

SELF AS BEING: GESTALT AND EXISTENTIALISM

PREPARED BY JAMES LOW IN 1984-85 FOR THE SCHOOL OF
INDEPENDENT STUDIES AT NORTH EAST LONDON POLYTECHNIC

*“What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form
and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In
apprehension how like a god!”*

Shakespeare

“I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

The Unnamable, Samuel Beckett

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Existentialist psychology</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Gestalt</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>A word of caution</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>11</i>

Introduction

Being rather than becoming, or perhaps becoming by being, is the orientation shared by gestalt and existentialist psychology. In simple terms this means that there is recognition of the need to actually see what is here, what is happening right now before one passes judgment on it and tries to transform it into something else. Both approaches arose from a sense of exasperation with abstract theories and

structures, for these encourage the feeling that the goal, the reality, lies somewhere ahead of one; that one must change, adapt in specific ways in order to become 'appropriate'. For them the individual is the square peg, the system has the round hole – and because the presentation is conceptual the abstract qualities of the structure seem so much more clear and correct than the jumbled details of individual existence; so one had better adapt, conform and find fulfillment in the appropriate slot.

For both the gestalt and the existential approach, honouring the significance of one's own experience is of primary importance, not because, as in other systems, this can give insights into hidden aspects of the psyche, causal experiences of childhood etc. but rather because these experiences are important in themselves. The manifestation is its own meaning, it is not a symbol of anything else. By being what one 'is', by being fully in the moment, one knows the totality, for it is complete and fully present here and now. With this integrity it becomes natural to develop sincere relationships with others by the authentic sharing of that being.

These are the ideas that will be presented and discussed here and the presentation will be direct and hopefully free of reliance on abstract conceptual justifications. What is, is true because it is; and if it is not something that isn't (i.e. isn't here, now, present) that is of no true matter. True means authentic, not false to itself. An experience, a moment, is true because of the authenticity of being experienced in it, even if from the standpoint of external judgment many errors and faults might be identified, for no moaning transcends the individual experience. Structural 'truths' are dead until brought to life by an individual's commitment to them. That two and two equals four has significance *only* because people accept it as true.

Thus if someone says '*I am God*' and really feels it then it is true for them even if the connotations such a statement may evoke for another are very different from what might be perceived as our own life situation. It is true if it is filled from the inside, by the purity of one's feeling and perception of it, quite independent of its capacity to fit into any conceptual structure, be it social, logical or whatever.

And the statement is false if as an experience its energy is too little or too much; if stated as a cover for shyness or an excuse for megalomania. The statement, '*I am a man*' is existentially false if I feel and act like a mouse - though in biological and social terms it might be quite true.

Existentialist psychology

Existentialism as an attitude of mind has three main modes of expression: philosophy, literature and psychology. There is no space to give a survey of these here and neither would there be any meaning to it – indeed it is a great insult to this approach to life to give it the kiss of death of a structural interpretation. Why? Because it can only be understood by feeling it, by entering into its spirit. All the approaches that are concerned with self-knowledge rather than self-presentation are in fact existential, in deed if not in word. However if they operate with a fixed and preconceived notion of what that self is, then from an existentialist point of view, they have made their quest impossible. To search for a goal outside the present state of oneself is to alienate oneself from what is occurring. It is to state that reality is

elsewhere. And thus since one must start from here, one commences inauthentically and this taint perverts one's whole experience so that the pure goal remains pure and remains a goal. It never becomes the flesh and blood experience of a present reality.

The principle enemy in the existential view is pretence, being inauthentic by not acknowledging one's feelings and not expressing them. This can occur due to individual fear of what is one's own state and/or because of the pressure to conform to social roles and patterns. The individual expects to be 'normal'. He expects it of others, and he feels that expectation coming from them. 'Normal' of course means fitting the norms, the accepted average patterns - and with so much attention focused on becoming an acceptable human being, one who knows 'what to do' in every situation, there is little time and attention left for looking at what is actually occurring.

As Freud and many others have shown the conscious self is most energetic in maintaining its territory and self-image, in having a wide variety of walls and moats to defend its limits and to ignore what is too disturbing.

For the existentialist this mode of behaviour is fundamentally dissatisfying, for it is living a lie. Better to know the devil than dream of god, for only in felt knowledge, true felt experience, is there meaning in life - all the rest is just deception, fantasy, inauthenticity. This of course is to spit in the face of the socialization processes and all the cultural institutions that back them up - which of course gives rise to an ample flow of official condemnation.

Setting oneself apart from the general attitudes of society also serves to reinforce one's feeling of alienation, isolation, aloneness. In feeling cut off from ordinary patterns of interpretation one comes to feel the absurdity of all these tasks, patterns, pleasures, sufferings that are part of social life. Since they are performed from the false motive of conformity they are inauthentic, meaningless. Yet the scornful attitude adopted by existential writers is itself an inauthentic attitude, one that has lost its balance in wishing to establish clear-cut right and wrongs and generalised interpretations.

To be authentic is to accept the absoluteness of one's individual state, the aloneness of being - to be *me* is to be *me* alone, it is an inner experience of feeling. It is an unwarranted presumption to imagine that the being of others is the same as one's own, to generalise a pattern, to create a structure of common humanness. Indeed the existential psychologist would see that as a way of avoiding a direct confrontation with one's being.

For 'being' is both a state and a content. If we describe someone we know well, or read a well defined characterisation in a novel we are aware of enough information to get quite a rounded picture of that person, to develop a feeling of them. Yet that is not how they would feel to themselves, even if they could recount no more significant details than we could about them. The content is not given individual significance just by the unique patterning of the personality but by the fact that each individual is alone in the act of experiencing and so it is inalienably their own experience.

This is the main point of the existentialist approach, for on the other hand if one is concerned only with the details of the patterning and quantity and quality of content, of psychological events, then one becomes a manipulator of well defined situations. By getting to know all the factors that are operating and by adjusting the points of disharmony some sort of personally acceptable, socially well-adjusted pattern may be attained, but then one's sense of self is as abstract and objective as the world one perceives. This is the position, though here rather crudely expressed, of all the behaviourist schools.

The existentialist however, sees the fact of existence as of primary importance, the state of being aware that *'I am'*. To paraphrase Descartes, *'I am therefore I am'*. I don't have to prove I am, I don't have to think about it, I am, I experience myself; right now, here, at this moment I am - and I am as much now as I will ever be. Being knows no development or change, it just is, How it is, how it expresses itself is the area of content, of thoughts, feelings, words, actions - all the varieties of human existence. Yet if the basic level of being is lost sight of due to intoxication with content, its manipulation, editing and skillful presentation, then the individual is living inauthentically.

So the existential psychologist tries to help people to stop deceiving themselves with false concepts of who and what they are and, instead of creating a better self-image as something to present to both themselves and the world, to explore as honestly as possible what they actually are, here and now. The psychotherapist has no preconceived notion of how a person should think, live or feel only that they should think, live and feel fully in a way that is true to their own being, that resonates right to their depths without falsity or pretence.

The psychotherapist is also endeavouring to live in that way himself, to be present, honest, open. For psychotherapy is seen as a meaningful encounter between two subjects, not between a subject and an object. Both must remain true to their own being for the subjective experiences of both are crucially important. There is here no notion of behaviour shaping or conditioning responses. There is no expert or controller, for no one can be an expert at living someone else's life.

Of course in trying to live authentically the individual may well find that what feels correct and honest for him is considered to be wrong, immoral, intolerable etc, by friends, family, workmates, society at large. This has led to various forms of compromise developing in the practice of existential psychotherapy. Yet fundamentally being true to being is more important than being socially acceptable. For if one is false to oneself then who is it who is experiencing the social acceptance? Thus from this point of view it would be 'better' (that is to say more authentic), to for example, declare oneself a homosexual even in an area where this was likely to provoke a violent response rather than to sit quietly and pretend to be straight.

Gestalt

There is a gestalt psychology and there is also a gestalt psychotherapy. The former developed in Europe in the early part of this century and its primary focus was on making sense of the process of perception in particular, and mental life in general.

David Katz in his book *'Gestalt Psychology'*, first published in 1942, quotes Wertheimer's statement that, "*A Gestalt is a whole whose characteristics are determined, not by the characteristics of its individual elements, but by the internal nature of the whole.*" Thus in a gestalt if any one part or aspect of it is changed then all the other parts will be altered too. This is different from a compound or collection which is a sum of independent pieces which can be arranged together without effecting a change in the qualities of any one of them.

Thus a gestalt is a dynamic 'organic' whole and this form of psychology rejects atomistic, associationist, mechanical and reflexological attitudes. Accepting a phenomenological approach, behaviourism is rejected and there is an acceptance that positivism cannot explain much that lies beyond what is purely factual – for example, the meaningful nature of mental processes.

However European gestalt psychology despite its dynamic, process-orientation was still very much concerned to discover the nature and degree of influence of physiological factors on mental functioning. It was essentially a school of experimental psychology concerned to discover principles and laws by means of scientific procedures. There was little interest in therapy since it was held that until the laws were clearly established one could not be sure where one was going nor what the effects of the psychological interventions would be.

The system of gestalt psychotherapy that has been developing, primarily in the USA during the last thirty years is a continuation of the dynamic concerns of the earlier European gestalt school but with a much more definite existential commitment to what is happening for the individual. Thus the earlier interest in determining experimentally and scientifically what was happening to the individual by statistical examination of responses to indicate 'verifiable' norms was abandoned in favour of focusing on the individual in his on-going quest for the meaning of his lived existence.

I say 'lived' existence in order to emphasise that the meaning of life, according to gestalt psychotherapy, is in life itself, in what the individual experiences his life as being. Thus it is not as if we live in confusion doing our daily bit, trying to make sense of things while somehow the 'meaning of life' is hovering in the sky above us, out of reach and by implication making all that we do quite meaningless. Rather the meaning lies in the gestalt, in the dynamic interdependent whole of our existence — and this whole is to be found in the 'here and now', right in the present moment.

The actuality of memories and hopes is that they exist in the present even if their content indicates other times and places. To imagine oneself anywhere but here and now is to entertain deception, to be inauthentic — and the price of that is stress, suffering and dissatisfaction. There is no denial of biological existence. We are present here and now in our bodies.

[Fritz Perls](#)¹ in an article on *Gestalt Therapy and Human Potentialities* says “*Gestalt therapy is fully ontological in that it recognises both conceptual activity and the biological formation of Gestalten. It is thus self-supporting and truly experiential*”. I will quote him further here since he is one of the ‘founding fathers’ of modern gestalt though we would do a grave injustice to the values of this approach if we were to see any statements about it as ‘authoritative’ or dogmatic; as having any general validity over and above the fact that some individuals may like the ideas and choose freely to incorporate them into their own gestalt.

“Our aim as therapists is to increase human potential through the process of integration. We do this by supporting the individual’s genuine interests, desires and needs.

Many of the individual’s needs contend with those of society. Competitiveness, need for control, demands for perfection, and immaturity are characteristic of our current culture. Out of this background emerge both the curse and the cause of our neurotic social behaviour. In such a context no psychotherapy can be successful; no unsatisfactory marriage can be improved. But, more importantly, the individual is unable to dissolve his own inner conflicts and to achieve integration.

Conflicts extend to the external as well. In demanding identification and submission to a self-image, society’s neurotic expectations further dissociate the individual from his own nature. The first and last problem for the individual is to integrate within and yet be accepted by society”.

There is thus a clear acceptance that there is nowhere to run to, no escape that does not involve falsity and self-betrayal. Since many of the forms of social existence are so corrupt, it is immoral not to be alienated. Yet the individual must not let the justifiable and perhaps worthy separation from social attitudes become internalised as a process of being cut off from his own true feelings. To become a martyr to principles is merely to continue the rejected process of outer socialisation on the inner level as an inflexible allegiance to conceptual interpretations, standpoints, and dogmas. To seek security in outer conformity or inner certainty is to lose the authentic reality of being present, being in the moment, open, loose, dynamic, in touch with one’s feelings and with anything that may occur.

No structures inner or outer can be trusted, for if such a structure of social roles or inner beliefs, is invested with power then some amount of power is depleted from the individual as a ‘present’ being. It is as if by relying on these formalised modes the individual loses his own groundedness, becomes uncentered and vulnerable - as if having removed both skin and skeleton he becomes a snail, forever hiding within the burden of his protective shell.

Gestalt therapy seeks to aid the individual to free himself from the false security of fixed patterns so that instead of having his energy dispersed over the various props

¹ Friedrich (Frederick) Salomon Perls (July 8 1893, Berlin - March 14, 1970, Chicago), better known as Fritz Perls

on which his self-image relies, he is able to experience himself fully just as he is. This naked vision can be very daunting indeed for it contains many aspects that the person has been trained to disguise or ignore and so the process of its unfoldment has to be facilitated with great sensitivity.

The therapist has no conceptual vision of where the person 'should' be going but rather tries to harmonise with their energy and feel the blockages with the client, exploring them until they are familiar and ripe enough to burst open and release a little more of the spontaneous energy of life. So it is a non-dogmatic approach with the individual slowly moving from reliance on props that actually diminish his energy, to trust in himself with the accompanying feeling of fulfillment, of continuously realising his potential, of being whole. In life there are so many questions, and so many experts with so many answers. We often ask ourselves, *'Where does the answer lie?'* Yet Barry Stevens in *'Don't Push the River'* makes this response: *"The answer lies in the person who answers. I like that 'lies'. It is a lie if anyone thinks he has the right answer, He has only his own answer."*

Another quote from Stevens' book should help to illustrate this:

"Fritz (Perls) was giving a demonstration in a high school auditorium. A fellow got up and made the usual announcements about no smoking, fire regulations, and so on. After the demonstration, a young woman asked Fritz, who had smoked all through, as usual, 'What right do you have to go on smoking, when some of us have our tongues out for a cigarette?' Fritz said 'I don't have the right to, and I don't have the right not to — I just do it.' Young woman: 'But suppose you get thrown out?' Fritz: 'I get thrown out.' Horrors! All those people looking at me as a person being thrown out. I never fully understand introjection and projection, so I may be wrong, but it seems to me that I have introjected the notion that it is bad to be thrown out and then project this on others. For of course I don't know how many of those people might have looked at me that way, and how many might have envied me for doing what I wanted to do regardless - plus other notions which I haven't thought of. When I am centered in myself, none of them matter."

For me, the principal point demonstrated here is that freedom, completeness, correctness, are feelings. They are states of being and they are the property of the individual alone. What is appropriate is what feels right. This of course calls for great sensitivity for if the sense of 'what feels right' is at all crude, inauthentic or habitual then it will end up as a prop for selfishness and self-indulgence. In claiming freedom to be oneself one must allow just such a freedom to others.

The gestalt view involves an implicit belief that authenticity of being carries an automatic spontaneity of action that is *always* appropriate. Now appropriate in this context does not mean that other people will be continually praising the suitability, correctness and niceness of ones actions, for the authenticity of gestalt is not the least concerned with performance. The action is appropriate because it arises from a deep-rooted yet non-defensive confidence. Being authentic, one has full trust in oneself, one is aware of what is going on; one accepts responsibility for one's actions because one knows where they are coming from.

If one is living inauthentically then one is under the sway of habitual responses and unrecognised patterns in one's mental life – and so one is often unsure why one is acting the way one is, especially when others hold one to be fully responsible. For the inauthentic person to be 'appropriate' in action he must try to conform to the rules of correct behaviour imbedded in his psyche in childhood and also assess the expectations of the social context he is functioning in. And so he is involved in manipulating himself and others, presenting himself in the most acceptable way and encouraging their collusion in this process. This kind of appropriateness needs the seal of other's approval and self's habits. If there is newness or uncertainty the action becomes dangerous and the actor looks for further props.

In contrast, in the gestalt position of personal authenticity there is trust in ones intention to be open and responsive and so the energy that arises and results in an action is complete in itself and requires nothing from other to make acceptable - it accepts itself and that is the only real acceptance that there is.

Gestalt is not the least concerned with either maximising the efficiency of a conscious ego nor of controlling the wayward impulses of the unconscious. It does not work within a framework of preconceived structures nor does it seek to develop such concepts. The therapist is effective not by virtue of being an expert interpreter of phenomena and guide to "normality". He is not the master of any process into which he wishes to introduce the client in order to improve him, rather he (or she) is an expert at being himself, at being authentic. Via a commitment to self-honesty he has confronted his perverting habits and programmes and has come to a state of completeness, integrity, authenticity. If this has not been accomplished he is a 'gestalt therapist' in name only for without that wholeness of being his habit-conditioned responses will keep hooking into the emotions and experiences that his client reveals. Clarity will be lost and he will be unable to give enough space for the client to bring up and dissolve their patterns of response. By remaining authentic at all times and not just in therapy situations the gestalt therapist endeavours to remain clear about what is occurring for himself so that that clarity will mirror back to the client the projects and expectations that the client is seeking to maintain and develop by seeing them reaffirmed in the responses of other.

Thus the gestalt therapist is not trying to impose any pattern on his client but to give them the space to strip off the dead skin of past experiences and feel fresh and alive to what is actually happening for them in the here and now. Being itself is non-conceptual; it is the state of consciousness that is self-aware, present and not so immersed in its own content that it can't see the wood for the trees. It is the host to the dynamic unfolding of its own energy which manifests as thoughts, memories, feelings, emotions etc. But even in trying to clarify in words what it is, one actually creates illusions about it since it offers no angles nor corners by which one can get hold of it - it is something to be *experienced* by the individual for it is *himself*. The mirror cannot look at itself.

Of course the picture for the person starting in gestalt therapy is quite different. He feels himself to be a vulnerable entity in need of defenses and escape routes so that he can avoid confronting things that are too dangerous or scary. In gestalt the path to unfoldment of being is the taking of risks, of going through one's own barriers and

limitations with eyes wide open. Or at least as wide as one can manage comfortably - for gestalt is a client-centered approach in which the client sets his own pace.

At the beginning of a course of therapy and even at the beginning of each session the client will make a contract with the therapist (and with the group if it is a group situation) regarding how much power to probe and uncover he wishes to grant the therapist. And if the therapist feels that the client is not prepared to take enough risks to make any real progress then he might tell the client that the process is not working and so should be terminated.

This form of therapy is always and on all levels a meeting of two human beings and its power and value derives from the respect for the meaning of each other's being that should be present at all times. By his insistence on his own value (but not superiority), the therapist refuses to allow the client to treat him as an object. And when there is no object to relate to there is no means to hide behind habitual actions. For the person that the therapist is, demands a subjective sensitivity in the client, an openness to what is unfolding. By loosening the idea of other as object, as a coat-hanger for projections of role-expectations etc. the self also is appreciated in a more dynamic way, for as its defensive positions are exposed as functionally useless, like the emperor's new clothes, so there develops a sense of confidence in the appropriateness of its responsive creativity.

A word of caution

Although I have written this in a positive, demonstrative style in order to give a sense of how these two approaches suggest we can conduct ourselves in all aspects of our lives there are certain dangers of interpretation that should be pointed out.

In contrast to the 'pure' consciousness written of by Descartes, existentialism and gestalt deal with an 'impure' consciousness, one that is always engaged in the external world and that is modified in all kinds of different ways by its presence in a world of things. 'Being here' is being here in the world - it is not a metaphysical absolute for it is a whole, a gestalt, by the purity or totality of its acceptance of what is occurring rather than by being a simple state or substance devoid of any extraneous matter, Authentic being is experienced as total, whole, gestalt because it has a capacity to handle whatever is occurring, because it can integrate with whatever situation arises. It is salvation in the world, with the world, even as the world, rather than salvation from the world.

Yet the very intensity and satisfaction of the experience of authentic being has led some writers in the transpersonal psychology movement to use it as the basis for developing a metaphysical system of transcendence. Thus Ken Wilber in *'Up from Eden'* takes such experiences as proof of the spiritual nature of man, which can be developed by means of other methods. This is to posit some kind of 'super-being', 'transcendent being' that goes beyond authentic being and although he talks of a 'spectrum of consciousness' the actual effect is to introduce a polarity of now and later, of temporary achievements and absolute goals. In the name of praising the achievement of gestalt he actually negates it. For gestalt is concerned with the natural totality of each moment, it is dynamic rather than mechanistic and it opposes

these 'spiritual, transcendent' interpretations just as it implicitly rejects body-mind splits, conscious-unconscious splits or any other kind of splits.

That was a danger of misinterpretation from without but there is also a danger of misinterpretation from within. For the existentialist or gestalt psychotherapist is only a facilitator – he cannot decide what is true and valid for another individual but can only help the person to confront his or her own limitations. The only seal of approval worth having is one's own - yet how can one be sure that one is in touch with the authentic self and not just another ego defense in disguise? This is tremendously important. Trusting oneself means trusting the strength of absolute nakedness, of stripping off the layers of habit and formal self-confidence, of stripping and stripping till all props are dispersed with and the self can feel its own integrity, its natural, innate completeness.

Gestalt believes that such a state is attainable and it may well be but the possibilities of self-deception are obviously very great – especially since the complex patterns of social life do not suddenly cease to operate when a person embarks on this course of self-discovery. Abandoning the habitual responses by which he functioned in society the person is encouraged to take risks and to trust the spontaneous appropriateness of his actions - yet others still judge and still have power and the least self-doubt can turn naked awareness into uncertain vulnerability in the face of a suddenly very real objective world.

Existential states are not identical with descriptive conditions. Thus one may feel rich, powerful, complete yet if one's external condition as available to the observation of others does not reflect that feeling then the social interpretation will focus on the contradiction, accept the truth of one's social condition and call one's feelings of well-being a fantasy. The happy beggar is seen as a beggar who may be happy and not as a happy man who just happens to be a beggar. So though the vision of gestalt may be most inspiring, the dangers inherent in its practical application should not be minimised.

Conclusion

I hope here to have given a taste of the flavour of these two closely aligned approaches. Definitions are clearly impossible when one of the guiding motifs is "lose your head and come to your senses." There has to be a creative jump, a leap out of habitual thought patterns, in order that the self has enough space and sense of freedom and choice to appreciate this fresh approach to living.

Existentialism and gestalt are paths for learning to become in touch with oneself and to trust the messages coming from within in preference to the patterns coming from outside and to the externals that have been internalised in the socialisation process. '*Relax, trust myself.*' How difficult it is for the 'normal' person to do *this*, for there has been such a vast investment in learning the right things to do, finding out how to please others, how to adapt oneself to the current fashions in dress, food, work, religion, etc., etc., etc. How difficult to stop admiring one's sand castle and become aware of the sand.

Gestalt says, 'Trying is lying.' If you have to force yourself to do something then it is probably inappropriate, so stop trying. Get a sense of yourself and then look again at the task and see just how valid it is given your own actual situation. No distracting oneself with fine intellectual theories and well-thought out explanations and justifications. For where is the person, the living human being, in the midst of all these words? Gestalt is the whole – the whole experience of the whole of life for the whole person.

Experiences happen in the here and now - if I'm happy I'm happy now or not at all. And nothing in the world can change my happiness now.

BE HERE NOW - WONDERFUL!

References

- Bugental, James F T: *Challenges of Humanistic Psychology*. (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1967)
- Bugental, James F T: *The Search for Authenticity*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965)
- Katz, David: *Gestalt Psychology*. (London: Methuen, 1951)
- Perls, Frederick S: *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. (Utah: Real People Press, 1969)
- Perls, Frederick S: *In and Out of the Garbage Pail*. (Utah: Real People Press, 1969)
- Stevens, Barry: *Don't Push the River*. (Utah: Real People Press, 1970)
- Stevens, John O. (Ed.): *Gestalt is*. (Utah: Real People Press, 1975)