

What do Gestalt therapy and Gestalt theory have to do with each other?

by Hans-Jürgen P. Walter

Presentation delivered at the 3rd Scientific Convention of the *Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications e. V. (GTA)* from the 21st to the 24th of September 1983 in Münster/Westf., Germany; originally published in German in *Gestalt Theory* 6, No. 1, 1984, 55-69; slightly revised for the translation. This English version was first published in *The Gestalt Journal*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, pp 45-68.

The above question permits answers ranging from "absolutely nothing" to "they're basically the same thing". I have phrased it in that way because I suspect it is possible for the answers those present will give to cover the entire spectrum between these two poles. For me, the question means that I have taken on the task of demonstrating how Gestalt therapy and Gestalt theory are related to each other and that they have decisive parts in common.

Preparing for this presentation, I increasingly got the impression that by taking on this task I had manoeuvred myself into a position of paralysing slackness. How much more attractive would it have been to define a "good" thing versus a "bad" thing using bold polemics? Why did I have to take on a task which demanded the psychic maturity of me to be convincing "without anger and jealousy", using no more than factual arguments? - After I had spent plenty of time feeling sorry for myself, I had an idea:

"I know you'd rather have your peace quietly drinking your pints of beer than explain yet again why you get along like you do", I told the Gestalt theoretician and the Gestalt therapist who had made themselves at home on my "psycho-physical level" (psychophysisches Niveau = PPN) or - more simply put - were vegetating in my garden of life. "But what", I continued, "if you pretended, for a good cause, that you had to worry about the other diluting your beer with water or spiking it with spirits, or imagine an intelligent young woman entering the scene and each of you wanting to take her home afterwards?"

The latter image struck home with both of them, and the Gestalt therapist - we'll call him Fritz - instantly began to gibe, "Age goes before beauty - you go first." Theo, the Gestalt theoretician, rebuffed on the spot, "Sex is your area of expertise, of course. Regarding age, at least I've stayed young, especially in my way of thinking, which I sometimes doubt you have. I totally go along with [Mary HENLE \(1978\)](#) and Maria RICKERS-OVSIANKINA and Rudolf ARNHEIM on this. RICKERS-OVSIANKINA wrote to me (letter of the 8th of December 1978) that she was worried about the too far-reaching and somewhat naive statements made by people like Fritz PERLS. And ARNHEIM is even more unequivocal (letter of the 10th of May 1979): He writes that in the United States the prospects for clinical psychology are bleak, 'mostly due to the influence of the unspeakable Fritz PERLS whose abuse of the term Gestalt has led to dreadful confusion and degeneration'. So I suggest you keep your first name secret if you want to be taken seriously by a Gestalt theoretician. Your great Fritz PERLS was really a philanderer first and foremost, wasn't he?"

Fritz: "And why are you putting on airs like this? In your case it was nothing but the wish to put me in the shade with a woman which has turned you on so much that you're being unfair and

are trying to get at me with quotes and untruthfully moralising insinuations. But that's not the way it works. I won't even get involved in a discussion about Fritz PERLS as a person. Look at your own horn! I'll start from an entirely different angle: Maybe you really haven't quite realised yet that Gestalt therapy has got Gestalt theory down from its academic ivory-tower where it might otherwise have continued to prove the ideas so revolutionary for human sciences on simple geometrical shapes until Doomsday. And I do mean 'revolutionary ideas'; but you had adjusted so well to this entire scientific ado which is so intent on pseudo-exactitude (including its elitist arrogance) and poses on the pedestal of alleged objectivity, that there was hardly anything left of the humanist notions of the holistic approach."

"All right, I'll get down to the facts now," said Theo. "But first I'd like to point out that your matter-of-factness wasn't exactly truthful. Academic Gestalt theory has never been as daft as you made it out to be, but I'll come back to that. The fact is that Gestalt therapy has developed into an irrational movement of salvation. In view of this I'd rather stay up in my ivory-tower of precise abstraction. I don't want anything to do with this humanist nonsense where holistic means that everything is somehow related to everything else!"

Listening to Theo and Fritz going on about their views I'm beginning to get impatient; they obviously need a mediator if there is to be a chance of initiating a factual dispute. The role-play seems to have become quite serious. "You two, I'd like to ask you a few questions now and make sure you stick to the subject. Firstly: ***Why is Gestalt therapy actually called Gestalt therapy?***"

Fritz: "PERLS called it that deliberately. According to him his theoretical knowledge and practical experiences which gained crucial importance for the articulation of his criticism of psychoanalysis and for the description of his own therapeutic method are owing to his encounter with Gestalt theory. He wrote, 'I am indebted to Professor K. GOLDSTEIN for first introducing me to Gestalt psychology. Unfortunately, in 1926 when I was working at the neurological institute in Frankfurt I was still too preoccupied with the orthodox psychoanalytical method, and was therefore only able to absorb a fraction of what I was offered' (PERLS, 1942, cited from German edition, 1978, 9; *Vorwort aus dem Jahr 1942*). But even if he hadn't been to lectures of Gestalt theoreticians as a medical student in Berlin, he certainly attended a few in Frankfurt, held by Adhémar GELB (who supervised the dissertation of his wife Lore) and probably also by WERTHEIMER, to whom he dedicated his first book (*Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, first published in South Africa in 1942, in England in 1947) when he began to realise the importance of his experiences with Gestalt theoreticians. Whenever he starts talking about the basics of his own psychotherapeutic approach, he refers to views and terms pertaining to Gestalt theory!"

Theo interrupts, "I'm having to restrain myself. You want to prove that after psychoanalysis Gestalt theory became and remained his psychological habitat. That may be, but I've also heard that GOLDSTEIN was a wee bit embarrassed when he later discovered PERLS among his listeners in the United States. ARNHEIM talks about the 'entirely unauthorised usurpation of this name (i.e. that of the term *Gestalt*) through Fritz PERLS' (personal message of the 11th of December 1979). - A touch of Gestalt theoretical 'stable odour' mixed with psychoanalysis - PERLS (1969, 4) even admits to not having read most of FREUD's books and even fewer Gestalt theoretical papers. Basically you've got a mixture of two different fragrances which at best serve to produce a perfume. Psychoanalysts should be grateful that he has chosen Gestalt

theory for his disavowal."

Fritz: "Let me start with the 'stable odour'. I don't think so little of it. Whoever has got his nose filled with the right intimate scent can never be totally wrong in his judgement of where his home is. [fn. 1](#) And that's what it was like for Fritz PERLS as well. He realized the significance the Gestalt theoretical approach gains for people, for the individual as well as for the community, provided it is systematically translated into practical therapeutic action. Who among the Gestalt theoreticians, apart from Kurt LEWIN after his emigration, has engaged with the confusing diversity of immediate human relationships?"

Theo: "Surely, there have been other approaches: the old paper by SCHULTE (1924) titled 'An Attempt at a Theory of the Paranoid Idea of Reference and Delusion Formation'; LUCHINS (e.g. 1949, 1964) and FROMM-OPPENHEIMER (e.g., 1968) studied clinical psychology in the United States, almost simultaneously with PERLS; ARNHEIM engaged in critical analysis of the arts and the film medium (cf., e.g., 1978); and there are a number of philosophical, almost psychotherapeutic and political publications by Max WERTHEIMER in the United States (1934, 1935, 1937, 1940)..."

Fritz: "... which no German Gestalt theoretician has found relevant enough to be translated, not even Wolfgang METZGER who has after all translated *Productive Thinking* (WERTHEIMER, 1964) and whose profound agreement with his teacher WERTHEIMER is supported by his important book *Creative Freedom (Schöpferische Freiheit, 1962)*. You could actually talk to METZGER about Gestalt therapy without him immediately turning up his nose. But apart from that, most German Gestalt theoreticians disowned their own fathers after the war unless papers fitted tolerably into the paradigm of experimental statistophilia, to coin a new term. And even in the United States neither WERTHEIMER nor LUCHINS achieved any acclaim or influence with the above mentioned treatises. [fn. 2](#)

Of course I'll readily concede that PERLS wasn't the incarnation of Gestalt theory pure and simple (who is?), but he has impressed so many people in his concrete work with them that they have spread - and who could be surprised at it? - even his theoretical inconsistencies and have on top of that, according to the principles of the development of rumours, distorted whatever was indeed acceptable. These people shouldn't have been deserted. Mary [HENLE's public discussion of PERLS in 1978](#), demonstrating remarkable passion and the obviously irrevocable intention of tearing him to pieces, came at least 20 years too late. Was LEWIN's fate any different in respect of the delay of discussion? No! And this has resulted in the fact that many representatives of group dynamics refer to him even though they have at best read his last programmatical papers, but have no idea about his Gestalt theoretical background (Jörg FENGLER, personal message to Jürgen STEINKOPFF of the 2nd of December 1977), which in turn has inflationary tendencies when it comes to theory and practice in this field. The group dynamics research of LEWIN hardly existed for academic Gestalt theoreticians. And this split too had already started in the United States."

Theo: "You've mentioned METZGER. He had reviewed the American LEWIN rather early on (cf. 1963, 1975). And very positively. And don't forget also many of those here present." -

"Right, let me interrupt you two once more. I'm finding all this reasonably interesting, but in regard to the topic I gave to you it seems a bit like talking about the world and his wife. But your conversation has made me realise one important thing: It seems to me that Gestalt

theoreticians of all orientations are to blame to some extent for the dissociated development of their own approach. After the dispersion of the former centres of Gestalt theory by the racist civil service legislation of the Nazis, too many theoreticians considered their own pile of muck to be the best and preferred to 'leave the field' when a realisation of the (lip) service to the whole and the differentiation of Gestalt characteristics would have required laborious and careful analysis of the achievements of others. So now I'd like to ask you, Fritz: ***Which Gestalt theoretical views and concepts does PERLS rely on?***"

Fritz: "Well, I can think of so many that I hardly know where to start. No, I do, I'll start with a quote which has only recently come to my attention in PERLS's autobiography *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (1969, unpaginated, pp. 6-9, beginning with the author's text). In it he comments on 'self-actualization':

'Self-actualization is a modest term. It has been glorified and distorted by hippies, artists, and, I am sorry to say, by many humanistic psychologists. It has been put forth as a program and achievement. This is the result of reification, the need to make a thing out of a process. In this case it even means to deify and glorify a locus, for self indicates merely a 'where' of happening, self to be contrasted (and making sense only through this contrast) with otherness.

... A wheat germ has the potential of becoming a plant and the wheat plant is its actualization.

Now: self actualization means the wheat will actualize itself as a wheat plant and never as a rye plant.

... No eagle will want to be an elephant, no elephant to be an eagle. They 'accept' themselves; they accept themselves'. No, they don't even accept themselves, for this would mean possible rejection. They take themselves for granted, No, they don't even take themselves for granted, for this would imply a possibility of otherness. They just are. They are what they are what they are.

How absurd it would be if ... the eagle wanted to have the strength and thick skin of the beast.

Leave this to the human - to try to be something he is not - to have ideals that cannot be reached, to be cursed with perfectionism so as to be safe from criticism, and to open the road to unending mental torture.

The gap between one's potential and its actualization on the one side of the ledger, and the distortion of this authenticity on the other, becomes apparent. 'Shouldism' rears its ugly head. We 'should' eliminate, disown, repress, negate many features and sources of genuineness and add, pretend, play at, develop roles unsupported by our *élan vital*, resulting in phony behavior of different degrees. Instead of the wholeness of a real person, we have the fragmentation, the conflicts, the unfelt despair of the paper people.

Homeostasis, the subtle mechanism of the self-regulating and self-controlling organism, is replaced by an external superimposed control-madness undermining the survival value of the person and the species. Psychosomatic symptoms, despondency, lassitude and compulsive behavior replace the *joie de vivre*.

The deepest split, long ingrained in our culture and thus taken for granted, is the mind/body dichotomy: the superstition that there is a separation, yet interdependency, of two different kinds of substance, the mental and the physical. ...

... We *are* organisms, we (...) do not have an organism. We are one wholesome unit, but we are at liberty to abstract many aspects from this totality. Abstract, not subtract, not split off. We can abstract, according to our interest, the behavior of that organism or its social function or its physiology or its anatomy or this or that, but we have to stay alert and not take any abstraction for a 'part' of the total organism. ... We can have a compositum of abstractions, we can approximate the knowing of a person or a thing, but we never can have the total awareness of (to talk in Kantian language) *das Ding an sich*, the thing itself.

Am I becoming too philosophical?"

"Indeed, indeed," sneers Theo who had begun to shake his head vehemently towards the end of the quote. But Fritz isn't quite ready to hand over to him: "Just bear with me a wee bit longer, then you may start to scoff. But before you do I'd like to propose a few theses in relation to this quote:

"1. PERLS's understanding of the term 'self-actualization' corresponds to what METZGER and WERTHEIMER call 'freedom' or 'creative freedom' (e.g. METZGER, 1962, 82ff.), especially with regard to PERLS's criticism of aberrations in so-called humanist psychology as well as in his mental proximity to Far Eastern practical philosophy. All three of them view meaningful self-actualization as the unfolding of a person's potential without external pressure such as rigid rules and without disregarding the general human and the individual possibilities (cf. METZGER, 1962, 22, 26, 75, 84).

"2. PERLS's understanding of self-actualization follows, like that of METZGER and WERTHEIMER, from the system- and field-theoretical view of Gestalt theory as it is represented by KÖHLER (cf. THOLEY, 1982). It is within the frame of this view that his discussion of homeostasis, of the 'subtle mechanism of the self-regulating organism', and of the 'control-madness' have their place.

"3. PERLS represents a psycho-physical approach based on his experiences with the Gestalt theoretically oriented neurologist GOLDSTEIN which, although the terminology may have been simplified, does justice to the Gestalt approach in the consequences it has for practical therapeutic work (i.e. on a level of immediate phenomena).

"4. In the final part of the quote PERLS discusses the feasibility and the possible benefits of an abstracting discussion of aspects of human wholeness; this part proves PERLS's epistemological affinity to a 'critical realism': Implicitly he differentiates between a naive-phenomenal world, a critical-phenomenal world (which is the physical view of life gained by abstraction), and a transphenomenal world of 'the thing itself' (cf. THOLEY, 1980 a).

"5. In conclusion we can say that psychotherapeutic practice which logically takes into account the views proposed in PERLS's text may rightfully refer to Gestalt theory. Furthermore I posit (substantiated by the session protocols in PERLS, 1974) that the practice of PERLSian Gestalt therapy undoubtedly shows that he has followed the right intimate scent. He integrates experiment, wholeness, and phenomenology, the holy Trinity of Gestalt theoretical research methodology, into an atmosphere permitting a person to breathe the air of freedom, which, as WERTHEIMER said once, can seem like recuperation after a long illness (1940).

Right, my dear Theo, thank you for letting me finish. Over to you now."

Footnotes:

[1]For further discussion of this proposition compare METZGER's (1963, 2. Kap.) deliberations about the term "Wesenseigenschaften" (physiognomic or expression characteristics of a Gestalt as a whole), as distinguished from material characteristics and structural characteristics. [\[-> back to text\]](#)

[2]It would indeed be interesting to draw a comparison between Mary HENLE's views about the position of Gestalt theory (1978) and the propositions of Michael WERTHEIMER, Max WERTHEIMER's son, about his father's understanding of the Gestalt approach (1980, also contained in Max WERTHEIMER, 1991). [\[-> back to text\]](#)

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2nd part

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Theo seems a bit miffed, to put it colloquially. He mutters sullenly, "You didn't leave me much of a chance to get a word in edgeways, did you?" And: "We didn't agree on your making a speech! Mister mediator! How am I supposed to refute all of what Fritz said at once?"

"Just give it a go," I say to him. Theo gives me a withering look which suggests that in the future he may want to go back to addressing me by my surname after years of being on first-name terms. Then suddenly a big grin appears on his face. "Hello!" he beams. "You two have chosen the perfect time to make your appearance. That's what my PPN-people, who are more intelligent than I am, are for. Now then, this is Paul (THOLEY) and that is Friedrich (HOETH). You've been listening, haven't you?" "Absolutely," comes the reply from these two friends and former colleagues at the institute under Edwin RAUSCH in Frankfurt (who supervised their dissertations). Friedrich adds, "That's okay," and Paul doesn't refuse to take part in the discussion either, but remarks thoughtfully, "Yes, but I wonder if it wouldn't have been more accurate to speak of second order PPN." - Fritz whispers into my ear, "Do you think Theo is aware that he's saving himself by using Gestalt therapeutic methodology?" I look at him sternly; after all I'm impartial here.

"Well, I shall go ahead and start then," said Friedrich, "but you..." - he addresses me directly and I'm wondering whether I'm going to have double vision in a minute; oh dear, this is going to be fun; just stick with the theory, I'm thinking; I can't handle third order PPN-people to enter the scene. I'm signalling inconspicuously to Fritz to mobilise his concentrated therapeutic competence - if the worst comes to the worst - to prevent an overwhelming confusion of roles.

"But you," repeats Friedrich, "I was going to tell you something first: I've read Hilarion PETZOLD's article (1978) in *Psychologie Heute*, and I don't quite know what to think of it except that she really hasn't got a clue about Gestalt theory. Everything she says about it is odd - and this is putting it mildly as befits a lady. But then she's a Gestalt therapist too, isn't she?" (personal message of the 24th of November 1979).

That's the last thing I needed, Friedrich saying this. I notice that I'm biased after all and quite liked Fritz's arguments.

"First of all, Friedrich," I tell him, "the lady is not a lady, but a gentleman. Secondly, Hilarion was my most important trainer of Gestalt therapy who taught me - let's be honest - a great deal in my personal development and Gestalt therapeutic practice. And thirdly, God knows why he has made public his insufficient knowledge about Gestalt theory [\[f. 3\]](#) - especially by saying that

Gestalt theory lacked a theory of values - and, moreover, denied what PERLS himself has acknowledged, i.e. that the latter views Gestalt theory, side by side with his experiences with psychoanalysis, as the primary basis of his practice. I suppose that only goes to show how crucial it is to make sure that the label 'Gestalt' must not be allowed to apply to just anything. Hence I would ask you to restrict yourselves to Fritz PERLS. Only if the founder of Gestalt therapy can be exposed as a pseudo Gestaltist, does it seem fit for Gestalt theorists to dissociate themselves from Gestalt therapy."

"Well," retorts Friedrich, "I wouldn't exactly call PERLS a wind-bag. On the contrary. I was almost convinced by what Fritz was saying. There is definitely something in this proposition. Incidentally, I have just finished reading the two volumes by PERLS, HEFFERLINE and GOODMAN. There are quite a few hitches when it comes to the details of Gestalt theoretical reasoning. And referring to the earlier quote: There exists an unusual contradiction between the part Fritz uses as evidence that PERLS is a critical realist - although the evidence in and of itself is quite good - and the part PERLS uses earlier for distinguishing between the physical and the psychical. The two don't fit together. The difference between the phenomenal and the objective-physical realities, which is constantly emphasised by Gestalt theory, is blurred; KÖHLER and METZGER's elaborations pertaining to the mind-body problem are ignored" (HOETH, 1980, 116).

Paul adds, "In the very first sentence of their book, PERLS, HEFFERLINE and GOODMAN note, 'Experience takes place at the boundary between the organism and its environment, primarily on the surface of the skin and other organs of sensory perception and motor reaction.' When talking about the surface of the skin and other organs of sensory perception the authors are obviously referring to the boundary between the physical organism and its physical environment. However, according to the critical-realistic view experience does not take place there, but within the phenomenal world which is based on cortical processes in the PPN. The contamination of phenomenal and physical circumstances becomes visible in the way the term 'organism/environment-field' (for example, 228) is used in so far as according to the system theoretical views of Gestalt theory the phenomenal ego and its phenomenal environment are indeed connected in a field-like context of effects, whereas circular regulation processes are responsible for the interaction between the physical organism and the physical environment. The impermissible transference of the term 'field' and other categories, which were originally designed to describe and explain processes in the phenomenal world, to the entire organism and beyond it to the physical environment is characteristic (according to BISCHOF) of a *semi-naive phenomenologism*. PERLS was probably inspired towards this by his acquaintance with GOLDSTEIN who holds similar views in this respect" (THOLEY, 1980, 183/314).

Theo says thoughtfully, "We acknowledge GOLDSTEIN's achievements in neurological research and practice, although he may not always have been a critical-realistic genius; then that imperfection is no reason to discard PERLS's achievements. On the other hand," he adds, addressing Fritz, "it has become clear even at this stage from what Friedrich and Paul have said that not a single one of your five theses is entirely waterproof. There are little hitches everywhere with the theoretician PERLS; he lacks consequence and stringency. Hence it is understandable why so much Gestalt gibberish has developed alongside Gestalt therapy.

"Let's consider your first thesis, for instance: I'm not sure whether METZGER agrees with PERLS's understanding of self-actualization when he says, 'In the domain of living creatures only

those forms will achieve long duration which are created through the unfolding of internal forces and are supported and renewed by these forces' (1962, p. 26). I can sense underlying tones with PERLS sounding somewhat like: Be like the wheat grain, like the eagle, or the elephant. I get the impression he's not only turning against 'control-madness', but even against simply thinking about oneself. Proclaiming the identity of the physical and the psychological he overshoots KÖHLER's presupposition of isomorphism by far. Such a view can at best be regarded as a peculiarity of Fritz PERLS's phenomenal world or as the pious wish to find peace within himself: he'd like this identity to exist because it would make life so much easier for him and for his work with clients."

"Exactly," Friedrich breaks in, "I got the very same impression with PERLS, HEFFERLINE and GOODMAN. But first of all, concerning self-actualization, a few crucial differences in relation to the term are mentioned. First and foremost there is the difference between 'becoming aware' and 'introspection': the latter disturbs self-regulation of the psycho-physical system by the interference of an 'intentional ego'. Also there is the difference between 'assimilation', i.e. the genuine incorporation of certain attitudes, views, and demands into one's own psycho-physical system, as opposed to 'introjection', which is the intake of entire 'unchewed chunks' of theories and demands forced on us by the authorities which remain undigested in the stomach of the psycho-physical system." -

"But it's indeed in the light of this irreconcilable opposition of assimilation and introjection," interrupts Theo, "that PERLS's sentence '*Shouldism*' rears its ugly head' becomes suspect. I can literally hear all the allegedly so very 'humanistic' egoists reciting:

'You are you and I am I,

And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped' (PERLS, 1969, 4).

As if there wasn't anything between. As if you couldn't approach someone and get used to them voluntarily without getting a dodgy stomach from it."

"I was just coming to that," continues Friedrich. "PIAGET has suggested that the nature of intelligence (I'd call it the principle of steady productive solutions to problems) is in the balance between assimilation and accommodation (i.e. the adjustment of one's own categories to the peculiarities of the 'stranger' with whom one enters into a relationship). Hence I would like to say to PERLS - though, in contrast to you, Theo, I'm only referring to the theoretical part of his work: In spite of the justified rejection of a process which is nothing but the forced 'introjection' of indigestible chunks, the regulating process of accommodation, i.e. the adjustment of one's own categories of recognition to the factual structure of what is to be recognised (e.g. the present terminology of Gestalt theory) is greatly neglected in a tendency towards exuberant assimilation (1980, p. 116). This becomes especially salient, for instance, when PERLS, HEFFERLINE and GOODMAN name the Gestalt theoretical differentiation between figure and ground as the basic concept of Gestalt therapy and its understanding of psychical processes. It is obvious that in this presupposition the Gestalt theoretical concepts of figure/ground on the one hand and centering on the other are confused, and thus the concept of figure/ground is strained to the point of becoming unfathomable (simply because it is really centering which is talked about). -In this so-called theoretical foundation of Gestalt therapy we have to look for clearly stated findings amidst this flood of assimilation, and there are indeed things to be discovered:

"1. It appears to me that the necessary, but at the same very difficult integration of Gestalt theory and psychoanalysis has been successful despite the occasional hitch when it comes to a precise terminology. This is a huge step and the reason why the volume concerned with practical matters (the second volume by PERLS, HEFFERLINE and GOODMAN) is so fascinating.

"2. I found the explanations in the volume about practical matters gripping and very enlightening. The book contains a fascinating demonstration of how an increasing awareness of the perception of external circumstances leads to an increasing awareness of internal processes. This makes clear the connection, perhaps even unity, of 'purely' perceptive, emotional, and motor processes, which constitutes a phenomenon which has not been sufficiently emphasised by the Berlin School of Gestalt theory, even though it was never overlooked. I have got to accept this criticism coming from PERLS and his colleagues even though I am a follower of the Berlin School myself (HOETH, 1980, 116).

"I used to have another suspicion - i.e. that PERLS tempted his patients into becoming assimilation fanatics -, but have not been able to find evidence for this, either. On the contrary: PERLS, who is a brilliant phenomenologist, implies in his practical explanations and quite possibly also in his practical therapy the duty of others towards accommodation by demanding that they develop categories of perception which would make possible an awareness of the phenomena, which become clear in his view. - Perhaps the therapeutic practitioner PERLS is ahead of the theoretician PERLS? - Integration is certainly necessary. I believe that so-called academic psychology ought to deal with PERLS's work in great detail (1980, 117).

That's it for the moment," closes Friedrich. "You're a tolerant man," remarks Theo with a quick side-glance at Fritz. The latter understands what is meant by it and suggests, "Perhaps Paul is yet to roast me."

Paul: "That's not the point, but there is something which I do think is important: In Gestalt therapy dreams play a crucial role. PERLS calls the dream the 'royal way to integration' in an attempt to distinguish himself as a Gestalt theoretician from FREUD, who called it the 'royal way to the unconscious'. However, PERLS remains rooted in psychoanalysis and basically in the same epistemological weaknesses as FREUD by straining the concept of unconscious projections. For him every part of the dream - people, animals, plants etc. - is a projection of alienated aspects of the personality. I think it's a shame that one of the most important aspects of Gestalt therapeutic work - i.e. dream work - is burdened with a discrepant theoretical foundation.

"For the critical realist there is absolutely no reason to consider all parts of a dream to be projections, just as there is no reason to view the waking perceptions of psychical processes within the phenomenal environment - e.g. another person's mood - as such projections. Such a view is the result of what we have mentioned before, which is blending the objective appearing world of perception (which belongs to the phenomenal world of a person) with the physical world."

"Yes," Theo adds, "so whether we're dealing with the perception of a figural fact, like a rectangle, or the perception of the physical existence of a person on the one hand, or with the perception of a so-called psychical fact, like a solemn or a happy tune or the sadness of another person, on the other hand, neither example is a case of objective facts in terms of the physical

world. Both cases are psychological facts, i.e. processes within the psychological world of a person. Hence the accusation that Gestalt theory has examined perception, but hardly any psychological processes, reveals gross ignorance.

"Perception of any kind is a psychological process. Therefore, the stock of knowledge Gestalt theory has enabled about figural perception as well as thinking or emotions is of immediate importance to our understanding of psychological processes. We don't need analogous conclusions, like it has been suggested; although we have to own that the same basic principles, the so-called Gestalt laws, will produce different results according to the circumstances and the material."

"That's a truism, though, isn't it!" Friedrich interrupts sharply. "Of course the consequences will differ according to whether it's two people or two matches which get together under the law of proximity. Who needs to have that explained?! Oh, I just remembered who does." Fritz smiles: "And on top of that everyone who wants to be or become a Gestalt theoretical psychotherapist ought to know this by heart and be able to quote it any time."

"Anyway," Friedrich continues, "in case I haven't made myself clear: PERLS makes use of this circumstance in the exercises he suggests to his clients in order to enhance their awareness. Suddenly he's right again in what he practices."

"I'd like Paul to be able to finish his thoughts about dreams," I urge. "It's really very simple," Paul says. "According to critical realism the external position of dreams, i.e. the fact that people and things appear outside of us in dreams just like they do when we're awake, doesn't need an explanation. Dreams deal with the same phenomenal world as our waking existence, except that assimilating new information is restricted to the phenomenal body-ego. But a lot of what appears in our dreams we have seen previously. Therefore it's unnecessary for us to project these appearances. This isn't to say, of course, that we don't still do 'project' (even though that is an epistemologically doubtful Freudian term) things for our own enjoyment or because of masochist tendencies as regards the characters of people in our dreams, for instance, or as to what they like or don't like, do for us or against us."

"Yes," agrees Theo. "And this is where the epistemological weakness of Gestalt therapy like that of psychoanalysis can turn into disregarding every utterance of the patient as being a projection, which is what Alice MILLER (1981) complains about so vehemently." Fritz nods: "I'll admit that such undeveloped models of thinking can do harm; but on the other hand, if Gestalt therapeutic practice is serious about abstaining as a leader and participant from most interpretations, which is what PERLS demands, and putting the emphasis on allowing the patient to make his world accessible for himself (like for instance using the technique of the empty chair when the patient acts both as himself and, on the other chair, as his father), he'll be able to find out for himself what counts as a 'projection' and what doesn't. And even if the patient doesn't invent any additional negative traits for his father and the latter really is the total dog he is made out to be, the important thing remains that the client makes up for a missed argument with his father and gets the chance to free himself from his 'unsettled business' as PERLS calls it, alluding to the theses by ZEIGARNIK and OVSIANKINA" (cf. JUNKER, 1960).

"Don't think you have to break any more lances for Gestalt therapy," says Paul. "By pointing to

the epistemological weaknesses of Gestalt therapy I'm not trying to detract from its merits when it comes to psychotherapy. I agree with Friedrich: many Gestalt therapeutic principles are compatible with Gestalt theory; although it is only possible to make them understood in a satisfactory way from the viewpoint of that theory. But if PERLS, as he seems to do sometimes, dismisses 'intellectual thinking' as 'mind fucking', then I'd like to point out that such thinking, where you have to step outside your immediate reality to be able to view it critically from an eccentric standpoint, is vital for research matters and for formulating theories, which in turn helps therapeutic practice." (cf. THOLEY, 1980, 183f)

Theo obviously doesn't want to repeat, this time addressing Paul while looking at Fritz, that the former is a tolerant person. Hence he says nothing at all and just stares straight ahead. The questioning of experts has worked out just the way I intended it, and the time I had is coming to an end anyway. Let me hence sum up: Fritz PERLS was a wretched and lousy Gestalt theoretician, (but at least he was a Gestalt theoretician) who, helped by an extraordinary sense of smell, developed into a noteworthy Gestalt practitioner (you may want to substitute 'sense of smell' with 'intuition'). I suppose that's the advantage of some of your typical lazy students, who never take notes on what they are taught in lectures and tutorials, nor are able to tell you a day later what they thought important and interesting the day before. - I'll make one last suggestion: Let's do Fritz PERLS and ourselves a favour: let's do the unmentionable Fritz PERLS a favour by posthumously fulfilling his wish of being a "great" Fritz of Gestalt psychology and the one who forced Gestalt theory to become an approach of clinical psychology and psychotherapy; and let's also do ourselves a favour by taking the precaution of speaking about Gestalt *theoretical* psychotherapy and - by taking seriously this small difference, the addition of the word 'theoretical' - so developing PERLS's approach in a way which will set it apart from all this world-wide Gestalt gibberish. - I was originally going to finish here, but just now Fritz asks me, "So where is the intelligent woman?" "Why do you ask?" snaps Theo. - "Oh you two," I tell them, "you don't even exist, so why would an intelligent woman be interested in you? You're nothing but a 'projection'." "So you deceived us?" asks Theo and continues, shaking his head, "in that case I'd like an explanation as to how Paul and Friedrich arrived on my PPN." "There are still some questions left unanswered in Gestalt theory," I answer evasively. "And by the way, I like both of you. - But let's be serious. I wanted to tell you something else:

"I've noticed that our discussion of the connection between Gestalt theory and Gestalt therapy was very different from those in my previous papers (1977a and b). First I thought there was a lot we'd missed out on in our discussion, for instance a remark on the fact that PERLS only uses a fraction of what Gestalt theory offers for therapeutic work; but I've since come to the conclusion that first of all anyone who's interested can read through these earlier papers, and secondly - and that's why I'm glad that we've worked as a team - we argued in different directions whereas then, when I didn't yet have you to talk to, I always used to just interpret PERLS from a Gestalt theoretical viewpoint. As a Gestalt theoretician I used to justify myself for also being a Gestalt therapist, and as a Gestalt therapist I tried to prove that I was a Gestalt theoretician as well. I've really enjoyed this, and I'd like to thank both of you, as well as our active guests Paul and Friedrich, and all our non-active, but nonetheless present listeners." We would all like to thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for listening.

Summary

Some Gestalt theoreticians don't want anything to do with the "unspeakable" Fritz PERLS and with what he first called Gestalt therapy. Conversely, some Gestalt therapists stress that, even

though PERLS was inspired towards his therapeutic approach by Gestalt theory, other influences go beyond the allegedly non-political Gestalt theory which is "reduced to a psychology of perception". The author believes that neither view does justice to the Gestalt therapy practised by Fritz PERLS.

Evidence is given that the decisive concepts, on which PERLS's criticism of psychoanalysis, where his roots are, and also his own approach is based, are taken from Gestalt theory. If Gestalt theory were to dissociate itself from the Gestalt therapy of Fritz PERLS, the result would equal a denial of its own central positions. In order to delimit ourselves from the "Gestalt gibberish" which arose as a result of some (epistemologically deficient) theoretical statements made by PERLS the use of the term "**Gestalt theoretical psychotherapy**" is introduced.

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Footnotes:

[3] Please note: PETZOLD's above mentioned knowledge about Gestalt theory is that of 1979, not that of 1998. [[-> back to text](#)]