Editorial

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Gestalt: A “Choiceful” Approach

Choisir d’être ceci ou cela, c’est affirmer en même temps la valeur de ce que nous choisissons, car nous ne pouvons jamais choisir le mal; ce que nous choisissons, c’est toujours le bien, et rien ne peut être bon pour nous sans l’être pour tous [Sartre, pp. 25-26].

[To choose to be this way or that is to assert at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil; what we choose is always for the better, and nothing can be good for ourselves if it is not good for everyone else (translation mine).]

Underlying Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy is a very positive—Gestalt inspired—message: our infinite freedom enables us to make authentic choices, even though physical and social constraints cannot be overlooked in the way we choose. Freedom is to be understood as characteristic of the nature of consciousness; that is, as spontaneity. But, at the same time, opting for one or the other choice is not a random or spontaneous decision but rather one that implies responsibility. Sartre presents his notion of freedom as amounting to making choices and, indeed, not being able to avoid making choices. Not to choose is still a choice.

The articles in the current issue of Gestalt Review are reflective of Gestalt’s power to create itself continually, to transform itself infinitely and thus avoid the pitfalls of

1 The inspiration for the thematic thrust of my Editorial comes from Frank Rubenfeld’s contribution to the Back Pages of this issue.

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“bad faith.” The authors represented here are defined not so much by their refusal to be stuck in a constant and particular pose, as by their active engagement with the Gestalt condition that condemns them to be free.

Our Current Issue

Nancy Amendt-Lyon’s article, “Gender Differences in Gestalt Therapy,” appears with—choiceful—commentaries from diverse fields of clinical practice (Carol Brockmon), body-oriented therapy (James Kepner), and organizational consulting (Jeanette Olsson and Elisabeth Flensted-Jensen), followed by the author’s mediated response. Amendt-Lyon addresses the ways that gender differences require us to reflect constantly on issues such as transference and countertransference phenomena, male–female constellations and the choice of a therapist, psychotherapeutic efficacy, disorders, and the role of the dialogic “I-Thou” relationship as espoused by Martin Buber. Illustrating her theoretical considerations with case examples, she exhorts therapists to acknowledge and identify with their own sexuality and choose consciously to disembody themselves temporarily from aspects of their identities. In this way, they will be free to articulate an awareness of gender processes and so conjoin responsibly with their clients in their world.

Brockmon, in Commentary I, expresses sadness that the issues raised by Amendt-Lyon are not, to invoke Jacques Derrida, “always already” part of the apperceptive mass that nourishes the training of (Gestalt) therapists. For Brockmon, the recognition of “the relevance of gender in the therapist” (italics in original) is more crucial than “the gender of the therapist”; in many ways, power dynamics more than desire (=intrapyschic, transference and countertransference) are central to discussions of gender.

Kepner, while appreciative of Amendt-Lyon’s commitment to exploring “the social and biological ground intrinsically woven into our fixed gestalts,” nonetheless laments the lack of a detailed articulation of Gestalt theory and methodology in the discussion of the gendered/sexual field. He also queries an implicitly narrowing focus on transference/countertransference issues and narcissistically based abuse. In the true spirit of dialogic thinking, Kepner poses a series of questions linked to the potentialities not developed, the non-choices that constitute choices, the roads not taken.

Olsson, for her part, also sees gender relations as “one of the strongest power structures upholding our society.” Focusing on gender, not in the therapeutic context, but from a field theoretical point of view in groups, organizations, and society, she draws from her own—complementary—study on political leadership to provide insight into “why … the gender-related order [is] so hard to break.”

Flensted-Jensen, in Commentary IV, finds Amendt-Lyon’s exploration of gender in therapy useful as a model for “doing gender” in consulting. She offers up her own work in organizational consultation to posit a way of initiating a fusion between social constructionalism and Gestalt that is sensitive to gender differences, but without “involuntarily getting stuck in gender dualism.” She queries whether Amendt-Lyon’s framing of the relevant question of “whether there are specifically male and female
forms of psychotherapy” is the result of the essentialist trap of seeing men and women as fixed categories.

Seán Gaffney and Ivan Jensen, in “Trifocal Vision: A Practical Field Perspective on Organization for Managers and Consultants” invoke the metaphor of the “‘Magic Eye’ pictures” in order to present a “conceptual toolbox” that can inform the practice of Gestalt OSD, enabling the observer to see organizations coming alive in richer—more choiceful—perspectives. Using Søren Kierkegaard’s version of “the paradoxical theory of change” as a conceptual framework, the authors offer two case vignettes from their own work to set the scene for the bi-focal taxonomy for practice they propose, which consists of “levels of complexity” and “domains of casualty.” To these dimensions they add the facet of “aspects of organization” to attain a “trifocal” view that, if appreciated in its full complexity by Gestalt practitioners with their field perspective, may also be relevant to managers and staff.

Lennart Bernhardtson, in “Gestalt Ethics: A Utopia?” posits that those who seek to de-emphasize the early individualism of Gestalt therapy as practiced in the 1950s and 1960s with Fritz Perls as inspiration and prominent figure, and espouse instead newer paradigms of unambiguous, non-individualistic ethics whose starting point is the field, risk falling into the trap of advocating a utopian approach to human nature. Taking issue, in particular, with the recent work of Gordon Wheeler and Robert Lee, Bernhardtson attempts to understand the individual–field phenomenon by offering a matrix with one dimension that is descriptive–normative/constructive and another that is antagonistic–paradoxical–harmonic. George Orwell’s critique of the idealistic thrust of Jonathan Swift’s satire, *Gulliver’s Travels*, is used to illustrate the shortcomings of paradigms that do not appear to accept reality as it is, “with all its ambiguity, indistinctness, mystery, and confusion.”

Eva Metzger, in “Interpersonal Conflicts: Where Gestalt Meets Mediation,” sets forth the characteristics and limitations of mediation to argue, on the one hand, that Gestalt philosophy and therapy theory, especially with respect to (self) awareness and choice, can facilitate the process of mediation; and, on the other, that some knowledge of the modus operandi of mediation can aid the Gestalt therapist in dealing with practical matters that need resolving. The “Gestalt” mediator, she maintains, has a special skill set that adds value to mediation without either compromising impartiality or getting in the way of the client(s)’ process. If, from one perspective, the resolution of conflicts in legal proceedings often does not take sufficient account of human needs and interests, then from another perspective, if therapists work only with one party in disaccord, the social, economic, and political fields that create and influence interpersonal conflicts frequently are not adequately examined.

**Back Pages**

The Back Pages feature a variety of reflections on the Gestalt world: a personal meditation combining verse and prose, three poems, and a book review.

In his piece, “Evolution, Choicefulness, and Gestalt Therapy,” Frank Rubenfeld summons the work of visionary and archeologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on the
subject of evolution, linking the universe to humanity to set the stage for his rumi-
nations on how biological flexibility and variety promoted the opportunity for more
choice. Rubenfeld draws as well on Eric Fromm’s classic, *Escape from Freedom*, to
underscore a polarity or meta-choice, as it were, within choicefulness: nonchoiceful-
ness.

Jenny Doughty’s poems—“Hunters in the Snow,” “When Bedrock Crumbles,” and
“Sundials”—are based in details of landscape and relationships but move beyond the
literal to the figurative as they contemplate the metaphysics of being. Tethered to the
specifics of the land and the here and now, they are not fettered to their autobiographi-
cal underpinnings but are open to the universal.

Finally, Eda Arduman’s review of Robert G. Lee’s edited collection of essays, *Val-
ues of Connection: A Relational Approach to Ethics* (2004), comments on the diverse
voices in the Gestalt field that explore the interrelations between the ethics of the therapeu-
tic endeavor and the Gestalt tradition. The reader may choose to chew upon the
critique, as she or he will, vis à vis the articles contained in the current issue.

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REFERENCE