead to potentials for experiments. At its simplest level, I would be keeping my own breathing full and regular, and make sure that I allow myself movement. This might be as challenging a response as Jim can accept. However, other possibilities could be:

Peter: Could you experiment with defocusing your eyes for a time, blur your vision, and breathe regularly?

Jim: [Finds this very difficult, stopping breathing as he defocuses his eyes.] I feel dizzy when I do that.

P: When you need to, refocus, then defocus again, move your eyes in and out of focus.

This can lead to more awareness of, and tolerance of, the anxieties of the pre-engagement id stage.

Or:

P: Look around the room ... notice slowly what arouses your interest.

But it could well be that this is not going to happen either. Both of the last two interventions are of the form "Do this", and will probably bring up another aspect of the field, Jim's suspicion and unwillingness to allow me authority in the relationship. Yet Jim's dilemma is that, in coming to therapy, Jim also wants me to help, which inevitably does give me authority (hopefully not authority *over* him, but the authority of my skill and experience). This relational dilemma can then become the basis for our next steps:

J: Sounds like bullshit to me.

P: What I am suggesting makes no sense to you, and you don't want to do it. I hear you as angry with me. Will you tell me more about that?

J: I don't like being told what to do.

P: And yet you have come to me. I see your dilemma here that you don't know what to do. My dilemma is that I don't want to try to push you to do whatever I want, yet I do have some ideas that I think will help.

[Long mutual silence]

J: Are you saying you can't help me?

P: No, I am not saying that. I am aware that what is between us now is what you came to me about, the distance between you and others, and your anger. Now it is here, we can explore it together. Seems like a question is whether you can trust me or what I suggest. How close can you let me?

J: I thought you were saying you couldn't help me, I'm too sick.

P: That gives me a sense of you as different from other people, too sick to be helped.

J: That's how it's seemed to me.

P: I feel sad hearing you.

[Another silence]

Commentary

This extract, which represents a not uncommon situation, points to a particular understanding of *resistance*. It would be accurate to say (and Jim would agree) that Jim is geared towards resisting the therapist's input. Yet, from the therapist's perspective, I am not *being resisted*. Phenomenologically, the client is showing his process of breaking contact, giving me the opportunity to engage with that process, not merely talk about it. I acknowledge and explore the resistance, and do not try to get past it. My initial bracketing of a stock response like "Why do you ask me if you don't want to do what I suggest?" allows me to be more open to what is happening with the client. This in turn allows the client to be more open to his own motivation. But then we need to go to another level, where we can explore what this

means for who we can be with each other. If we had stayed with the exploration of Jim's motivation, we would have stayed in our own worlds, and we would not have engaged with Jim's central dilemma: his suspicion versus his wish to connect.

It is also useful to see that even though I have dropped the suggestion to explore loosening of focus, paradoxically I am still encouraging a wider focus, while Jim is habitually focusing so tightly on his opposition that he is unaware of his need for connection. This is a common feature of non-linear orders, a *fractal* structure where the same kind of shape forms at different levels in the structure.

In the next chapter, we will look more closely at the themes of relationship and feedback, the non-linearity that allows the development of the order that is consciousness and selfhood.

CHAPTER THREE

Relationship and Feedback

3.1 *Theory*

We have been looking at how new complex systems can emerge from non-linear field interactions, where feedback loops replace simple linear cause-and-effect chains. We have looked at the increasingly complex levels of life, intelligence and choicefulness. The question I want to explore in this chapter is: how does this happen in the case of our emergent conscious self? What are the “nuts and bolts” of the interactions leading to my ability to be myself?

Notice how this is immediately a different question from the more familiar ones of how conscious self affects the environment, or vice versa. Both of these assume a primary separation of self from environment, so that the interactions each way can be charted. But using the “three boundaries” language from Chapter Two, we can see how this oversimplifies the situation. “Self” and “environment” do not belong to the same level of interaction. Environment engages with organism at the physical contact boundary; self engages with other at the ego boundary which allows for whole new classes of engagement, in particular choiceful contacting. Self/other emerges from

organism/environment rather than organism alone, and then allows the conscious modulation of the way organism and environment function. In this way, human beings have made massive changes in the physical world and to our physical makeup (through planned food intake and exercise, medicine, even cosmetic surgery).

I will describe three different interactions that provide this non-linearity. They are *evolution*, *early neural development* and *intersubjectivity*. We will see how these affect the three boundaries in a way that produces complex order. Once again, we will then explore the clinical applications of this theory, the underlying philosophy and case examples.

Evolution

Darwinian evolution is a good place to start our exploration, because it is such a clear example of the power of non-linear relationships. It is a source of wonder to me that Charles Darwin, through careful observation, proposed his theory so many years before the discovery of DNA and the chemistry behind the effects he was observing.

It is also important to look at the scandal the theory caused, and continues to cause. This is not because of the idea of inherited characteristics: we can all see that children often resemble one or other of their parents. It is because Darwin's theory says that this order of species can arise without needing a divine plan. All that is needed is randomly faulty inheritability of characteristics, the fact that if a living thing doesn't survive it doesn't reproduce; and huge amounts of time.

In a sense, the first of these characteristics is philosophically most important, because it shows a situation where *randomness* is the prerequisite of order. If inheritability was completely orderly, there would be no evolution and no new species. There would be nowhere for novelty to come from. But the randomness has a non-random effect. If the variation is such that the new life doesn't attain viability in its environment (which could be ability to fully develop, to feed itself, to reproduce itself, or any of the other ways organisms sustain themselves and their species), then it cannot pass its inheritance to the next generation. If, on the other hand, it is more likely to survive or reproduce than the general level of the species, barring accidents its descendants will become more numerous over time. This has been called "survival of the fittest", but that wording can lead to a faulty

understanding, as if there is some objective measure of “fitness” that can be seen by an observer. This culminates in ideas of superior and inferior races, eugenics and genetic engineering. If my understanding is right, the overall effect of introducing such planning is that evolution works less well to adjust species, including ours, to changing environmental circumstances. We cannot know in advance what variation will make a significant difference (although we will tend to assume it is the variation that defines our own species!), and the more random variation there is, the more likely it will be that the necessary adaptation will happen.

Evolution is inherently non-linear, because each living species provides a part of the environment for the others in its locality. They feed on each other, compete for resources, make the terrain more or less usable for each other, and, within a species, compete to reproduce with each other. As one species changes, it requires adaptation by other species, which in turn affects the first species, and so on in many different directions. For example, as one species develops better vision, its prey will survive best if it becomes more difficult to see, which in turn will produce an evolutionary pressure for the predator either to develop even better vision or to find a less camouflaged prey. As the terrain changes, the camouflage will work less well, and more will be eaten, unless there is another adaptation of colour (for example, there are now populations of grey butterflies and moths in some urban areas of Britain).

In this way, evolutionary non-linearity allows randomness to power the creation of order in a way that cannot be planned or predicted, and in a way that will not work as well if the initial randomness is reduced. It allows for the emergence of human beings in an environment that is connected to their emergence rather than one they just happen to be faced with. It allows the development of very complex functions of consciousness and planning, while never (except in our vanity) guaranteeing that these functions will keep us in the ascendancy in future changes of our environment. In fact, quite the reverse: the more our planning reduces the possibility of randomness (by genetic engineering or planned crop breeding, or even by planning to preserve species habitats), the less effectively species can adapt to changing conditions.

We will now look at two specifically human evolutionary developments that allow us to act in a human way.

Early neural development

One of the distinguishing features of human beings is that human babies are born with their brains only partly “wired up” neurologically (it has been estimated that 70% of the neural connections develop after birth). By contrast, other young animals are born much more viable, and develop neurologically much less after birth. Part of the evolutionary pressure for this is the size of the human head. If babies were born when they had developed more fully, their heads would be too big to allow normal birth. The human brain keeps developing new capacities, particularly in the frontal lobes, until the teenage years (which explains a lot).

In the first two years of life (actually starting in the last three months of pregnancy) there is a massive growth spurt of brain development, more than a person can use (Schore, 2003). Then something very significant happens. Those neural connections which are used remain, and those that are not used are whittled away. In this way, our brains are sculpted into an image of the infant's environment and its relational possibilities and deprivations. So, if the infant is surrounded by love, caring touch and play, and a little inevitable frustration, the infant develops, and hands on to the child and the adult, a stronger capacity to experience and process pleasure than to experience pain and frustration. Pleasure will be more figural, not as part of a psychological expression of preference, but because that is the way they have developed neurologically.

Conversely, if they have experienced a lot of pain and deprivation, and a little pleasure and care, they will retain rich connections to process the hurt and little to process pleasure. Painful experiences will now be more figural, once again not because this is chosen but because this is what their brains have developed to process.

In either case (and also, of course in infancies where there are less extreme mixes of pleasure and pain), we can say that the brain is *sculpted* into an image of the infant's caring environment. I use the image of sculpting as opposed to painting to emphasise that the image forms by removal, as a sculptor might remove marble from a block, rather than by adding, as a painter adds paint to a canvas. In a way that is very similar to the picture with evolution, random and chaotic neural connections plus the non-linearity of the infant living in a given environment, impacting it and being impacted by it, leads to the rapid development of a relational order.

After the first two years of life, the growth spurt ends, and while the brain continues to develop for many years, and retains some ability to adapt (plasticity) throughout life, the process is now a much slower *painting* process, developing new connections to process a change in circumstances. This is a fascinating discovery, with many ramifications. So I would suggest that one implication is that there are likely to be general differences in neural development in different cultural and social settings, especially where the cultural differences affect patterns of childcare.

The clinical significance of this for psychotherapy is clear. There are two separate routes by which the figures that I make can be rigidified. One could be called a *psychological* route: avoidance of areas that are frightening or anxiety-producing, as I discussed in the last chapter. These emphasise work at the first two boundaries: organism/environment and self/other. The other would then be a *neurological* route, where some figures cannot be formed because the person's neurological development does not support them. In terms of the theory of three boundaries, the emphasis here would have to be on the personality boundary, the more stabilised and fixed aspects of our being. The way of working that we looked at in the last chapter would not be helpful in this latter case, but it has an important similarity: it would still rely on the therapeutic relationship rather than on a set of fixed procedures. In fact, Schore (2003) argues that these limitations are purely located in the right brain hemisphere, and that more cognitive therapeutic interventions which act mostly on the right hemisphere are not relevant here. One of the questions we must face is to what extent people can change if some aspects of full human functioning have been outside their experiencing possibilities throughout their lives. We will look at this below.

Intersubjectivity

In the last section, we looked at how, in the earliest years, the caring environment feeds back into the infant's developing brain. We are now going to explore another connection which continues throughout life.

The whole basis for this approach to self involves interplay between self and other, based on experience at the sensitive boundary between organism and environment, stabilised by assimilation of

personality. It is through experience of otherness that we both know the world and know ourselves as that which is not other. As Sartre's Translator puts it in her Introduction (Sartre, 1978, p. xxvii), "And it is by means of knowing what it is not that consciousness makes known to itself what it is."

This way of describing the emergence of selfhood does not distinguish between a human and a non-human other. We now need to look at what is special in the interaction between two human beings. What distinguishes contact with another person from contact with a chair a tree? We can know ourselves as the person who sits in the chair, or who looks at or climbs the tree. And we can also know ourselves as the person who is talking to or hugging another person. Our intuition is that it is different, but exactly how?

The first thing to notice is that with another person, there is a new non-linearity. Whatever I am doing to orient myself in relation to the other person, the other is also doing with me. If I dance with a chair, or round a tree, all the motion comes from me, and I assign the other—the chair or the tree—its role in the dance. The chair or the tree is not dancing with me! If I dance with another person, she is dancing with me, making her own movements in relation to me as I am to her. And we have seen how such a non-linearity allows for the emergence of new and more complex interactions. So we can co-create new movements that neither of us would have thought of if we were dancing alone. We can both be surprised by where we end up as a result of dancing together!

But there is another feedback loop, which has only been fully explored in the last fifteen years. It is something that we have in some ways always known, but it also radically changes what we know. This is the discovery of *mirror neurons*, first in capuchin monkeys, and then in human beings.

We have always known that we as human beings have the capacity for empathy, feeling along with another person who is distressed or "infectiously" joyful or excited. We also know that we are capable of recognising the intentions of others from their movements, and can even feel our own muscles reacting alongside someone we are watching participating in sport. And we also know that there are some people, described as having autistic spectrum disorders, who do not have these experiences. We did not know how this happens until a chance occurrence in 1992, when capuchin monkeys were

being observed picking up fruit, and, through electrodes implanted in their brains, the researchers were checking what part of their brain was being used for this action. Then one of the researchers picked up some fruit, watched by the monkeys, whose brain showed the same arousal pattern as when the monkeys did the action themselves.

On exploring this further, the researchers discovered that there were systems of “mirror neurons” in a number of areas, in particular area F5 of the premotor cortex (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004, p. 169). Through these neurons, monkeys could get a personal motor sense of the experience of another monkey, or even of a human being. The obvious next question was: do human beings also have mirror neurons? And how can one research this, given that it is not acceptable to put electrodes in human brains?

There are now many studies from neurophysiological and brain imaging experiments that confirm the existence of human mirror neurons. What is more, it turns out that mirror neurons in human beings are much more developed than those in monkeys. For example, if a monkey is shown meaningless rather than purposeful action, it has no mirror response, whereas a human being will have a mirror response to any movements, however random and purposeless. (However, the wide range of usefulness of mirror neurons shows in the fact that, in monkeys and human beings, there was a mirror response to purposeful actions even when the object of the action—e.g. the fruit in grasping—was not visible to the observer.) Through this mirroring of the motor components of an action, human beings can get a sense of the intention behind the action, and have a different motor response to a cup being picked up to drink from or to be cleared away. And Oberman *et al* have described research evidence for mirror neuron dysfunction in autism spectrum disorders (at <<http://psy.ucsd.edu/~lshenk/mirrorneuronpaper.pdf>>).

Writing about the implications for psychology and psychotherapy of these discoveries, Daniel Stern wrote the following (repeated here from Chapter One):

It's very clear that human beings are constructed to read other people's minds... Our nervous system is constructed to do that... The conclusion...is that our minds are not so independent. Indeed, they are very interdependent. Our minds are not separate or isolated, and we are not the only owners of our

own mind... Minds get created by virtue of being in constant interaction and dialogue with other minds, so that the whole idea of a “one person psychology” ought not to exist, or at least it must be incomplete. (Stern, 2003, p. 23)

Restating this in the terms we are discussing here, we can say that interaction with another human being is very different from interaction with an object, and this is not just because (as I wrote before) the other person is simultaneously interacting with me, but also because our experiences are inseparably linked. I very quickly get a sense of the other person’s intention, and vice versa, and our intentions and actions build up in tandem. So we could call our engagements with other people intersubjective, but it is not the intersubjectivity of one subjective point of view meeting another. Rather it is a *transpersonal* intersubjectivity where the subjective experience is inseparable from the subjective experience of people we are in contact with. We actually have to have mechanisms to limit this sharing in order to be able to function independently. So, for example, there is a mechanism that buffers the mirror neurons from motor neurons, so that we do not reflexively copy other people’s actions (although some people, labelled as suffering from echopraxis, do indeed do that). It is a more complex task for a human being to go from the first boundary, organism/environment, to the second boundary, self/other, with another human being; yet on the other side of the equation we can co-operate with others for work or play without even thinking about it. We easily get swept along by crowds, automatically create culture and share language and social norms and take on other people’s priorities. This is consistent with the fact that we are social animals, evolved to function as a group rather than as solitary hunters.

This distinction is a very important one, turning round Stolorow, Atwood and Orange’s definition of intersubjectivity as “any psychological field formed by interacting worlds of experience, at whatever developmental level these worlds may be organized” (Stolorow et al., 2002, p. 32). If the “worlds of experience” form a field by interacting, the emphasis will be on their joining. If, conversely, people interacting together tend to co-create a single world (even if they stand on different parts of it), then the existential *act* of individuation, of retaining the ability to say “no” to the demands of that world and to make personal choices, is at least as important a dynamic to

explore. There is a *dialectic* between a human being as part of a wider field that penetrates every action, and a human being as a choiceful individual. To lose either pole is for me to lose the essence of a human being, both immanent and transcendent. And it is also to lose the human role I described in the last chapter, to embody the unpredictability as well as the predictability of the universe.

There are two further important implications to this capacity for mirroring. Firstly, as I wrote earlier, there is a question about how a person can achieve growth if they have, for example, experienced little love or care in their early lives, and have thus emerged from that infancy with scant neurological support for experiencing them in later life. How can they know what experience is even being pointed to, so that they can begin to develop the neurological pathways that are needed? This is where mirror neurons come in: even though their neurological abilities are impaired, their mirror neuron system is intact. Therefore they will be able to get a subjective experience of the therapist's caring, as well as, hopefully, the caring of other people in their current lives. Without an understanding of the mirror neuron system, it is far more difficult to explain how this could happen.

The second, more speculative implication comes from Stern (2004, p. 126) in his discussion of "intersubjective consciousness". "Recall that the neuroscientific explanations of consciousness are from an intrapsychic perspective. Within one brain, an initial neuronal grouping gets activated by an experience. This grouping then activates a second neuronal grouping in the same brain, which then reports back to the initial grouping, reactivating it and creating a reentry loop.

In contrast, intersubjective consciousness is viewed as an interpsychic event requiring two minds. An experience is had by one individual. This is felt directly. It activates almost the same experience in another individual, via intersubjective sharing. This is then reflected back to the first individual in the regard and behavior of the second individual. As they encounter each other in this shared present moment, a reentry loop is created between the two minds.

If this is accurate, the consciousness of an individual can be seen as an intersubjective event, not just an event for that person alone. And the idea that the way the person is currently being received

impacts on their conscious experience rings very true to my own experience. My experience in the moment is very much connected with who I am with and their way of receiving me. This can be either people who are with me in person, or people I have internalised as “invoked companions” (Stern, 1985)

Let us look at how the three boundaries act round this dialectic between individuality and intersubjective sharing.

The organism/environment boundary (it/not-it) does not yet have a sense of the individual, and the human being engaged in this boundary can be seen as a sensing organ of the field. This may seem like a strange way to put it, but it fits well with the understanding of person and self emerging from a field. The example I would want to use is my ear, which at first approximation would be taken as the organ of my hearing. On its own, my eardrum can vibrate to the sound waves impacting on it, and turn them into electrical signals. To turn these signals into hearing requires the sound waves from outside my organism and the neural structures within my organism that engage the signals, pay attention to them, filter some and bring others to awareness. But look also at what my existence with ears does to the waves. If animals with ears did not exist, there would be no sound. There would maybe be waves (depending on the view one takes of quantum physics), but those waves only become sounds in the presence of hearing beings. This has feedback on the level of living creatures, as animals create sound waves for direction finding, mating, language and so forth. Sounds come into being that would never have existed if there were no ears! So through the evolutionary co-creation of sound and hearing, the whole field has acquired a new relational possibility that affects how it will develop. Similarly, through the evolutionary co-creation of human consciousness (or, if you prefer, any consciousness that has the capacity for innovation and choicefulness of a human being), the whole field has acquired a new relational capacity of purposefulness and possibility.

So here the capacity is of possibility, the dialectic pole of the person as part of the field. The sense experience is not just an event in itself, but an invitation to many possible futures. Intersubjectively, as we have been looking at it, there is no clarity here on what is me and what is you. That question actually doesn’t mean much: my actions are always penetrated by the context of the actions. My selfhood, when it arises in the next moment of contacting and self-actualization, does

not depend on an ability to determine my completely individual part of the interaction: that would make no sense.

Moving on to the *self-other boundary*, it appears as if two things have happened, but in fact only one has. The two seemingly separate occurrences are the actualization of a purposeful self, and the engagement with a differentiated other. But these are two ways of saying precisely the same thing. The “possibility-path travelled down from the field experiencing of the first boundary solidifies both self and other”. If this seems reminiscent of the quantum-theoretical concept of the “collapse of the wave function”, that is intentional. If I as an experimenter am somehow separate from the field of an experiment with light, the fact that my choice of experiment affects whether photons show themselves as particles or waves is totally counterintuitive. If, on the other hand, the path taken from the interconnected field of possibilities simultaneously solidifies myself as the experimenter and the other that I engage with, crystallises them out of the field, it makes so much more sense.

In the dialectic, this boundary is right in the middle: the separateness of self grows intimately with the connectedness with other. I cannot develop a separate self separately! I am pushed towards this middle point by the possibilities of the field. I am also pulled by the third boundary, which encodes my individual commitments, longer-term interests and ways of doing things. In the middle of this push and pull, the underlying indeterminism of the field allows the emergent me to make choices, which is indeterminacy pulled into an emergent order (just as we have seen in the case of evolution above).

At the third boundary, the *personality boundary*, I can know myself, who I am and what I am like, in a way that, while not as stable as it appears to me, has a coherence that the other boundaries do not have. I have limited the possibilities to be engaged with at the first boundary, and therefore not only my ways of being self, but also the world’s possibilities of becoming other. If I only do a certain sort of experiment, light will only ever be a wave for me, as it was for many generations of scientists. Personality can be seen as a magnet that pulls the world towards my knowledge of who I am and what my world is. And, from the perspective of the field, it is an emergent order that is about the field as a whole including the person, and not about a person on her own.

Dialectically, this is the pole of myself as a self-known individual. I can have values and ways of doing things or habits that supply a counterpole to the shifting intersubjective sharing. In Stern's terms (although he does not mention this), personality is one of the gating mechanisms that allow us to individuate from our surroundings. Our mirror responses occur in relation to our imagined world in the same way as to the observed world. Because we can, for example, interpose our imagining of future consequences of actions between ourselves and the pulls of our observable environment, we can affect to what extent we resonate to the environment or to this imagining. In this way, our intuitive experience of choicefulness in a part-lawful, part-unpredictable world of which we are part (in both our lawfulness and unpredictability) can be understood without having to make the choicefulness or unpredictability just an illusion based on lack of knowledge of the completely determined functioning of the universe.

I have developed this at some theory at some length. Now it is time to look at what this means in practice.

3.2 Clinical application

This theory leads to a very particular understanding of therapy. We are not engaged in the therapy of an individual. Rather, in the meeting between a therapist and a client (who in turn are both emergent from an overarching field) a new set of possibilities arises. As our capacity for attunement through mirror neurons (among other functions) works in this situation, it is actually impossible for the client to stay the same except by inducting me as therapist into the familiar other-role. Even this induction has to be creative, as the same induction will not work in every situation, and in particular the attempt to control the therapeutic situation with its different dynamic is likely to require different methods.

My engagement with the client must attend to each aspect from the centre of the dialectic: what Friedlaender (1918) called "creative indifference". I must be able to be part of and to be separate, to embrace the familiar and the unfamiliar, to be observer and participant. I, like the client, must have all three boundaries available to me as a therapist. And I, like the client, must be able to embrace uncertainty and anxiety.

At the organism/environment or id boundary as a therapist, I must be willing and able to be very slow to move towards knowing and doing. I must be able to be *alongside* the client's id boundary as it pushes towards self-other, implicitly holding open worlds of possibilities branching out from each moment, ready to crystallise out in the non-linear interaction between us. My function is to provide new connections, not just inputs. An input is only meaningful if it opens a new possibility of connection and for contact. I must also be slow enough that I avoid the pull of the familiar if the client goes very quickly into fixed personality functioning and invites us into a familiar self-other activity. If this happens, one of my options is to stay open at the first boundary, not engaged with the client at the self-other level until I experience the excitement of a new possibility.

Example

Alan: [Sits very still with a blank face but eyes very strongly focused on me]

Peter: I want to let you know that I have a sense of you waiting for me to do something, and yet I don't know what to do or say.

A: Neither do I. I thought you would have some ideas. I feel very stuck.

P: I can get a sense of that from your stillness and how little your face is showing. I guess that is also part of my not knowing what to do.

A: [Sits for a while longer, starts making small movements with arms and feet, then says somewhat angrily] So are we going to sit here all day?

P: The only answer I can give is that I don't know. I am open to a lot more happening, and I have a sense in your anger that you also want something to happen. But it is not clear to either of us at this moment what is going to be a meaningful next step in the therapy we are engaged in, and I don't want to do something just for the sake of doing something.

Fritz Perls (1969) called this the "implosion". Both therapist and client are risking moving beyond the familiar and have entered a

terrain where there are no signposts, there is no “right way to proceed”. The images are of death and deserts (Perls also called this the “death layer”), and although there can be a lot of energy, this is shown by tension and agitation rather than movement. The situation looks similar to that of a person holding back from taking an action that he fears to take, turning the energy inwards and into tension. Here any action would be a new statement of self, an act of choiceful individuation in an area that has hitherto been unchoiceful and would probably have a history for the client of being a risky area to make choices in. It is a weighty matter in itself, not just for its historical associations, because the sum total of the movements at these points will be a reorientation of the person’s life, with repercussions not just for the client but for those connected to him.

A: [Gets up and starts walking around rather aimlessly]

P: [Also standing up] I suggest you slow down, and see which way your feet want to move. [I also keep checking with myself how I feel called on by the situation to move].

A: [Moves towards me slowly, then stops at a closer distance]

P: I feel pleasure at you coming closer, but it doesn’t feel right for me to move towards you, but to leave the choice of distance to you.

We stop at a short distance from each other and smile at each other, and then sit down.

My connection to this kind of work is that clients engage in it as they are preparing to risk moving towards people in their lives, either developing new friendships or allowing the ones they already have to become closer and more intimate.

At the ego boundary (self/other), I as therapist need to stay open to my own choosing and capacity for figure-formation. I need to be able to play with many possible ways to see what I am engaged in with my client, and to be able to respond flexibly and in a spirit of playful experimentation and exploration. In the example above, I make choices about standing or remaining sitting, and whether to move closer or not. It is important to remember that when we do this, there is continuous mirroring interchange so that the “I” that is making decisions as therapist is not inherently separate from the “I” of the

client who is also making decisions. Yet out of this emerges a contacting of two people who can make choices that surprise the other.

In order for this to happen, I must also be able to use the braking or gating abilities that Stern (2004, p. 82) writes about, the abilities that mean I am more than just an echo chamber for others. When he writes (op. cit.) that “There must be a gating of attention so that the other is sufficiently taken in and engaged by the mind, or is excluded from the process.” Stern is writing about *awareness*, active engagement with the possibilities to align myself optimally with the demands and opportunities of the environment, and with my own interests and values. When thinking about awareness, it is important to realise that it is primarily about filtering out rather than filtering in: at any moment, far more is filtered out than is allowed through, and it is by moving most of the possible awarenesses into the background that the chosen figure becomes clear. Once again, it is by alienating what is now not-I that I take shape.

My hope in our play and experimenting, and through our mutual self-actualization, is that we achieve contact a new way, one that is for the moment, where the client can see the world outside her habitual borders.

Example

Jenny: I feel excited coming here today. I’ve been looking forward to it, rather than dreading it, as I have before.

Peter: I also feel excited hearing you say that. Do you know what is different for you?

J: I don’t feel suspicious of you today, wondering what your agenda is. I don’t think it would matter to me even if you did have an agenda—I wouldn’t feel threatened by it.

P: I see you looking at me very directly and also speaking to me very directly. I feel more free in my being with you. I think sometimes I try to be careful, but I don’t feel that now. I am enjoying looking at you.

J: I like seeing your smile... I like you.

P: I feel moved hearing you say that.

In this example, a client who has been holding herself at a distance from me (and from others, particularly men, in her life) is risking being more intimate and direct. It is also a useful reminder that the client's image can affect how the therapist and others actually do relate to her. Jenny in this case sees me as being strategic with her, and looks out for threats in how I relate to her. My response is to be aware that she is doing this, and to be careful about what I say or do, which of course amounts to my being strategic with her. Then, when Jenny allows herself to risk being more direct, I do not feel the need to tread carefully and check my words and actions. We have moved to a different part of the attractor formed by the system Peter/Jenny.

At the personality boundary (me/not-me), resides my autonomy as a therapist and my ability to orient myself separately from the expectations of my client. So this will include my theoretical approach: some clients try to pull the therapist away from their way of working into something more familiar or comfortable to themselves, and I need to continue to assert the limits to my flexibility, and that in the end I work the way I work. It will include my own character: my lifestyle, experiences, outlook on the world. Again, I need to have the flexibility in my character to be able to explore a wide range of possibilities with my clients, but not so much that I become a mere mirror of their requirements of a therapist but a separate person whom they can truly meet. In this way, I meet the requirement that I combine predictability and unpredictability.

Example

Martin is in a job that he does not like, but which offers him a good salary. Because he feels angry towards people at work, he misses deadlines and gets other people angry at him. Potentially, he could get dismissed, and then find it more difficult to get another job because of poor references.

Martin: I see you as a wise man, and I would really like you to tell me how to get out of the mess I am in. I'm really open to you saying what you think.

Peter: Could you come over and sit in my chair, answer as me.

M: [Sitting in my chair] You don't like your work—get out! Find what you do like.

P: Switch back.

M: [Moving back: seems to pull into himself] I suppose so.

P: What are you experiencing?

By staying with my own way of working, I avoid being pulled into what on the surface is an “advisory” role, but is, predictably, not. Rather, I am staying as an observer of a process of angry self-talk and withdrawal.

3.3 Philosophy

The central theme here is the dialectic between *predictability* and *unpredictability*. Recall that our central theme in this book is to focus on emergent boundaries, supported by the dynamics of non-linear systems. These boundaries have to have two properties: to maintain their own integrity as boundaries, and to allow the interactions between the processes on either side of the boundary to continue. What is more, these two functions are not inherently separate: since the boundaries we have been considering emerge from and are sustained by relational processes, if they “solidified” too much to allow these processes to continue, they would destroy themselves. In these emergent fields, *homoeostasis* and *change* support each other, rather than being in opposition. A good example would be riding a bicycle: I have to be able to change my distribution of weight and pedalling style to deal with different riding situations and maintain my basic homoeostatic need to keep upright and keep moving forwards. If I tried to ride in the same manner in every situation, I would fall off.

In a wholly predictable universe, there would be no meaning to choice. Choice would be an illusion, and the path I follow would be the path that inevitably follows from the starting conditions of the universe. Similarly, in a wholly unpredictable universe there would be no meaning to choice for a different reason. For choice implies a ground for making the choice, a sense of pattern, trajectory and intention. If everything is unpredictable, there could be no pattern to give significance to the choice.

Yet because of the mathematical properties of non-linear systems, we are constantly surrounded by examples of such mixes of the predictable and the unpredictable. Weather patterns form in meaningful ways that can be predicted in the short term, but not in the longer term. Living things form groupings that resemble each other, while no two examples are exactly the same. Human beings have a descriptably predictable anatomy (though there are some random variations or abnormalities in this) but come in different sizes, shapes, colours, capacities and other attributes.

Navigating among the pitfalls

I have done something questionable in the paragraph above. Mathematicians will point out that the non-linear equations that govern weather (and similar) systems are not *in theory* unpredictable, only in practice. The point is that such equations are *sensitively dependent on initial conditions*, so that a small inaccuracy in measurement will lead to a large divergence in outcome. That is why chaos theorists talk about the “butterfly effect”, where a butterfly flapping its wings in Japan can “produce” a tornado in America (of course it is not cause and effect, merely a dramatic illustration of the large potential effect of a small change). But the equations are still fully deterministic. It is therefore only our accuracy in measurement that is in question. If the universe is governed by deterministic laws, non-linearity will not get us out of the trap. Both the weather and the choicefulness of the individual are illusions: the weather an illusion of indeterminacy based on our inaccuracy of measurement, and the choicefulness an illusion of separation from the overall workings of the universe as a whole.

This is a perfectly coherent philosophy, yet as we have seen it is not the philosophy I am pursuing here. In fact, it would make the whole idea of pursuing or developing a philosophy equally illusory: it would be just another output from the equations. Philosophically, it is a hard knot to get out of. But it is possible. The problem is that it is very easy to be caught in a picture of a somehow non-deterministic person springing up in the middle of an otherwise deterministic universe. Then, if it is not a butterfly which is of dubious choicefulness, but a choiceful human being flapping, the indeterminacy of the person inevitably creates an indeterminism of the universe. So even if the universe was deterministic before

the appearance of human beings, as could be suggested by dualists who see humanness coming from outside matter, the dynamics of non-linear systems show that determinacy cannot survive the presence of any choiceful or indeterminate element.

So in order to account for a choiceful human being, the whole argument needs to be reversed to start with an indeterminate universe developing areas of determinacy, not by the powers of the laws of physics but by the requirements of mathematics, in particular the mathematics of non-linear systems. And the human being, as I have said earlier, is not the bringer of choice but an organ of choice: choice being here defined as indeterminacy within an area of mostly determinacy, so that it has the following characteristics:

1. There is no requirement of the universe or science that I do what I do.
2. What I do is constrained by the determinacies in the field. I cannot choose to walk through walls, but I can use a crowbar to make a hole to go through.
3. What I do is not merely random but takes into account the constraints of the determinacies in the field, so it is meaningful to speak of intention and purpose.

The next pitfall, which follows on from this, is a very common misunderstanding of the quantum universe. This is the story of that misunderstanding: the way the universe acts depends on how it is observed. So, in the classic two-slit experiment, if the apparatus is set up to observe particle-like behaviour, photons behave like particles (in particular, exerting pressure where they collide with another object); if it is set up to observe wave-like behaviour, photons behave like waves (in particular interference effects). So how we observe the universe affects how it is. In some writings, this is taken even further: the universe is what we make it be. (You can see the shades of the constructivist worldview in this.) This is the theme of the famous “Schrödinger’s cat” thought experiment, where a cat is in a sealed box with a device that kills it if a radioactive particle decays, which it has a 50% chance of doing. So before the box is opened, is the cat dead or alive? In this story, it is in the opening of the box and looking that the cat becomes either dead or alive: it is the observation that makes it so.

The misunderstanding is comparatively easy to see, from what we have been looking at. The assumption is that the observer is *on a quantum level* outside the system until the box is open. But on the quantum level, there is no human being to be an observer, there is no box or killing apparatus nor a cat. Alive and dead have no meaning on that level. The observer is emergent from the same system as the observed. We are, as much as the radioactive particle, part of the quantum field.

So what does an observation *do*? Murray Gell-Mann, the Nobel Physics prizewinner writes about another measurement situation (Gell-Mann, 1994, pp. 154–5): “A quantum event may become fully correlated with something in the quasiclassical domain. That is what happens in the sensible part of the cat story, where such an event becomes correlated with the fate of the animal. A simpler and less fanciful example would be a radioactive nucleus that occurs as an impurity in a mica crystal and decays, say, into just two electrically charged fragments moving in opposite directions. The direction of motion of one fragment is completely undetermined until the decay occurs, but then it correlates perfectly with a track left in the mica... Such a track, at ordinary temperatures, lasts for tens of thousands of years or more...

But a complex adaptive system [e.g. a human being] observing the track... [includes] the observation in the data stream that gives rise to the evolution of its schemata. The subsequent behavior of the system can then reflect its observation of the particular track direction.

That is, the difference between a human measuring situation and the measuring implicit in the track in the mica is that the former is non-linear. The track in the mica has little impact on the future behaviour of the field, whereas the observation by a human involves the system in the powerful planned activities of human selves, mediated by higher-level emergent possibilities of intention, fantasy, communication, collaboration, tool-use, etc. Once again, the philosophy is of new levels emergent from non-linear processes which then have the capacity to affect all the lower levels, as well as being dependent on and affected by them. At this level, “people”, “knowing”, “alive”, “apparatus” and “cat” have a significance, and

it appears as if the knowing person using the apparatus is an external observer to the aliveness or otherwise of the cat.

Randomness and order in intersubjectivity

In my discussions of evolution and early neural development, I emphasised the way in which randomness moulded by feedback produces order. Random genetic variation in a competitive evolutionary environment produces the variety of life of which we are a part. Random neural connections plus the feedback loops in the caring environment produces a brain predisposing to a particular character that fits that environment.

I have not so far spoken about randomness and order in the third “building block”, that of intersubjectivity. I will write about this now, since it fits most immediately into the discussion of the significance of the theory for psychotherapy. And I want to start with dancing.

I prepare to dance with an unfamiliar partner. We stand close to each other. The music starts, and we both respond to the rhythm with our bodies (in a way that it seems is unique to human beings). We do not discuss how we are going to dance, and this is not a dance where the steps are preordained. The “seed” for what actually happens is a random beginning movement by one or both of us, meaningless of itself, but acquiring meaning as it reverberates round our intersubjective sharing. One movement leads to more movement, and so back and forth. We touch or don’t touch, find complementary foot movements that mostly do not leave us standing on each other’s toes, spin each other round, change places, signal sexual suggestion or wariness (or both!), and build up a complex structure of interaction without a word being spoken.

The seed movement is not particularly significant in what happens next. I may always put my hand out or step forward with my right foot at the beginning of a dance, but why I do that is relatively unimportant. When I do my usual movement in the new situation, the feedback and responsive movement will be different, leading to a new dance. There is more significance in whether I am open to responding to the new response rather than whether the first step is spontaneous. The analogy would be jazz improvisation, where the musicians start with a set tune, but use that as a jumping-off point for improvisations that are of the moment. This observation has immedi-

ate implications for psychotherapy. It is a psychotherapeutic truism that people often make relationships with people who share characteristics with a parent: "I married my mother!" But from this perspective that question has much less significance than the question of whether I will allow my partner, in the dance or in life, to show me different moves, or whether I will try to insist that she becomes more like my mother, or refuse to see the differences between them.

3.4 *Case Example*

Harry complains that his wife Julie bullies him. As we sit together, I have little sense of Harry's movement: he seems to be waiting for me to do something. He has earlier described his mother as a very powerful and dominating woman both towards him and towards his father. It is very tempting to say that he has married someone strongly resembling his mother.

In peer supervision, it turns out that a colleague has been seeing Julie. She describes Julie as lively, energetic and determined, but complaining of a husband who leaves all decisions to her, and then acts as if she is the bully "But honestly, what am I supposed to do if we need to decide a new colour scheme, and Harry won't make a decision?" She doesn't wait for an answer from my colleague. She has described her father as an amiable but indecisive man, leaving his mother to run the home and bring up the family. And Julie has married someone similar to her father.

But let us look further than this. For there are many ways in which Harry and Julie are also going to be very different from their parents. Apart from any other differences, they are engaged in a very different relationship to the parent-child one. Neither of them would say that it is the responsibility of the other to bring them up, and the sexual games they play are very different from those of a parent and child. So it is not the familiarity of the first move that is significant, but the dance steps they develop after this in the new dance they perform with each other. And they both want to explore what they are doing to find a more fully loving way to engage.

So what is the present significance of the relationship they seem to be forming with each other? The common theme is of an absence of direct meeting between two people who are fully empowering them-

selves. The Gestalt couples therapist Bob Resnick (personal communication) talks about this as a “two power system”, in contrast to a “one power system” where only one person in the relationship can be powerful at any one time. There would be a sense of the danger involved in a full meeting. As will often be the case in such circumstances, the work involved for me and my colleague would be quite similar: to find a place for ourselves in the therapeutic relationship other than the one assigned to us. For me the place assigned would be as the one who takes responsibility. Often a good beginning is:

P: I see you sitting here very still, and my sense is that you are waiting for me to do something. I need to tell you that I don't know what to do at this moment. I don't know how that is for you.

H: I feel confused. I thought you could help me.

P: It sounds as if I am not coming up to your expectations. Can you say more about this?

H: If we're both helpless, I'm in big trouble. Things can't stay as they are, and I don't know what to do about it.

P: So your image of the way forward is for me or someone to tell you a right answer that will make things better for you. If nobody has an answer, you have to stay where you are. But what I'm curious about is the very opposite: what if you and me both have answers?

H: I feel confused. How can we both have answers? I assume you mean different answers.

In this extract, the process is already in evidence in Harry's “I'm in big trouble.” On the level of me being someone he wants help from who is not “coming up with the goods”, on the face of it he could be critical and angry with me. Yet it is he that faces trouble on his own. He has no sense of “we are in this together” or “we have a problem”. If one is right, one must be wrong, and there is no possibility of support and contact.

And what of Julie? With her therapist, she attempts to put herself “in the right”, and the image of “one right, one wrong” and no possibility of mutuality, dialogue or equal conflict can arise. And again, Julie has to face the trouble on her own. The therapist is allowed

no clear way to engage with her or to support her. As Friedlaender (1918) pointed out, and as the Chinese Taoists knew 2,000 years ago, the two poles share at least as much as they differ. What looks on the behavioural level like an incompatible relationship, engaged in only because it reminds each person of a parental figure, is on a relational level a much more understandable and mutual event: the avoidance of full and equal intimacy. And so it ends up the task of the therapist to offer possibilities for such intimacy and explore the fears that emerge behind the avoidance.

In the next chapter, we will explore further the two levels of self as field event and self as structure.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chaos, Process and Structure

4.1 Theory

From time to time, Light and Darkness met one another in the kingdom of Primal Chaos, who made them welcome. Light and Darkness wanted to repay his kindness and said "All men have seven openings with which they see, hear, eat, and breathe, but Primal Chaos has none. Let us try to give him some." So every day they bored one hole, and on the seventh day, Primal Chaos died. (Chuang Tsu, 1974, p. 161)

The theme of this chapter is the progressive emergence of order from disorder, predictability from unpredictability, things from processes, continuity from fluidity. We will look at what grounds we have for our intuition of the continuity of selfhood and anxiety as an acknowledgement of discontinuity and unpredictability. We will look at the central "solid-me", the human body. We will look at ways in which the therapeutic relationship becomes similar to earlier significant relationships, otherwise called transference.

Another three levels

Analogous to, and participating in, the three boundaries of selfhood, I am again proposing three levels of the ontological field of which human beings are aspects: *chaos*, *process* and *structure*. These three boundaries progressively firm up the world into one where self can be meaningful. If it seems strange that I go to such cosmological lengths in the quest for self and an understanding of psychotherapy, my contention is that it is only through this kind of contextualisation that we can get a sense of how randomness and order, predictability and unpredictability and choice and determinism can coexist and even support each other. I contend that an awareness of this context can help orient both an understanding of the nature of selfhood and the possibilities of psychotherapy.

Level 1: Chaos

As the Chuang Tsu quote (written around the fourth century BCE) asserts, the emergence of order does not replace the primal disorder, which needs to continue as the substratum driving the emergent order. We saw a much less universal example of this in the last chapter, where the condition for evolutionary change is the continuation of random genetic variation, and any attempt to make it less random (boring the holes in Chaos!) damages the creation of an order suited to the changeable world.

At the chaos level, there is no time or space, there are no things. It is not just that there are no scientific laws, but that there is no structure to which these laws can adhere. Nothing *exists* or stands out of the whole. Scientific laws are based on the ability to predict events, and that involves the orderliness of time and events. There is nothing predictable, but equally unpredictability has no meaning, because again there is an implicit "arrow of time" in denying that some B will follow some A. There is similarly no disorder understood as any kind of comparison with order: entropy has no meaning at this level. In a sense, this way of looking at things makes the transition to the next level (the Big Bang, or whatever) less of a leap from nothing to something. Whatever nothingness was before still remains while the order emergent from it runs its course. Taking the analogy to evolution, random variation has no direction or order, and is not essentially affected by the evolutionary events that depend on it (though

those events will affect the baseline genetic codes from which the random variations fan out). At this level also, there are of course no people, there is no consciousness or choicefulness. And again, the orderliness implicit in choosing is absent at this level. The message of chaos to the self is that the moment needs attending to, without any necessity that this moment has a connection to the last, and without a sense of a flow of time. From our perspective, this can be a message both of hope and confusion. The hope is that the frustrations of the past can be transcended in the present, as the randomness of the moment provides the nudge that moves self to a different part of its attractor. The confusion is a necessary adjunct to this transcendence, and also contains a message of hope: the possibility of moving beyond the dismal certainties of self-defeating behaviour.

This is analogous to our first self-boundary in several ways. At the organism/environment boundary, there is no self, no choosing, no time-structuring. There is just the functioning of the sensitive boundary. This is the boundary that can deal with the chaos, allowing the emergence of an organisation of experience that is not the same as the organisation before that moment. And by virtue of this substratum there is the possibility of experience and the potential for selfhood. Behind the development of experience into contact, this “ground of being” continues. At this level, there will be no sense of an organised body or any clarity as to what extent the experience is a sensory perception or a proprioception.

This is a very important aspect of the philosophy underlying the approach. The very images of “personal development” and “growth” evoke a sense of continuity and ongoing evolution. But, just as with evolution itself, the continuity builds on a basic randomness to create Prigogine’s dissipative structures, areas of continuity. The next moment has no necessary connection to the previous one, and sometimes, again as with both evolution and Kuhn’s “normal science” (which I discuss below), a line of orderly development leads to its own collapse and re-formation.

Level 2: Process

At the process level, there is the new fact of ordering, which underlies our perception of space and time. There is differentiation, so that it is meaningful to say that the process here and now is other than

the process there or then. There are interactions and regularities, sometimes causes and effects. It is this level that allows events and relationships.

However, at this level there is nothing “solid”, nothing beyond the process in the moment. Yet there is the prototype of time in that one moment points to the next moment. There is a relationship between the moments, but there is nowhere outside that sequence of moments where that relationship can be discerned. In the same way, the ego boundary allows for a self/other process of the moment but no sense of any continuity of selfhood. And yet, once again the process is wider than the moment: it is going somewhere, even if at this level there is no place to register that going-somewhere.

The language I use for this mix of for-the-moment and direction is the mathematical language of *vectors*. An example of a vector is velocity, which at any moment has a numerical value (the speed) and a direction, even if, at the next moment, that direction changes. The vector does not commit the system to any particular next moment, but approaches that next moment from a particular direction.

The sense of body will have become much more organised and owned or identified with the forming self. Movement is spontaneous rather than planned. It is a vector: going in some direction but without any commitment to where it will go in the next moment. Again, the self/other process differs from the process level of the field in that the direction of self is geared to an otherness that has considerable continuity over time, even if the way self approaches other can change spontaneously. A way of seeing this is that the three levels of self “lag behind” the corresponding three field levels, and get pulled along. So we get pulled into ego functioning by such field processes as hunger and demanding events, and, as we shall see, we get pulled into personality functioning by relating to the more solid structures of the field.

The message of the process level to self is “you are going somewhere: what you do has significance beyond the moment”.

Level 3: Structure

In the same way as a process theory of self has to be able to account for self-continuity, a process theory of the way things are must account for the solidity of tables and people and the continuity of things. This

is the level at which the directionality of vectors becomes time and space and process becomes matter. The world we live in becomes more than a process of which we are part, but is differentiated out enough that the idea of a person as separate from the world, living “in” it, is meaningful. However, we also know that this solidity is a matter of perception. If we look closer, it is always possible to observe the underlying processes on a molecular or subatomic level, the action of DNA, the human body’s interactions with environment, whether it is air, food, light, or heat. This is not, in this perspective, to say that solidity is an illusion, but rather that the meaning of solidity involves our interaction with the object. I can see the table (but not through it), it resists my hand, I can saw it into pieces of wood. Once more, behind the image of solidity as a property of the object, it becomes clear that it is a property of relationship: with hand, eye and saw.

In the same way, we have been looking at the processes behind the level of ongoing self, and also the relationships that make for our sense of the solidity of self. This does not make self an illusion, but points to the relational nature of the “thingness” of self in the same way as it does for the “thingness” of the table.

The Gestaltist Gary Yontef spoke well to the image I am presenting: “Structures are slowly changing processes that organize other processes” (Yontef, 1992, p. 107). So if we took a film of a table covering 200 years and speeded it up to span 15 minutes, we can see the changes that occur in relation to its environment: scuffing, scratching, colour changes, leg falling off, nails rusting. If there is a fire nearby, it will burn. If we go far enough back it will be a tree, a seed, or stardust! We could then see the slowly changing process, and yet the table is able to organise other processes: hold a shape, carry plates, provide resistance to my hands, and be visible. And further, we can see that even that word “slowly” is only meaningful in relation to the other processes that are being organised: the seeing and touching, the organisation of the molecular boundary with the plates which take place in a much faster time-frame.

The message of this boundary is that we live in a world that we can treat as solid, where we can make meaning, and where we can have solidity and continuity. This emergent solidity in the field also allows for organism/environment boundaries where the self/other process can begin.

Then when we are at the personality stage of knowable, coherent self, we are most vulnerable to the random twists of the field that moves us outside the familiar. The Chaos is never far away, and we create many structures to hold it at bay: culture, habit, rules, commitments and fantasies that impose an orderliness onto the world. We have to do this explicitly since human beings are not tied to set instinctual responses in the same way as other animals, so we are once again in the dialectic between spontaneity and autonomy that I wrote about before. So we have come round in a circle, with the first (Chaos) field level pulling us away from personality to id.

This three-level understanding of the world is similar to Thomas Kuhn's (1970) theory of science. For Kuhn, there is no "objective knowledge" that will describe and predict the fullness of the world (level 1) and unify all science. However, there will be areas of experience where regular processes are observed (level 2) and people want to explain and describe them scientifically. For any such area of science, there are potentially many theories which will cover the evidence, but one will eventually become accepted as true and providing a sense of meaning to the processes underlying the world, which has sufficient structure that this understanding is widely useable (level 3). This understanding would not just apply to the concepts that are meaningful, but to the acceptable methods of experiment and ways to use results. In this period of "normal science", anyone proposing a different theory, or putting forward results that do not fit the theory, would be seen as wrong. However, paradoxically, working in this normal "paradigm" and exploring all the implications of the theory will inexorably lead to discovery of areas where the theory does not work. Even now, the theory is not summarily abandoned: too much understanding and meaning is based on it. Attempts will be made to shore up the theory or question the accuracy of results. It is only if that is not possible that eventually science reaches the stage of "scientific revolution" where a new paradigm emerges leading to a new normal science. In this way, each stage leads to the next: chaos to process to structure and back to chaos. Kuhn (op. cit.) illustrates this with reference to many revolutions in scientific understanding, and particularly the move from the Newtonian theory of space and time to Relativity.

If we compare this theory with that of Karl Popper (1979), we can see the difference very clearly. For Popper, there is a possibility of

objective knowledge that underlies and unifies all scientific discovery in every field, and that knowledge is progressively knowable. So we make hypotheses and continue to test them, throwing them out if they are falsified, so as to approach ever closer to the objective truth. Of course, viewed from our perspective here, that truth would bind all events deterministically, making choice and will an illusion. There is no wriggle-room for human beings to do anything interesting. Yet Popper requires human beings to do something very interesting: to discern the objective nature of the reality they are part of and to create bold hypotheses that move towards this reality.

4.2 Clinical Applications

I will look at three areas where the theory of the emergence of field and system directly informs the therapy work I do: looking at the distinction between neurosis and psychosis, transference and issues around individual and group therapy.

1. Self as knowable: neurosis and psychosis

Self in this theory is knowable in its relating to a knowable world which can be for us the other. This knowing of self and world only occurs at the third level where the world has structure, and furthermore this structure has to operate in two ways. There must be enough structure that a meaningful approach to the world is possible, and it must also be structured in such a way that we can experience the world as having a form separate from ourselves. However, there must be, as we have seen, enough unknowability from the first level of chaos that the world is interesting to engage with and make meaning out of.

This balance of knowing and unknowing provides a useful way to approach the difference between neurosis and psychosis, and the therapeutic requirements of work with these processes. In neurosis, self is *too* knowable, relating to a world that is seen as and is kept overwhelmingly predictable in specific areas. In these areas, the unknown appears as a danger to be avoided. For example, the world can appear as if people won't like me, and so I don't have to risk intimacy, and can stay in a hostile pattern of relating that became familiar in childhood. The purpose of therapy is to support and chal-

lenge the client to risk the chaos and the unknown. This is where the therapeutic relationship emphasises experimenting with the spontaneity of the here-and-now, the therapist as much as the client taking the risk of creative engagement, and thus demonstrating that it can be a safe possibility.

In psychosis, self is unknowable in one of two ways. Either I find the world too chaotic for me to be able to make any sense of and to meaningfully relate to, or for some reason I am not able or willing to move from the first self boundary to the second and thus to assert a meaningful self and other. Both of these forms can emerge from particular stressful environments (and can be, for example, induced by interrogators) or from neurological problems or drug use in the individual, and usually involve some elements of both. The feedback loops which allow the emergence of the complex levels of self and other are not able to develop. There is no possibility of assimilation of personality functioning.

In the first instance, the psychotic person is unable to actualize a coherent self that engages with the world and appears randomly chaotic or immobile and unable to find a basis on which to act. The therapy would consist of providing a much simplified world for the person to inhabit for a period, with opportunities for simple engagement with a non-demanding other. Medication can also help this simplification. You could see this therapy as providing feedback loops which allow the creation of a new emergent order. Gendlin (1981) writes of work involving standing beside psychotic patients for long periods. Erickson (1980) wrote of getting a stenographer to write down a patient's utterances, which Erickson then analyses so that he could compose sentences in a similar form to give back to the patient.

In the second case, the psychotic person will get a sense that they magically control everything in the world (self invading other) or that the world is producing their images and subvocal speech, and they hear voices or see images, which are actually part of their activity; as coming from outside themselves in a way that they alienate and feel in no control of (other invading self). In this kind of psychosis, the primary therapeutic task is to enact a boundary that encapsulates both separation and joining, to the extent that the client is capable of this (again possibly assisted by medication). The trap would be to try to argue the client out of his perspective, an approach that cannot

support him to experience himself as a valid other. A stance I have usefully taken is to say to the client: "We have a problem here: if you are sure the voices are coming from the walls, you need to know that I am not any good with walls. If you can entertain the possibility that what you hear coming from walls is actually coming from you, then it gives me a possibility of working where I can work. If not, the only way to go will be through psychiatry." Analysing this, I start on the level of "we", accepting the overall situation, emphasising the joining and not imposing an I and a you that is problematic for the client. I then bring in a separation based on a statement of "I" rather than "you". I am not attacking the competence of the client, but stating the limitations of my own competence. I am also stating my own ongoing personality in describing myself. This would hopefully be easier for the client to accept.

Another similar response that I have used is "We need to face the situation that the world you see and the world I see are different. You hear angry voices in the room telling you how terrible you are; I don't hear them. You are responding to your world, I am responding to mine. The question is how we can meet, and that is what I want to experiment with finding a way to do." Once again, I start with "we", and then continue with a differentiated "I" and "you", but with no statement of who is right and who is wrong. Then I move to a statement of what I want to do and describing something of my ongoing personality. Such an approach maximises the possibility of the client being able to respond in some way with what he wants to do.

In any of these situations, my hope is that the client can allow his own being to emerge in the situation and describe his own ongoing personality. The underlying philosophy is helpful, since it makes sense of, and therefore normalises, the seemingly strange manifestations of a person experiencing psychosis. It is not, in this view, that the self has been disturbed, but that there is a disturbance in the complex processes from which self emerges. In either case, the primary result, from which all the other symptoms derive, is a loss of ability to actualize a coherent self to make contact with a coherent other.

2. Transference

What is the meaning and use of "transference" in this approach? Recall that we are treating "self" as a field-relational term, so that what we are exploring in the therapy situation is the moment-by-

moment *co-creation* of therapist and client. This is a very different image of the therapeutic encounter to the analytic one in which transference has its normal meaning: "A patient in psychotherapy tends to transfer into his relationship with the therapist the sometimes intense feelings he experienced at an earlier stage in his life, in his relationship with his mother or father or other important figure" (Davis, 1987, p. 781). So the classical theory presupposes a possibility of the therapist being a blank screen onto which some other historical relationship can be projected. This cannot be true in this theory.

Furthermore, this is a *phenomenological* approach, so the idea that we can ever fail to transfer our expectations onto our present experience is inconsistent with the approach. Yet neither does our phenomenology support the idea that all is transference, that the world is just what we make of it. The theory always points to a co-creation in a field context: organism and environment, or self and other. The most we can achieve is some degree of "bracketing": having some sense of our own bias, and what this might mean in terms of the "spin" we put on our experience and consequent ways in which we limit our being in the world.

One of the problems with the whole theme of "transference" is the assumption that it's a replay of childhood in some sense. Rather than exploring phenomenologically the meaning of this desire or emotion *now* as part of the process between the therapist and the client, it is seen in analytic psychotherapy as a provider of information on the past, to be interpreted and understood. In some forms of post-analytic psychotherapy, the transference is seen as a regression to childhood behaviour, to be re-enacted with the therapist explicitly taking a parental role to provide a corrective developmental experience to the client's "inner child". In either case, the emotions and behaviour assumed to be "childlike" are love, hate, fear, dependency, or desire for nurturing; but I would not see these as being inappropriate adult responses.

Thus, rather than bracketing assumptions, and looking for what is particular in this moment, the whole process is looked at through a fixed lens based on the past. The therapist acts (and encourages the client to act) as though this lens is the present reality, and as though the client's phenomenology cannot belong to the present. Then clients will often become confluent with this sense of themselves as

“regressed” children. This can be a way of mutually understanding psychotherapy, but it is very different from the paradoxical theory of change in Gestalt therapy, where what the client brings in relation to the therapist is accepted and explored in aware relation to what the therapist is bringing to the relationship, so that it can be fully owned by the client as her own choiceful activity. The chronic inhibitions can be relaxed precisely because the person is now not in the childhood situation, the therapist is not the parent, and thus the emergency is safe.

Thirdly, there are presuppositions about the nature of memory, childhood and developmental theory concealed in the word “transference” which are quite different from our present-centred emphasis. Developmentally, the theoretical groundwork was in the classical theories of Mahler (Mahler et al., 1975), where child development was understood to proceed in completed stages, with a developmental arrest if a stage is not able to be completed satisfactorily. The meaning of “transference” was caught up in the idea of “regression”, conceived as a wholesale return to a historically previous way of being. The more recent work of Stern (1985) has questioned the empirical and theoretical basis for this approach, and the whole idea of “regression” as a return to a past state has been questioned in the Gestalt world (Staemmler, 1997b and Philippon, 1993). In PHG we read “...it is not by inertia but by function that a form persists, and it is not by lapse of time but by lack of function that a form is forgotten” (p. 70) and “For the purposes of therapy, however, only the present structure of sensation, introspection, behavior is available; and our question must be what role remembering plays in this structure” (p. 69).

Transference and co-creation

If the client experiences the therapist in ways which could be labelled (by client, therapist, or observer) as resembling childhood relationships to significant others, how does this come about? It is often simplistically assumed to be inherent in a relationship where the client is looking for help, or where the therapist is offering help, but this is not true in my experience. The client is equally likely to expect some arcane procedure from the therapist (analogous to what might be expected from a doctor) that will make things better; or to expect to

talk to the therapist and be listened to with little other input. It rather depends what has been shown on television most recently, or how the referring agency has described the therapy. It is true that clients are often ready to pick up therapists' assumptions, but it is unclear to me as a parent that this is a defining aspect of what children do with parents!

If something recognised as transference develops (which I agree it does, in a sense), then it must emerge from something the therapist brings to the encounter. This might be an assumption that transference will emerge, which is then passed to the client. If so, it says something about the therapist, and very little about the client. It might be the therapist's refusal to take the role the client does expect—the understanding I favour—but then there is a need to explain two things: how do the actions of the therapist connect with the client's "transferential" responses, and how is this therapeutic?

The present moment, history and memory

The classical theory of transference assumes that the meaning of the client's response belongs to the past, and thus that the past is accurately reconstructable from such responses. In Stern's (1985) terms, the "clinically reconstructed infant" is synonymous with the actual infant. Stern and many other researchers working with memory make it clear that this is not how memory works. Memory is always a construct based on the person's present state. Nor does recent research, notably by Stern (op. cit.) support the idea of developmental stages as sequential and needing to be completed before the next stage can begin. Rather, there are several "domains of relatedness", which may start sequentially, but which continue as ways of relating and experiencing selfhood throughout a person's life.

Phenomenologically, what is the difference between childhood and the client's present adult state? Is there anything to be gained therapeutically by trying to "recapture" the childhood state? The differences as I understand them are:

1. The child is physiologically not fully developed. This means lack of mobility, physical dependence on carers, brain function (especially in the field of memory and understanding of consequences) not fully developed.

2. The child is smaller and weaker than parents for most of childhood. This is supported by the fact that parents and schools are supported by law in their control of the child. The child cannot just leave home, for example.
3. The child has limited perspective. The way things happen in his/her limited world is how the world is. Even that is only understood in a limited way.

There are also aspects that do not conform to the “regressed” view of the child. Children can feel secure and powerful, relate to other children and adults with pleasure and skill, enjoy experimenting and learning about the world, even if aspects of their lives are difficult. They often look forward to growing up and having more possibilities in their lives, rather than trying to stay little.

Taking all these aspects into account, I do not understand how it can be helpful to encourage a regression to a position which emphasises lack of resources. It is true that clients sometimes go to such a place, usually as part of an avoidance of choicefulness (loss of ego function), as described above. The experience of being with a therapist who is being encouraged to act in the complementary parental way will then seem familiar and intense, but the meaning will be very different from the analogous experience in childhood (even if this was an accurate depiction of the client’s own childhood), where this could have been an experience of an inescapable reality.

Defensive and expressive transference

That is, much of what is called transference is an enactment of a fixed gestalt of smallness and powerlessness, a projection of the largeness and power onto the therapist, and an avoidance of facing the reality of present freedom and choice. We could call this “*defensive transference*”. The therapist’s countertransference is either a confluence with the client’s fixed position, or something of the therapist’s own process (a wish for a powerful position, for example): and these two are not mutually exclusive. Unless there is an underlying theory of the need to complete developmental stages, there is no possible therapeutic reason for the therapist to encourage the development of such a state.

The other aspect of the transference experience is the re-owning in the relationship with the therapist of intense emotions of love, hate,

fear, shame, rage and sexual arousal, long denied as overwhelmingly dangerous, either to the client or to those around him. We could call this "*expressive transference*". The therapist's countertransference here could be fear and withdrawal, or a wish to exploit the client's experience by, for example, engaging in inappropriate sexual activity (sometimes in the guise of physical nurturing).

For example, let us take the situation of a man, severely beaten in childhood for the slightest infraction of parents' wishes. The immediate organismic responses to the beatings were fear and rage, which the boy did not dare to express. I have described the consequences of this in my paper on shame (Philippson, 2004, p. 87):

An energetic, emotional expression of a vital boundary function [disgust] does not merely disappear, however: it is retroflected. To be more precise, the boundary identifications and alienations of the ego are altered, so that the child identifies with the force-feeder and alienates her/his disgust response as an "other", whose disgust is then aimed at the "self" that is the source of the poisoned food.

In this way, the boy retroflects his outward aggression, regards the world as too dangerous to look at directly, and himself as both weak and the object of his own retroflected aggression. He projects this aggression onto other significant figures, who are seen as dangerously hostile towards him, once more justifying his avoidance of contact. Thus he never has to face the fear of risking his outward aggression, but at the cost of a greatly diminished capacity for spontaneous existence.

This makes very clear what the "defensive transference" of this boy-become-man would be with a therapist: "I am weak and he is powerful, and will hurt or reject me if I show myself." If the man is supported to risk moving beyond this avoidance, this will be replaced by the "*expressive transference*": the fear and rage appropriate to the full expression of the unfinished situation, expressed to the therapist, who "according to his own self-awareness, declines to be bored, intimidated, cajoled, etc.; he meets anger with explanation of the misunderstanding, or sometimes apology, or even with anger, according to the truth of the situation" (PHG:25).

Transference in therapy

The therapist must face the defensive transference enactment in full understanding that this is a present action in support of a fixed gestalt, avoiding the risk and anxiety of choicefulness. The therapist needs to avoid becoming confluent with the client's wish for a parent. At the same time, the therapist must be aware that the client can only move beyond this by facing a high, and seemingly overwhelming, level of anxiety. It is like imagining there is an intruder in a room: the only way to remove that fear is to turn on the light and check—but this is frightening because the intruder might actually be there and attack you. What the therapist provides at this point is the support that the client is not alone.

In terms of our example client, the experiment towards moving out of the defensive transference might be to look the therapist in the eyes, to sit more upright, to say an uncomfortable truth, to show an interest in some aspect of the room, to breathe more fully etc. If there is no increase in anxiety or agitation, the situation is still in some way avoiding the real issue.

The expressive transference needs to be met by the therapist as a present moment experience: with acceptance and presence, neither exploiting it nor pulling away from it. For this client, the transference is likely to be rage, fear of rejection, fear of exercising his own power and becoming like father, or of killing the therapist. It is very tempting, but not very useful for the therapist to avoid facing this by exploring the defensive transference rather than encouraging the client to move beyond it to such an expression.

While it is easier for a client to mourn and mature from a "good enough" parenting experience, the need to be able to move on and become adult is common to all. For example, a child who has been sexually abused by father needs to reclaim her own sexuality from him and apply it to the adult situation—and so does every maturing adolescent. It is in this case more anxiety-producing and needs more support, but the process is not inherently different.

3. Individual and group therapy

The significance of groups as an important way of working thus becomes clearer, precisely because it discourages the viewing of the therapy horizon as limited as childhood. The other group members

can be a support in challenging the therapist, and a support for the therapist in facing the client's rage and disgust. The client can see other group members denying their power in ways which they cannot see in themselves. Kindly feedback from group members is often more easily believed than the same feedback from the therapist, who can be dismissed as saying what she thinks the client will like. The power of an individual therapy to encourage a "childlike" transference is a potential problem to be avoided by the therapist rather than an advantage. (Even in its own terms, there is a contradiction: is an only child generally more psychologically healthy than one with siblings?)

Looking at self in a field-relational way has significant implications for how we view group psychotherapy.

Most importantly for this chapter, it questions the conventional wisdom that individual therapy "goes deeper" than group therapy. This idea is based on an understanding of the therapeutic process as an elucidation of a self that is inherent in the person, so that the presence of other people can be seen as a distraction. In our approach here, self is seen as an ongoing assimilation of experience which is continually challenged—to the extent that we allow it—by our participation in what Stern (2004) calls the "intersubjective matrix" of our being with other people.

In everyday life, we are adept at signalling what kind of interactions we are open to and what we will not engage in, and at eliciting from others the kind of behaviour that we find most familiar. Much of our cultural way of communicating, such as systems of politeness and modes of interchange, is meant to facilitate this. Even before culture, we are, as Stern points out, neurologically equipped to "read others' minds" through a system of "mirror neurons" (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). In a therapy group, cultural norms are challenged by both the therapist and the situation. Thus the invitations and prohibitions, and the fixities and anxieties underlying them, become visible and can be explored. Each group member is faced, both explicitly and implicitly through the mirror neuron interactions, with a variety of different ways of seeing and engaging with the world, and with a slow, aware discovery of his own response to this variety. As Perls said in his 1967 address to the American Psychological Association:

Now, in the group situation something happens that is not possible in the private interview. To the whole group it is obvious that the person in distress does not see the obvious, does not see the way out of the impasse, and does not see (for instance) that most of his misery is a purely imagined one. In the face of this collective conviction of the group, he cannot use his usual phobic way of disowning the therapist when he cannot manipulate him. Somehow, trust in the group seems to be greater than trust in the therapist—in spite of all so-called transference confidence. (In Stevens [Ed.], 1975, pp. 13–14)

It is the task of the therapist to keep the level of group awareness high enough to allow for this clear-sightedness to develop, and not be concealed by the social niceties and interlocking defensive pairings.

Grounding the group in the Gestalt theory of relational self or Stern's intersubjective matrix highlights an important tenet of the Manchester Gestalt Centre model of group psychotherapy: that the three areas of group therapeutic focus—individual, interpersonal and whole-group—are not separable, but rather that each elucidates the other. What the individual does is done in the matrix of the group situation; and the group can pick up and amplify what is importantly unfinished for one of its members. Therefore, any exploration would typically involve a continual movement between these levels, rather than staying with one group member, or conversely with the whole group.

In fact, I would argue that all individual therapy can be seen as group therapy. The individual client is present as a self in relation to the therapist, as we have discussed before, but also out of a matrix of upbringing, family and current circumstances. All of these are background for the experiences and actions of the individual the therapist sees. The prognosis for change in the individual will be strongly affected by the ability of her current environment to tolerate change. Some environments will welcome the change, and feel able to grow alongside the new possibilities for the individual. Other environments will work hard to re-induct the individual back into a familiar way of relating, and reject her if she will not do this. Such an outcome can occur both in isolated dysfunctional families, and also in environments based on cultures and religions which are strongly

prescriptive of how individuals are permitted to behave. In each of these situations, the field of the individual includes the environment of the family: in the first instance through patterns of isolation, in the second instance through patterns of compliance.

Furthermore, we can join the systemic family therapists (see for example Palazzoli et al., 1978) in seeing the patient who comes to therapy as acting on behalf of the whole family system. For example, Palazzoli et al. (op. cit., p. 26) understand the emotional expression of each member of a family to be part of a pattern involving the whole family. Rather than describing what emotion an individual family member *feels*, they describe what the individuals *show* and how they respond to the showing. For example (Palazzoli, op. cit., p. 28):

The father, Mr Franchi, shows, during the session, a veiled erotic interest in the designated patient, who, for her part, shows hostility and scorn toward him. Mrs Franchi shows an intense jealousy toward husband and daughter, while she shows a strong affection toward her other daughter, who, in turn, shows no sign of reciprocating this affection.

Compare this with the assumption, common in individual therapy settings, that the client's emotional expression gives objective information about her response to the situation she is talking about, the situation and the response being seen as quite separable.

The three boundaries in a group

Each of the three self-boundaries is significant in a group setting, in the same way as it would in an individual therapy.

The first boundary (organism-environment): for example, someone speaks in the group. The words, as we have been seeing, while spoken by one person, emerge from a matrix that is larger than that one person, but from that person as actualized in that intersubjective matrix. This is heard by everyone in the group, but the ways people hear it are once again functions of something wider than the individual hearers. A field event has occurred: it has no significance at this stage for the interplay of self and other. It is easy to miss this (often short) period, and to see the event as a series of separate stimulus-response arcs between separate people, with each utterance and

emotion “owned” solely by the person who expresses it. The experience of the systemic family therapists I described above shows what can be lost by this individualisation of events.

The second boundary (self-other): continuing the example of the group, different people will “firm up” the vague experience of someone talking in different ways. Some will become interested: in the content or feeling, or because of their sense of connection to the speaker. They will turn their heads, adjust their breathing, focus their eyes, they may walk towards the other person. Some will stay with their previous figures, not making the speaking figural. Yet others may focus on the talking as an annoying interruption. As they each make their own kind of contact with the otherness, they experience themselves in different ways.

The third (personality) boundary: in a group, these different ways of relating to others show themselves very clearly. If a group member is supporting new and creative possibilities by her contact, people will have a sense of energy and liveliness in their relating to her. If a group member is avoiding contact, the relationship will be experienced as de-energised, disconnected and limiting. People can explore both how they habitually know themselves, and also the implications for how others know them and respond to them.

The Gestalt “Empty Chair”: a reassessment

One of the most famous images of Gestalt Therapy is the “empty chair”, where a client visualises another character, often a parent, in that chair and speaks to him or her. The client then switches chairs and speaks as the other person before returning to his own chair. Often strong emotion can be expressed in these fantasy dialogues.

I have often observed these dialogues being used in the form of behaviour modification: practicing new ways to approach the other person, usually suggested by the therapist, and then switching chairs to try out how the client imagines the other person would respond.

I would understand the technique from a very different standpoint. The other person whom they perceive relating to them is emergent from the same intersubjective matrix as my client as she describes herself as relating *to* that other. Each person’s behaviour and experiencing is inseparably intertwined with the behaviour and experience of the other. Thus it is in the *reowning* of the self-possibilities which

have been identified with the other person that new outcomes are possible for both. The more significant chair for this understanding of the “empty chair” technique is the “other” chair: this contains the unfamiliar polarities—often of aggression, ability to stand firm, willingness not to tolerate the other’s actions.

4.3 *Philosophy*

*If everything returns to the One, to what does the One return?
What was your original face before your mother was born? Zen
koans*

For the philosophy of this section, I go to the teachings of Zen Buddhism. Zen, uniquely among Buddhist schools, holds out the possibility of *satori*, a direct experiencing of the nature of things. Students of Zen, including my late Aikido *sensei* Marion Mucha, train with a *roshi* or Master, who sets them to focus intensely on breath or on seemingly meaningless questions such as the above. Everything they do is done with the same focus: walking, sitting, cooking, eating and working. The aim is to cut loose all false associations and experience the world in a true way. But what is that true way? The answer is a startling parallel to the approach I take in this book.

Roshi Philip Kapleau writes: “...all phenomena are transformations of Buddha- or Dharma-nature... What is the substance of this Buddha- or Dharma-nature? In Buddhism it is called *ku* [*shunyata*]. Now *ku* is not mere emptiness. It is that which is living, dynamic, devoid of mass, unfixed, beyond individuality or personality—the matrix of all phenomena. Here we have the fundamental principle or doctrine or philosophy of Buddhism” (Kapleau, 1989, p. 79).

Now this seems to me very much what I am pointing to. Before there was anything, and continuing to underlie everything, there is a nothingness that is not empty, but energetic, chaotic and anarchic. All the events we experience are transformations of this “matrix”. And so we can appreciate the sheer aliveness of the universe, not as something that dwarfs us, but as an aliveness that we participate in and emerge from.

Just like Husserl’s reductions, the aim of Zen training is to put aside temporarily all the conventional understandings, words, reasons

and evaluations that belong to the world of process and structure, and to know directly that there is something fundamental and real left. In the terms of this book, there is an intention to stay at the first boundary. And, parallel to my insistence that this first boundary is not “mine” but an experiencing of the whole field, the knowing that is required in Zen is not a knowing from the outside, but a knowing of the field by the field. So, in one of the famous *koans*, the *roshi* asks a student what he is doing. The student says he is meditating in order to achieve enlightenment. The *roshi* picks up a tile and starts rubbing it. The student asks why he is rubbing the tile, and the *roshi* replies “To make a mirror”. The student is puzzled and says “But you can’t make a mirror by polishing a tile.” The *roshi* replies “And you can’t achieve enlightenment by meditating.

This has sometimes been taken as a denial of meditation, but that is not the meaning of the *koan*: the *roshi* was the one who set the student meditating in the first place! The point is that no amount of polishing or self-improvement of the ego (the second boundary) will make it able to take the form of the id (the first boundary). If I take the position of a fixed ongoing self that then is to achieve something called enlightenment, or to see the universe in some enlightened way from the outside, this denies the very experience that Zen is pointing towards. Truly the student is then trying to polish something to make it something it can’t be. Psychologically, it would lead to a sense of enlightenment as a way to superiority, a narcissistic move towards further separation from the world, even a transcending of the world. The humility and wonder described by those who follow through to the experience of this energetic emptiness is quite the opposite of this.

It is also easy to see how this experience can also be found in the Eastern martial arts, which are often linked to Zen philosophy. I think of my experience of facing an attack, particularly an attack by several people at once. I do not know what is going to happen. If I try to keep myself separate from the attackers and to work out what they are going to do, I will soon find myself caught. The training is to become one with the situation, to flow with it so that my movement cannot be differentiated from the attackers’ movements. The situation, rather than my planning, moves my body. In the rare moments when I completely “get” this, it is an extraordinary experience. The attackers stop being enemies to be fought, but parts of my experience

to be welcomed. I move and I laugh. As Aikido puts it, my energy is aligned with the energy of the whole universe (*ki*), in harmony (*ai*) with the attackers and the physical situation where this happens. If I get caught up in being aware what I am doing, maybe congratulating myself or evaluating my performance, then once again I will be caught because I will have removed myself from the situation.

4.4 Case Example

Dave is a Buddhist, active in a meditation group. He speaks softly and uniformly calmly. He feels high emotion, whether of pleasure or anger, is suspect and incompatible with his spiritual striving. At one level he seems unassuming, yet he gives off a sense of superiority based on his calmness and ability to meditate. Somehow it feels difficult to be high-spirited around him.

Dave has come to therapy because he has had a series of disappointing relationships where he and his girlfriends have drifted apart, often with the girlfriend getting very angry with him before leaving. In the relationship with the therapist, Dave is courteous and attentive to the therapist's words, yet politely clear that he is committed to a way of approaching the world that is quite different to the therapist's, and that this is not negotiable or, for him, problematic. He sits very still and breathes evenly, as if he is in his meditation group. He could alternatively be seen as being in a continuous state of trance, focused inwards rather than to the otherness.

Dave does not experience himself as isolated, having the connection to his meditation group. Yet when difficulties occur in his life, particularly in his intimate relationships, he feels alone with his feelings, as it doesn't seem appropriate to show them to his co-meditators. Dave feels, maybe rightly, that they would see such emotion as a shortcoming in his spiritual development.

The most obvious aspect of the therapeutic co-creation is that Dave is in a real dilemma. He has come to therapy, implicitly saying that there is something going wrong in his life. Yet he will not allow himself to question his core approach to life, nor show the therapist the feelings by which he knows that something is wrong. The therapist is caught in the same dilemma. If the contradiction is pointed out in very clear terms to Dave ("You want to change something,

yet see your life as committed to the way you are going.”) he will probably leave. If the therapist sits silently, Dave will move into meditation.

It is important to see the difference between Dave’s Buddhism and the Zen I was writing about earlier. He has done exactly what the Rinzai Zen masters so strongly warned against: seeking individual purification, looking inwards rather than abolishing the inside/outside distinction in his practice. Rather than aligning with the total situation, he has very little awareness in his trance state of anything beyond his own practice. The idea of the chaotic, lively emptiness as the foundation for the universe including himself is completely alien to him. His world is much quieter and more ordered than that.

Dave’s therapy

The central theme of the therapy between Dave and his therapist Sylvia is an exploration of body process. For Dave, his body is an inconvenient necessity, to be kept in line. By sitting still, he has reduced his sense of embodiment. Yet he misses the physical intimacy with his girlfriends, even though it also rather disgusts him. He doesn’t meet Sylvia’s eyes in any strong way, and avoids seeing her as a woman. This gives Sylvia a therapeutic opportunity, because Dave, who splits mind and body strongly, will not allow himself to be aware of how much a physical exploration can affect him.

S: Would you be willing to look straight at me?

D: [Looks at Sylvia, and immediately inhibits his breathing].

S: Are you willing to look at me and keep breathing?

D: [Looks and breathes for a short time and then looks away quickly]
That’s hard.

S: Can you tell me more about that?

D: I felt a pain in my stomach.

S: Would you be willing to explore that more? Maybe look, look away, look back, keep it manageable. This looks important.

[This is not a compliant client, and there is no problem with suggesting things.]

D: [Does this for a slightly longer time. His eyes redden.] It feels too much. I can't do it. [Sounding annoyed] What is important about it anyway?

S: You sound angry. Tell me about it.

D: I'm not angry. I don't know why we're doing this. It isn't what I'm here for.

S: Dave, my understanding is that you want to explore your difficulties in relationships. We have discovered that you find difficulty in looking at me and breathing at the same time. It is actually painful for you. This must be connected to your difficulties.

D: [Silence, looking at Sylvia, then looking away, then looking back, then his eyes moisten] Yes. I see.

S: And I see you seeing!

In this extract, Dave at first denies the significance of his experience of looking, and also raises the question "What am I here for?" When his defensive anger is accepted by Sylvia, he feels supported enough to risk accepting both his experiences and closeness to his therapist, leading to a moment of meeting.

It is important to realise that this example, like all the others in this book, is not a "textbook" suggestion about how to work with a client, but is something that has grown out of the moment. With a different client, or even with Dave at another time, he would have gone on arguing, or even walked out of the therapy rather than face his feelings. It is only through the therapist's ability to attune to the present relationship between her and the client that she can reasonably accurately gauge the possibilities of the moment. Notice that I write "attune to the relationship" rather than "attune to the client", which is a more common way to speak of the task of the therapist. This difference is inherent in our basic idea that the client and therapist are not separate people meeting, but that the people that we meet arise in their present being from the meeting. In this case, it means that the therapist's experience of being with the client provides infor-

mation about the client as he is currently self-actualizing, and that the client is affected by the self-actualization of the therapist. It is therefore a moment of mutuality that allows for the change in their relating, not some openness of the client alone. The fact that such moments occur regularly in therapy, and of course in other intimate relationships, is good evidence for the inherent relational nature of our being.

In the next chapter, we will look primarily at the more structured end of relating, and in particular at issues to do with choice and will.

Choice and Will

5.1 *Theory*

We have been exploring the three levels of field functioning: chaos, process and structure, how they support each other and emerge from each other. There is no area in which this approach is as fruitful as in understanding of choice and will.

Normally there is a dilemma here for philosophers and psychologists. It appears that one has to go either for an individualist approach, where the emphasis is on “What do you want, and what are you going to do about it?” (an approach that was frequently taken in the name of Gestalt Therapy, although it is incompatible with Gestalt’s central theory of relational self); or one goes with a field theory where the directions people take in life are determined by their situation, and their sense of choosing is illusory.

In the approach we have been looking at, we have a third option, and a very finely balanced one. We have been looking at the emergence of the individual as the organ of choice for the field. So there is an individual making choices, but that individual is not encapsulated in a single isolated body. In this way, and it seems to me only in this way, we can simultaneously have the person as field-relational *and* choiceful.

We have looked at the requirements for choice to have meaning in terms of the dialectic of *predictability* and *unpredictability*. If the universe is entirely predictable, there would be no place for choice. We would do what the laws of the universe made us do. Conversely, if the universe is strongly chaotic and unpredictable, what we do would be unconstrained but meaningless. This is not what we mean by choice either. For choice and will to mean anything like what we intuit it to mean, we need to be able to tap into all three levels. We need the indeterminacy of the first chaos level so that our choices can make a difference in the world. We need the third level (structure) so that we can sense a coherent enough world in which to make meaningful choices. And we need the second (process) level by which we move from the openness of possibility to the observable result of our chosen path in the direction of our needs and interests.

This way of putting it may give the impression of a linear sequence from chaos to structure, but it is not. Our choosing is constrained by structure: we cannot walk through walls, and our actions will be taken in the context of culture that will facilitate some paths and make others difficult or impossible. Conversely, there will be much unpredictability in the outcomes of our choices. We only know where we finally get to by actually taking the path, since the outcome is subject to the same mixture of predictability and unpredictability as our starting point.

Or we can look at choice from the perspective of the three levels of self that engage with these three levels of field. At the first (id) level, all is potential, both myself and the world. There is experience, but initially without coherence, choice, or direction, or even a directing self. In Husserl's language, it is the experiencing of the "transcendent ego". At the second (ego) level, there is the act of identification and alienation, so that I am the one who experiences the other. Now there is a self that can make choices, and identify figures to engage with: "I want this", "this interests me", "this frightens me", "I see you". This is a familiar world to us: it is the everyday world we are aware of, because awareness has no meaning at the first level, any more than we see ourselves blink.

But there is also the third level of self, personality functioning, which is particularly significant for what it means for a human being to make choices. And this is what we will look at now.

Beliefs, values and commitments

When we speak of choice, we do not only mean a choice in that moment. We also make choices that form commitments regarding our future actions and orienting. Such choices become part of our assimilated personality, who we are and would describe ourselves to be. The three interlocking areas of such personality choices are:

Our beliefs: what we believe is true about the world and ourselves in the world. This will for some include religious or spiritual beliefs, but also can include such orienting beliefs as "People are only out for what they can get." or "I'm a lucky person with lots of friends who will help me out if things get difficult." It is easy to see that such beliefs will have a great influence on the moment-by-moment choices people make. They can provide a background colouring of security or insecurity to all we do. Paradoxically, the beliefs that lead to more anxiety and insecurity are less easy to challenge than those leading to more security, since they do not predispose us to trust what the world tells us. If I am reasonably secure and a friend lets me down, I will have enough support from others that I can accurately update my view of that person. However, if I generally do not trust other people and someone is kind, I would be more likely to wonder what the ulterior motive of that person is than to question my world-view. I would also say that with some religious or political viewpoints, while people experience them as supportive, they also contain a background of anxiety, so that their adherents would not risk enquiring too deeply outside their faith in case the ground of their security falls away.

Our values: these are the kind of ways we find acceptable to engage with others, and include our morality and our preferred modes of relating. These may stem from our beliefs, or alternatively we might adopt beliefs that allow us to engage in the way we want. Or our ways of relating to people may even contradict our beliefs (I have come across people who are both more and less caring than their espoused beliefs would suggest). Once again, such values will have a major bearing on our immediate choices.

For some people, these values allow a great deal of freedom to improvise spontaneously in the novelty of the current situation. For others, they are a rigid framework that provides a single "right way" to meet every challenge. Once again, there is a trade-off between spontaneity and autonomy, being unpredictable and unknowable versus being predictable and knowable.

Our commitments: these include our relationships: with friends, loved ones, parents and children. They would also include our place of residence, our work and other activities like hobbies, the culture we relate to, our plans for what we want to do, how we want to do it, the people we will meet on the way and how we want to engage with them. These form the external structures of our lives, once again a background against which we are partially knowable. At their best, they allow us to be secure enough in our world that we can risk more: we can be more honest, more emotional, more contactfully physical and sexual. When these stable and known points of reference are taken away, as is for example the case with refugees, people experience a loss of self-coherence, and a sense of not being part of the world.

With all of these, it is important to be aware that what we actually do might not accord with our plans for the consequences of our commitments! These long-term personality choices are constrained by the same unpredictabilities in the actuality of the present moment as are the more momentary choices. Beliefs fail, situations come up where our values contradict each other, loved ones die unexpectedly, our work environment changes or no longer wants us, we become ill or displaced. Once again, we are born of the union of order and disorder. And so it should be, if we are to keep the non-linearity on which our living and consciousness depend. Our commitments impact on our world, and our world impacts on our commitments. We build a world round us (even if that is a world where we experience ourselves as passive followers of the world's demands) and we learn from experience.

Choice, neurosis and will

*Too late to save us but try to understand
The seas were empty there was hunger in the land
We let the blind man lead the way too long
Easy to see where we went wrong
Nothing to live for
Nothing to die for
We're lost in the middle of a hopeless world
Lost in the middle of a hopeless world.*

Alan Parsons Project: Children of the Moon
(from the album "Eye in the Sky")

Even when therapists speak of the need for “meaning” and “love,” they define love and meaning simply as the fulfilment of the patient’s emotional requirements. It hardly occurs to them...to encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself. (Lasch, 1979, pp. 42–43)

As I discussed in Chapter Four, neurosis is a giving up, or blotting out, of choice in a particular area of our functioning where we have learned not to trust the world, or our ability to act creatively in the world. In the areas of our neuroses, we act, and perceive the world, in a particular fixed way, limit our awareness to those areas that support that way. We could also look at this way of functioning as a source of belief and commitment. It is useful and instructive to look at the differences and similarities of these two “routes” to an ongoing, knowable personality.

If I make a choiceful commitment to a belief or to a relationship, I am opening the way to more contact possibilities: something to live for, or even to die for, as Alan Parson says. With another person in a committed relationship, for example, we are supported to explore and develop that relationship, and to discover new things about each other, and about how we can engage as a couple in the world. As time goes on, and the relationship changes, maybe with children coming along or the physical side becoming less significant overall, we can move into those changes supported by the knowledge of our mutual commitment. In the same way, a commitment to a faith, to moral values, or to a career or a leisure activity can support us to take risks, to practice our commitment even when it is uncomfortable, to intervene in a situation of injustice even if we put ourselves at risk by doing so. In doing this, our lives develop more meaning and we engage in it with more skill.

For people with such an intimate connection to aspects of their environment, the implicit understanding of self is not far away from the understanding I am espousing here. Who they are involves more than just what is inside their skin, and extends to those to whom they have made commitments.

As the Parsons and Lasch quotes above point out though, such commitment is not strongly culturally supported in Western society at this time.

If on the other hand, my commitment is to my own security and to the attitudes and actions that I experience as contributing to this security, my aim is to prevent change, whether in myself or in my environment. The people around me will be secure with me only insofar as my own security is not threatened, otherwise they will need to be sacrificed. Who I am is what is inside my skin, and my attitude to the world is that I want to “save my skin”. I might seem to have a strong, even fundamentalist, faith, but, looked at more closely, I am rather avoiding retribution from a vengeful God or from an intolerant community, or providing for myself a ready-made set of values and actions to perform without having to make my own choices.

Of course, I have put this in a somewhat extreme way, and it is true for all of us that we have areas of each of those ways of functioning. So for example I might be a caring parent, and yet pull back from confrontations with a bullying teacher of my child since I am scared of confrontation. I could back this up with an espoused “value” of encouraging the child to “fight their own battles” or tell the child “You must have done something wrong”. It is useful also to put this in terms of the three boundaries of selfhood: in the areas of neurotic defensiveness, the figures and self-other configurations of the second ego boundary are organised by the fixities of the third personality boundary to the exclusion of (rather than in balance with) the spontaneity of the first id boundary. So in the example I gave above of the parent, the fixity is avoiding confrontation. If this was a *value* that still allowed spontaneity, the parent would also be open to the complexity of the present situation: of a value of acting kindly, of the love for and need to protect the child, of anger towards the teacher, maybe also of ambivalence whether my child was telling me accurately what happened.

This analysis shows very clearly the distinction between *choice* and *will*. In either case, whether my personality is geared towards ongoing commitments that support my deepening contact and my values, or whether it is geared towards protective predictability, I am acting from my will to project my interests onto my environment. In the first instance, I will be able to sustain a choiceful dialogue with that environment, and I will have an interest in its perspective. I will even be open to my own viewpoint being affected by that dialogue. In the second instance, I will not be willing to make a contact in which

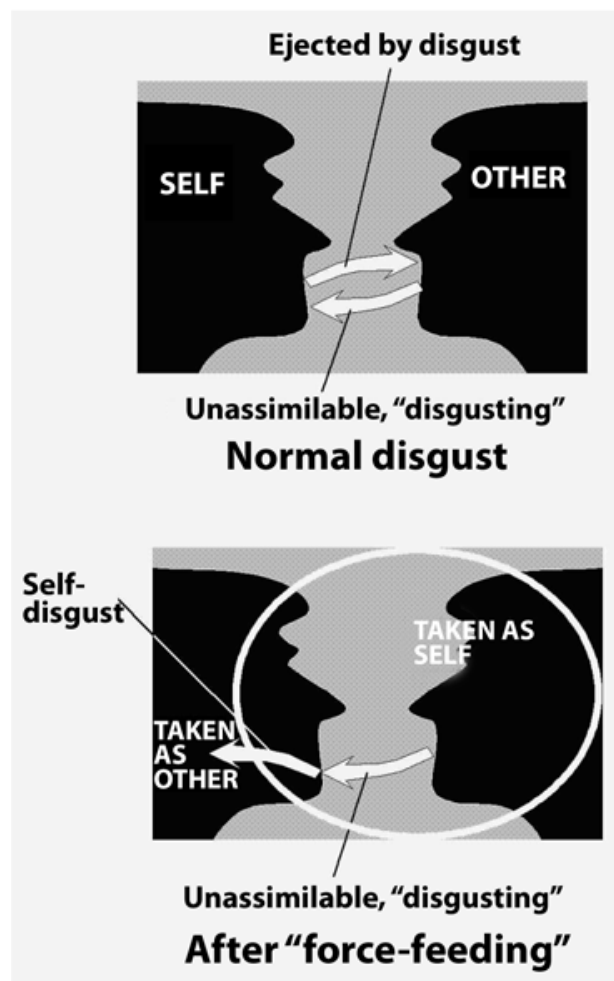
I can be meaningfully affected, and will not be open to dialogue. Even if my fixed point is to agree with other people, that does not mean that I am acting any less wilfully. You will find this out if you try to discover my own viewpoint about any area where I cannot guess your views: I will not be willing to develop any discussion in that area. I will be using my will to restrict my (and others') choices rather than to enhance our possibilities together.

Disgust and shame

From the earliest times, living organisms with the ability to move have been able to recoil instinctively from areas of their environment which are toxic or unpleasant to them. Single cell creatures pull away from nutrient in which acid has been dropped, cats avoid food that smells different from what they like, human beings instinctively screw up their faces if they smell or taste something that they find unpleasant. If they swallow it, they gag, spit it out, or vomit it up. This is *disgust*, and it is a vital part of any species' ability to survive. For we all have to eat, and at the same time we all have to avoid food which will make us ill or kill us.

Human beings take disgust further, since we are beings that assimilate culture and values and develop an aesthetic sense. If we experience something that offends these moral or aesthetic values, we similarly feel disgust, and for a similar reason: part of what sustains us as people is being threatened. Contrary to the pattern in the previous section, the experience at the first id boundary is threatening to overwhelm the third personality boundary. Part of this overwhelm could well be our attraction towards "forbidden pleasures". Either way, our disgust is a strong and energetic emotional affirmation of our being, and away from what we experience as inimical to our being.

However, things do not always go as smoothly as that. Human beings, especially when small and vulnerable as children, can experience it as too dangerous to express their disgust, and can be "force fed", whether that is with food or experiences that taste disgusting to them or with contacts that they find offensive. In order to be able to do this, they have to inhibit their disgust reflex. However, such a powerful reflex cannot be easily inhibited, and something much more complicated has to happen.



In the top picture, what is presented to the self is found “disgusting” and is responded to by rejection. The boundary of self and other (the second boundary in my schema) is intact. In the bottom picture, by contrast, self is split (i.e. the self-other boundary is placed so as to take part of my own functioning as other, and part of another person’s functioning as self), part of the self identifies with the force-feeder, and the disgust is actively and energetically turned against the other split part of self as “self-disgust”, a process called in Gestalt Therapy *retroflection*, the turning back of an impulse against the self rather than engaging it towards other. This retroflection of disgust is what I understand as *shame*.

There are several possible reasons for the retroflection. Sometimes it is through fear of the consequences of standing out against a parent: punishment or abandonment. Sometimes it is through altruism: the child believes that the parent is not capable of dealing with her rebellion, because the parent has presented herself as fragile, and so the child

protects the parent by seeing any individuation as wrong and dangerous to others. Whichever it is, the person experiencing the shame is tied to playing both the rejected, inherently bad or toxic person and the self-righteous forceful rejecting person, mostly towards herself, but sometimes also in attitudes towards the world. Erskine (1995) has also pointed to the strong link between shame and self-righteousness.

This picture shows itself clinically in the posture taken in shame: collapsed in, shallow breathing, head down. These are all movements very similar to those adopted to prevent vomiting. Furthermore, there is often a phobia about vomiting, and, when the client starts turning outwards again, there is often an experience of nausea. Psychologically (not that, to my understanding, one can separate this off from the physical description) the client does not judge others by her own assimilated criteria, but judges herself through the eyes of others. This is very evident in the language of position. For example, "I feel very distant". Now through whose eyes am I distant? Not my own surely: in my own eyes I can only see the other as distant. I see myself as distant only through the eyes of another whom I take as distancing me.

Furthermore, since the identification is usually with a person at another time, usually (but not always) childhood, the process does not allow a client to make full contact with those around her. She is at least partially in the world of the person she identifies with, or in communication with the split-off part-self that is the object of the self-disgust. This means that in therapy the client engaged at this level will usually be in poor sensory contact with her environment including the therapist. I believe that this is the clinical picture that is often referred to as *regression*. Now regression cannot be seen in this approach as a return to an earlier stage of development. The meaning of a child in a child's context doing something and the meaning of an adult doing something that looks similar in an adult's context cannot be the same. Yet we can recapture some of the sense of this by noting that the eyes with which a person in shame identifies, and through which they see themselves in shame, are usually eyes that looked at a child. The "child" self-image in this case is the image of the "self" in the second diagram above, the self identified with the force-feeder against the alienated self-taken-as-other. This way of looking at shame therefore explains the combination of sense of being a child and unavailability in relation to the present context.

Shame and guilt

It is important and useful to differentiate between shame and guilt. *Shame*, as we have seen, is a loss of self to an unassimilable but seemingly unrejectable other. The specific complaints against the self are secondary, more given as reasons to explain the badness of the self than the organisers of the experience. The significance of this for therapy is of course that for the therapist to try to argue with the client to show that a particular action is not as bad as she claims it is will get nowhere, because it is the *badness* that is primary, not the action. In fact, the likelihood is that the action will have been remembered to fit the badness, so the way the client describes the action will differ from the therapist's sense of what happened. The client will see her responsibility in situations in sometimes wildly exaggerated terms, sometimes even magically: "I disobeyed my father and he died the next day—I killed him."

In *guilt*, it is the action that is central. I feel guilt if the action or inaction I have performed offends my values. I might have cheated someone or spoken in what I see as a needlessly hurtful way, or stood by while a friend was attacked. There is nothing inherently problematic about guilt—rather it is problematic if someone will never feel guilt, since that is a strong indicator of a psychopathic personality, somebody who has no sense of what he does to others as being significant beyond his own immediate gratification. He is therefore a danger to others, and completely isolated in himself. Guilt at its best informs us where we need to make amends, to apologise, change our actions in future, give recompense. Where guilt can become problematic is if the values on which it is based are introjected rather than assimilated. That is, where I feel guilty for offending against someone else's demands of me that I at this moment take as my own.

This latter kind of introjected guilt is usually accompanied by resentment. It would be an instance of Fritz Perls' famous "topdog-underdog" split. This theory, I believe, deserves more understanding than it has sometimes received. To put it in context, we need to remember that Perls began his psychotherapy career as a psychoanalyst, receiving training analyses from Horney and Reich among others. Gestalt Therapy began as a revision of psychoanalysis, and essentially all the terms from psychoanalysis are there in an altered form. So Id and Ego are made relational terms, as is Personality (in the

sense used by Reich); therapeutic abstinence becomes Friedlaender's (1918) term "creative indifference", a way of looking at both poles simultaneously rather than allying with any one pole. The "topdog" is of course Freud's "superego". In Freud's tripartite schema, the superego of introjected parental and societal demands conflicts with the Id drives, while the ego acts as an integrator. Perls said that it was more complicated than this. Along with the superego/topdog develops another pole, which he called the "infra-ego" or underdog. This pushes against the demands by a combination of sullenness, empty promises to "do it tomorrow", or unwillingness to listen, etc., just as a child would do. And the primary struggle, in Perls' and my view, is the power struggle between the superego and infra-ego rather than between the superego and the id drives. In fact, as in any power struggle, what is fought over, in this case the person's wants and needs, gets lost as the struggle becomes one that seems as if it is about survival. A great deal of energy is put into this survival struggle, as it seems a safer (because more predictable) fight than the fight with the world to achieve what I want.

Splitting

Another implication of this way of approaching choice, will and shame is to highlight the centrality of *splitting* or *polarisation*. We have seen two versions of this in looking at the retroflection of disgust in shame: the splitting of the self with one aspect turning the disgust towards the other aspect; and the topdog-underdog split. Formally what is happening is that there are two distinct versions of the personality boundary, both fixed rather than fluid, with few if any links between them. We all do this kind of splitting to some extent: in fact it is inherent in a theory of relational selfhood that we will show ourselves differently in different contexts. I am somewhat different as a therapist, as a husband and father, as an aikido teacher and as a member of a committee. Not only do I act differently but I experience myself and others differently as well. However, part of each of these is my knowledge that the other is also available. It is when that knowledge gets removed from these partial personality structures that the difficulties multiply, both for the individual and for her therapist. The polarity that is not identified with tends to be projected onto the world and seen as a possibility to be avoided. For example,

somebody who avoids anger will be likely to be very aware of and want to avoid people who are showing anger.

A major reason for splitting is as an alternative to choosing. I will say more about this in the next chapter, but for now it is important to say that any choice is also a letting go of the choices not made. In fact, we are always letting go of more than we take hold of, for each path taken is, even if we do not let ourselves be aware of the extent of it, a letting go of all the other life-possibilities of that moment. In the same way, each awareness, each making of a figure, is more about filtering out into the background of all the possible competing figures than about the figure attended to. A way to avoid this letting go is to try to hold onto fundamentally incompatible possibilities, and to hold a continuing internal dialogue or struggle rather than let go of something. From this perspective, the way out of a split or polarisation is to make a choice and to let go fully of what is not chosen.

So for example, we get the classical borderline splitting (Masterson, 1981), where the two poles of clinging and rejection lead to quite different evaluations of oneself and of significant others. Furthermore, it is a defining quality of the splitting that the one pole excludes awareness of the other. Neurologically, part of the mechanism is *state-dependent memory learning and behaviour* (SDMLB) (Rossi & Cheek, 1988, 55ff). This is the name given to the finding that memory is not stored in an "objective" way like a tape recording, but is linked to our physical and emotional state at the time. In this way, our memories are coloured by and support the emotional state I am in. If a person's experiences are such that the world shifts suddenly, especially to threat and abuse, those personality states can be equally separate with little point of contact. Gleaves (1996) makes a cogent point that state-dependent memory is at least as good a mechanism as repression to explain forgotten memories of abuse, and has the advantage that it is a well-established fact. A child who is abused will also live in a family, go to school and have her hobbies, and yet be faced with somebody close acting in a way that is painful, frightening and humiliating. There will often be no way for the child to get a sense of a world that links both of these aspects of her reality, and therefore she will form two quite separate state-dependent systems with little or no overlap. We know that in such systems the memories from one state do not carry over into another.

5.2 *Clinical implications*

I now want to look at the implications for therapy of this way of looking at choice, will and shame, and I would like to start doing this by making a comparison with a more behavioural perspective. In such a perspective, the client is also seen to have a diminished sense of possible choices. These are understood to have been learnt and reinforced by repetition of both experience and action. It is then the task of the therapist to reinforce different possibilities by assigning them as exercises to be repeated. The therapist can also work with areas of anxiety or phobias by providing graded exercises into the area of the phobia and progressively reducing the fear attached (I remember talking to a psychiatrist specialising in working with arachnophobia, who gave his children a small amount of money for every spider they caught for him to use in his work). This approach can be very useful and can often change people's lives for the better. So what might this present approach add?

From a relational perspective, the anxieties have a quite different meaning. They are existential acknowledgements that the world is bigger than we are, that it is unpredictable and can hurt us when we least expect it. One of the things that in my experience frighten people about spiders is precisely that quality of unpredictability, the switch from non-movement to fast movement. Yet the response to this unpredictability can also be excitement. What makes the shift between excitement and anxiety is whether I start from a place where I regard myself as part of this unpredictable, sometimes dangerous world, and therefore able to act creatively (which includes the destruction of previous balances!), or whether I see myself only "on the receiving end" of what the world gives me.

Therefore, the critique of behavioural work from a relational perspective is that it tends to leave people in an emotional middle ground, with neither the anxiety nor the excitement by which to be aggressively and even unpredictably creative, to make something new of my world. This is reinforced by the client's relationship with the therapist, who is (at least by implication) seen by both as someone who knows better how to live.

However, I do think there is something else that operates in behaviour therapy, which brings it closer to the relational model, but is not taken into account in discussion of the theory. This is the

fact that the client takes his new behaviours out into the world, and by trying them out finds that he gets a response from others different from what he expects. So he might risk engaging in conflict, or getting closer to people, and is not rejected. The therapy from my perspective happens outside the therapy room, but is supported to happen by the actions of the therapist. However, there is a problem here. It has been shown, and is basic to the various systemic family therapies, that there is a strong likelihood that at least some of the people who surround the client will not act in a welcoming way to him being different. Rather, they will try to apply various pressures to reinduct the client into a more familiar way of acting and thus reintroduce homoeostasis. What is being brought to therapy is a problem for the whole family or wider environment “encoded” in the self of the client. So what the therapist suggests to the client could lead to a separation between him and his family and friends, a breaking of those commitments in our terms, a prospect difficult enough that it is more likely to lead to a rejection of what the therapist is teaching in order to preserve these relationships.

Compare this with the field-relational approach. Now the encouragement is for the client to be able to move between anxiety and excitement, to allow himself to mould the world creatively at the same time as allowing himself to be moulded. The experiments with new possibilities are first conducted with the therapist, and only then taken forward into the wider world. What is more, since the experiments emerge out of the expressed interests of the client, they will often be more finely judged in relation to the client’s home environment, to what is possible and what poses too many dangers of isolation and rejection. This would be particularly true if the strictures against the client changing too much are religious or cultural restrictions, which might lead to drastic or violent responses to him making relationships outside the culture, asserting an expression of sexuality or gender role that is proscribed, etc.

Working with shame

The way of working with shame and regression emerges quite clearly from the theory. The aim is to encourage present contact, to allow the expression of disgust towards the therapist without the latter withdrawing or punishing, and thus to support an individuation from the

force-feeder and the formation of an authentic self-other boundary. It is also clear why this will be slow work, and can be challenging for the therapist facing an at times very critical client while being able to keep his own self support.

The story I tell clients is that of the standard horror film. Someone is being chased by a monster or an axe-man. She (it is usually a she) runs into a house, locks the door and bars the windows. And everybody knows where the monster is—she has just locked herself in with it! It is the inside that is dangerous, not the outside, but she can only find that out by opening the door and risking the monster being there.

In the expression of disgust, the client is re-owning her annihilating monster possibilities, her own choice to reject in the environment rather than turn it round and experience the environment as rejecting her.

In general, I have found that in working with a polarisation of aggressor and victim, it is only contact with the aggressor pole that allows the client to move towards integration. The way of such polarisation is that a person's possibilities for responding to a situation get "sorted" between the poles, and the sense of agency, of active engagement, that allows a moving on is only discoverable in the aggressor pole.

A good example of this is that there was a technique practiced in Gestalt and other therapies in the 1970s where a client was held down by a therapist or other group members to make physical a sense of oppression. The client then had to fight his way out. People sometimes did this, but others collapsed completely rather than access their own ability to aggress in what appeared such a dangerous situation (and in some cases was dangerous because it also accessed the latent sadism in the people holding down). I have experimented with reversing this experiment and asking a client to hold me down and notice what he experiences. I have found this works well to bring awareness to the polarisation, and avoids the pitfalls of asking the client to find a way out of a frightening situation by accessing his victim pole.

Working with guilt

As I explained above, there is nothing problematic with guilt in itself. A client's experience of guilt can be a focus for the exploration and assertion of her own assimilated core values, acknowledgement that

she has offended against those values, and choosing her next step, whether it is apology, recompense, or simply a determination not to act in this way again.

On the other hand, in the more problematic situation where a client is ambivalent, operating a topdog/underdog split, our task would be to help the client to find and act on her own authentic values. In this case, by giving a voice to both sides of this split, and allowing the therapist to engage with the previously purely internal dialogue or fight, it is possible for the client to refine her values in a way that honours both sides, and yet to commit wholeheartedly to a way forward that she can acknowledge as hers.

Example

Gemma is a young student with a background in a churchgoing family, who is challenged by the free and easy sexual culture at university. She has engaged sexually with some male acquaintances, but has never had intercourse, and doesn't know whether she thinks it is right for people who are not married. This ambivalence has been brought to crisis point by her developing interest in a young man, Ian, who reciprocates her interest.

Gemma: I know he has had sex before, and would like to with me. I am scared, excited, worried about losing him if I don't agree to have sex with him, worried about losing my virginity, worried about becoming pregnant or getting AIDS.

Peter: Would you be willing to try an experiment? You could put Gemma who will say yes to sex on one chair and Gemma who says no on the other. Then the two could talk to each other. See what that dialogue sounds like out loud rather than going on inside.

Gemma: OK, I could try that.

Gemma on "yes" chair: [Sounding defiant] Well I want to have sex with Ian, that's all there is to it. It's not as if I believe that it's wrong like my parents do. I'm an adult, and I want to have fun in my life.

Gemma on "no" chair: [Sounding cautious] I don't know. It isn't just about having fun. I think to lose my virginity is a big deal, and I'm

scared about taking that step. I like Ian, but I don't think I love him or want to spend the rest of my life with him or have children with him. I don't want to rush into this.

G "yes": You just sound like mum. I don't want to start thinking about that yet.

This is typically topdog/underdog material. While the Gemma who says yes to sex is proclaiming her adulthood, she sounds like a rebellious teenager. Meanwhile the Gemma who says no is in touch with her caution but not with her excitement, like a protective parent. From neither place can she be fully in touch with her curiosity, her excitement and her fear all at the same time. The primary motivation is not to do with values or interests, but with the competition between the two poles. It is particularly important that I do not align with either pole, making the other pole the "problem". The issue is about contactful individuation (both from parental demands, and the demands of her peer group), not about whether Gemma engages in sex with Ian or not. I decide that the best way to bring more awareness to the situation is to encourage more basic sensory awareness.

P: [To Gemma "yes"] Can you take a moment just to check with how your body feels to you?

G "yes": I feel tight and solid.

P: Notice how you are breathing. It looks to me as if you are breathing quickly and shallowly.

G "yes": Yes that's right. When I concentrate on my breathing, I feel quite shaky, and as if I would fall apart if I wasn't holding myself so tightly.

P: Switch to the other chair. See what it feels like to be there.

G "no": It doesn't feel nice to say this, but when I look at you becoming shaky, I feel happy! I am more relaxed, don't have to hold onto you so hard. I can come in and comfort you.

G "yes": If I show you that I am frightened, you can pull me closer to you. That's what mother did. So I act tough. But I am scared, and I do

still need to make my own way in the world. And if it seems right to me, I will have sex with Ian, even though I am scared, and may even be making the wrong decision.

G “no”: That feels better.

In noticing the replay of the relationship with mother, Gemma is more able to risk engaging with both what she wants and what she fears, and can see her fear as a source of individuation, rather than just as a source of weakness that she fears her mother can exploit. It shows the way Gemma’s actual wants and values get lost in the top-dog-underdog or superego-infraego conflict for supremacy, while superficially the whole conflict is about what she wants.

It also shows the use of the classic Gestalt “empty chair” method in its relational use, as a way of externalising a split which is usually kept internal. This allows for integration supported by the therapist, whereas the chances would be that any use of two chairs in a behavioural or educational frame would support one side of the split, probably the resolute “I’m not scared” side. The part (should I have sex?) would be taken for the whole that is encoded in the parts (how can I risk individuating rather than leaning on or defying mother?).

5.3 Philosophy

The philosophy behind any discussion of choice and will is for me inevitably linked to the existentialists, and in particular to Jean-Paul Sartre (1978):

But ontology and existential psychoanalysis...must reveal to the moral agent that he is *the being by whom values exist*. It is then that his freedom will become conscious of itself and will reveal itself in anguish as the unique source of values and the nothingness by which the *world* exists. (Sartre, op. cit., p. 797, italics in original)

Let us take this in bits, because it is rather dense. At its most basic level, it says that human beings are the source of values in the world. There is no set of values inherent in the world outside those espoused

by human beings. But that makes it sound as if an individual human being says, independently from everyone else, "I will follow this rule and not that one". This makes each person a separate and isolated being whose values are unconnected from anybody else's. But that is not the way Sartre sees people or consciousness. For him, the starting point is "being-in-the-midst-of-the-world" (what I describe here as *id* functioning), without the capacity to engage with the world because I have no separateness from it. I need to "negate", to make a separation from the world and become a "being-in-the-world" for consciousness to have any possible meaning. (This is similar to what I describe here as *ego* functioning and to Buber's concept of "primary distancing" that I discussed earlier.) So the act of negation brings into existence both myself as a conscious being and the world in which I am consciously engaged. There is, as the quote says, no world outside myself until I have created this "nothingness", this place outside the world where I exist.

But then I have to do even more than this to be able to imagine a world-to-be, which I am part of creating through my value-laden action. In order to do this, I need to make a second negation, and see possible worlds where I take different actions or the world ends up differently. I can only see something in the world if I can imagine the world without it. So I can only see a tree if I can "see" it in relation to a backdrop of the same world without the tree. I can only intend to move the world around me in one direction if I can imagine it moving in other possible directions that I like less. Far from an image of isolated people, Sartre points to people initially so entwined with the world that we have to make a separation in order to be able to have a world to act in relation to.

And here is where "anguish" or "existential anxiety" comes into the picture. From this perspective, the idea of banishing anxiety from our lives is not one to follow, for it comes only at a prohibitive cost, the cost of losing our freedom. Every exercise of freedom involves me stepping out of the world and for that moment standing alone, without any knowledge of what will follow.

This is the real difference between an existential approach, based on the emergence of selfhood from the field, and a behavioural approach. For a behavioural therapist, the difficulty or distress, expressed in avoidance, phobia, or compulsive behaviour, is something to be got past. For the existential therapist, it is a statement of

an aspect of the field that needs to be faced with courage and also with support. And even the support has to be of a particular kind, as we shall see below.

To quote the veteran Jungian, James Hillman (Hillman & Ventura, 1992):

Or take Manolete who, when he was nine years old, was supposedly a very frightened little skinny boy who hung around his mother in the kitchen. So he becomes the greatest bullfighter of our age. Psychology would say "Yes, he became a great bullfighter because he was such a puny little kid that he compensated by being a macho hero." ... But suppose you take it the other way and read a person's life backwards. Then you say, Manolete was the greatest bullfighter, and he *knew* that. Inside, his psyche sensed at the age of nine that his fate was to meet thousand-pound black bulls with great horns. Of course he ****ing well held onto his mother! (p. 18, italics in original)

I would not take it as far as Hillman did, although I enjoy the challenge he sets us. But what I do believe is that those who see the potential danger in the world and respond to it with anxiety are seeing one element of truth, and have a potential to move into that world which is easier than for those who have created (or had created for them) a "safe" and predictable world where nothing else can enter unless it has been "sanitised" (like my behaviourist friend's clients and spiders) into something safe and predictable in relation to which they can experience themselves as fitting in easily.

I would like to put in some personal experience here. My family (those that survived) were Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany in the late 1930s. They were frightened, as was I when I was a child. We knew that one of the potentials of the world was that our friends and neighbours could rise up against us and be part of having us killed (we have seen this more recently in former Yugoslavia, Darfur and Rwanda). And I experienced enough racism in school and elsewhere that I could see those potentials in British as well as Austrian and German people (I remember people lighting fiery crosses in an Ealing park during a local festival and the British fascist party campaigning door to door during elections). It also raised for me the

question of how far I would go to defend myself, and so how dangerous I can be. Those who did not have those experiences, either directly or as relayed in the family, would not see those potentials in those around them, or in themselves. There would be ways in which we could not understand each other's perceived worlds. I have certainly experienced therapists who could not meet me in my wariness of others and saw it as wholly pathological. This made it difficult for me to accept their sense of the world as safer than I saw it, because they were not willing to extend themselves to seeing the potential for danger in the world as I saw it.

Yet there was an advantage for me in my anxiety. If my contemporaries experienced rejection, they often saw themselves as probably being at fault, and tried to fit in more with what they thought was expected of them. If the image that is portrayed of the world is of a safe place, then if something goes wrong it would be very challenging of that image to say that it was not just one's own fault. In the same way, abused children often take what is happening as their own fault, and thus maintain an illusion of the world as lawful and just. In contrast, it was very clear to me that what people disliked was primarily my race and my mother's accent, which I was very clear I could do nothing about, and also thought "why should I". I went into anger and contempt rather than self-blame.

Support

The therapist needs to be in support of the client, and, more generally, people need support in order to engage in the world. But what does "support" mean in a relational theory? It cannot be just something one person "does to" another. Support in such a theory has to be a two-way relationship.

Gestalt Therapy has a theory of "self support". This is often (including by some Gestaltists) understood as a non-relational replacement for support from others, but it is not. In fact that version would make no sense in terms of the Gestalt relational theory of self which arises in contact. Rather it means *orienting oneself in the world so that the world supports you*. For example, I can stand in such a way that gravity supports good but flexible contact with the ground, and thus helps me move and act; or I can stand in such a way that gravity burdens me and makes movement slow and difficult. I can relate

to people so that they know who I am and what my intentions are. Then those who have a similar vision become part of my support, while it could well be that other people who have an opposing vision move away. Being supported for any meaningful endeavour is itself a risk (sometimes small, sometimes large). If I take a step, I risk that the ground I step on will not support me and I will fall. In its literal sense, this is not a great risk (though I have fallen into a peat bog), but if I want to stand for something it is a greater risk, and many people prefer to hide what is important to them in order to fit in. The problem with this is that there is a background anxiety that “if they really knew me they would not like me”.

Liking as support has real limitations, for it is an emotional response that we would expect to vary with the present situation. It makes no sense, even in the most intimate and loving relationships, for people to like each other all the time. In fact, it is often within loving relationships, say between parents and children, that it is most important that the love carries the relationship through times of conflict, not liking, or even hate. I remember receiving a flyer for the *Journal of Family Violence*, which explained that the journal was aimed at exploring “the problem why people hurt those they love”, and wondering who else we would hurt—the milkman? Therapeutic support, like love, is for me more about commitment even when I don’t feel liking than it is about “good feelings” all the time. If I find with a client that I feel liking and warmth all the time, my hypothesis would be that they are acting in a limited way in order to keep me feeling positive about them, and that they are acting on an assimilation of experiences of loss of support at times of conflict.

So where a client is looking to me for liking, I will say that I think that is too small a category for what we are doing, and I would rather keep a sense of the different feelings that our relationship arouses moment by moment. However I would not abandon the relationship because I felt less warm in any situation, nor become more accepting of them if I felt warmer. This is helped in the therapeutic relationship by the fact that I do not in actuality have any needs from the clients apart from those contracted (whether that is times, money, or such other matters). Thus any times I become angry with a client are to do with my wants that arise in the relationship (unless they are my entirely habitual wants that I should have a sense of from my own therapy and training).

5.4 Case Example

John is 45 years old, and has lived what he calls a “quiet life” in the village where he grew up. He describes his childhood as happy and “uneventful”. He has been married for fifteen years to Moira and they have two children. He works in an accountancy firm.

He came to see the therapist Phil after a recent health scare, a possible heart attack. In looking over his life at a time when he thought he may be dying, John was struck by a sense of his life as being limited (he sometimes uses the word “boring”), and a determination that he would find a wider world. He has long enjoyed watching adventure films in the cinema or on television. Now he wants to visit new countries, put himself into the (rather romanticised) pictures he has been watching. Moira is willing to go with this to a certain extent, though she herself does not want to extend herself very far, and she is still quite happy with beach holidays and familiar food and situations. This has become a source of vague tension between John and Moira, and John has been feeling “trapped”.

This situation has been brought to a stronger focus by John’s growing attraction towards a secretary at his work, Frances, a woman John describes as the antithesis of Moira: emotional, adventurous, loud and flirtatious. John finds himself fantasising about a relationship with her, even though he insists nothing has passed between them and he does not even know if she has a partner. So he has come to therapy with a sense that he wants his life to be different, yet those “differences” are at the moment mainly on a fantasy level, adding to his frustration but not changing the facts of his life any more than watching the adventure films have done.

In his relating to Phil, John is polite and engaging in a way that Phil finds difficult to warm to. His manner seems engaging in a professional kind of way, but with little variation. In supervision, Phil describes him as someone he could happily chat to in the pub, but does not find easy to engage with as therapist and client. Furthermore, there is little in John’s descriptions of his life and history that holds much emotional or aspirational energy for either of them. There is nothing really unpleasant or unbearable apart from the sense of the whole being unfulfilling.

I would contend that much of the conventional “toolkit” of psychotherapy is of little use in this situation. If the therapist works with

insight, the truth of the matter is that there is little to discover. Aristotle said “The unexamined life is not worth living”. However, a client like John shows that the reverse is actually more true: “The un-lived life is not worth examining”. If they explore John’s fears, those fears will be more about what he imagines rather than what is real. I think of clients who have taken up activities (e.g. joining a gymnasium) they were hitherto scared of, and discovered that what they feared was not present in actuality. They had actually no fear of the activity, merely of their fantasy of the activity. If the therapy engages with that fantasy before the client has tried it, the result would be to reaffirm the fear, making the activity more difficult to engage with. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Wasteland*, “We think of the key, each in his prison. Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison” (Eliot, 1961, p. 67). However, after trying out the activity, there is the knowledge of the reality with which to compare the fantasy. Now there is solid ground on which to enquire what the significance of the fantasy is.

If the therapist works with behaviour in a solution-focused manner, the problem will be that there is no clear problem to solve. The naming of a problem could become an oversimplified replacement for the reality of the dilemma facing the client. In the case of John, the problem could be stated as “The need to become more assertive with Moira” or “The need to decide whether to stay in the marriage”. Yet I have usually found that most often unresolved dilemmas about which of two possible partners to stay with are more about what sense the person has of her life direction than just about the people involved. Because of this, a choice either way will leave one of the poles of the client’s split personality functioning unfulfilled, leading to regret and a sense of maybe having made the wrong decision.

The potential therapy problem is that the metaphor is one of “work”, and the human capacity which supports wider perspectives is not work but play. Young animals play at hunting to allow the development of abilities they will need for the wider, less looked after world of adulthood. Children play at looking after children (with dolls), or at fighting or being sexual “mummies and daddies”, or they play at being someone different by dressing up or changing their voices. Adults also play games, taking up hobbies that allow them to be different from their everyday persona, flirting, inventing stories about their prowess, playing “air guitar”. In a game, new pos-

sibilities can be enacted away from the demands of self-expectation or the expectations of others.

There are two mutually supportive ways to play-work with a client like John. One is an exploration of possibilities in the actual therapy situation, looking at the possibilities for play in the therapeutic relationship, given that it has almost no rules about what is possible to enact. Even where there is an inbuilt boundary, most notably around violence and sexual relating, those themes can still be played with. Violent interacting can be played with by pushing against each other, or by a slow enactment of a desire to hurt. The therapist can wholeheartedly accept the client's flirtatiousness and expressions of attraction. The other possibility is to decide together that the client is going to try new things in the world, experiences that are not too anxiety-provoking but which are new.

So in the example of Phil and John:

P: Imagine what you might do that is different and interesting in a relationship with someone like Frances.

J: I would be visiting new places in the world, meeting different kinds of people, eating different foods.

This could lead to an experiment with finding somewhere different in the place where John lives, trying different kinds of foods, starting a salsa dancing class, volunteering in a project to feed the homeless, or all sorts of other possibilities.

The aim is not to desensitise specific fears, but to gather a wider sense of the world in both its aspects: its possibilities and its risks. It could well be that John discovers he does not like the food he tries, or that some people are not kind to him at the salsa class. I do not imply that everything will go well, just that any disappointments are going to be tolerable. One of the fantasies John will engage in is that the act of trying something new will make his world fall apart (and of course his attraction towards Frances could do exactly that!). My understanding is that this fantasy of a narrow world of safety and/or order will be one carried by John's family, rather than by him alone. The family response will be to see the world in the restricted way John shows, and avoid the anxiety of checking out what lies beyond the self-imposed boundaries. There are two "flavours" of this. One is that the world outside is dangerous, the other that the goodness

of the family cannot withstand the temptations of the world. The children in the former kind of family often have a worse time than those in the latter, since the image of the danger of the world will be a projection of the potential for danger of family members. The projection in the latter situation, the one John shows, is of chaos and disorder, and, as I have been showing in all the previous chapters, we can only be fully engaged in the world we are now in if we can allow the chaos of the first boundary, the boundary the chaos-fearing families by definition avoid.

So John discovers possibilities for play in the therapy situation: whether it's using modelling clay or paints, or swapping jokes, or play fighting. He discovers that he is not as fragile as he thought, and that Phil is not going to either fall apart or dominate him. He goes to a salsa class, having negotiated with Phil that at this stage he is not going to start an affair with someone he meets there. And life changes in its usual messy way. Possibly Moira decides to come along to salsa and remembers that she enjoyed dancing when she was younger. Possibly Moira gets jealous of his dance partners and issues an ultimatum that John has to stop or she will leave, and maybe eventually she does, or maybe he decides to stop to protect the children from the parents' separation. And whatever path the world goes down, John discovers that he can deal with it, and more than just deal with it: he can put his own wants, needs, values and interests into it.

And in the end whatever is must end. The next chapter explores the meaning of endings including death in our way of seeing the world.

Death and Endings

6.1 Theory: life and death: what ends?

In this chapter, I want to explore the meaning of life and death, the interplay of continuity and discontinuity. In other ways to approach selfhood, the question can be much simpler to answer. If we have an ‘immortal soul’, then that doesn’t die, while our body does. If we are purely material, then when our material body dies, we are simply gone, living on only in our works and other people’s memories of us. Yet we have in this approach a much more complex relationship between self, body and environment, and the questions similarly become more complex, and, I would add, more interesting and even intuitive once we adjust to the unfamiliarity of the language.

So our first question here must be: what is life? What is the difference between a living being and a dead one? The answer within the approach taken in this book has to be that *life is an emergent level of organisation of the material field*. That is, life is not some separate ‘spiritual substance’ to matter, it is rather an organisation of matter to produce behaviours which are consistent with the laws of matter, and which also has its own laws which are not derivable from the

simpler level of organisation. The analogy I gave is to the running of a car, based on the organisation of the engine, and always consistent with the physical workings of the components, but with its own characteristics once the engine starts.

In this way, we can understand how a human or animal body can have states that are so different: alive and dead. And yet, even as they are different, there are states which to some extent defy the classification, states where some of the higher-level interactions are happening and others are not. These are the states that have caused most of the ethical dilemmas and arguments: the life of the foetus, of the severely brain-damaged, of those in a deep coma. Unfortunately, looking at life in the way we have been doing does not resolve any of these dilemmas by giving firm answers to questions about when life starts, or when conscious human life starts. What it does say is that something new and valuable arises at the complexity level of human consciousness. In fact, at any level less than this, there is in fact no meaning to 'value'. There is just the 'isness' of events and the reflexive response of life that is not conscious of itself living in a world with choices.

Now this is exciting, because it puts us always at the centre of the universe! What do I mean by this? Far from being insignificant motes in a vast universe, we are in this way of thinking the embodiment of the universe's capacity for conscious living. At any less complex level, there is either no ability to respond sensitively across an organism/environment boundary, or to grow and reproduce, or to imagine a world different from the world we are currently part of, or to do something unpredictable *and* at the same time purposeful, or to say 'This has value, meaning, or beauty'.

So the birth of a new human being extends the possibilities of the whole universe for meaning, value and creativity. And then there is the community of humans, wonderfully and simultaneously creative and destructive, inherently challenging to every ecological balance, because we can never just be part of that balance: we are inevitably imagining something new. If we are 'the measure of all things', as the humanistic enlightenment termed us, we are a measuring that emerged from what we measure rather than a measure external to what is measured. Through us, the universe is measuring itself, and the universe that is being measured includes us.

From this perspective, the problem with the humanistic formulation is that it put human beings in the place formerly given to God:

one who creates and measures *from outside* and is not affected by the measuring. If, rather, we are as much part of what is being measured as we are the measure, then our measuring, creating, giving value, has a price. As Prigogine saw (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), if we locally reduce entropy and increase complexity, the entropy has to go somewhere else, and is dissipated to the edge of the system. If we are to maintain the sharp straight edge that a ruler needs to be able to measure, then we are inevitably destructive of order in the environment that we measure. We will always, by our nature, foul our own nests. Our fate will probably be to destroy ourselves in the process.

And yet, the underlying mathematics of non-linear fields and the immense underlying energy of the quantum vacuum are not subject to entropy, and it is unlikely that we are the only emergent universe or the only measuring beings. We would not be able to measure any universe other than one of which we are a part. It is through our belonging rather than our separateness that we can do the measuring.

So what dies?

As we have seen, the birth of a human consciousness is inherently valuable, but what happens at death? Let us start by looking at the death of a non-conscious animal (I am not going to get into the argument about whether human beings are the only conscious animals in our world: it is not strictly relevant to this discussion). It is clear that what is happening is that death is a return to a simpler level, and a falling-apart of the non-linear processes that sustained the level of life. This can be caused by wear or damage to any of the vital systems, or even something throwing the processes out of alignment (an emotional shock, or an electric shock). It is the exact equivalent of a car stalling or a major car part failing. The engine stays warm for a time, but there is no more movement. The parts can even be 'transplanted' into another car and function well.

But now we need to look at the death of this wonderful, conscious human being. Here we have the three levels of human consciousness and selfhood, and the situation is more complicated.

At the first boundary, the physical boundary, the sensitivity of the boundary stops. There can be no more experience at this boundary. At this boundary also, the higher-level processes that support life

stop in the same way as in a non-conscious animal. At this level, a human corpse is not different from the corpse of any creature. Sometimes it is physically still intact enough to have the capacity to sustain the higher-level activity of life, and can therefore be resuscitated (and even after that some people are resuscitated with reduced functioning), but soon even that capacity goes.

When we move to *the second, ego, boundary*, we see something new. Self and other transcend the organism-environment boundary, I can identify with you even if you are not physically present in a way that can strongly affect my actions. People consult their memories of important others after they are dead, so that the dead truly live on in those who love them (and also in those who hate or fear them!). And still something is lost. The remembered person becomes a kind of predictable caricature, unable to say 'I know you valued this aspect of me, but I am not going to be like this any more'. Our image of the person is fixed by our memories and expectations of them.

At the third, personality, boundary, there are the structures the dead person has developed, the things the person has built or created, the ripples the person has put into the culture of the country, the workplace, the family, the friendship network. I am very much in touch with this, having just been to Athens, where I went to the Acropolis and sat in the amphitheatre where Sophocles and others first had their dramas performed, and where what we know of theatre took form. It is clear to me sitting there that the lives and ideas of people who were alive over 2000 years ago can still affect me now through what they created.

Death at every moment

The theory points to something more, because we are working with a self that is not inherently continuous. We are therefore facing a death and rebirth of self in every moment. We can once more paraphrase the theory of psychological dysfunction, and see it as an inability or unwillingness to face this existential truth at times when it is vital to do so.

These are the times when the factors that provide our sense of continuity cease to fulfil that function. Good examples of this include times of bereavement and loss of significant people in our lives (I will say more about this below), children leaving home, the ending of

relationships, retirement and redundancy. At a larger scale, it would include becoming a refugee or times of disaster. In these periods, it is not in actuality possible to keep up the previous self-continuity *except* by selectively cutting off sensory contact with that actuality. We hold onto our sense of self-continuity at the expense of our ability to become the person who is emerging, to be one who 'identifies with his forming self' as PHG puts it (p. 11). Or, less damagingly, we hold onto some pleasure or security and lose the actual pleasures and connections available in the next moment. So a compulsive eater does not know when to stop eating and move to the pleasure of satisfaction.

6.2 Clinical application

Clinically, we are working with two things: the losses people have sustained, of people and life possibilities; and the polarisation people fall into in order to avoid taking one path and losing another, not wanting to 'burn their bridges'. I will show how these two very much deal with the same process and avoidance of process.

Mourning the dead

If someone close to us dies or leaves our lives in a permanent manner, the way it affects us is not just the loss of the other person. Since self is a co-creation, the implication is that there are significant ways in which we have to come to terms with a change in ourselves. A major part of the significance of the mourning process is an acceptance of this life-change for ourselves.

Let us take as an example an adult whose mother has just died. In order to see the significance of this, it is worth looking at the co-creation that has taken place in the family that now needs to change. Families find many and various ways to 'divide up the chores' which need to be undertaken in a family with children. These include holding a sense of the family as a unit, holding a connection to the outside world, protection, doing jobs such as shopping, cooking and handiwork, kindness, firmness, timekeeping and spontaneity. Chores going in the opposite direction are assertion of independence, questioning, being irresponsible and bringing novelty into the

family. These patterns are not taken in isolation, but in relation to everybody else in the family. So for example, in a family where the father is very strict and there are two children, it is very common for one child to become the 'good child', wanting to avoid the punishment and rejection disobedience brings to the bad child; while the other child becomes the 'bad child', wanting to avoid the limitation and lack of spontaneity of the good child, and finding the punishment involved acceptable as a trade. These patterns develop together in relation to each other rather than as individual choices.

So in this situation where the mother has died let us say that she has been the one whose function has been to hold a sense of the family, so that other family members relate to each other through her rather than directly to each other. Once she has died, there will be a question of how the people who are left will relate to each other. They will have to develop new relational possibilities with each other to achieve this. Who takes the initiative to invite the others? Who will smooth over arguments? Who will the good child look to for approval, and who will the bad child rebel against?

One very common way out of these dilemmas is for people who have been bereaved to hold a continuing, often caricatured, image of the dead parent, and to use that image to keep a sense that nothing has changed. They consult this image to help them make decisions, or when they feel the need for nurturing and support. Or, conversely, they hold a sense of rage and defiance towards the mother long after the mother has died, because that is how they define their individuality.

Once again, as we have seen many times, it is not the fact of consulting the remembered wisdom of a dead parent that is problematic, but rather when this is a fixed solution. In this case, the adult son or daughter does not move outside the polarised 'task allocation' of their childhood family, and are not open to the whole spectrum of nurturing and being nurtured, fighting and acting with firm authority.

The therapy with a person who is still reliant on an image of a dead parent involves them explicitly taking over for themselves the roles they have passed to that parent. With the therapist, their defensive transference, as I described in Chapter Four, is likely to be to encourage the therapist to take over the parental role, so that they can then either feel nurtured, told what to do, or given somebody to

fight so that they feel strong in the conflict. The therapy occurs as the therapist does not take that role. Then the client, and of course also the therapist, has to find a different way to engage. It is also possible to use the 'empty chair' method to explore saying his goodbyes to the dead parent and what this means for him, and also to explore the 'unfinished business', what has been left unsaid and unacknowledged. We will see more about this later.

Example

Rob's mother has recently died after a short illness. Rob (who is now 28) has never formed stable relationships, but has rather kept his focus on his support for his mother, especially after his father died when he was ten. In the last six months, he moved out of the parental home into a flat of his own for the first time, and because of this, he feels some guilt over her death. Would she have died if he had still been living with her? And how will he orientate his life now?

Graham, Rob's therapist, is aware of his own response to Rob. He feels two things at the same time: a wish to look after a 'little boy lost', and a sense of impatience 'He should grow up and act like an adult'. Looking more closely in supervision at his impatience, he realises that it also involves a kind of looking after, and that once again it involves a parental role. Seeing the situation this way helps Graham to take a more equal and accepting role with Rob.

The session starts with a period of silence. Rob is looking intently at Graham. Graham is supported by his understanding of the ease with which they could move into a parent-child relationship, and keeps accepting, non-demanding eye contact with Rob.

Rob: I don't know what to do.

Graham: OK. I get a sense of that.

R: Do you know what to do?

G: I am staying with you as you find your own next step. I don't feel any need to do anything different from that. Is there something else you might want from me?

R: [Confused] I need some help here. I feel stuck.

G: The trouble is, I don't know how to help you any more at this moment without telling you 'Do this', and that seems quite wrong to me. I would only recommend that you stay with your own experience of being here with me, and see what becomes important or interesting for you.

There is more silence. Then Rob bursts out laughing.

R: If anyone was watching us, they would find it so funny, each of us waiting for the other one to start. The blind leading the blind.

G: Tell me more about your and my blindness.

R: I don't see the way ahead. When my mother was alive, I knew what to do, and it was mostly about her, even after I moved out. Now I wait for you to tell me what to do, but how could you know either! So we just sit here not knowing.

G: That makes sense to me.

R: And that is why my mother dying has left such a big hole in my life.

G: I'm not sure. Did that hole in your life only start after your mother died?

R: Oh... Well my life wasn't a bundle of laughs before she died, and nor was hers either. Come to think of it, we sometimes sat in the same room not knowing what to say to each other either. Neither of us went out much.

G: I feel sad hearing you. It sounds so closed in.

R: And I still don't know what to do.

G: It's that word 'know', as if there is some right answer somewhere outside you in your situation. What I hear you saying is that you looked to your mother to define what to do for you, but she didn't have a right answer any more than you did, though you acted as if she did. I suppose the other thing I want to say is that you are not on your own with this, even if I am not telling you what to do.

R: Yes, I know you are here with me.

The above shows a fairly common sequence. In Rob's laughter, he is seeing, in a non-disparaging way, an image of himself and Graham in a mutual dilemma, neither one more in possession of knowledge than the other. Furthermore, he is able to keep a sense of Graham's presence with him, and even in his service, in this new, more egalitarian, way. Finally, Rob is looking at his mother in a new way, as one who led him, but not as a leader with a meaningful vision.

6.3 *Philosophy*

Once again, the philosophy here has much in common with Buddhist ideas about the impermanence of all forms. However, there are also differences. Similarly, there are elements similar to Existential philosophy. In reading around the subject, I have tried to find an approach to death that captured my understanding, but did not manage to. This supports my contention that what we are discovering about emergent complexity is something completely new, which puts previous philosophical approaches in a new light.

If we look at the historical philosophical questions around death, we can see this quite clearly.

Do I have a self that is different from my body? To this, I have to give the answer 'Yes and no'. Theories of emergence allow for a third possibility, of selfhood as an emergent level of complexity with possibilities not available at the simpler level, but, vitally for any discussion of death, not separable from that simpler level. Using the analogy of the car engine, the running engine can do things not possible for any of its constituent parts (it cannot be reduced to a summation of the parts), and it is dependent on the environment to be able to function (air, a certain temperature range, protection from water landing on the electrics, replacement of fuel), but if you take away or damage the parts, it cannot run. The running of the engine cannot separate itself from its physical base.

Do I survive physical death? As I showed above, the answer I would mainly give is 'no'. The 'running' of my conscious personhood cannot separate itself from the physical base of my body. But I do not mean the same by this as someone who equates the person with the physical body. My consciousness, what makes me a human

person, relies on but does not consist of my physical processes, even my brain processes. As I have shown, the work of Schore (2003) and others shows how our being in the world affects even how our brains develop, and of course what they are processing in this moment. The most complete way to state what is lost is a node of choicefulness in the field, remembering that choicefulness is the creative intersection of predictability and unpredictability.

Furthermore, in that this relational approach does not propose a unitary, always-existing self, my answer to the question 'Do I die and get reborn at each moment?' is basically 'yes'. If selfhood is essentially an *attractor* in a non-linear process, the coherence is produced by the properties of the attractor rather than the way I experience myself (in that part of the attractor) in the moment or even over a period of time. The advantage of course for psychotherapy is the possibility of profound change in a short time as the client moves to a different part of the attractor. I have written above about the problems inherent in losing that sense of endings at each moment.

Is mind an illusion? This would be the Buddhist view. And once again, my answer would be 'Yes and no'. I would certainly say that the sense of continuity and 'describability' of self is an illusion. However, if all matter is emergent from a process (Big Bang to expanding universe to condensing galaxies to stars and planets to living organisms to consciousness), then there is no real reason to say that selfhood or life is any more illusory than a table—and certainly impacts the world at least as much as a table. And the boundary between what looks solid and what is a much more esoteric process is quite a fluid one: I can see this especially when the computer on which I am typing this depends for its functioning on quantum processes that were not even known when I was in school!

Does something of myself remain after death? At the level of the whole field, self is, as I said earlier, an organ of choosing for the whole field. In that sense, all that is lost in my death is a particular manifestation of that organ, one way among many for the universe to move to its future. However, what is included in that loss is a perspective, a literal point of view, which is a meaningful loss. And since who I am is bound up with the being of those I am in contact with, Donne's meditation XVIII is also accurate: 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee'.

Thus the philosophy which comes out of the considerations I have been exploring does not fit fully with the philosophies that came before, but, I would contend, does fit well with our intuitions of ourselves and our world. This would fit with my sense of the idea of emergent levels not having been understood before the twentieth century, with its picture of life and not-life, physics and consciousness, as being the same but also different.

6.4 Case Example

One of the most moving aspects of Gestalt Therapy is the use of the 'empty chair' with a bereaved client, who has a dialogue with the person who has died. However, as I said in Chapter Four, I have a very specific view of the meaning of that method. It is not consistent with the relational theory to use this simply as a behavioural tool to teach a client new ways to relate to another person. Nor is that understanding consistent with the power and meaningfulness of the emotions a client expresses in Gestalt 'grief work'. I have emphasised the dialogue as an externalisation in relation to the therapist of an 'internal' dialogue between two split aspects of the client, rather than as a way to 'practice' different ways of relating. We can now see more of what is being enacted in such an approach when the 'other' role is of a loved (or hated) person who has died.

Example 1: Julie

In this example, Julie's father has died after a long illness. They had had a loving relationship, which was however, on father's part, not physically demonstrative until shortly before he died. Julie's sense is of having just got something she had wanted for years, and then having it taken away from her. Her therapist Alan suggests she talks to her father using the empty chair method. She agrees, and chooses a chair for herself and a larger one for father. Alan suggests that Julie starts with those words.

Julie (to father): You gave me what I had been longing for all these years, and then you took it away. (To Alan) That feels bad to say — he didn't mean to die.

Alan: Say that to your father.

J (to father): It feels unfair to say this to you—you didn't mean to die.

Julie switches chairs.

J (as father): It was too short for me too. You were such a comfort to me when I was ill and in pain.

J (to father): It was that comfort that I needed from you when I was little and things went wrong. I was glad to give it to you when you were ill, and I wish you had comforted me more. I still feel bad saying this to you.

A: Try saying as father that you shouldn't be saying this.

J (as father): [Complaining voice] Well I did my best. Why are you criticising me? I didn't want to die.

A (to father): You sound angry.

J (as father): Well I'd have thought Julie would be a bit more supportive. I went through a terrible time.

It is beginning to dawn on Julie that there is something here that has been on the edge of her awareness for many years.

J (to father): I always had to look after your feelings, didn't I! If I wanted to sit on your lap, you pushed me off, told me you'd had a hard day at work or something. And I felt sorry for you and backed off, even though I desperately wanted to sit with you. And yes, the holding we did when you were ill was lovely, but it was for you because you were frightened. [Thoughtful] You were frightened a lot, weren't you?

J (as father): I don't want to talk about it. What good could it do? Just accept me as I am, not how you want me to be.

Julie returns to her chair and sits in silence for a time, then starts crying quietly.

J: [Talking partly to father, partly to Alan] He's right. I have to let him be him. I know he loved me the way he could. And it's over.

A: I think I see you saying goodbye both to your father and to your hopes for what he could become for you.

J: Yes. [Continues to cry] Goodbye dad. I love you.

In this piece, Julie realises that what she is holding onto in her father is a hope for a relationship that she missed as a child. In the fantasy dialogue, she realised that this is not available for her from him. However, there is also another level. Historically, Julie adjusted herself to look after her father, and probably others she saw as being in need. In taking on the persona of father, she can embrace a possibility of not adjusting, but of saying 'This is where I am and I want you to accept it'.

It is also potentially significant that Julie's need is to be held physically. In bringing out this need while letting go of the wish to get it from father, she could discover where in her current adult life she could get this need fulfilled. A fixation on a parent as a perfect source of affection can often get in the way of the development of an adult intimate relationship, as this seems pale by comparison with the perfect image. It could even be that father's fear is of his own incestuous possibilities which at some fantasy level are shared by the daughter, so no present-day man can compete in this fantasy relationship.

Example 2: Brian

Brian's father has also recently died after a long illness. However, Brian expresses hatred of his father, who was cold and often violent, especially when drunk. Yet his father's death felt very significant to Brian, and he found himself continuing to rage at him in his fantasies. His therapist, also Alan, offers him a two-chair dialogue with his father.

Brian: I have nothing to say to him. I hate him.

Alan: And yet you have fantasy confrontations with him. Maybe start by saying to him 'I have nothing to say to you', and see where you get.

B: OK, I'll give it a try. (To father) I have nothing to say to you, I hate you.

B: (As father) Well stuff you then. Why should I talk to you? You always showed me nothing but contempt, so that's that.

A: What I am noticing is that you both start by saying you have nothing to say, then saying something.

B: I just don't want to give him the satisfaction of pretending none of the pain happened and talking to him like a father.

A: So even your saying 'I won't talk to you' has a message to him. You are saying 'If I talk to you, I would be saying 'You are my father'. I even know you want that connection to me, it would give you satisfaction, but I punish you by not showing you that.' I wonder if there is something father is also saying in his telling you he doesn't want to talk to you.

B (as father): I don't want him to know that I care when he rejects me. I just don't know how to relate to him, so I get angry, push him away.

B: Well I'm not going to be the one doing the running this time.

A: I feel sad listening to you. I hear that you both have wishes from each other, and that you see no way to meet. So in relation to each other you both end up angry and unfulfilled, and also unable to say goodbye to each other. I'm wondering if the only way through this is for one of you to risk inviting the other close enough to meet and say goodbye.

In this situation, it is the hatred, based on desires that feel unfulfillable, that binds Brian to his father, unable to complete his ending with him. But once again, at another level, Brian is also 'father': punitive and rejecting when frustrated, unwilling to risk making himself vulnerable in order to get closer to someone difficult. It may take some time for this basic impasse to be worked through, because Brian has much less assimilated support than Julie. It will be at least partly through the assimilation of Alan's willingness to stay when Brian gets angry and rejecting that new and more generous ways of relating are possible. My experience is that these first emerge in relation to others in the client's life rather than in the completion of the relationship with father or even with the therapist. And indeed it

is best this way. I will often advise clients who are working on issues related to anger that there is a danger of them using those currently close to them as recipients of many years' worth of historical anger, and thus distancing precisely those they need support and affection from. I encourage them to bring the anger to therapy at first. I also discourage people from expressing their historical anger to parents until they have similarly worked with it a while in therapy, and are able to get a clear sense of what is meaningful in relation to the two people in the present day. Otherwise, what I see happening is that both my client and the parent fall into their familiar warring roles. This fits with the approach in this book that, if one person acts differently, the other cannot stay the same, and even if they act similarly it means something different. So if Brian, for example, finds a possibility of engaging more openly with his father, and his father acts in the same rejecting way, it will mean something different: that he is not only not open to Brian's habitual way of relating to him, but that he is not (at least currently) prepared to relate to Brian in any other way either.

Epilogue

So we have moved through a cycle from the emergence of greater and greater order to the ending of a moment and the ending of a life. I have tried to show how each element of this emergence contributes to the possibility of therapeutic change. The therapy then is to engage with the actual processes of self formation and ending in the here-and-now of the therapy relationship rather than actions by the therapist to make the client different. In the process, the therapist is also open to the challenge of the next moment and the lure of the easy and familiar.

There only remains one bit unfinished for me. I have written this book from the perspective of complexity and emergence rather than Gestalt Therapy, and I want to add an appendix bringing back the connections or translations between the two languages.

Gestalt Therapy and Emergence

In many ways, the approach I have been presenting are set in the same universe as the one described by Gestalt Therapy. I developed the ideas in this book while working as a Gestalt Therapist and training Gestalt Therapists. I am aware that some of my readers will be Gestaltists and wonder where this is compatible with our shared approach; while others will want to know the theoretical and clinical background out of which my ideas emerged.

Looking over what I have written, I do not have a sense of inconsistency between the approaches. Rather, by elaborating the background, I have found that aspects of Gestalt Therapy that seemed opaque to me and to others became more coherent and meaningful. At the same time, other aspects of Gestalt Therapy which some Gestaltists rely on become clearly unsupported by the approach.

In this Appendix, I will look at various areas of both agreement between this approach based on emergence, and areas where I was pushed into a critique of some ideas within the Gestalt spectrum.

1. *Emergence*

On a base level, Gestalt Therapy itself emerged out of a field rich in early ideas on emergence. In particular, Fritz Perls was very influenced by the ideas of the South African soldier, statesman and philosopher Jan Smuts, as espoused in his classic book “Holism and Evolution” (Smuts, 1996/1926). This book, where Smuts coined the term “holism”, and explored how the parts depended on the whole, rather than the whole being simply made up of the parts. He spoke of the emergence of life: “The difference between matter and life is no longer measured by the distance between deadness or absolute passivity on the one hand, and activity on the other—a distance so great as to constitute an impassable gulf in thought. The difference between them is merely a difference in the character of their activities.” (op. cit., 51). And “Thus the four great series in reality—matter, life, mind and Personality—apparently so far removed from each other, are seen to be but steps in the progressive evolution of one and the same fundamental factor, whose pathway is the universe within us and around us.” (op. cit., 320) You will notice how this has been taken as a central theme of this present book.

In an interesting footnote in his book (op. cit., 321n), Smuts compares his understanding with that of other then current writers on “Emergentism”, and contrasts their emphasis on emergence with his emphasis on Holism. “To [Morgan] emergence of the new in the evolution of the universe is the essential fact; to me there is something more fundamental—the character of wholeness, the tendency to wholes, ever more intensive and effective wholes, which is basic to the universe, and of which emergence or creativeness is but one feature, however important it is in other respects.” That is, he sees the emphasis on emergence as primary leading to a conception of the whole as made up of the parts, together with what emerges from the interaction of the parts. In contrast, Smuts understands the parts emergent from, and taking their function from, the whole. In the understanding proposed in this book, I would say that this distinction has broken down. The whole is for me, as it is for Smuts, primary, yet the whole, as we can see from an exploration of the quantum vacuum, has a potential for everything or nothing. It has no inherent structure, and is not the whole with a potential for order that Smuts was writing about. In our terms then, that potential is already an emergence, and it is this emergent universe that is prior to the parts as Smuts showed.

The other main source here shared between Gestalt Therapy and the view presented here is the link with Kurt Goldstein. Goldstein ran the Berlin clinic for brain-damaged soldiers from the First World War. He used the opportunity to do some of the earliest systematic brain research, essentially exploring what functions were disrupted by different areas of the soldier's brain being destroyed by battle injury. He saw the Organism (the title of his major book: Goldstein, 1939) as functioning as a whole, but using various specialised parts of the brain to make this happen. He coined the term "self-actualization" in this book, though it has since been altered in meaning by Maslow and others who gave the term a normative sense (self-actualization is an outcome of growth, and there is a possibility for a non-self-actualized self), whereas for Goldstein, it meant only that self formed in its action. His work impacted strongly on the development of psychotherapy through his assistants: Fritz Perls, and Fuchs (later Foulkes), the founder of Group Analysis. Finally, Fritz Perls explained the Freudian "repetition compulsion" in terms of "unfinished business", based on the Gestalt Psychologists' Ziegarnik Effect, that unfinished tasks are remembered more than finished ones. Interestingly, the senior staff of the Moscow Gestalt Institute trained in Gestalt Psychology at the University of Moscow under the Professorship of Bluma Ziegarnik.

Thus my emphasis on brain and other psychological researches as providing the non-linearity necessary for the emergence of mind is well connected with the path taken by the major founder of Gestalt Therapy. My sadness is that he later disowned some of his own roots to make Gestalt Therapy look as if it emerged from nowhere. This is particularly sad, since Gestalt Therapy has stood up very well to the latest researches, to the extent that a recent book on "The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy" (Cozolino, 2002) can say "Although Gestalt Therapy is not widely practiced, it is a unique expression of psychodynamic therapy that is particularly relevant to the notion of neural integration." (op. cit., 60) Furthermore, there is large and acknowledged overlap between Gestalt theory and practice and the developmental approach of Daniel Stern, to the extent that Stern co-wrote a chapter in a Gestalt book. (Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon [Eds.], 2003, 21–36).

The major difference in this present book is my emphasis on what we have discovered about the emergence of order from complexity, an emphasis that was not available to either Smuts or the founders of Gestalt Therapy. This allows us to keep both a mean-

ingful and often lawful universe, and also a universe open enough that we can make meaningful choices in our lives.

2. Theory of Self

The theory of self that I espouse here is the same as that espoused by Fritz Perls in his 1957 lecture (Perls, 1978). That theory was then expanded, with his introduction of Id, Ego and Personality Functions, by Paul Goodman in his contribution to the seminal Gestalt theoretical work “Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality” (Perls et al., 1994/1951, or PHG). The approach of always relationally juxtaposing self and other as co-creations is an enormously fruitful one, and, as I have shown above, one that is only now being brought forward again through research in neuroscience and developmental psychology. Once again, my “three boundaries” approach is not fundamentally different from the theory of self in the chapter on “Self, Ego, Id and Personality” in PHG (op. cit., 149–161), but is hopefully easier to understand. However, self is also written about in describing the process of contacting (which for PHG and for myself are describing the same process) in the chapter “Creative Adjustment I” (op. cit., 182–4), and there is an important inconsistency between these two descriptions, based on the understanding of Id, the first part of both contacting and self formation. Many Gestaltists have used the latter understanding while I use the former, so I need to describe how I understand the difference between the two, and how it is important both theoretically and clinically.

In the chapter on the Self, “Id” is defined as “passive, scattered and irrational; its contents are hallucinatory and the body looms large... The self seems scattered, and it is indeed disintegrating and vanishing into mere potentiality, for it exists, is actualized, by contacting” (op. cit., 159–160). This is consistent with my explanation of the first boundary as a sensing of the field, not as an activity of a coherent and separate self.

In the second description however, we read this: “Fore-contact: the body is the ground, the appetite or environmental stimulus is the figure. This is what is aware as the ‘given’ or Id of the situation, dissolving into its possibilities.” (op. cit., 182). Now, in their own terms, this is a contradiction with far more than the previous definition of Id. For figure-ground formation is for them an action of the ego func-

tions of identification (figure) and alienation (ground). This description speaks to the primacy of the formation of wants ("appetites") and interests ("environmental stimulus").

To begin to get a sense of the importance of this difference, let us look at another important exposition in Fritz Perls' first book, "Ego, Hunger and Aggression" (Perls, 1947). In this book, Perls describes three different people entering a corn-field. "A merchant, looking at the corn-field, will estimate the gain he may derive from handling the sale of the crop, while a couple of lovers, choosing the corn-field as a place in which to withdraw from the world, do not care at all about its monetary value. A painter may grow enthusiastic about its slowly moving harmonies of light and shade, but to the pilot, who is about to make a forced landing, the movement of the corn serves only as a wind indicator" (op. cit., 39). Their personality identification in the moment (as merchant, lover, painter, or pilot) defines the figures they make, what they find interesting or corresponding to their needs in the field. If they cannot maintain the beginning of the self or contact process as a prior state to this double identification (of who the person is in the situation and what is of interest to that identified person), they are trapped in a fixed view of both themselves in the situation and of what is interesting. In fact, they will have to rely on that fixity in order to make their figures, rather than being able to let the figures grow naturally out of the emergence of the situation (of course, it is right that sometimes I go into a situation with my self-concept and interests predetermined, yet that cannot be taken as the whole picture).

In particular, most people come to therapy because their personality functioning is fixed in a way that no longer supports them to face their current situation, *and they have not been able to re-evaluate their basic orientation in that situation*. In terms of Perls' example, the merchant cannot notice that the field is beautiful with poppies, or the farmer does not take the time to show his love for the lover who has come to visit him. It is this ability to move away from a fixed identification and to allow something new and of-the-moment to emerge that is the essential first step towards a new and more adaptive orientation. To get even more clinically specific, it boils down to a question of whether it is always meaningful to say to a client "What do you want?", a question often taken as central in some understandings of Gestalt Therapy. For the second definition of the self/contacting process, this must always be a meaningful question, and all that is

needed is to remove the blocks that prevent the client from coming to know the answer. The therapist in this situation is similarly well-defined as someone who is focusing on this question. However, for the first definition, the question we start with is “Who are you, and who am I with you?”, not as a question with a ready-made answer, but as an invitation to explore and create the answer together. This allows for the emergence of totally new personality identifications and a playfulness with possibilities. So I remember a shift with a client from working on painful childhood issues to the excitement of her having on impulse bought a violin, and another one taking up dancing.

3. The Paradoxical Theory of Change

A very common statement of Gestalt practice is Arnold Beisser’s “Paradoxical Theory of Change”. This states that “change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not” (Beisser, 1970, 88). To expand this very useful statement, the client experiences some aspects of her functioning as both problematic and out of control, and comes to the therapist to “get rid of” this “symptom” as if it was something alien. If the therapist agrees to this, he is effectively allying with the client against an unaccepted aspect of herself. If, on the other hand, the therapist helps the client to explore and own all aspects of her functioning, she can get to know all of her conflicting motivations, and come to her next step bringing all of this potential. As the late Miriam Polster said (personal communication) “What is, is; and one thing leads to another”. In the background of this theory is the Gestalt theory of organismic self-regulation, which states that, unless we interrupt ourselves, we have a capacity for awareness of and contact with what is growthful that will bring us to our best solution in the situation we are in.

The Paradoxical Theory of Change challenges the idea of the therapist as a change agent, saying rather that the therapist is an agent of contact and awareness, and that this provides the most fertile ground for the client’s own organismic self-regulation to find the change that fits her. This is of course very much the argument of this book.

However, there are situations where the Paradoxical Theory does not work, and the therapist needs to be a change agent. For the organismic self-regulation that underlies the theory to operate effectively, the client must be in reasonably good sensory contact with the

situation she is in. She must be able to see and hear the world accurately enough to self-regulate to it. A paranoid person, for example, is regulating effectively to a world where everybody is out to destroy him, but not effectively to the actual world. If the client does not have good sensory awareness, it is a task of the therapist to help her achieve this by providing specific exercises which could be in seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. These are not Gestalt experiments, in that they are geared to a specific outcome rather than to a more open process of self-discovery.

The other circumstance where the Paradoxical Theory does not work is where due to early deprivation, the client has missed out on the early neural development described by Schore (19xx) and in Chapter Three of this book. In those circumstances, which often coincide with poor sensory awareness, self-regulation is skewed by a neurologically-bound way of experiencing the world, so that, as I have described in Chapter Three, the client will always tend to make pain and disappointment figural because that is what she is “wired up” to do, and any other way of perceiving will have to be worked at and will feel unnatural and artificial for much of the first part of the therapy. The therapist will have to encourage the client to continue to open to these “unnatural” possibilities until there is a growth of new neural pathways that will support further relational development.

In either of these cases, the aim of the therapist is to put in place the prerequisites for the Paradoxical Theory of Change, and for the development of the client’s own ability to self-regulate.

4. Gestalt Therapy and Intersubjectivity

There is a strand within contemporary Gestalt theory that wishes to assimilate the intersubjectivist self-theories of Stolorow and others: see for example Tobin (1982), Jacobs & Hycner (1995). As I showed in Chapter Three, the theory of intersubjectivity is stated as “any psychological field formed by interacting worlds of experience, at whatever developmental level these worlds may be organized” (Stolorow et al., 2002, 32), which is divergent from both the Gestalt theory of self functioning and also what is becoming known through recent neurological and developmental research. It seems strange to me that the original theory is being dropped at the time it is becoming most fully supported by others outside our field!

However, the aim of those who work with this model is to counter the individualism they saw inherent in much of early Gestalt Therapy: “You do your thing and I do my thing”, and often the debate within the Gestalt world is between those who would hold the intersubjectivist position and those who hold a much more individualist position than the one I hold.

My critique of both these positions will maybe become clearer if I discuss one of the most disputed pieces of Gestalt writing, the “Gestalt Prayer”.

5. *The “Gestalt Prayer”*

I do my thing and you do your thing.
 I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
 And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
 You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other,
 it's beautiful.
 If not, it can't be helped. (Perls, 1969: cover)

At first sight, this is very much a statement of individualism. “My thing” is separate from “your thing”, and we can have no expectations from each other. And the sadness and impotence of the last line has also come under fire. Dublin (in Smith [Ed.], 1977, 142) suggests that Perls should have used his own methodology to change the “it” in the last two lines to “I”: “the implications for him might have been beautifully horrendous”.

However, let us rather read the Prayer from the perspective of this book. Then the first three and a half lines are not statements of fact, but the activity of self-actualization itself. Self is actualized in its action (“I do”), by gating the expectations of others (see the discussion of Stern’s ideas in Chapter Three) and by the ego functions at the self-other boundary of identification (“I am I”) and alienation (“you are you”). It is only by such self-actualization that the next stage, making contact (“finding each other”) is possible, but, due to the ultimate unpredictability of the field of which we are part, there are no guarantees, and disappointment at times is part of the human condition.

Furthermore, I have questioned the dichotomization of self-as-individual and self-as-part-of-field. For me, the two are inseparable dialectic processes. If self is emergent process rather than a separate

thing, so is the Earth and the Sun! We are, so to speak, one complexity loop on from a great ape, two from a dog, three from an amoeba and four from a stone. I would say that this double face of selfhood is not fully developed in Gestalt theory, though it is I think implicit.

6. Working with relationship or working with presenting issues?

Classical Gestalt Therapy has always emphasised working with the present moment as central, as I do. However, there has always been a strand of Gestalt Therapy which takes working with issues as central. In this case, it is more likely that the “empty chair” method is used as a behavioural tool, training in different ways to engage with the difficult situation, rather than the original aim of reintegration of the personality, and in particular to reintegrate the power projected onto the situation rather than owned, thus leaving the client taking the powerless pole. The aim is to help the client succeed, rather than that the client engages with her full potentialities, knowing that disappointment as well as success is also part of the human condition.

Once again, this is happening at a time when the term “the present moment” is gaining currency outside Gestalt Therapy, in particular in the writing of Daniel Stern (Stern, 2004), and the whole thrust of much of the research is on how situations are neurally processed in present time. My view, and experience, is that Gestalt Therapy works much less well as a behavioural therapy than as a therapy of integration.

Conclusion

My view therefore is that there is nothing in my theoretical or clinical approach that is incompatible with a Gestalt approach, and that it highlights questions that are under discussion between Gestalt practitioners by me presenting my own “map”. Hopefully this will encourage others to present their maps.

In particular, there are many ways to cut the Gestalt “cake”, focusing on dialogue, experiment, theory of self, awareness-raising, contact-making, phenomenology etc. Sometimes it seems to me that these are taken as separate “pillars” without much sense of the overview that links them. It is such an overview that I would encourage people to undertake. I hope this book will help people to do that.

Peter Philippon, 21 November, 2007

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