

## Let the Straw Man Speak Husserl's Phenomenology in Context

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Gestalt therapy has long acknowledged its indebtedness to phenomenological philosophy in general and to Edmund Husserl in particular, but ironically in a fashion that disregards the organic context of this work. The result is too often exemplified by discussions of phenomenology that either misrepresent its contribution to Gestalt therapy or apply its insights in stilted or inappropriate fashion. The literal translation of Husserl's reduction as psychotherapeutic method is a case in point. This article asks Gestalt therapy to assess Husserl's method in its own context and to appreciate his real contribution, which was no less than providing a philosophical foundation and justification for Gestalt therapy's reverence for human experience.

IT IS ALWAYS GOOD TO SEE GESTALT THERAPY acknowledging its indebtedness to phenomenology, and as one who was trained in existential-phenomenological psychology and who learned Gestalt therapy only as a second language, I am in admiration of Van De Riet for his thoughtful formulation and reformulation of Gestalt therapy's method. I have some things I would like to say here but wish to emphasize that the spirit of my remarks is more along the lines of filling out Gestalt therapy's theoretical ground than in challenging Van De Riet's work in particular. Nonetheless, his characterization of Husserl very much reflects the common canon of Gestalt therapy's rendering of phenomenology (see, for example, Sapriel, 1998, and Resnick, 1995), which as a whole has seriously canted, at least to my way of thinking, Husserl's place in the landscape of Gestalt therapy theory. Some of what I see

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differently is rather implicit; some is quite explicit. My interest lies in situating Husserl more satisfyingly with respect to the Gestalt therapy tradition and in promoting an appreciation of our philosophical indebtedness to the tradition that he founded.

With this objective in mind, there are several lacunae in Van De Riet's article that I would like to address. The first is the matter of Husserl's (1962) own historical and scholarly context, which is conspicuously absent and which absence seriously disorients us in assessing his place in Gestalt therapy's ground. The second is the characterization of Husserl's phenomenological method, specifically the phenomenological reduction, and its appropriate legacy in Gestalt therapy.

### Husserl's Context

If, in reading Van De Riet's article, we were to bracket what we know about Husserl and his project, we might conclude that Husserl was, like Freud, the originator of a school of psychotherapy. His intent, it would seem, was to teach us how to clear out our minds, so that we might understand our patients strictly on their own terms or, if we are athletes, to clear our minds of thoughts that interfere with our concentration. The irony of this characterization is that it takes Husserl's work wildly out of context, detaches it from its own historical and philosophical ground, and applies it to a task far removed from its original target.

Husserl was a mathematician turned philosopher. His stated intent, at least early on, was to establish an epistemological foundation for mathematics and logic and, eventually for all of science. He is properly compared, not to Freud, but to Descartes and Kant. His philosophical project was to challenge the Cartesian dualism of consciousness and world and to establish a unifying common ground for the opposing traditions of philosophical realism and idealism.

One dimension of Husserl's philosophical project was the "radicalizing of the Cartesian demand for an absolutely certain basis for philosophy" (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 316). For Descartes (1960), this basis was the isolated Cogito, the thinking, philosophical subject's prehension of its own act of thought. For Husserl, this separation of subject from the world, that is, from the field of its experience, was unacceptable, and he sought a means of overcoming this separation.

Another dimension of Husserl's project was to challenge the positivistic psychology of his day. For positivistic psychology, human experience and behavior were reduced to elements of objective measurement and classification (for example in Fechner's psychophysics), like any other object of natural science.

Husserl viewed this dichotomy in Western thinking as the legacy of Cartesian dualism: human experience was either trapped in an isolated, unconnected, thinking Cogito, or it was stripped of its intrinsic subjectivity and reconstructed according to the available methods of natural science.

These, then, were the issues that concerned Husserl, and it is important to name them in this context in order to show how far were his concerns from the practical dilemmas of today's psychotherapy consulting room. Husserl was not trying to *do* psychology; he was trying to establish a philosophical foundation for doing psychology. This historical/philosophical context may seem far removed from the immediate concerns of Gestalt therapy, but that is exactly why I have included them here. Husserl's work is most certainly relevant to our work, but I believe it is necessary to meet him on his own turf before we determine his relevance to ours.

### The Phenomenological Reduction

Van De Riet, drawing upon the earlier work of Sapriel (1998) and Resnick (1995), presents the phenomenological reduction ostensibly as a method of psychotherapeutic intervention. I agree that Husserl's method indeed has profound implications for psychotherapy but would like to suggest, ultimately, an alternative way of conceptualizing that influence.

Van De Riet tells us that Husserl's reduction, with its method of bracketing our preconceptions and biases, was designed as a method of studying consciousness, of determining "the role of subjective experiencing" and ultimately of understanding people "as they are." The phenomenologist attempts to suspend her personal ground, her history, in order to experience the situation as if for the first time. Sapriel (1998) offers that in bracketing, we are to look with "presuppositionless eyes," and attempt thereby to "transcend our own organizing principles and unique life experience" (p. 38). Resnick (1995) indicates that we bracket "so as to be touched anew by the *noumena*, the virgin experience" (p. 4).

There is a degree of truth in these descriptions, but there is also some degree of exaggeration and error. My quarrel, however, is not so much with the particulars of this description as with this business of lifting the reduction out of its Husserlian context and applying it so literally to the situation of contemporary psychotherapy.

Husserl designed his method to deal with problems of a different order from those of the consulting room. I would like to do two things here: first, to situate Husserl's method in its original context in order to demonstrate its achievements within that context, and second, I would

like to sketch out its relevance to the psychotherapeutic situation is a fashion that more closely preserves and applies the intent of Husserl's philosophy.

Husserl began his philosophical project by identifying what he called the "natural attitude" of consciousness—that is, the mode of ordinary consciousness, whereby the world is presented to us as real, as "out there," in itself, independent of my subjectivity. This is the world studied by the natural sciences, including positivistic psychology, as the court of highest appeal in the determination of the real. It is also the world that Descartes negated with his systematic doubt and his "evil genius," en route to claiming pure, isolated consciousness—the Cogito—as the archimedian point of philosophy. Husserl, rather than suspending the world, as had Descartes, suspended instead the natural attitude. He asked that we place in brackets all that we know or think we know about the "objective reality" of the world and consider it purely as it shows itself in experience, that is, as *phenomena*. Husserl set aside the philosophical question of whether the world is objectively real or of what constitutes its final objectivity and considered only how it is *known*, how it enters into consciousness.

Under the spell of the reduction, Husserl made two fundamental discoveries. He found that consciousness could not be conceived as an isolated Cogito, for it always completes itself in the world, is always consciousness *of* something. This defines Husserl's concept of *intentionality*.

And just as his method failed to validate a pure, encapsulated consciousness, it failed to confirm a noumenal world, an objectivity that could be said to exist in itself, apart from co-constituting subjectivity. Husserl's reduction showed that the world *always* reveals itself to consciousness in profiles, each taken *from a perspective* and always in the form of an object standing against a horizon (what Gestalt psychology later called figure-ground). Things and, by extension, the world are only and always revealed *from a point of view*, and that "point of view" is consciousness.

These discoveries constitute the core of Husserl's phenomenology: conscious experience, considered as figure, can only be grasped against the ground of its intended world, and worldly object, made figural, can only be considered against the ground of co-constituting subjectivity. Thus, where Descartes anchored his philosophy to the undeniable fact of thinking, Husserl anchored his in the world's revelation of itself to consciousness—what Gestalt therapy labels "experience."

This is the original context of Husserl's phenomenological method. The reduction was not intended to "understand people as they are" nor to learn what experience means to an observer nor to "see the essence of the other." These are psychological questions. Husserl's project



was fundamentally ontological, namely, to demonstrate in principle and in fact that essences are housed in the phenomenal unfolding of the world to human experience.

In this way, Husserl established—against the traditions of philosophical idealism and scientific positivism—that objectivity and subjectivity are conjoined primordially and that we cannot speak properly of one without the other. The reduction, in effect, brought into philosophical cognizance the experiential field that is the context of all being, identifying this field as the implicit (but made explicit by the reduction) frame of all serious scientific (and, we should add, psychotherapeutic) inquiry.

### Husserl and Field Theory

One implication of this understanding of Husserl's reduction is that it clarifies the role of his work relative to Gestalt therapy's field theory. Van De Riet treats field theory and Husserl's phenomenology as independent clusters of ideas and proposes that their relationship in Gestalt therapy theory might be complementary, with field theory filling out some of the gaps created by Husserl's method. Van De Riet (again, along with Sapriel, 1998) presents Husserl as arriving at a position that isolates consciousness from the world and then tells us that phenomenology can be rehabilitated only by grafting field theory onto the package. This presentation of phenomenology and field theory as essentially independent of one another reflects a decidedly nonphenomenological conceptualization of each.

Gestalt therapy's field theory is often mistakenly equated with the field theory of Gestalt psychology, when in fact there is an essential difference. It is certainly true that the Gestalt psychologists identified field phenomena as the irreducible data of psychological investigation. But they too were trapped in the philosophical position of the natural sciences, the natural attitude of which Husserl speaks, and viewed the fields they studied (perceptual, organic, and so on) ultimately as "real," that is, as constituted by nature, independent of a co-constitutive human subject (Lewin is the one noteworthy exception). When Koffka (1935), for example, described the organized dynamic patterns of human perception, he described them as if the field forces existed in nature. And Köhler (1947), when he got down to the business of explaining the organized fields of his investigations, spoke of isomorphic patterns in the brain. What both left out—and this same style of nonphenomenological thinking often shows up in the literature of Gestalt therapy—was the constituting human subjectivity of Husserl.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes about Gestalt psychology's oversight in this regard, calling it a failure to see the phenomenology that was implicit in its discoveries. In the figure-ground structure, Merleau-Ponty

wrote, there is a *third term*, always implicitly understood, and without which the very notion of a figure–ground structure makes no sense. That third term is the immanent, embodied consciousness of the perceiving subject. His reasoning was quintessential Husserl: apart from an engaged, bodily perceiver, nothing can stand out from anything. There is no field, in other words, unless we are referring to a field that includes, as a co-constitutive pole, an engaged subjectivity. Writers in Gestalt therapy often leave out this phenomenological rudiment of field theory, speaking of fields as if they existed in themselves or using the term “phenomenology” to refer to “subjective” experience (as if there might be some form of experience that does not require a subject).

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951) spell out the field theoretical basis of Gestalt therapy. They write:

The meaning of anger involves a frustrating obstacle; the meaning of reasoning involves problems of practice. Let us call this interacting of organism and environment in any function the “organism/environment field”; and let us remember that no matter how we theorize about impulses, drives, etc., it is always to such an interacting field that we are referring, and not to an isolated animal [p. 228].

It is Gary Yontef (1993), however, who most decisively identifies Gestalt therapy’s field theory precisely as a *phenomenological* field theory. He notes: “In phenomenological field theory, which field is being studied is defined by the experience of an observer” (p. 243). He goes on to elaborate:

The field may be that of the experience of a participant in an organism/environment field, e.g., one of the participants in a dialog. It can be the field as defined by the experience of a third party observer who considers himself/herself outside the interaction being studied. That outside observer is also part of an organism/environment field that includes the interaction being studied [pp. 243–244].

Yontef teases out here what is only implicit in Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, as it is only implicit in the writings of Köhler and Koffka—namely, that the very notion of a field, as an organized “object” of study, implies the contextualized field of an observer’s experience. This formulation of Gestalt field theory—and this is the point I wish to make—is Gestalt therapy’s Husserlian legacy. Again, quoting Merleau-Ponty (1962):

By taking the *Gestalt* [vis: the patterned field] as the theme of his reflection, the psychologist breaks with psychologism [vis: reduction of experience to "objective" variables], since the meaning, connection and "truth" of the percept no longer arise from the fortuitous coming together of our sensations as they are given to us by our psycho-physiological nature, but determine the spatial and quantitative values of these sensations, and *are* their irreducible configuration. *It follows that the transcendental attitude is already implied in the descriptions [of the field] of the psychologist, in so far as they are faithful ones* [second italics added; p. 59].

The point here is that Husserl's phenomenology, rather than requiring field theory for its rehabilitation, is more accurately taken as the ground-work, the founding basis for Gestalt therapy's unique radicalization of field theory. Fields cannot be spoken of properly as existing in themselves, in nature, apart from a co-constitutive human subjectivity, and it is this philosophical tenet that justifies Gestalt therapy's reverence for first-person human experience.

### Husserl's Legacy

Husserl likened his philosophical project (as had Kant) to a "Copernican revolution," because he had wrested truth and being from the en-soi "real world" of scientific objectivity, establishing in its place the domain of human experience. This was his answer to philosophical realism and positivistic psychology and pointed the way to a phenomenological psychology.

Merleau-Ponty (1962), teasing out the implications of Husserl's work, particularly as it impacts the worlds of psychological research and practice, made this point eloquently:

Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world's, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself round me and begins to exist for me. To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is [p. ix].

And so, Husserl's reduction needs to be seen fundamentally, not as itself a tool of scientific or psychotherapeutic inquiry, but as what it was for Husserl—a tool of philosophic inquiry. And as such, the reduction could hardly be said to denude and obliterate the complexities and contingencies of human subjectivity—personality, culture, history—but instead to bring them into our awareness precisely as constitutive of the experiential world. What the reduction accomplished, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962), was to “slacken the threads which attach us to the world, and thus bring them to our attention” (p. xiii).

So, how might Husserl's phenomenological method be applied to the fields of psychology and psychotherapy? I propose that we base its application upon the spirit of his project and discoveries, rather than a literal extrapolation of his method without regard to context. In the domain of scientific psychological research, Amedeo Giorgi (1970) proposed an application of Husserl's method as a primary *modus operandi*. The researcher, he advised, must bracket all that is known scientifically concerning the phenomenon being studied. If, for example, the researcher wished to study the phenomenon of interpersonal trust, he or she would suspend all that has been theoretically and empirically established about the phenomenon, suspending, in effect, the traditional research starting point of experimental hypothesis. In Giorgi's approach, the researcher adopts a posture of “purposeful naïvete” and inquires of her subjects concerning their unreflective experiencing of trust in the actual relationships in their life. Giorgi accentuates Husserl's regard for the *Liebenswelt*, the lived world of everyday experience, as the organizing matrix for any subsequent experimentation, validation, and theoretical formulation. What is it, he wanted to discover, that we *already* know about the phenomenon in question at the level of prereflective living? According to Giorgi, an existing scientific body of theoretical and research literature could only be adequately explored and validated on the basis of such an original inquiry. His method, at root, is unmistakably Husserlian.

Charles Maes (1973), a phenomenological psychotherapist, taught a parallel application of Husserl's method, but in this case to the specific domain of psychotherapeutic encounter. Maes encouraged his psychotherapy trainees to “learn everything—every theoretical framework, every technique and method, every mode of analysis and intervention available—and once you've absorbed it thoroughly, forget every bit of it, throw it to the wind.” Approach your client, he advised,

as if you are the original therapist–client dyad, as if you were inventing psychotherapy. Empty yourself of everything you think you know—about psychotherapy, about your client, about your-



self. And then, above all, pay attention. Your client is the world, and he will call out of you what is relevant to the encounter. In one encounter you will find yourself called upon as a Rogerian reflector; in another you will encounter your client's unconscious strivings; in another his unresolved polarities, and at another time, his classically conditioned neurosis. Your orienting therapeutic task is to forget what you know, to become ordinary, and to engage this Other with simplicity and authenticity.

The references in his message may be dated but, nonetheless, reflect the timelessness of Husserl's phenomenological legacy to psychotherapy: whatever it is that is relevant as theory, as method, whatever is appropriate to this particular piece of work, its origin is here, now, in the experiential field that is forming around me, this moment as we engage.

This, I contend, is Husserl's legacy to Gestalt psychotherapy. It is the reduction adapted to a new context, rather than applied literally, out of context. It is not so much the reduction-as-method, as it is the outcome of his investigations. It is not so much technique, as it is a justification for anchoring ourselves in immediate experience. It is not so much a way to practice, as it is an ontological justification of the way we practice—praxis that we take for granted as Gestalt therapy practitioners: attending, respecting the role of the Other's experience, appreciating the role of our own biases (theoretical, philosophical, cultural, scientific and personal, aware and unaware) play in co-creating the emergent meanings of the therapeutic field. None of this would be philosophically or theoretically defensible were it not for Husserl's phenomenology.

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