

## **Gestalt: A New Idiosyncratic Introduction**

by John Bernard Harris

Note: The Manchester Gestalt Centre has for years published a booklet called *An Idiosyncratic Introduction to Gestalt*. By way of a taster, I offer here some selected chapters.

### **Introduction: Introducing Gestalt**

When people learn that I am a Gestalt therapist, they usually ask me to explain what Gestalt therapy is. This is not an easy a task, for several reasons.

First and foremost, Gestalt therapy is about human experience and so the best way to understand what it means is 'experientially' - by trying it out for yourself.

My second difficulty lies in trying to summarise a therapy of great complexity and subtlety in a few choice words. If they exist, I haven't discovered them.

The third problem is that you, the reader, are naturally interested in having me tell you exactly what a Gestalt therapist does with his client. This is hard to describe, not because it is necessarily complex or difficult to understand, but because it is unpredictable. As we work together, my clients and I follow our moment-to-moment experiences, and neither of us knows exactly where they will take us.

Furthermore, the range of possible therapeutic encounters, interactions, interventions and experiments is potentially infinite. As a therapist I live on my wits, sometimes knowing where the work is going, sometimes not. In so doing, I rely heavily on my spontaneity, inventiveness and *present-centredness*. Indeed, it's precisely this creative and innovative aspect of Gestalt therapy that I find challenging and exciting - and sometimes a bit scary. But then, as the analyst Wilfred Bion said, if there are not at times two frightened people in the therapy room, we will only find out what everyone already knows.

Nevertheless, because I am eager for people to know more about Gestalt, I am going to explain some of its basic ideas and practices in a simple and straightforward way. My main hope is that in reading this book you will find your interest stimulated, and want to find out more about Gestalt in an experiential way, perhaps by going to a 'taster', or some other Gestalt group. Your own experience will then instruct you better than any words of mine can ever do. You will then be in a position to test the truth or falsity of the famous statement by Fritz Perls that: 'the Gestalt outlook is the original, undistorted, natural approach to life: that is, to man's thinking, acting, feeling.'

### **Setting the Scene**

Gestalt therapy is one of the main approaches to practical psychology - i.e. psychotherapy - which have been developed in this century. Though it originally developed in the United States, it has spread widely, and there are now Gestalt practitioners all over the world. It can be carried out 'one-to-one' with individuals, with couples, in small and large groups, and with families. In this opening chapter, I am going to provide some historical background.

There have been three important *streams* of psychotherapy this century, each of which has its own theory of human nature. The first approach comes from Sigmund Freud, and is known as psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Freud's first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, burst upon

an unsuspecting public in 1900, and his ideas were revolutionary. Freud viewed human beings as motivated by and influenced by unconscious sexual and other drives we can do little to control. He introduced the idea of 'the unconscious', a part of our minds which profoundly influences our behaviour, yet about which we know nothing - before analysis, of course. We owe the main idea of psychotherapy practice, the 'talking treatment', to him, although he saw analysis as being primarily about understanding, rather than changing ourselves.

The second stream of thought in the early part of the century is behaviourism. Some of the psychologists who developed it were Pavlov, Watson and Skinner. Behaviourists are interested in the ways in which we can control or modify human behaviour by controlling the environment - in effect, setting up systems of rewards and punishments. Their emphasis was on 'observable behaviour' and they were very little interested in our inner life. More recently, behaviourism has developed into the more sophisticated form of cognitive psychology and psychotherapy, which is still mostly practised by psychologists.

The 'third force', as the psychologist Abraham Maslow called it, has its roots in existential and other 'humanistic' philosophies. It arose mid-century as a reaction to psychoanalytic and behaviourist views of human nature, which many people felt to be reductionistic and deterministic. Humanistic therapists, as this group have become known, sought to take a more optimistic view of human potentialities which stressed our natural tendency towards growth and self-development - in the right conditions, of course. Humanistic psychotherapies thus put the patient back in the centre of the frame, making us the stars of our own movies, so to speak, and giving us a crucial and necessary role in our growth and development.

Gestalt therapy is but one of many psychotherapies which have developed from this broad humanist tradition in the second half of the century. Others include Transactional Analysis, whose founder was Eric Berne, and the whole client-centred counselling movement, which was developed by Carl Rogers.

As a Gestalt therapist, my humanistic roots are important to me. If I cannot see what is growthful and creative in my clients, how can they be expected to see it for themselves? Unless I believe that they are 'self-actualising', capable of changing themselves and their lives should they wish to do so, then why are we working together? For me, therapy is about people taking charge of their lives, and becoming 'whole' rather than split or fragmented people.

In the next section, I will tell you a little bit about the lives of some of the people who created 'Gestalt Therapy'.

### **A Brief History of Gestalt Therapy**

The story of Gestalt therapy begins with Frederick ('Fritz') Perls. Perls was born in Berlin in 1893, and lived in Germany until 1933. He trained as a medical doctor, and then set up in practice as a neuropsychiatrist.

In 1926 he moved to Frankfurt, which then had a exciting intellectual environment. Here Perls became interested in Gestalt psychology, and existentialist philosophy. The former emphasised the ways in which human beings actively construct their experiences; the latter was interested in questions of free will and personal responsibility.

Another student of both Gestalt psychology and existentialism who attended the same lectures was Fritz's future wife, Lore (later Laura) Posner. They married in 1929. Their intellectual partnership and the personal love-hate chemistry between them played a major part in the development of Gestalt.

While in Frankfurt, Fritz worked at the Institute for Brain Damaged soldiers run by Kurt Goldstein. Goldstein noticed that if one part of a person is injured, the whole person is affected, and he came to view human beings holistically as a result. He had a major influence on Fritz's developing ideas.

Fritz underwent a 'training analysis', and when he returned to Berlin in 1928 he began to work as a certified Freudian analyst. Freud was a major influence on both the young analysts, and his theory was the launch pad for the new system that Fritz and Laura were to work out. Like many other important figures in the development of psychotherapy (Jung, Adler, Reich), Fritz and Laura began their original thinking by modifying Freud's ideas. Fritz at first idealised Freud, and once arranged to meet him, wanting to share his new ideas. But Freud only saw him briefly, leaving Fritz angry and disappointed and, we might guess, determined to show the old so-and-so what he could do.

Another more personal influence on Fritz Perls was Wilhelm Reich. Fritz underwent a training analysis with him, and afterwards said that he was the therapist who influenced him most. In particular, Fritz was interested in Reich's approach to the role of the body in therapy, and Gestalt developed as a body-oriented therapy as a result.

The rise of Fascism saw the Perls' moving to South Africa, where they established successful psychoanalytic practices. Perls became familiar with the work of Jan Smuts, from whom they took many ideas about the holistic nature of people and the interconnectedness of all things with each other and with their environment.

During the 1940's Fritz and Laura worked out the ideas for the first major work of Gestalt therapy (though it was not called that yet), *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*. This took ideas from a large number of sources, and blended them into a new approach to therapy called 'concentration therapy'. Though a joint venture, the book was mostly written by Fritz, and appeared under his name.

After the war, Fritz and Laura moved to the United States, and lived in New York. There they met many interesting people, including Paul Goodman, who became the third main founder of the Gestalt approach. Goodman was a gay activist, and a communitarian anarchist, and very interested - as were both Fritz and Laura - in writing and the arts. It was he whom Fritz approached a couple of years later, along with a professor of psychology called Ralph Hefferline, to develop some notes and ideas into the first major work of Gestalt theory, *Gestalt Therapy - Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, which was published in 1951.

There was a great debate about what the new therapy should be called: Laura felt that calling it 'Gestalt' would annoy the Gestalt psychologists, which it did. But this was the name which was eventually chosen and which remains today.

After the publication of this important but rather obscure work, Fritz and Laura founded the Gestalt Institute of New York, and Fritz began to travel widely spreading Gestalt therapy throughout the USA and the world. Institutes began to spring up, and today there are many, not only in the USA, but also in the UK, and in South America, Western and Eastern Europe, Asia and Australia and New Zealand.

Fritz and Laura eventually separated, and Fritz began to absorb new influences, including ideas from Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism. Different approaches to thinking about and doing Gestalt developed in consequence, and this wide variety of styles and thinking about Gestalt has continued to this day, with some practitioners being influenced by Fritz and his flamboyant style, and others favouring Laura with her quieter approach. Fritz died in 1970, and Laura continued to live and work in New York until her death in 1990.

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## **Chapter 2: Organising Ourselves**

Any psychotherapy has behind it a psychology. This is a theory, explicit or implicit, about what makes human beings tick. In the previous chapter, we outlined some of the principles of Gestalt therapy, which were based on ideas from Gestalt psychology.

Another of the perspectives taken by Gestalt therapy is a biological one. This considers human beings as organisms existing in an environment. In this chapter I will spell out why this point of view is important for Gestalt therapy.

### **The Organism-environment Field**

My present physical environment includes air to breathe, a chair to support my body, music on the stereo, and a room temperature of about sixty degrees. Looking out of my office window, I can see trees being blown by a blustery wind.

Of course, this is far from being a full description of my present environment. Such a description would contain many more physical factors, and just as many psychological ones (I am feeling a little sad today), and socio-cultural ones (I am a white middle-class man).

In Gestalt we call the whole complex and many-faceted system of 'me-now-in-relation-to-my-environment' my 'organism-environment field'. The sudden outburst of hyphens is significant, and meant to indicate that the organism (or person) is intimately connected with their environment, and cannot really be separated from it. When I breathe it is air around me that I breathe. When I am sad, it is an absent friend about whom I am sad. My writing this book is based on my expectation that someone will read and enjoy it. In short: no aspect of my behaviour and experience can exist except in relation to the organism/environment field of which I am a part.

Fritz Perls puts it beautifully:

No individual is self-sufficient; the individual can exist only in an environmental field. The individual is inevitably, at every moment, a part of some field. His behaviour is a function of the total field, which includes both him and his environment.

As a human organism, then, I am always intimately connected with my environment, totally dependent on it, and in constant interaction with it. The words I am using are not adequate to express this relationship, because they might be taken to imply that I and my environment are in theory separable, albeit 'connected' in practice. But this is not the case. My existence as a human person is not only impossible but literally unthinkable except in relation to my environment. I am not merely 'in' the organism-environment field, but wholly 'of' it.

The relationship between me and my environment is so close and all-embracing that it is sometimes hard to say where I end and my environment begins. To illustrate this, you have only to think of the simple act of breathing, and the intimate relationship between lungs and air that is involved in inhaling and exhaling.

One important feature of organism-environment contact which is clearly shown when we think of breathing, is that in contact something crosses the boundary between me and the world. There is an exchange between organism and environment. For example: if I breathe, my blood stream is oxygenated and superfluous gases are exhaled. And if I eat, food passes from my plate into my stomach, where the nourishing bits of it are assimilated, and the waste expelled.

Sometimes, as in these two cases, it is matter or energy that is exchanged. But often it is information, as when I look at the clock, or create some more sentences for you to read. The energy or information continually passes to and from across the boundary between me and my environment.

The point of all this activity is simple: human maintenance and growth in the environmental field. Let me explain in more detail...

Here the extracts end. I hope you have enjoyed them. You'll have to get the book to read more... **Gestalt: A New Idiosyncratic Introduction** is published in January 2003, and costs £5 plus P&P

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