Quantum Gestalt: Dynamic Expansion at the Contact Boundary

The aspectuality of truth, the idea that truth is not singular, is a key concept of diverse twentieth-century cultural fields. Albert Einstein recognized it in atomic physics; William Empson applied it in literary criticism with his revolutionary *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930); Ludwig Wittgenstein employed it in his later philosophy when he adopted a “language game” method of arguing to attend to the particular function of words and, more to the point, when he reflected that both aspects of the familiar “duck / rabbit” drawing of Gestalt psychology are true but cannot be seen both at one and the same time; and Jonathan Bate brought it to bear in *The Genius of Shakespeare*, with regard to the intensity and variety of contradictory reactions and actions that the Bard’s works provoke, only one of which can be sensed in a given moment. Shakespeare’s “ambidextrousness” (p. 328), the so-called “Shakespeare Effect” (p. 321), Bate argues, can best be apprehended through a leap into a quantum world, where light has both wave and particle aspects, although each equation is incompatible with the other and cannot be specified at the same time. He explains Shakespeare’s aspectual representation of truth this way:

Empson is Modernism’s Einstein among literary critics. His “both / and” is the twentieth century’s most powerful understanding of Shakespeare because it is both a microscopic and a macroscopic way of seeing. It begins with ambiguous words and syntaxes—think of them as wavicles which are the literary work’s smallest unit of energy—but it can be extended to the work as a whole. It enabled Empson to apply an “uncertainty principle” to every aspect of Shakespeare [p. 316].
In parallel fashion, aspectuality is a key concept of the diverse fields of twenty-first century Gestalt therapy. The afterlife of Gestalt can well be apprehended through a leap into a so-called quantum world, where seemingly incompatible ideas and approaches converge at the contact boundary. The ensuing connections—links, associations, relationships, correlations—with other theories, philosophies, and practices perforce expand the parameters, or wholeness, of the field. If, as a result, they both widen our gaze and heighten the aspectual and performative truth of our model, they work subsequently to diminish Gestalt therapy’s perceived insular afterlife in what Joseph Melnick denominates appositely as “the marketplace of change” (p. 3).

Our Current Issue

Brian O’Neill’s article, “Relativistic Quantum Field Theory: Implications for Gestalt Therapy,” appears along with divergent commentaries by Joel Latner and Alan Meara and a Response by O’Neill. O’Neill addresses the ways that Gestalt therapy and physics have developed the terms “field” and “field theory” and the possible interrelationships between the two approaches, especially in respect of how relativistic quantum theory may interface with the seminal text on Gestalt therapy by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman. For O’Neill, the larger selves of couples, families, and groups bring us closer to the world of quantum physics.

Latner, in “Commentary I: Relativistic Quantum Field Theory: Implications for Gestalt Therapy (or, The Speed of Light Revisited)” asserts that the literature of theoretical physics is “looking from a scientific perspective,” while Gestaltists are “looking from a humanistic one,” centered on experience and the imagination. He returns to an article that he wrote some twenty-five years ago in which he sought to distinguish field from system. His focus, more therapeutic than theoretical, is on constellations of ideas that “come out of field thinking” (e.g., Reality Flight, We-Function, Character, Confluence).

Meara, for his part, concentrates broadly on the idea of “the complexity of simplicity,” avowing that “one cannot selectively choose one aspect of physics and say that this represents the field, either through metaphor or analogy.” Stepping back from the detail, he asks whether there is anything in the current conception of the field in the physical sciences that is useful for understanding Gestalt field theory; for him, recent developments within “complexity theory” are a more fertile ground for relating natural and social science.

Rick Maurer’s article, “Connection Versus Survival at Work (or Buber Meets Machiavelli),” also speaks to the aspectuality of the Gestalt contact boundary. Maurer posits that if organizational development consultants generally encourage exchanges that foster trust, fairness, and transparency (=Intimate/Buber aspirations), they often fail to attend sufficiently to the needs of survival that may demand the ability to be cunning and deceitful (=Strategic/Machiavellian actions). He advocates a practice that draws from and supports both sides of the polarity, a marriage between intimacy and strategy. He proposes, for example, explicit exploration of the far ends of the by now
classic “paradoxical theory of change” (e.g., the need for contact, as well as for power, security, and control).

Dorian Kondas’s article, “Existential Explosion and Gestalt Therapy for Gay Male Survivors of Domestic Violence,” is boundary bending in its own right. The operant question visited here can be framed as follows: “Is an existential modality that emphasizes free choice appropriate for gay men for whom the curtailment of civil freedoms may be a daily reality?” Kondas argues that cathartic explosion (taken from the seven-stage model of Gestalt explosion and implosion) needs to be reexamined vis-à-vis the ground restructuring role it can play, not so much in retraumatizing the gay male client as in freeing him from self-blame in a gay-affirming context.

Iris Fodor and Karen Hooker, in “Teaching Mindfulness to Children,” make a case for adapting mindfulness techniques, commonly used to treat physical and psychological problems including stress, chronic pain, anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, and so on, to enhance work with children. The expansion of this sort of training—with its nonjudgmental, focused attention to internal and external experiences in the present moment and its interface with fundamental Gestalt principles (e.g., the paradoxical theory of change)—has the potential, the authors argue, to increase children’s attention and focus, improving memory, self-acceptance, self-management skills, and self-understanding.

Back Pages

The Back Pages feature two reviews and a personal reflection. Detlef Klöckner’s book, Stages of Passion: Emotional Developments in Couples’ Relationships, is assessed by Lilli Lehner through a translation at the hand of Andreas Weichselbraun; and Gonzague Masquelier’s work, Gestalt Therapy: Living Creatively Today, is evaluated by Carol Brockmon.

Séan Gaffney’s piece on “Gestalt in the North of Ireland: A Blow-in’s Perspective” addresses issues that are cornerstones of the dynamic expansion of Gestalt at the contact boundary, insofar as it introduces the approach into politicized cultures in conflict that do not match the original—democratic, individualistic, and anti-bourgeois—setting of its development. To what extent, queries Gaffney, do the core competencies of Gestalt—use of self, awareness, contact, figure-ground, and an active acknowledgement of both person and environment—have to be modified or adapted in accordance with emerging socio-political and socio-cultural contexts? Northern Ireland is taken as a representative case study.

As a final word, I am delighted to be joining the Editorial Board of Gestalt Review as Co-Editor along with Joseph Melnick. If my diverse background represents, in some ways, a quantum leap into the Gestalt world, it is precisely Gestalt’s way of viewing the whole as greater than the sum of its parts that invites such challenging and exciting connections. I am touched by the warm welcome I am receiving from the Associate Editors, and I look forward to establishing fruitful and supportive contact with the most important constituencies of Gestalt Review—with you—the journal’s
current readers and future writers. I am very pleased to be embarking on this new journey with all of you.

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**REFERENCES**

