CHAPTER NINE

SARTRE AND PSYCHOLOGY

NOTHINGNESS AT THE HEART OF BEING: EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS AND GESTALT THERAPY

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Nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being – like a worm. - Sartre

While discussing existential psychoanalysis in *Being and Nothingness*,[1] Sartre notes that this form of therapy "has not yet found its Freud" (*BN* 734). Nevertheless, he does succeed in laying out its basic principles and aims, although procedural details that would be demanded by a full-fledged clinical methodology are definitely lacking. Since Gestalt therapy, however, is rooted in both psychoanalysis and existential philosophy, I will show in what follows that it is a particularly good candidate for helping to fill in just such a methodology for existential psychoanalysis.

According to Sartre, it is also necessary that the "final discoveries of ontology" must become the first principles of existential psychoanalysis (*BN* 735). And exactly insofar as Gestalt therapy can help to provide concrete detail and evidence for Sartre's theories, the exact significance of otherwise arcane and difficult ideas such as fundamental choice, purifying reflection, and consciousness as nothingness become much more decisive and clear when grasped in the light of the clinical detail that Gestalt therapy can provide.

In examining how Gestalt therapy can supplement the work of Sartre, it is also important to note that both Sartre and Frederick S. Perls—the most well-known originator of Gestalt therapy—have similar objections to Freud. While Perls objects to Freud's "mechanistically-oriented philosophy,"[2] Sartre objects to the "mechanistic cramp" that pervades Freud's metapsychology.[3] Both Perls and Sartre object to Freudian determinism, asserting instead that "nothingness" (Sartre and Perls) or the "fertile void" (Perls) lies at the heart of human reality; and it is this nothingness that allows for freedom and change.

In addition to all these similarities, Gestalt therapy, like existential psychoanalysis, disputes the existence of the unconscious and the essentially hierarchical nature of the classical analytic relationship. Like existential psychoanalysis, it emphasizes authenticity, freedom and responsibility, plus a phenomenological approach where the therapist

looks to the lived body to find neurosis and health. Also like existential psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy rejects universal symbolism, and looks for what is individual and unique. The aim of both approaches is not adjustment or normality, but instead to **evoke** a special kind of awareness **that** will lead to the recovery of spontaneity and the embracing of freedom and responsibility. Sartre calls this awareness "purifying reflection," while Perls simply calls it "awareness," introducing many interventions that could lead to a new choice of a way of being in the world. It is to this last idea, of a type awareness that allows one to overcome the need to see oneself as a type of fixed thing or substance, that we turn in what follows.

Purifying Reflection and the Preconditions for Change

Perls is emphatic that Gestalt therapy is existential and phenomenological. He states, "I have made awareness the hub of my approach, recognizing that phenomenology is the primary and indispensable step towards knowing all there is to know" (*IO* 69). Like Perls, Sartre too employed a phenomenological approach, indicating in his subtitle that *Being and Nothingness* is a "phenomenological ontology." As was the case for Husserl, consciousness for Perls and Sartre is always intentional**, i.e.,** consciousness is always consciousness of an object.[4] For both the latter two though there is no unifying, transcendental ego behind conscious acts as there is for Husserl. Also as opposed to Husserl, consciousness for Perls and Sartre is most fundamentally experienced in its interaction with the world. From a clinical point of view, emphasis lies on the so-called "nothingness" which mediates the relation between consciousness and its object. In fact, this nothingness is the source of my freedom, so that understanding and coming to terms with it becomes basic for both Sartre's existential psychoanalysis and Perls' Gestalt therapy.

Sartre's philosophical formulations help us understand Perls' more clinically oriented remarks. Sartre defines nothingness as the basic nihilation through which human reality establishes itself in the world as *not* being its objects of awareness. I can take a vantage point on a table or chair since I am aware that I am *not* this table or chair, whereas the objects themselves have no such vantage point or awareness. Like Perls**,** Sartre uses the work of Gestalt perceptual psychologist Kurt Lewin to show how the world is "hodologically organized" around paths or vectors that extend to objects that come to stand out or fade as a function of one's intentionality (*BN* 424).[5] An object focused on stands out as a figure against the ground of the rest of the **world.** So, for instance, because of

one's intentional concern or interest, a mountain is experienced differently by a climber, a geologist or a person simply out for a walk.

For Sartre, this world is the product of so-called "prereflective" consciousness. And since the emphasis at this level is object related, the experiencing subject possesses no interiority in the sense of a psychic content. With the operation of prereflective consciousness, instead of an "I" or "me" there is merely consciousness *of* this or that object. The "I" only becomes an addition of reflective consciousness, as when I am wholly engaged in reading a novel and stop for a moment to remark to my companion, "I am enjoying this book." Before this there was no "I," but only consciousness absorbed in the story on the page.

I can try to escape my freedom, with the attendant anxiety that it provokes, by making use of what Sartre calls "impure" or "accessory" reflection, attempting to establish myself as an object in the world. Specifically, I construct an ego, a "quasi-object" (since I cannot grasp myself directly like other objects in the world) that is inevitably contaminated by the voices of those in my childhood who first saw and named me. In fact, the ego consists of all those states and qualities that I mistakenly imagine motivate and define me. Although it is inevitable that we develop an ego, and although Sartre sometimes notes that a non-hypostatized ego may even be beneficial,[6] he most often emphasizes that this phenomenon is a false construct of accessory reflection.

Perls agrees with Sartre that nothingness is basic to human experience. He too says that reflection that attempts to construct a static ego distorts and stultifies, so that release from this state allows us to recover spontaneity. Distinguishing ontological nothingness from neurotic emptiness that arises when we suppress spontaneity, Perls says:

> When the Eastern person says "nothingness," he calls it *no thingness* - there are no *things* there. There is only process ….And we find when we accept and *enter* this nothingness….then the desert starts to bloom…. the sterile void becomes the fertile void.…There are no *things* there. There is only process, happening….I feel this way, as if I am nothing, just function….*Nothing* equals *real*.[7]

Perls however is far more of a phenomenologist than a devotee of Zen, as can be seen when he in effect affirms the intentionality of consciousness by writing, "Absolute awareness cannot possibly exist because… awareness always has content. One is always aware *of something*."[8]

As with Sartre, Perls is aware of the stultification that arises from attempting to arrange myself as a particular kind of object. He took from Wilhelm Reich the idea that character is equivalent to resistance and that

structure is frozen motion. "Once you have character," he insisted, "you have developed a rigid system":

> Your behavior becomes petrified, predictable, and you lose your ability to cope freely with the world… You are predetermined just to cope with events in one way, namely, as your character prescribes it to be. So it seems a paradox when I say that the richest person, the most productive, creative person, is a person who has *no* character." (*GTV* 7)

As we will see, many of the techniques of Gestalt therapy aim to dislodge this rigidity and to restore a sense of spontaneity and authentic relatedness.

Perls' "character" is similar to Sartre's "ego," and the development of both these phenomena involves an allegiance to the self-as-object that one creates for oneself through accessory reflection. This construct or ego as a "system of identifications and alienations" (*PHG* 277) must be contrasted to Perls' "self" as integrator, or the "artist of life" (*PHG* 276) (which is equivalent to Sartre's nihilating consciousness). The purpose of Gestalt therapy is therefore:

> …to train the ego, the various identifications and alienations, by experiments of deliberate awareness of one's various functions, until the sense is spontaneously revived that 'it is I who am thinking, perceiving, feeling, and doing this.' ***(PHG 277)***

This is certainly a succinct statement of the existential aim of Gestalt therapy as it is of existential psychoanalysis itself: to create the experience of an I that is not really a (hypostatized) I at all.

Put in another way, it can be said that for both Perls and Sartre the aim of therapy is a release from seriousness and the recovery of play or spontaneity. For Sartre, existential psychoanalysis allows us to "repudiate the *spirit of seriousness*" (*BN* 706); and it is play that undermines the idea that we have a fixed identity or nature. Playfulness "releases subjectivity" since as "soon as a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom…then his activity is play" (*BN* 741). Perls would agree, almost echoing Sartre when he says, "I cannot abide by the dictum that play is bad and seriousness is laudable" (*IO* 9). Most of the experiments of Gestalt therapy are introduced in the spirit of play. They are suggestions to the client for dropping the serious attitude toward self and world and trying out something different.

In spite of the fact that being serious is generally considered to be a virtue, laudable in that it indicates sincerity and responsibility, Sartre insists that the "spirit of seriousness" indicates an avoidance of freedom. It

is an attitude in bad faith since it takes into account only one pole of our existence, the heaviness of the material world, leaving out the "lightness" of free consciousness in constituting that world. Seriousness involves pretending to be a fact in a world without freedom.

The serious attitude posits the priority of the object over the subject, including the self that is taken to be an object of accessory reflection. I experience myself causally enmeshed in a world that becomes heavy, weighing me down. Because I try to find out who I am, I create an idea of myself as object - only then to become further entrapped in this ego that I construct with the help of the early significant others who have seen and named me. Releasing myself from this trap involves a "radical conversion" (*BN* 534n) via the use of "purifying reflection," so that I come to value freedom itself, my own and that of others. The ego still exists, but it is now recognized as a construct and not mistaken for a subject. Instead of purifying reflection, Perls would talk about deepening awareness.

For Sartre, significant others in the child's early history influence the ego's development through the so-called "look," by which I come to recognize that I am an object beneath the other's gaze. This leads to my attempt to regain control over the object that I have become for the other as subject, which in turn results in the temptation to engage in a sado-masochistic circle, described by Sartre in the section entitled "Concrete Relations with Others" in *Being and Nothingness* (471-556). I try to be the subject in the process of making the other an object, or I try to be a certain kind of object in the eyes of the other, or I alternate between the two states. Release from this circle involves recognizing and valuing my own and the other's freedom. Perls also notes that the attempt to manipulate the other lies at the heart of many neurotic interactions. He says that most neurotics "have no eyes." They are "mirror-draggers" in that their chief concern is to get others to reflect them as a particular kind of object. In doing so, they deny their own freedom while attempting to manipulate the freedom of others.

Sartre mentions "purifying reflection" only twice in *Being and Nothingness,* both times in connection with moments of radical change. He asserts that nothingness can be revealed neither to prereflective consciousness nor to accessory reflection but "is accessible only to the purifying reflection" *(BN 273)*. There is a conversion to the project of valuing freedom itself, or to living life in the spirit of play rather than seriousness. Purifying reflection is predicated on the prior appearance of "pure reflection." While accessory reflection is discovered first─as I attempt to characterize myself as this or that kind of object in the world─pure reflection is said to be "at once the original form of reflection

and its ideal form." However, because it is never given first, pure reflection "must be won by a sort of katharsis" (*BN* 218).

I submit that it is something like purifying reflection that allows for the appearance of what Sartre calls the psychological "instant," that moment of "double nothingness" (*BN* 600) in which self and world change together. I find that I am no longer what I was, and that there is a discontinuity between what I was and what I am about to become. There is a katharsis for I now live in a world whose possibilities I perceive differently. I take a different perspective on both past and future. The psychological instant is not a moment in any static sense, since temporality is a continuous flow. Instead, the process usually takes place over time, with many starts and stops, though there are some instances of sudden shifts that affect a lifetime. Sartre refers to these as "conversions."

The appearance of the psychological instant is predicated on pure supplemented by purifying reflection since I catch myself in the present, in my world-making process. I know myself in the "aha" sense of "This is what I am doing," rather than in the theoretical sense of what must be true about me based on speculation about the meaning of my past or present feelings, my behavior, or my future plans. Now the ego is no longer "another."[9] Pure reflection is as close to the person and as little distorted by accessory reflection as possible. Sartre says that when the non-reflective project with its layers of accessory reflection is known, when it is brought into the clear light of day, then it is no longer possible to sustain the neurosis associated with it. It is through being able to purify accessory reflection and return it to direct experience that the client, in the course of existential psychoanalysis (or Gestalt therapy), discovers nothingness at the heart of being—the agent behind the ego.

Gestalt therapy emphasizes the kind of deepening awareness that allows for the appearance of the psychological "instant." Perls' student, Claudio Naranjo[10], notes that awareness exercises hold a primary place in Gestalt therapy. The interventions of this therapy, which target process over content, are designed to facilitate catching myself in my world-making process. Such awareness, rather than trying to change on a willful level, makes possible a new choice of a way of being in the world. Gestalt therapists assert that awareness itself, rather than goal setting or other forms of self-manipulation, produces change.

Naranjo has described Gestalt therapy as an "attitude and practice" rather than a "theory and technique" (*GT* 11). Like existential psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy involves a type of presence to the client and a facilitation of this presence that cannot be captured in a set technique. In fact, it involves what Sartre calls "comprehension," the

awareness of the other (i.e., the client) as a meaning making subject like the therapist rather than an object of intellectual study. Perls often invented interventions in response to a particular client at a particular moment. Gestalt therapy is in accord with Sartre's claim that existential psychoanalysis attempts to be "flexible and adapt itself to the slightest observable changes in the subject." Both approaches attempt to understand "what is individual and even instantaneous" and to make way for those instantaneous shifts in which an individual reorients to self and world simultaneously (*BN* 732). Although Gestalt therapy has many interventions that allow an individual to take a new look at his way of being in the world, it never uses these mechanically, according to rules.

Gestalt Interventions and the Psychological Instant

What are some of the actual interventions of Gestalt therapy that can facilitate what Sartre would call "purifying reflection" and the appearance of the psychological instant? Attention to bodily lived experience is the basis for a whole set of these interventions. Perls, like Sartre, believes that consciousness is always embodied. One lives the world through living one's body, and so a client's prereflective intentionality reveals itself through the behavior of her lived body. This comprehension on a body level of the other person makes use of what Sartre calls "the fundamental, pre-ontological comprehension which man has of the human person" (*BN* 726). Sartre says that the existential psychoanalyst cannot afford to ignore "the indications contained in a gesture, a word, a sign" (*BN* 726). Perls would agree: I comprehend you through my awareness of your and my own lived body, as well as our shared language, as expressive or intentional.[11]

Given the emphasis placed on the body as lived, many Gestalt interventions aim at provoking the client to see and claim her world-making process through body awareness, through the awareness of intentions behind words, or through experimenting with actions or gestures. Where Gestalt therapists pay attention to the verbal, they aim at verbal process rather than content. All of these experiences are present-centered. That is, these various awareness exercises of Gestalt therapy are designed to help the client let go of the reifications of accessory reflection and keep to the present without escaping into the past or the future. Similarly, Sartre says that pure reflection "keeps to the given without setting up claims for the future."[12]

The kingpin of such awareness interventions is the simple "I am aware exercise" in which the client reports her on-going experience in the

moment, both external and internal. For example, "I am aware of a loud noise outside and a sudden clenching feeling in my stomach and shoulders." This might lead to further awareness, such as feeling the fear that the noise evokes, and perhaps eventually grasping the perpetual state of hyper-vigilance that has its origins in the client's early childhood, one that has long since become part of her habitual stance toward the world. Or perhaps the client is aware of interpersonal meanings that she gives to the exercise: "I am aware of wanting to please you by coming up with interesting and original awarenesses" or "I am aware of wanting to do this exercise right" or "I am aware of not wanting to do this because you ask me to." These interpersonal, idiosyncratic meanings too may lead to greater awareness of fundamental choices. For example, of a life stance of wanting to please and impress others over valuing one's own experience, or of wanting to be right, or of rebellion and opposition.

Sometimes the interventions center on verbal expression. Perls' "language of responsibility" involves changing nouns into verbs. It also involves replacing "you," "it" and "they" language with "I" language, "I can't" with "I won't," questions with statements (when the question is an avoidance of self-revelation or an escape into intellectualization), past talk with present talk, or "talking about" with "talking to." All these challenges invite the client to experience living more directly and immediately, and to take responsibility for her life choices. For example, consider the client who says, "I can't express my feelings." By substituting "I won't," she gets in touch with her intention (perhaps of avoiding shame) and with the possibility of responsibility ("I won't" implies "I could if I chose to"). The language of responsibility is certainly not a set of techniques for prescribing how one *should* communicate but rather an experiment in increasing spontaneity, responsibility and immediacy.

From a Sartrean perspective, the invitation to use the language of responsibility is an invitation to move from accessory to pure reflection, to increase one's spontaneity, and to assume responsibility for oneself. Sartre's discussion of the psychology of states and accessory reflection is relevant here. He notes that "[t]he entire psychology of states (and non-phenomenological psychology in general) is a psychology of the inert" (*TE* 67). The problem is that such psychologizing is mistaken, a construct of accessory reflection. There are no psychic states that motivate or control actions. There is simply consciousness encountering the world in this way or that. By contrast, this shows that by adopting or positing a static state as motivation, I can try to escape responsibility: I didn't do it, *it* did me. My confusion made me do it, for example. Or my love or hate or irritation made me do it. However, if I actively experience myself doing *it* rather

than *it* doing me, I recover my liveliness together with my capacity to do something different. One of Perls' favorite interventions was to ask a client talking about his "confusion" to replace the noun with, "I confuse myself by…." In claiming responsibility I open the way to not confusing myself if I so choose.

The Empty Chair as an Existential Analytic Technique

This brings us to the famous empty chair technique of Gestalt therapy, which is often a way of working with transference (unfinished business), resistance, and defenses (boundary disturbances). This technique is especially useful for existential psychoanalysis since it can help to recover what Sartre calls the "fundamental project of being" in its lived reality. Where past and future impinge on the present, they are made explicit in a dialogical fashion and their impact on the present moment investigated in dramatic form. Like Sartre, Perls recognizes that only the present is "presence to being" (*BN* 285 passim). It is only in the present, though resting on the base of the past and lying in the shadow of the future, that deep level change can take place. The past, my "original choice" of a way of being in the world, is discovered and explored as it continues to be lived in the present; and it is from this present that it has the possibility of being revoked.

In Gestalt therapy, rather than interpret the past, we enact and attempt to experience the original choice concretely, including the additions it has accrued over the course of a lifetime. Perls says that at any particular moment in therapy the client will bring up the material that needs to be worked with at this time. It will emerge in the therapeutic dialogue and may lead to the original choice. The empty chair technique is a potent tool for exploring what Sartre calls the lived past as distinguished from the "thematized" past of accessory reflection. It is this lived past that Sartre describes as "the origin and springboard of all my actions"—"the unalterable background-depth of all my thoughts and all my feelings" (*BN* 201). This lived past can "haunt" me, functioning as the "mermaid's tail" of dead possibilities that I drag behind while moving through the present toward the future (*BN* 208). It is this haunting which the empty chair technique can help to bring into the clear light of day, where it can be reflectively reconsidered.

The empty chair is used in Gestalt therapy when a conflict is identified, either between self and self or self and other. Though such conflicts are lived in the present, they have their origin in the past. The empty chair dialogue allows the client to make the lived past present to pure reflection

so that old choices of ways of being the world can be revisited and hopefully revised. Consider the ubiquitous self-self conflict. The client is battling with a division in herself: she wants to lose weight, for example. Obviously, there is a conflict between the part that wants to lose weight and the part that isn't doing it. The therapist asks the client to invent a dialogue between the two parts, perhaps beginning by putting the part that doesn't lose weight in the empty chair and talking to it. Then the client goes over to the empty chair and responds as the overeater. Perhaps she says, "I am hungry for love and I eat to fill this emptiness."

Such self-self conflicts often turn out to involve two "I's" warring with each other; what Perls' calls "topdog-underdog" conflicts. The former operates on a reflective level, the latter prereflectively. Topdog often bears traces of the parental introject that says I "should" or "shouldn't" do or be this or that. According to Perls, in these sorts of conflicts the underdog always wins since that is where my psychic vitality lies, though **often** at the price of a lack of self-esteem or a resort to passive aggression that makes me look less than competent.

In those cases when, on the surface, underdog does not seem to win, there is a diminishment of vital living, or the occurrence of boundary disturbances. For Gestalt therapy the most important of these disturbances are introjection, projection, retroflection, deflection and confluence. While Freud saw these phenomena as intrapsychic mechanisms designed to defend the conscious psyche against unconscious content, Perls sees them as interpersonal strategies, developed out of a desire to please original others and hence to become a good or acceptable person. Perls calls this attempt to be a "good boy" or "good girl" phony and Sartre would agree with him, calling the attempt to be this kind of (acceptable) person "inauthentic."

The empty chair dialogue reveals both the original choice of being plus the resulting defenses that keep the phony self in place. Consider, for example, the epithet hurled at the child, "You are selfish." As an adult, I see myself as selfish whenever I take care of my own interests or put my needs first. What I try to do is to *be* unselfish and to make others see me as unselfish by self-sacrificing acts, but I overdo it. Others sense the manipulation and either take advantage of me or feel uncomfortable. The topdog-underdog dialogue (between the critical part that says don't be selfish and the part receiving this demand) may deepen into a dialogue with my mother who told me I was selfish when I paid attention to my own interests or desires.

During an extended course of this dialogue, I may "purify" the old attitude toward myself—manifest via the *introjected* voice of my

mother—so that I no longer see myself as inevitably selfish when I refuse to be self-sacrificing. In so doing, I become more rather than less capable of contact with others. I decide to no longer play the "good girl" who perhaps *projects* my own disowned desires onto others. I am more spontaneous. I no longer get depressed because I no longer turn my anger at having my desires thwarted on myself (*retroflection*). I do not *deflect* my needs or desires, nervously laughing or squirming when I am asked what I would like to do in a particular situation. I am able to give up trying to avoid conflict by agreeing with you or getting you to agree with me (*confluence*). Instead, not only am I able to stand up for myself and meet you directly, but I also grant you the satisfaction of giving to me in a relationship in which both of our needs and desires are important. This is what Sartre defines as "reciprocity" in *Notebooks for an Ethics*.[13] It can only be achieved when I give up the need to be a particular kind of person for you. When I no longer need you to affirm my identity, we can meet in a mutual affirmation that acknowledges both of us as free subjects. My allegiance to my "ego" or "character" is no longer an obstruction keeping us apart.

As a further interesting point of comparison between existential psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy we can ask: Exactly how is it that the past can still have a profound impact on the lived present? How can it function as the "background depth" of a particular current way of living my life in the world, which includes my relations with others? Once again, existential psychoanalysis can provide us with a theoretical approach that is concretely informed by Gestalt therapy. Sartre's response as to how the past can still dictate an existential present would be that important infantile choices have not been elucidated by anything like purifying reflection - an insight that would recognize them as choices of being, although originally made within the constraints and painful circumstances of a particular childhood. These infantile choices would cease to exist if they were viewed though purifying reflection in the clear light of the lived, adult present. Although once viable and helpful strategies for living, they may well no longer be necessary. To recognize this, however, is to approach that moment of "double nothingness" in which self and world change together.

This is exactly what Gestalt therapy can provoke via the empty chair technique and transference. The client comes to a new choice of a way of being in the world, one that arises from recognizing the archaic and painful character of continuing an allegiance to her past and to the future self that she is bringing into being on the ground of this past. What the Gestalt therapist does is to invite the client to imagine the contemporary

person, with whom she is having a difficult time, sitting in an empty chair which the therapist places opposite her in order to create a dialogue. The dialogue brings both the recent and distant past into the present. It becomes alive with conflict, drama, and feeling - as opposed to being dead, with the usual complaints associated with thematizing *about* one's situation.

The client begins by inventing a dialogue with the contemporary other. Once there is emotional energy in the dialogue, the therapist invites the client to expand on an underlying scenario. This most often happens when the therapist starts to hear echoes of a childish relationship in the current dialogue. The client talks in a childish voice, says that she feels little or small, fearfully refuses to express herself directly (deflection), shrinks back, placates, turns her anger on herself (retroflection), or explodes with impotent rage. The therapist may intervene with questions designed to evoke the past in the immediacy of the client's presently lived experience: How old do you feel? What or who are you afraid of? Who are you talking to? Where have you experienced this before? Where did you learn this?

Or perhaps the client is role-playing the contemporary other when past echoes are heard. For example, the other sounds like a scolding critical parent. The therapist's question, "Who talks to you like this?" may evoke an underlying relationship from the past. The client then puts that person from the past in the empty chair and continues the dialogue with the client-as-child talking to the original other. This deepening into the past is not made merely intellectually, but emotionally, and its point is not historical accuracy but instead working with the "background depth" as it emotionally impinges on the actual, living present. At the same time, it is also important to explore the way the client lives this experience as a lived body, as well as to get the client to experience the defenses or boundary disturbances that inhibit full expression.

Again, we can note the convergence of existential psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy since, to reiterate, the point for both is not historical reconstruction but rather to evoke a new choice of being. For both approaches—whether through purifying reflection or Gestalt techniques—this becomes possible to the extent that the client can, in the present, relive the making of early choices, but now grasp them as made originally with the vulnerability of a child. However, since one is no longer a child, and so constrained by an original family or situation, a new choice becomes possible. For both approaches, the point is not, *à la* Freud, to make the unconscious conscious. Instead the client must make a new choice of a way of being in the world; and to do this, she must become a different self experiencing a different world.

Anxiety and Temporality

In addition to the more practically oriented Gestalt therapy supplying clinical material to help illustrate principles from existential psychoanalysis, the point should also be made that traditional Gestalt therapists have something to learn from the more theoretical approach of existential psychoanalysis. Naranjo, while respecting Perls' phenomenological emphasis on concrete lived experience, thinks that Gestalt therapy may have suffered from an anti-intellectual bias (Nararjo 54). Perls, with his emphasis on experiential immediacy, was often suspicious of abstraction and so overly dismissive of theoretical understanding (*GTV* 47). I submit, in particular, that Gestalt therapists might benefit from paying more attention to the concept of existential anxiety and **to** the idea of time as a temporalizing activity of human consciousness.

Though Perls sometimes mentions existential anxiety, identifying it rightly as "dread of nothingness" (*IO* 174), he is more often concerned with the kind of neurotic anxiety that is future oriented. This form of anxiety is based on "stage fright" or the "gap between the now and the then"; it stems from trying to live in the future rather than living in the present. Existential anxiety, however, is part of the human condition, and recognizing it can help us understand resistance to change. Holding onto a familiar life stance, plus accompanying symptoms, may be motivated by a fear of the unknown, i.e., by an avoidance of freedom. One prefers the known self to an unknown possibility; one prefers to be even a miserable *this* to being nothing substantial, in the existential sense of "nothing" discussed earlier.

Clients approaching moments of significant change in therapy often express this by statements such as: "Who will I be if I stop being….?"; "I feel like the ground is disappearing beneath my feet"; "I feel like I'm hanging over the edge of an abyss"; "I don't know who I am without…." If the therapist recognizes the appearance of existential anxiety as a sign that significant change may be occurring, the client has a better chance of negotiating it. Far from being a neurotic symptom, existential anxiety is the other side of that experience of "lightness" that is often associated with the spirit of play. It is in fact the experience of a release of spontaneity, which is exactly what both existential psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy aim for. Indeed, when Gestalt therapy or existential psychoanalysis evoke the appearance of the psychological "instant," this is most often accompanied by existential anxiety.

Gestalt therapists might also gain from an existential understanding of lived time as temporalizing activity. We have already said that Gestalt

therapy emphasizes the present moment, the now and how over the then and why, experience over theory or intellectualization. But this emphasis on the "now" can sometimes be taken too far. It must also be realized that we are always moving through time. Creating value and meaning are future oriented activities, so that a person's future oriented project must be comprehended in therapy. So it is not exactly true to say that complete present-centeredness is an ideal. Even when in Gestalt dialogue one recovers the past, it is in fact one's past orientation to the future that is discovered. That is, while it is true that one can only live and change in the present, it is also true that one must understand human reality as a projection out of the past toward the future.[14]

Successful therapy allows the client to discover a maladjusted self moving through the world—and through time—in a particular way. Hence, to reorient, she must begin to project herself in a different way. To reiterate, one lives in the present, but out of a particular past and toward a future that one is bringing into being. To the extent therefore that one is able to experience the psychological instant, the established, neurotically oriented past starts to look and become different, as does the future. In this case one is not talking about Perls' "rehearsing" for the future, as noted above, which is in reality nothing but an attempt in bad faith to control the future, oneself and others. Instead, what is at stake is one's own trajectory which changes as it meets objects and persons in the world, but which is meaning-creating rather than passively responsive. And, when in the psychological instant, one encounters a different self and world, this is often a source of existential anxiety as world and self start to change together, with one encountering nothingness at the heart of one's being.

Conclusion

In sum, it has been shown that like existential psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy does not deal with psychological states, qualities or complexes, but instead with the nothingness that consciousness is. Like existential psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy explores the various ways in which we avoid living freely, authentically and responsibly, and this with the aim that we may recover agency and come to live more freely, authentically and responsibly. Gestalt therapy, like existential psychoanalysis, explores the past as it impinges on the present and influences the future, thereby evoking the "psychological instant" in which self and world change together. Finally, like existential psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy discourages top-heavy manipulation and instead attempts to facilitate a

"radical conversion" or purifying "katharsis" that promotes the recognition of our freedom, accompanied by authentic contact with others.

Notes

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Pocket books, 1966). Henceforth *BN*.

[2] Frederic S. Perls, *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 45. Henceforth *IO*.

[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. Translated by John Mathews (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), p. 37.

[4] The term "intentionality" is a technical term in phenomenology. It indicates not intentions in the ordinary sense of motivation, but the relationship between consciousness and its objects.

[5] Here see Adrian Mirvish, "Sartre, Hodological Space, and the Existence of Others," *Research in Phenomenology,*15 (1984), 149-73. It is important to note that Perls, like Sartre, borrows concepts from Lewin to describe the paths to objects that appear in a figure/ground configuration created by human need and desire. Perls et. al. make the point that objects in the world appear to consciousness and become figural as "perception-initiating movement tinged with feeling," as when I am thirsty and experience water as "bright-desirable-moved toward, or the absence of water as absent-irksome-problematic." See Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, *Gestalt Psychology* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 304-05. Henceforth *PHG*.

[6] Barnes points out that while Sartre often views the ego as something of a villain, one must question this view on the basis of his own philosophy. [Hazel E. Barnes, "The Role of the Ego in Reciprocity," in *Sartre Alive,* ed. Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp.151-59.] The ego, Barnes suggests, ". . .is always at the horizon of my choices as a kind of imposed ordering (imposed by consciousness, of course), which must be taken into account but can be modified" just as I continually modify my notion of the world (p. 154). In addition, the ego (my own and the other's) must be the ground for reciprocity as described by Sartre in *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983). Furthermore, since I cannot grasp (or love) the other as a pure freedom, it is as an embodied freedom or ego that I must relate to her. Only if I attempt to control or manipulate her, rather than to support her in what she wishes to make of herself, do I violate the claims of reciprocity. Sartre himself questions his earlier assumptions about the ego in the first volume of the Flaubert biography, where he asserts that the "true" ego is simply the "object-unity of my reflective experience" purged of the reflective distortions of others and the urge to establish myself as an object like other objects in the world.

[7] Frederic S. Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 62-63. Henceforth *GTV*.

[8] *GTV* p.14. There may be some crossovers between "nothingness" in Buddhist thought and existential "nothingness," though the differences are largely the ones I have outlined here. When Heidegger, toward the end of his life, read eastern texts, he acknowledged some similarities to his own philosophy. For more on the comparison between Sartre and Buddhist thought, see Steven Laycock, *Nothingness and Emptiness: A Buddhist Engagement with the Ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001). For a discussion of differences, see Hazel E. Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[9] Barnes says that pure reflection is strictly speaking impossible, since there will always be a gap between the consciousness reflecting and the consciousness reflected on; one cannot lay hands on a subjectivity. Yet if Sartre means that its purpose would be not to discover a reified self but to liberate consciousness from the incrustations of the ego, then she believes that pure or purifying reflection might have some meaning. See Hazel E. Barnes, "Sartre's Concept of the Self," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 17, (1980-81), 41-65.

[10] Claudio Naranjo, *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude & Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism* (Nevada City, CA: Gateways/IDHHB Publishing, 1993). Henceforth *GT*.

[11] This idea that we have the capacity for fundamental "comprehension" of each other's intentions and experience is partially confirmed by the discovery of "mirror neurons" by neurobiologists. Mirror neurons, first discovered in the brains of macaque monkeys in the nineteen-nineties by Italian scientists, enable the brain to mimic the actions of another person. They fire when the other person completes an action, not just when I do. Interestingly enough, they fire differently depending on the intent of the action (reaching for food versus reaching and placing an object, for example). It is posited that in human beings, mirror neurons are the origin of empathy. Their lack may lead to autism or Asberger's syndrome. For an account of the discovery and current research into mirror neurons **see** Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008). Citing the work of Merleau-Ponty in phenomenology as an influence through one of the initial researchers who was interested in his philosophy, Iacoboni refers to these discoveries as a "new existentialism."

[12] Sartre, Jean-Paul, *The Transcendence of the Ego.* Trans. Robert Kirkpatrick and Forrest Williams. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, l957), p. 64. Henceforth *TE*.

[13] See, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Transl. by David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 284 and 330.

[14] See Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 167.