Some years ago, I had the opportunity informally to mentor a young psychologist, psychoanalytically oriented, who had come to study under a legendary senior analyst at Cleveland’s Psychoanalytic Institute. One day, we were discussing the differences between the self-in-isolation Psychoanalytic model and Gestalt therapy’s interpersonal field model of shame, when she offered a telling observation: the students in her training program, who collectively revered their teacher as “a master therapist,” were not infrequently shamed in class for their own theoretical errors and practical insufficiencies. I chided my friend gently about the paradox posed by this implicit incongruity. She conceded the paradox, and asked my thoughts on the matter, to which I replied: “Brilliant teacher; flawed model.”

I was left with a similar reaction upon reading Todd Burley’s “A...
Phenomenologically Based Theory of Personality.” The breadth and depth of Burley’s mastery of his material can hardly be questioned. His reasoning is precise, his logic sound, and his writing lucid. His intention of constructing a phenomenologically based theory of personality is admirably ambitious, and points to an important frontier of Gestalt theory development. The dissonance, for me, comes from Burley’s presumption that Gestalt therapy theory can best further its development by aligning itself with mainstream psychology’s tradition and standards of theory development and research.

I disagree, and to set a proper context of my remarks, I must concede at the outset that I am using Burley’s article as a bit of a soapbox. My real issue is not so much with this article in particular, as with a certain kind of thinking and theorizing that has threaded its way through Gestalt therapy’s developmental history. I must also acknowledge that by raising my objections, I am entering a debate that has long standing in the Gestalt therapy literature, variously framed as Perls versus Goodman, Fritz versus Lore, or “old Gestalt” versus “new Gestalt.” But Burley’s article, precisely because of its internal consistency and the transparency of his framework, offers an opportunity to further the discussion by clarifying the divergence of underlying assumptions.

Georges Wollants (2010) says it best, when he points out that Gestalt therapy’s seminal text, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman’s (PHG) Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality (1951), has long admitted to a “double reading.” This double reading reflects the text’s strange and inconsistent interweaving of biological metaphors (the legacy of Perls’s Ego, Hunger and Aggression: A Revision of Freud’s Theory and Method, 1947) and phenomenological field theory (the product of Goodman’s familiarity with European existential-phenomenological thinking). Failing to appreciate fully the widely divergent implications of such different modes of thinking, Gestalt therapy writing has often bode forth a confusing intermixture of models and propositions. Speaking emphatically on behalf of the phenomenological inclinations of Gestalt therapy, Wollants (2010) puts it this way:

It stands reason on its head that the later writers who developed the theory of Gestalt therapy should prefer a model like homeostatic self-regulation to the situational characterisation of person-world relations as striving for self-realisation, which takes all parts of the whole into account and addresses the requirements of the total situation. The main reason for the ambiguity of the PHG text is that Goodman himself elaborates on Perls’s homeostatic model, in which the interdependency of organism and environment is described and contact is reduced to the correction of a disturbed balance. In contrast with the many authors who put forward the principle of a
quasi automatic auto-regulation, Goodman proposed a model of a contacting process that deals with the given of the situation on the basis of an awareness of what the situation demands as a whole and the realisation of the best possible form of contact between person and environment. (p. 3)

These two models – homeostatic self-regulation, and situational person-world relations – derive from very different philosophical foundations, and as such are fundamentally incompatible. The homeostatic self-regulation model derives from the philosophical tradition of positivistic realism, with its embrace of natural scientific methodology, whereas the situational person-world relations model derives from existential-phenomenological field theory, which embraces a more qualitative and descriptive methodology of investigation (Giorgi, 1970). I contend that Burley’s proposed theory of personality, in spite of his explicit intention of generating a phenomenologically based theory, follows more closely the first path, expressing the stream of Gestalt therapy thinking that derives from philosophical realism. With Wollants, I believe that the second route is more congruent with the original insights and discoveries of Gestalt therapy, and that for Gestalt therapy to fulfill its promise and potential as a paradigm-challenging, radical humanism, it must espouse, embrace, clarify, and develop the implicit phenomenology of its seminal formulation.

Burley’s theory of personality fails as a phenomenological investigation on several critical counts, which I will elaborate in turn. The first is that he conceptualizes the Contact Cycle model in essentially biological, need-reduction terms and uses this model to explain reductively human psychological functioning. The second is that he appeals to mainstream scientific methodology as the appropriate arbiter for furthering Gestalt therapy theory. In my view, both aspects of Burley’s approach violate essential criteria for a phenomenologically based elaboration of Gestalt therapy theory.

1. The Reductive Use of a Biological Model: Merleau-Ponty’s Argument Against

The first important way in which Burley’s theory fails a basic test of phenomenology is its use of biological processes and metaphors to express and explain essentially human psychological phenomena. He builds his theory on the core idea, taken from PHG, that “the person has a tendency to form and complete Gestalten evoked by organismically based needs and interests” (emphasis in original). He concretizes this idea in the format of a homeostatically conceived, need-reduction version of the Gestalt Contact Cycle model. To his credit, it is clear from Burley’s elaboration of this premise that he intends to
do justice to the full range of human behavior and meaning-making, and ultimately to show that human personality and psychopathology can be framed in terms of the unfolding and interruptions of experience. Indeed, the intent of his project is genuinely, and admirably, phenomenological. It falls short of this objective because, as I have said, its foundation derives from a distinctly biological, antiphenomenological conceptualization of human experiencing.

Drawing directly from Perls’s own unfortunate reliance upon biological processes and metaphors, Burley states that “Needs and Interests are based in the organism itself. That is, they arise from the person’s biological processes” (emphasis in original). Mirroring the confusion of PHG that Wollants so aptly identifies, Burley both concedes that the need reduction model fails to account for the richness of higher order human behavior, and reverts to need reduction as the appropriate model for understanding these phenomena. He writes that “need is not enough to explain behavior. . . . it takes more than a narrowly defined need to motivate ‘doing and being in the world.’” But then, when he goes on to address this dimension of human behavior whose structure and meaning transcend the need reduction model, he cites the theorizing of previous researchers who concluded that “manipulation, exploration, and orienting or attending to various stimuli [are] . . . reinforcing and . . . constitute needs in their own right.” In other words, having conceded the intrinsic limitations of the biological needs model, he falls back on that very model as the template for understanding what exceeds it.

Burley is in good company here, for as Giorgi (1970, 2007) points out, this error of psychological reasoning has evolved as the default format of mainstream “scientific” psychological theory over the course of its history. The most explicit and lucid critique of this mode of reasoning, offered from a phenomenological perspective, is to be found in Merleau-Ponty’s (1963) *The Structure of Behavior*. Merleau-Ponty’s argument warrants Gestalt therapy’s close attention.

Merleau-Ponty notes that the realities accessible to science sort themselves into different “orders” on the basis of intrinsic dialectical patterns. He differentiates inanimate (the “physical order”), biological (the “vital order”), and human (the “human order”) reality according to the Gestalt patterns and dynamics of each. The orders are not defined by differences in substance, he emphasizes, but by differences in the relations that each exhibits. Thus, a soap bubble is to be understood in terms of field forces distributed across its surface and in the dynamic conditions that segregate it from its surrounds; animal behavior is understood as a dialectic wherein instinct, need, and habit appropriate the geographical environment as a milieu of adaptive behavior. And human behavior evinces a dialectic of human intention and symbolically
infused use- and cultural-objects that is best captured by descriptive terms such as “work” and “project.” Each order thus manifests its own unique sort of field phenomena, its own qualitative patterning, and its own organizational and dynamic principles, or laws. Merleau-Ponty’s unique elaboration of Husserl’s philosophy is often referred to as phenomenological field theory and, as such, it possesses a natural foundational affinity for Gestalt therapy theory.

The essential difference between the positivistic realism underlying natural scientific psychology, and the phenomenological philosophy underlying Goodman’s contribution to Gestalt therapy, is the way that each understands the relationships between the physical, the vital, and the human orders. Positivistic realism presumes that what is more elementary is more real, and therefore that each order finds its causal origins, and thus its appropriate and ultimate explanations, in the order beneath it. Thus, in early behavioral science – for example, Pavlov – animal adaptation was reduced to reflex, and reflexes were in turn conceived as the product of physical energy impacting upon elementary anatomical structures. In B. F. Skinner’s late twentieth-century Behaviorism, human meaning-making was reduced to environment-response adaptation, learned behaviors, and quantifiable reinforcement contingencies.

And while one might argue that contemporary psychology has moved beyond such blatant reductionistic thinking, Merleau-Ponty would surely answer that this is only apparently the case. Contemporary psychology has taken on more ambitious subject matter to be sure (Cognitive Behavior therapy’s reductive definition of thinking as “behavior” is one example), but it does so on the shoulders of its old natural scientific paradigm, extending that paradigm by means of models and metaphors that effectively reduce the higher to the lower and more elementary.

Burley’s article contains ample evidence of his incorporation of this positivistic assumption. For example, when Burley notes that “awareness is based upon the body in general,” he is not speaking of the embodied, human-order subjectivity that writers like James Kepner (1987) and Michael Vincent Miller (2001) introduce to Gestalt therapy theory. He speaks instead of the biological, vital-order body, where awareness is found in “the nervous system specifically” and “organismically based” in the “inferior colliculi.” Such tangential references, taken together with his pivotal reliance upon a homeostatic need reduction model of human contacting, bear witness to the reductive legacy of natural scientific thinking in psychology.

Significantly, it was Gestalt psychology that first effectively challenged this sort of positivistic behavioral science showing, for example, that reflexes could not be understood at an anatomical-mechanistic level without presupposing the function (a particular adaptation of the organism to its environment)
that the mechanism was supposed to explain. Kohler, Koffka, and others elaborated this discovery in their Gestalt psychology – a psychology which demonstrated that the meaningful elements of perception and behavior were already-organized units of organism-environment interaction. The Gestalt psychologists showed us that breaking behavior down into its composite elements, its parts, gives us no more an explanation of behavior than would the gears and springs of a watch give us an explanation of time.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Gestalt psychology failed to understand the radical implications of its own discovery (coincidentally the same point that Wollants makes for Gestalt therapy), namely, that the wholes that intrinsically define a behavior’s meaning cannot be explained via reductive causality. Kohler (1947), in the end, explained the meaningful patterns of perceptual experience in terms of a presumed physiological isomorphism of cortical process. But as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, this sort of reductive explanation only begged the question, “for whom is the pattern precisely a pattern,” as opposed to a series of partes ex partes physical events, so many billiard balls knocking about with no “knowledge” of the higher order gestalts to which they belong? Had the Gestalt psychologists answered this question in a philosophically consistent fashion, they would have arrived at something equivalent to Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of behavioral orders, and have understood the relations between them quite differently than does natural science.

For Merleau-Ponty (1963), “the ‘physical,’ the ‘vital’ and the ‘mental’ do not represent three powers of being, but three dialectics. . . .[E]ach of them had to be conceived as a retaking and a ‘new’ structuration of the preceding one” (p. 184). Thus, concerning the relationship of human psychology and its biological substrates, “it is not a question of two de facto orders external to each other, but of two types of relations, the second of which integrates the first” (pp. 180-181), such that when human psychological functioning is “reorganized in its turn in new wholes, vital behavior as such disappears” (p. 181). Summarizing, Merleau-Ponty states:

The relation of each order to the higher order is that of the partial to the total. A normal man is not a body bearing certain autonomous instincts joined to a “psychological life” defined by certain characteristic processes... and surmounted with a mind which would unfold its proper acts over this infrastructure. The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them (p. 181).
In his analysis of the structure of behavior, Merleau-Ponty turns traditional causal thinking on its head. Rather than each order finding its causal origins in the order beneath it, Merleau-Ponty tells us that each higher order “absorbs” the order beneath it, integrating it at a more complex level, transforming its meaning within the context of a richer dialectic, or gestalt. The appeal to anatomical structures to “explain” the functionality of animal behavior failed, as Koehler and Koffka themselves demonstrated, precisely because the proposed causal mechanics presupposed the very functions they purported to explain.

The appeal to an organismic need reduction model to explain human contact and personality similarly fails, and for precisely the same reason, namely, that it presupposes an understanding of precisely what it purports to explain. Burley’s example of viewing expressionist paintings in an art gallery can no more be explained by the stimulation of his limbic system, than (to borrow again from Merleau-Ponty, 1963) the elongated images of El Greco’s paintings can be explained by his astigmatism. In each case, the meaning of the biological events is conferred by the human-order events they purport to explain. The same argument holds for the Contact Cycle model as a template for understanding personality in general. Indeed, the model does manage to trace the vicissitudes of need arousal and satisfaction, but these patterns fail to account for the richness and complexity of what we call “human experience,” or even “human personality.” We might say of the Contact Cycle the same thing Merleau-Ponty (1963) says of the reflex, namely, “it is not by means of it that the remainder can be understood” (p. 47).

Biological causal thinking steals its way into psychological theory because it smacks of “common sense” and “scientific logic.” But this only means that we have been taught to think this way by the cultural and scientific traditions in which we are embedded – precisely the traditions that Husserl exhorts us to “bracket” when we undertake phenomenological investigation. Challenging the Cartesian separation of subject and world, and the resulting tradition of philosophical realism which has come to constitute the underpinnings of scientific psychology, Merleau-Ponty (1963) posed the question we have elaborated upon here: “Might mechanistic science have missed the definition of objectivity?” (p. 10).

2. The Appeal to Natural Scientific Method: Giorgi’s Argument Against
Given the foregoing, it is not surprising that the implicit, and often explicit, scientific model that guides Burley’s proposal for a scientifically valid and verifiable Gestalt theory of personality is the model proposed by the natural sciences for understanding the physical and biological orders. Amedeo Giorgi (1970, 2009) has challenged the uncritical acceptance of this model as the last
Mainstream psychology adopted the framework of the natural sciences and has continued to evolve within that perspective. Its models were physics and chemistry. . . . To accept such a model meant that the experimental paradigm was the most desirable situation for research and that measurement of variables was the desideratum along with quantified expression of results. Psychological phenomena were understood to be analogues of the physical phenomena that the natural sciences studied. (p. 6)

Spirited by early success, and by its consequent establishment as a “legitimate” science, twentieth-century psychology enthusiastically adopted the essential values and methodological criteria of natural science as its own. This success, however, has not come without a price. In order for any psychological domain to qualify as a legitimate object of study, it has had to truncate, reify, and operationalize its subject matter in a fashion dictated by the research methodologies it embraced. In adopting, in other words, scientific methodology appropriate to the physical and vital orders, modern psychology has denuded and distorted the human-order subject matter that it ultimately wishes to understand.

A contemporary example familiar to all clinicians is the ever growing bias, required as much by the insurance industry as by the ethos of natural science, toward “evidence based” therapies. Measurement of the outcomes of psychotherapeutic intervention is valuable as far as it goes, but “the tail wags the dog” when mainstream mental health constrains and operationalizes itself on the basis of what can be convincingly quantified. Giorgi (2009) notes that phenomenologically based research “is not ‘anti-quantitative’. . . if one asks a quantitative question, one should use a quantitative method; if one asks a qualitative question, one should use a qualitative method” (p. 5). Giorgi concludes that natural scientific methodologies “are very useful criteria where they are applicable, but . . . they are not applicable to the full range of phenomena that psychologists would be interested in studying” (p. 3).

For most psychological phenomena – and “personality” would certainly qualify here – quantitative research most appropriately rests upon a foundation of qualitative, phenomenological investigation. Before we can legitimately measure those aspects of personality functioning that invite quantitative delimitation, we must first ask the phenomenologist’s question: “What do we mean by this term, ‘personality’”? What are the phenomena which present themselves to us in the “lived world” (Husserl) and summon up
the very question of its investigation?

Phenomenological research, according to Giorgi, proceeds from the descriptive to the conceptual, from the everyday experiences of the life world, to the explanatory models of science. Burley’s exploration of personality, like too much in Gestalt therapy’s literature, is decidedly nonphenomenological on this account. He proceeds deductively rather than descriptively, taking as his starting point the very sort of scientific models (Maddi’s definition of personality; Digman’s five-factor theory of personality; and the Cycle model itself) that Husserl insists we bracket before beginning a phenomenological inquiry.

If we were to take Burley’s implicit premise that contact is what is central to human personality, we would pursue a much more broadly based description of the varieties of contact phenomena (as, for example, Gordon Wheeler [1991] has done in Gestalt Reconsidered: A New Approach to Contact and Resistance), and look for “the statue embedded in the marble” – those dialectical structures of human-world meaning-making that constitute Merleau-Ponty’s human-order, and that Giorgi posits as the product of descriptive phenomenological research. The shortcoming of Burley’s approach as phenomenological research lies in that he has posited an underlying mechanism as his starting point, and attempts to derive from it an explanation of the complexity of the human experiential domain subtended by the term “personality.” The inability of the Contact Cycle model to support such an ambitious project is demonstrated by the fact that in the end, Burley is required to graft existing theories of personality onto the Cycle model in order to reconnect it to the recognizable domain of personality functioning.

Proper phenomenological research has a way of simplifying things, revealing the essence immanent in the complexity. Burley’s theory, it seems to me, does just the opposite, grafting models onto models, and increasing complexity as a result. When a theoretical model reflects a phenomenologically derived “essential structure” (to use Giorgi’s term), that structure works to simplify our understanding, to create in one stroke an integration of previously disparate phenomena.

**Conclusion**

Todd Burley is certainly not the first to make an issue of the considerable gap between the Weltanschauung of Gestalt therapy and that of mainstream academic and clinical psychology. The discussion here seems to be what precisely to make of that difference. Burley frames it in terms of Gestalt therapy’s lack of precision and specificity, and its consequent failure to generate “a position that could be tested and refined by the scientific community.”
I understand this gap differently. What comes to mind for me are things like Spagnuolo-Lobb’s (2001) description of Gestalt therapy as “theorizing the un-theorizable,” or Miller’s (1997) embrace of Gestalt therapy’s “positive emptiness,” or Bowman’s (2005) depiction of Gestalt therapy as an “aesthetically based psychotherapy.” There is, in other words, a way of looking at the gap between Gestalt therapy and mainstream science as testimony to Gestalt therapy’s being something more than a theory in the traditional scientific sense. My position is that this “more” is best supported by a different foundational framework than that of mainstream scientific realism. That framework is phenomenology.

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REFERENCES


