

## **The Self is discovered at the Contact Boundary.**

### **Discuss with reference to your personal experience on the programme**

#### **Introduction**

I will define Self and Contact (with boundary) placing this in the context of Gestalt theory. With this as my backdrop I will explore the issue of discovery and elaborate on how the process of contact and self relate to the concepts of figure and ground, and the cycle of awareness, discussing this in relation to my personal experiences.

#### **Gestalt Theory**

To explore meaningfully the ideas of Self, Contact Boundary, and whether there is discovery of one with the other it is necessary to reflect on the vehicle in which we journey.

Gestalt Theory provides for an approach of seeing a person in their completeness, as a whole. In this wholeness is viewed the many parts of the person, the organism. This includes the past and the present. This includes the physical, the emotional and the intellectual. This includes the social and physical environment. This includes cultural and spiritual definitions.

Each part of the whole impacts the person, each part adds to the whole person, but is not the whole person. The whole is greater, and different, than the parts. The fitting of the parts adds another dimension. Clarkson, P. (1989) introduces the definition of Gestalt through the example of a family. Using this metaphor, if you wish to analyse the family then to analyse each member is not sufficient, indeed is misleading. The analysis of each member loses the dynamics of interaction. This is what

I mean in referring to the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Additionally an important aspect of this is that the removal, or dismissing of any one part changes the whole.

Gestalt approaches the whole and deals with the whole person. To isolate the emotional from the intellectual, to dismiss the past at the expense of the present, to avoid the cultural or spiritual definition for an individual is to diminish part of the person.

Indeed this also naturally lends itself to the notion of the individual interacting with their environment in all these ways, and this interaction being a necessary part of recognising and knowing oneself. For example, physically in being cold when the temperature drops. Culturally in terms of customs and beliefs of family, of religion and of nation.

In treating the individual in a holistic way Gestalt practice fundamentally holds that an individual strives to be complete, to be who they are. I will address this further on in this essay

## **Discovery**

Discovery suggests finding something that already exists. Something that is available to be found. With this state of already being come the possibilities of already being active, dynamic, at rest, etc. As such this something may already be affective. Furthermore, existing but not being discovered does not preclude this something being experienced. For example the Earth is subject to the motion of the planets. This exists and was experienced before the discovery of the planets and before the discovery, or formation, of the laws of planetary movement.

Further reflection on this process is required. Reflection on whether there is an adding to the discovery; whether there is a replacing or subtraction; whether there is creation, or also whether this creation is instead of, or in addition, to discovery. Indeed the possibility of creation indicates the possibility of destruction.

## **The Self**

Self is considered as active; in Gestalt language it is a verb. Self is active, is changing, is evolving, is experiencing.

Perls et al (1951, p 235) refers to self as “the system of contacts at any moment” and “the self *is* the system of creative adjustments” (p247).

Mackewn, J. (1997, p73) notes that the self is an elusive and controversial concept and is the subject of much lively debate amongst theoreticians of Gestalt and other orientations.

Mackewn, J. (1997 p73-76) describes the various Gestalt theories of Self. Starting with the proposition of its founders that the Self is a changing process, not a structure. Later came the added dimension of Self as having structure.

She illustrates "Self as ground (or sea) with enduring features of consistency, cohesion, flexibility and so on." and "The Self assimilates learning and experiences from each unique contact episode".

There is a certain simplicity and intuitive sense for me in accepting her view of Self being composed of both changing process and enduring features. That the Self does remake, amend, and adjust with each contact. Equally the Self preserves and carries forward in contact after contact some enduring qualities and habits, a personality, a certain style of being.

In describing Self there is that which is always me of yesterday, today, tomorrow - I am male, I am white, - but there is also consistent traits of personality - adherence to my beliefs, my habits; this Self is constant or, perhaps, may have some slow adaptiveness. There is Self that is sometimes me - tender with my baby, aggressive on the sports field; this Self is constantly changing, is malleable.

Parlett, M. (1991 p69) quotes Sonia Nevis for what to me is a gutsy working realism of Self "The Self is the quivering mass of our potential". Parlett goes on to describe the Self as providing a way of choosing our reality

## **Contact and Boundary**

Any and all contact involves at least two entities, parties, processes, or objects. Put another way, there is no situation or environment that does not provide for contact in some form. The point or line at which contact occurs is the boundary. So, in an obvious example the border between countries is a boundary. Countries merge when the boundary is removed; countries become unsettled when the boundary is not clearly defined.

Physically we have a boundary between our body and the environment, our skin. As we contact with the environment our internal structure is able to respond; heat, light, noise etc may induce a voluntary or involuntary response from our body. We experience the heat, light, etc, *at* the boundary. Mentally we exercise ourselves at boundaries of perception and interpretation; choosing whether to listen or selecting thoughts to concentrate on.

The attention we give to contact and our environment parcels together the concepts of Figure, Ground and Awareness.

## **Figure and Ground**

At any given moment the individual is required to be focussing on one thought, one sensation, one item. This occupies the attention, no matter how fleeting and with this sensation the individual, the organism, will respond either autonomously or consciously. Each process is a gestalt. Each gestalt requires the organism to focus attention on the sensation. This brings that particular sensation to

the fore, becoming figure, and the rest of the environment is then unfocused, becoming ground.

When the focus shifts elsewhere that which was figure dissolves to ground.

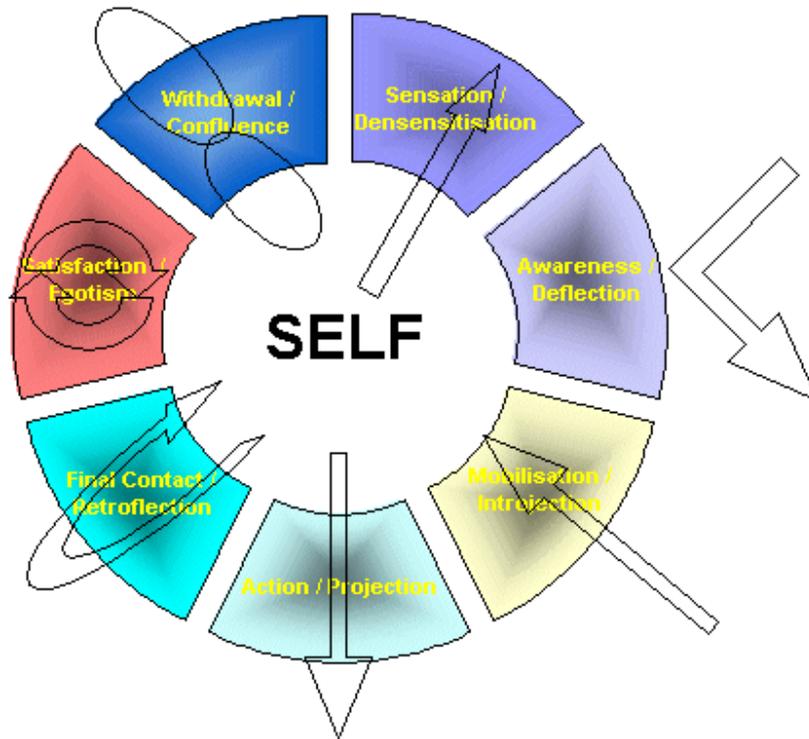
For example, whilst I am writing this essay, now, my attention is focused, writing the essay is the figure, all else is ground, but saying that causes my attention to drift to the books open around me, uncomfortably under my arms. The focus is now on the discomfort of my elbows, this is now figure; the writing has merged into the (back) ground. I choose whether to make figural the discomfort, or the writing, or indeed another process that impinges, thirst, weariness or energy etc.

### **Cycle of Awareness**

The stages through which the organism moves, organises and experiences figure and ground has been termed the Cycle of Gestalt Formation and Destruction by Clarkson, P. (1989, p32) and provides a useful diagrammatic representation, from which I produce my model, figure 1.

Figure 1

**Cycle of Gestalt Formation and Destruction, with disturbance representations**



Diagrammatic representation is usually shown as a circle but I do like the diagram, see figure 2, shown by Mackewn, J (1997, p19), 'inspired by Zinker' on the basis of showing a more fluid motion.

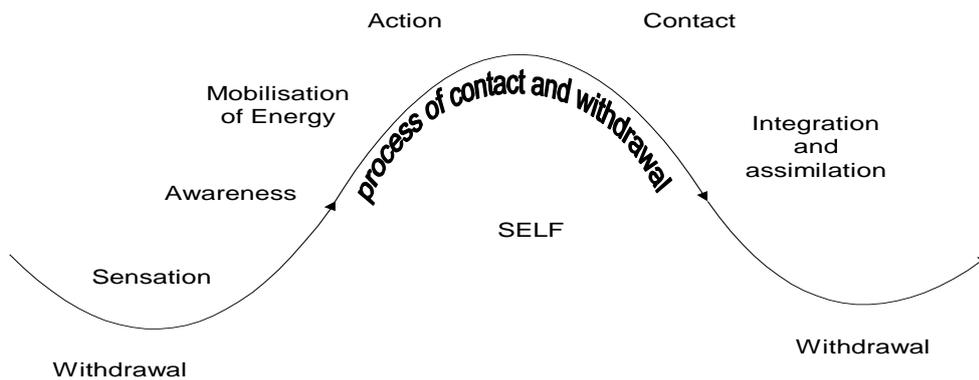


Figure 2 Mackewn, J (1997, p19) Interactive cycle of contact – withdrawal of organism and environment (inspired by Zinker, 1978)

Mackewn, J. (1997 p18-19) provides additional descriptors and cites Perls naming this, “cycle of the interdependency of organism and environment” plus other descriptors - 'cycle of awareness', 'cycle of contact', 'process of contact'.

The simplification of naming seems to be at the expense of the original more descriptive and informative original.

The cycle representation and naming is an area in which for teaching purposes I would like to develop, particularly with the possible use of 3D graphics to represent the moving along the cycle, the revisiting, the onward flow, the ground and figure.

Figure 1 and 2 both show the stages through which the healthy gestalt will cycle beginning with sensation (the formation) to withdrawal (the destruction). This is the process of addressing a need and when completed the need is removed. Before continuing, though, I refer to Parlett, M. and Hemming, J. (1996, Ch 9 p198) who describe the completion not as having destruction but as dissolving. I find this a more satisfying, positive and healthy term to use. So I refer to a figure forming and dissolving.

The process of contact and withdrawal, of figure forming and dissolving sweeps through each phase and may be in the space of an instant, a second, a minute, an hour, a month and so on. The process may be applied to the micro and macro level; indeed it is fractal.

So I sense a change in my body, I am now aware of being cold, I choose to initiate a response to act, and I put on my jumper, so my contact with the environment becomes balanced with the cold dissolving, I am no longer cold but comfortable, satisfied, and am able to withdraw, complete the cycle, the gestalten.

Figure 3 shows this diagrammatically, following the same structure as figure 1



## The Self Discovered

With the example above I discovered that

- I do not like to be cold
- That I am able to affect a remedy
- That I am comfortable being warm
- That I am allowed to be comfortable

This discovery was only possible by my body interacting with the environment.

This same process of discovery goes beyond the physical. Each opinion, each thought is affected by the contact of our self with the environment. Through such contact we may discover more about our Self. So although I am cold, because I am clearing snow I endure. I choose not to acknowledge

the cold in preference to completing the task. I have discovered that tolerance to the cold means an immediate response to cold is not required.

Looking at this in relation to an upset child he learns that his parents will comfort and make him feel better. The unity of the parent and the child is strengthened. The Self discovers

- That support is provided
- That there is protection
- That the upset is manageable

This is a healthy process. The experiences of the individual contacting at the boundary allows the Self to be formed, to be discovered.

The Self seeks to be whole and complete and will seek to achieve this. However in learning rules such as 'do not touch the fire' and in circumstances where the child is not comforted, or indeed over comforted, the Self is disturbed from its natural tendency to complete in a healthy way.

These disturbances impact the Self and often remain with the person through their life. Figures 1 shows the disturbances impacting on the Healthy Cycle, and are diagrammatically positioned against the healthy counterpart. I say diagrammatically as the disturbances may impact anywhere in the cycle. For an introduction it is useful to show the disturbances in this way. I note that Ellis, M. & Leary-Joyce, J (2000) state that there was, originally, four disturbances defined by Perls; Introjection, Projection, Retroflexion, and Confluence. I find though, Perls et al (1951, p 451) refers also to Egotism as a disturbance.

The events to which I now refer represent vividly the discovery of my Self at the contact boundary.

Until late October 2001 I have had a fear of the dark. This extended to be anywhere in the house where all the lights were off. In bed I also experienced discomfort with wardrobe doors left ajar or

a curtain not shut properly. The clearest manifestation of this neurosis was being very uncomfortable in coming up the stairs once the lights had been turned off downstairs; even though the stairs are lit from above. Although this fear has always been present the intensity ebbs and flows.

I had been working on this fear in therapy for several months. Attempting several times to meet it but becoming too upset. Eventually after some preparation and with a leap of faith and trust I took the decision to open myself to this pain and fear.

In letting go I allowed my Self to explore and not interpret what was happening. In so doing I found the cause of my fear; in so doing I do not change the circumstances, or my current environment; nor do I change the cause.

Rather, I have met my Self, where I was and how I protected my Self. I discovered and thus am now able to know my Self; and no longer fear the dark for it was not the dark I feared, but what happened in the dark.

### **Introjection**

Whilst the learning process of childhood requires social behavioural rules - should do this, should not do that - the child needs to be allowed, as part of their growth, to break out and decide which 'shoulds', which rules, to observe; which to reject; and which to alter. Best summed up as "the teenage years!" Actually every generation, even as far back as the ancient Greeks, had rebellious youngsters. The healthy child will question the rules; will seek to qualify which are applicable and valid to the Self, to their own community and growing culture.

My childhood fear of the dark was not resolved. My desire to seek comfort was rejected, indeed met with cruel treatment. My response to my childhood fear, the fixed gestalt, was the introjection of a behaviour pattern. Now I know the dark was not my fear, rather the treatment received as the

child. In this present I have attended to my child, I have discovered my Self. More generally in my life this introject displays as I will not (show) fear. Positively, and paradoxically, perhaps, the same introject allowed me to face my fear, and not to fear facing it.

## **Projection**

During the first five-day workshop programme a small group of were together talking socially. One person turned to me and described me as a father figure.

I found this to be irritating and frustrating. I felt that I would have to fulfil this role, and interpreted this role as advisor, as being required to 'look out for' others, to act in some ways as a teacher/helper. I was angry, inside, with the speaker for labelling me!

Having now given the reader plenty to work with I will focus on the teacher/helper.

I used to teach, I enjoyed teaching, I enjoyed looking out for my students, encouraging and guiding them. I feel guilty for not being there now.

So on one level, at least, my anger is not with the speaker labelling me as teacher/helper, but with my self. I am very much a teacher/helper; maybe this is my part of my life script; maybe it is not truly who I am. I am still working on this.

However as an example of projection and the ongoing discovery of Self this contact has helped clarify my anger and frustrations in labelling myself with something I was/am good at and have been denying.

## **Conclusion**

I have considered a number of major elements of Gestalt theory; in particular the elements of Self, Contact Boundary, Discovery, Figure and Ground, and the Cycle of the Interdependency of

Organism and Environment. I have illustrated the Self being discovered with a powerful gestalt of my own involving introjection and another as an issue of projection.

Further research is indicated with regard to the notion of discovery, or formation and the possibilities of adding and subtracting, of creation and destruction. I will expect to consider this with reference to the concept of life scripts.

The contact boundary is not an edge or barrier, rather the between where we experience, assimilate and discover our Self. Where assimilation is not to our true Self a disturbance is created. Whilst such disturbance may be managed, until recognised will impact out behaviour and actions, but without our understanding. Only by addressing the disturbance, by completing the original assimilation in a healthy way will the Self be discovered and made whole.

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