

Nothingness as the Ground for Change

Gestalt Therapy and Existential Psychoanalysis

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

Jean-Paul Sartre

1. A Collision of Two Worlds

In the mid-nineteen seventies, as a graduate student at the University of Colorado and a trainee at the Gestalt Institute of Denver, I experienced a collision of two worlds. One was the world of academic philosophy - perhaps a dry subject for some, but not at all so for me. I was studying Sartre with Hazel E. Barnes, the translator of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and probably the person most responsible for bringing existentialism to the English speaking world. I was also doing training in Gestalt therapy with people who had studied with its most well-known founder, Frederick S. (Fritz) Perls - or people who had studied with Perls' students. Perls had recently died. I was in love with both the philosophy and the therapy.

I admired Sartre for his ideas, his literary efforts, his radical politics, and his egalitarian relationship with Simone de Beauvoir. I admired Hazel, who became my mentor and lifelong friend, for her rare combination of brilliance and warm humanity - and her capacity for authentic relationship. I later dedicated my book on *Sartre and Psychoanalysis* (1991) to her. She was sympathetic to my attempts to weave existential philosophy together with the experiential work I was doing at the Institute. Her interest in psychology went back to an early interest in the work of William James and continued through her interest in Sartre's phenomenological perspective and the work of R.D. Laing and others. Shortly before she died, she read this keynote address for the Society for Existential Analysis and commented that it probably contained the seeds for another book.

The other pole in my world collision, the Gestalt Institute of Denver, was a place where all kinds of seemingly magical things happened - deep feeling, humor, community, an utterly passionate attention to bodily lived experience, experiments with new ways of being in the world, and the willingness to try a new form of therapy that felt compelling and real. Fritz Perls himself insisted that Gestalt therapy was both phenomenological and existential. Laura Perls reports that she, Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman, its three founders, had first conceived of naming Gestalt therapy existential therapy. They decided not to do so because "existentialism was so much

identified with Sartre, the nihilistic approach" (Laura Perls, Interview with Edward Rosenfeld, 1978, p. 20). Obviously, I do not agree that Sartre's philosophy is nihilistic - and I think that Fritz Perls, had he known Sartre's work better, would have seen some remarkable similarities in their views. At least, I myself was seeing them at the time. I wrote my final paper for the Institute on this topic.

Since then, I have gone on to develop and teach a form of therapy that is highly influenced by both Gestalt therapy and existential philosophy, especially the philosophy of Sartre. Many other approaches have played their part in the integration of perspectives that I have taught and practiced over the past thirty years - among them other experiential approaches, body oriented psychotherapy, trauma work and contemporary psychoanalysis. I especially value the latter for its emphasis on interpersonal and relational issues and for its understanding of the impact of earliest infancy and childhood on an individual's world-making process. What I have done with the help of others at the Boulder Psychotherapy Institute is to develop an integrative approach that we call Applied Existential Psychotherapy (AEP).

Despite the additional influences, this approach owes its inception and its greatest debt to those twin inspirations - Gestalt therapy and Sartrean existentialism. They are so interwoven in my thinking at this point that it is sometimes difficult to tease them apart. I still think the interventions of Gestalt therapy might well provide the means to practice existential psychoanalysis as conceived by Sartre. I also think that Gestalt therapy has something further to learn from existential psychoanalysis about the nature of anxiety (and other matters) that has important implications for the practice of psychotherapy. If nothing else, I believe that a strong grounding in existential philosophy will prevent the degeneration of Gestalt therapy into a mere set of techniques - a complaint that existential therapists sometimes lodge against it.

Toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre says that existential psychoanalysis has not yet "found its Freud" (Sartre, 1943, p. 734). What I think he means is that he has laid the philosophical groundwork and that others - I assume practicing existential psychotherapists - must find the means for implementing these insights. Hence he says that the "final discoveries of ontology" must become the "first principles of psychoanalysis" (Sartre, 1943, p. 575). He himself applied them to his autobiography and to his psychobiographies of Mallarme (posthumously published in 1986), Baudelaire (1946), Genet (1952) and Flaubert (1971). Since Sartre wrote those words about existential psychoanalysis not having yet found its Freud, many existential psychologists have attempted to develop interventions (often borrowed from other approaches) that are in line with existential premises and insights.¹ Sartre seems to have believed

that R.D. Laing, who was influenced by his work, was making strides in this direction.²

It seems to me that Gestalt therapy is especially promising as an approach for existential psychoanalysis since Perls and Sartre share many of the same philosophical premises. Primary among these is the idea that "nothingness" lies at the heart of the human world-making process. Both also acknowledge their debt to traditional psychoanalysis while disavowing its fundamental philosophical premises. Actually, the two sound much alike in their rejection of the underlying Freudian philosophy. Sartre says that he objects not to the "facts of disguise and repression as facts," but to the "mechanistic cramp" of Freud's philosophy (Sartre, 1972, p. 37). Perls, who was originally trained as classical analyst, similarly objects not to Freud the phenomenologist, but to Freud's "mechanistically-oriented philosophy" (Perls, 1969b, p. 45). Both reject the Freudian unconscious in favor of a phenomenological view of the relationship between consciousness and its objects. Consciousness, both say, is always intentional, always world related, always consciousness of this or that object. Perls' well-known emphasis on experience over intellectualization is fundamentally phenomenological/existential.

Both insist that the client-therapist relationship in existential therapy, in so far as this is possible, should be collaborative rather than hierarchical. The existential analyst, as Sartre says, must respect the "final intuition of the subject" as "decisive" (Sartre, 1943, p. 733). Perls believes that the attitude to be cultivated by the Gestalt therapist is one of attention to the obvious - without the presumption that the therapist has privileged insight into the client's unconscious. This stance is similar to the attitude of "unknowing" recommended by existential psychologist Ernesto Spinelli (1997, 2007). Or, as Sartre would say, it is an attitude of openness to the client's "fundamental project of being" without letting preconceptions or theoretical principles get in the way of attentiveness to moment to moment shifts and changes. Perls, taking his inspiration from Martin Buber, says that the relationship must be an "I-Thou" encounter that occurs in the Here and Now of the present moment. Sartre similarly recommends a "bond of reciprocity" (Sartre, 1972, p. 204) between client and therapist, viewing effective therapy as "a joint undertaking in which each person takes his chances and assumes his responsibilities" (Sartre, 1972, p. 201).

I would like to elaborate here on the integration of existential philosophy and Gestalt interventions that has proved so productive for me in my practice with clients and for students who have learned this approach. I will begin with a discussion of how the similarity in philosophical perspectives of Sartre and Perls makes Gestalt interventions effective for achieving the aims of existential psychoanalysis. I will illustrate AEP techniques with a transcript of a dream working with a student in one of my seminars, allowing the reader to compare and contrast our approach

with other existential approaches - as well as Freudian and Jungian dream work. A brief conclusion follows.

2. Nothingness at the Heart of Being: Sartre and Perls

What then are the similarities between the pungent, often irreverent, here and now concrete observations of Perls and the philosophical abstractions of Sartre? And could each benefit from a coming together of the two? I believe the answer is yes. "Nothingness" is a critical concept in both, making the synthesis of Gestalt interventions and existential concepts viable. Let us look more closely at what Sartre and Perls say about nothingness and the possibility for human transformation - and at the interventions Perls has invented that facilitate the process of radical change.

In his famous statement quoted earlier, Sartre evokes the image of reality as an apple with a worm in it. He says, "Nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being - like a worm" (Sartre, 1943, p. 56). He is referring to the upsurge of human freedom in the material world, being-in-itself (what's simply there) defined by being-for-itself (human value creation) hollowing out the apple of existence by endowing it with specificity, meaning and purpose. Because of this gap or nothingness, Sartre asserts that consciousness, though bodily lived, is translucent and free. Though the material world exists first and is not dependent on consciousness to *be*, it does depend on consciousness to be *this* or *that*. It is through the upsurge of my freedom, as part of my fundamental "project of being," that objects in the world come to take on their character as distinguished from each other and from me. It is because I am *not* the object of my consciousness that I can take a vantage point on that object. A mountain is a very different object for a mountain climber, a geologist, or a person out for a leisurely walk in nature.

Perls says much the same thing, and, like Sartre, he regards the escape from nothingness as a denial of freedom - and reality. He says,

When the Eastern person says "nothingness," he calls it *no thingness* - there are no *things* there. There is only process, happening... And we find when we accept and *enter* this nothingness, the void, then the desert starts to bloom. The empty void becomes alive, is being filled. The sterile void becomes the fertile void... There are no *things* there. There is only process, happening... *Nothing equals real.* (Perls, 1969a, pp. 61-62).

Despite the reference to eastern philosophy and the fact that Perls was a student of Zen, his perspective here is actually phenomenological. As Perls himself says, "The Zen idea of absolute awareness... is nonsense. Absolute awareness cannot possibly exist because... awareness always has content. One is always aware of *something*" (Perls, 1969a, p. 14).³ Nothingness,

from this perspective, can only be nihilating consciousness creating the world as *my* world.

What goes wrong? Why would I not be happy with this? According to both Perls and Sartre, I attempt to escape my freedom. This is so because my freedom leaves me feeling unfounded, ungrounded, unable to count on myself to be this or that kind of person. If I turn and take a vantage point on myself, my self eludes me. There arises a gap or nothingness between the self perceiving and the self perceived. Sartre believes that this gap, and not the presence of an unconscious realm of the psyche, explains the various forms of self-deception noted by Freud. Because I cannot simultaneously see myself and be myself, I can lie to myself reflectively about what is there on a prereflective level - or I can fail to reflectively conceive what is happening on a gut level at all.

The source of much of this self-deception is the desire to make myself be a certain kind of positive (or negative) object. Sartre calls this attempt to substantialize the self the creation of the "ego" or self as object. It is always contaminated by the voices of the original powerful others in one's life - the people who first see and name me as being this or that kind of person. These people become so important because it is the experience of the "look" of the other that first announces to me that I am an object for another consciousness. In his biographies of Flaubert and Genet respectively, Sartre notes that the *touches* and *words* of the original powerful others are also extremely potent for my formation of a sense of self. The result may be giving up my spontaneity in an attempt to *be* the good boy or girl that my parents want me to be. Or it may be the spiteful decision to "be the thief [or other negative objectification] they said I was," as Sartre says was the case with Genet. Or it may be some other choice that leads to stultification or denial of spontaneity. Challenges to the identification of the self as a particular kind of object, which occur in therapy or elsewhere, may lead to the appearance of existential anxiety, as they call into question the idea that I can actually have a fixed self or nature. Better to be the unhappy self that I know than to be *nothing* at all.

Perls agrees with Sartre that the abjuration of spontaneity in favor of attempting to be a certain kind of object is at the core of much human misery - and that the look of the other is an important part of the development of this unhappy life stance. Hence he says that most neurotics have "no eyes" because they have given them away to the other. They are what he terms "mirror-draggers" because 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. This is exactly the point that Sartre makes when he describes bad faith or inauthentic relationships in the section entitled "Concrete Relations with Others" in *Being and Nothingness*. (Sartre, 1943, pp. 471-556). In Sartre's description, I either try to be the only subject while making the other a

mere object or I try to be a certain kind of object in the eyes of the other - or I alternate between the two. The release from the sado-masochistic circle is recognizing and valuing my own and the other's freedom.⁴

Perls, like Sartre, is aware that much human misery arises from the denial of spontaneity that results from the attempt to be a person as a table is a table - to delude oneself (and/or the other) into believing that one has a fixed nature or character. Taking the term from Wilhelm Reich, who was his most influential analyst, Perls speaks of the stultification resulting from allegiance to "character." "Once you have character," Perls insists, "you have developed a rigid system" (Perls, 1969a, p. 7). Character for Perls is much the same thing as ego for Sartre - a commitment to predictability based on an attempt to objectify the self. Many Gestalt interventions call the client's attention to this rigidity - and suggest "experiments" in another direction if the client so chooses. A number of these experiments are designed to challenge the client to move beyond the self-imposed restrictions of childhood - or adulthood. Often they are body-oriented, since Gestalt therapy, like existential psychoanalysis, recognizes that consciousness is always bodily lived and situated.

What is the antidote to all this self and other reification? Sartre says it is the "radical conversion" to a philosophy of freedom leading to an "ethics of deliverance and salvation" (Sartre, 1943, p. 534n). Toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*, he associates this radical conversion with assuming a playful as opposed to a serious attitude toward life. Indeed he considers the aim of existential psychoanalysis to be repudiation of the "spirit of seriousness" (Sartre, 1943, p. 706) - the idea that we are weighed down and controlled by the material world and the accidents of our history. Perls agrees. He says, "I cannot abide by the dictum that play is bad and seriousness is laudable" (Perls, 1969b, p. 9). Of course, we are not free outside our experience of the world. Instead we are bodily grounded and free *in situation*, which is a combination of what the world brings and what I make of what the world brings. We experience the world and our history, but we *choose* what we make of them. Nothingness is the source of our freedom.

The means, I think, to the radical conversion is "purifying reflection." Unfortunately, like "pure reflection" as opposed to "accessory reflection" and "authenticity" as opposed to "bad faith," this is a concept about which one wishes Sartre had spoken at greater length. It might be worthwhile to revisit the three forms of reflection described by Sartre. Sartre says that pure reflection is "at once the original form of reflection and its ideal form" (Sartre, 1943, p. 218). It is the "simple presence of the consciousness reflecting to the consciousness reflected on" without the addition of other motivations, such as the attempt to make myself be this or that kind of object (Sartre, 1943, p. 218). In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre says that pure reflection "keeps to the given without setting up claims for the

future" (Sartre, 1937, p. 64). Because pure reflection is never given first, it "must be won by a sort of katharsis" (Sartre, 1943, p. 218). It is the original form because without it the other forms would be impossible.

Accessory reflection, the most common form of reflection, is the attempt to reflect on the self in order to fix myself as a certain kind of object. It is the source of the formation of the ego, or self as object, as a collection of static qualities and states. It is most often a creation in bad faith, since it involves an attempt to reify the self - though Sartre says in the Flaubert biography that there may be some rudimentary form of the ego as simple "reflective ipseity" that is authentic (Sartre, 1971, p. 167n). In any case, it is hardly possible, or even desirable, to live without creating an ego.⁵

While Sartre says very little about "purifying reflection," what he does say is that nothingness can be revealed neither to non-reflective consciousness nor to accessory reflection but only to "purifying reflection" (Sartre, 1943, p. 273). What does Sartre mean and how does this happen? I think he is talking about the "katharsis" involved in winning back pure reflection mentioned above. One must do this by turning and taking a look at all those reflective distortions of the self that happen as one takes the position of accessory reflection on the self. One must attempt to take the position of simple presence to self - including presence to all the reflective distortions that one has adopted as ways of dealing with the original powerful others and other life circumstances with the aim of creating a self as object. One must reflect on one's own reflective distortions.

Purifying reflection may lead to what Sartre refers to as the "psychological instant" - which he describes as a moment of "double nothingness" in which self and world change together (Sartre, 1943, p. 600). I find that I am no longer what I was, and that I am no longer in the process of becoming what I was about to become. I take a different perspective on both past and future. It is as though I am suspended over an abyss, grasping in order to let go and letting go in order to grasp a new way of being in the world. Of course, the psychological instant is not an instant or a moment in any static sense, since time is a continuous flow, but it is a radical redirection of one's project of being. Its source is a certain kind of awareness - purifying reflection. Its result may be the kind of change in my fundamental project of being that allows me to no longer stultify myself by trying to make myself into a certain kind of object. Hence I may be able to reorient to a new way of being for self and with others.

Gestalt therapy, too, takes a certain kind of awareness as its cornerstone. This is exactly the kind of awareness that Sartre says "keeps to the given without setting up claims for the future" (Sartre, 1937, p. 64). It involves attention to the present moment as "presence to being" (Sartre, 1943, *passim*). Hence the 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. This is

the meaning of the famous "present centeredness" and "paradoxical theory of change" (See Beisser, 1970) that are cornerstones of Gestalt therapy. According to Gestalt therapy, "deepening awareness" itself produces change, while "trying to change" produces alienation and self-division. Hence the Gestalt therapist might begin a session by simply inviting the client to begin a series of sentences with, "I am aware," or to pay attention to what is going on in her body.

Gestalt interventions are provocative of purifying reflection. They are not introduced mechanically or schematically, but rather, as Sartre insisted must be the case with the interventions of existential psychoanalysis, arise out of a particular moment in therapy. Sartre says,

Existential psychoanalysis will have to be completely flexible and adapt itself to the slightest observable changes in the subject. Our concern here is to understand what is individual or even instantaneous. The method which has served for one subject will not necessarily be suitable for another subject or for the same subject at a later period.

(Sartre, 1943, p. 732)

Perls was fond of saying that the "emergency emerges" in the "safe emergency" of the therapeutic encounter. One begins where the client is and goes from there, rather than setting goals or following a set agenda. Gestalt interventions are essentially experiments, suggested in the spirit of play rather than the spirit of seriousness, that allow one to try on new ways of being in the world. Interpretation is avoided in favor of calling attention to what is, including bodily awareness, and suggesting ways to experiment with this. This facilitates the kind of awareness that may precipitate the appearance of the "psychological instant." Gut level experience, feeling and movement are favored over intellectualization - body and process over language and content. Verbal meaning statements come from the client after the experience instead of being imposed by the therapist. Hence the Gestalt therapist avoids the mistakes of the authoritarian psychoanalyst whose interpretations, Sartre complains, fall from on high "like stone tablets," fixing the client as an object for the therapist as subject (Sartre, 1972, p. 201).

Where language becomes part of the experiment in Gestalt therapy, it is in order to de-reify language. Examples include turning "it," "you," and "they" language into "I" language, nouns into verbs, questions (as avoidance) into statements, "I can't" into "I won't," talking about into talking to, and past talk into present talk. Perls calls this the "language of responsibility."⁶ It helps the client to turn "it does me" into "I do it" - the sense of self as object into self as agent. For example, changing "I can't say this to my wife" to "I won't say it" makes the speaker responsible for

his action. Or saying “I confuse myself by....” helps the person talking about “my confusion” to reclaim agency. One is reminded of Sartre’s idea that states and qualities are reificatory. “My love” is a static entity. “I love you” is an active expression of feeling in the moment.

The most famous Gestalt intervention is probably the “empty chair” technique. Perfected by Perls, its inspiration was theater⁷ and the psychodrama of Jacob Moreno. It has often been borrowed by other approaches - and frequently distorted in the process.⁸ The “empty chair” is a dialogical technique in which the client invents a dialogue between parts of the self (actually opposing self-tendencies, often indicating a division between reflective and prereflective consciousness) or between self and other (often pointing to early childhood dilemmas). Or perhaps one role-plays the parts of a dream. The dialogue often leads to the discovery of how the past acts as an overlay to the present, preventing full engagement in presence to being. It may lead to the discovery of a new self in a new world - as one lets go of the ideas of self/world one has held (and modified in various ways) since childhood. It is always undertaken with deep attention to bodily lived experience as opposed to mere story or verbal content. The emotional vitality of the empty chair technique probably needs to be experienced to be fully grasped. I will give an idea of how it is used - and how it may lead to transformation - in the dream transcript that follows. The transcript also underscores how my understanding of existential anxiety⁹ was crucial to suggesting experiments that allowed the dreamer to move through his moment of radical change.

3. Bill's Dream as an ‘Existential Message’

Fritz Perls was fond of declaring, “The dream is an existential message.” I am grateful to Bill, a student from one of my Gestalt training groups, for allowing me to use his session as an example of dream work. Quotes from the session are exact transcripts.¹⁰ Bill has read this paper and has provided a response to what I have written here.

To set the stage, let me remind you that in Gestalt therapy we do not interpret dreams but enact them. The dreamer tells the dream in the present tense - as if it is happening now. Every part of the dream, including inanimate objects and sometimes even missing parts, is a character. Any or all of these characters may occupy the “empty chair.” We may also invent new scenes and characters or try out new experiences. Often we do not work with the whole dream, but rather with the part that seems most enticing to the dreamer. Unlike classical analytic work with dreams, Gestalt dream work does not attempt to interpret dreams as representing unsolved early childhood dilemmas and disowned wishes. While the past may be illuminated by dreams as part of the underpinnings to current difficulties, what is more important is the dream as an “existential

message" about the dreamer's way of living his life in the world. This message is discovered through enactment rather than delivered as an interpretation. Rather than regarding the dream as the "royal road to the unconscious," as Freud thought, the Gestalt therapist sees the dream as the royal road to possible opening to new experience and to the spirit of play. Obviously, this as an existentialist rather than essentialist view of dreams.

As background, the reader should know that Bill was born with a congenital abnormality in his throat that led to a series of surgeries throughout childhood and continuing into adulthood that were quite traumatic. At one point, he was supplied with a trachea tube to help his breathing. This was a particularly difficult situation for a young boy trying to make his way among peers. Though his mother was sympathetic, she was also quite worried about him and felt guilty about his difficulties. His father was mostly absent and detached. He was also an alcoholic.

At the point where Bill introduced the dream, the group was discussing introjection.¹¹ I had commented that as a client gets more in touch with an introjected parental voice there may be a feeling of nausea - of literally wanting to throw up the undigested (and indigestible) criticism of the introjected parent. This reminded Bill of the first dream he had in therapy. Our work with this dream illustrates that an important dream may be fruitful, even long after it was dreamed. It also illustrates that a dream may not "mean" what we initially suspect it to mean.

In this dream, Bill's mother is in the house giving birth. At the moment she gives birth, Bill is in the back yard with a group of people. "I vomit up this mass - huge buckets full of something," he says.

I ask if Bill would like to work with this dream and he agrees. We identify the "characters" in the dream: Bill, His Mother, What She Gives Birth To, The House, The Backyard, The People and The Vomit.

I ask where Bill feels the most energy in telling the dream.

"It's the moment where I vomit," he says. He is repulsed by the vile mass. I invite him to role-play the vomit and speak to Bill.

"I am thick and stinking and vile and sticky and overwhelming and big," he says. "You can't contain me. I'm going to cover everything. I'm toxic. I am, you know I am."

I ask him to complete the sentence: "What I'm doing here in your dream is...."

Bill says, "I'm making myself known to you. This is who you are. This is all you are. This is what the world sees. I am the you that is alive in the world."

I then ask Bill to change chairs and speak to the vomit.

"I want to rip you out, I want to do 'surgery' on you," he says. The session becomes very visceral with Bill dialoguing and physically struggling with the vomit, which becomes stringy and rubbery and refuses to die.

Finally, since I imagine that he has introjected this "icky" sense of himself from his early experiences, I suggest that he try the statement, "I am *not* you." This is done in the spirit of an experiment, not as a directive. If Bill had said, "No, this doesn't feel right," I would have gone in another direction. As it is, the reversal, a common technique in Gestalt therapy, works for Bill. It is the opposite of what the vomit had said to Bill: "This is all you are."

Repeating these words, "I am not you," he is able to disengage from the vomit. He exhibits relief by sighing and looking less burdened.

I move the chair representing the vomit away, since Bill has disconnected from it, and suggest that he stand up and see what his body wants to do now. I imagine that he will feel more open to moving in any direction if he stands up. He says he feels "pulled away" and starts to move backwards. Then he feels that his body wants to "step in" -- "get a grip." I make a guess based on the distancing which is one of his primary defense strategies and say, "Step into life?"

"Yes," he says with conviction. He steps in. Then he again feels like "withdrawing." I encourage him to experiment with physically "stepping in" and "withdrawing," feeling the movements as his own actions and possibilities rather than as something imposed from the outside - as choices, if you will. All the while we are working with his breathing, which gets raspy at times, and with a good many guttural sounds and much emotion.

As Bill steps in again, he starts to touch his throat. He expresses fear. As he stays with this feeling and continues to experience himself, he feels the desire to - as he says - "get inside my skin, to be in there, inside there where all that trauma was, where all that surgery was." This connection with the past does not come from an interpretation of mine, but arises spontaneously from his own felt sense of what is going on. He starts to rub his throat, feeling the stuckness there. As he loosens it up, he says he feels "tired" and a sense of "release." His voice becomes more relaxed.

I again ask what his body wants to do, and Bill says he wants to lie down. Diane, my assistant, provides him with a pillow. His left hand begins to make a grabbing motion, and I ask what it wants. He says he wants another hand. Diane offers him her hand. He says it feels comforting. This seems to allow him to go more fully into his pain. Lying down triggers a memory of the surgeries he had as a child, and we go more deeply into the trauma.

Bill: I'm thinking about the . . . the surgeries when I was a kid. That feeling of . . . I used to get ether. They used to say, 'Now you're going to go on a spaceship ride,' and I would. . . I would see the bed lift up off of the floor, and spin around the room. I would see the room from above. . .

Betty: So you don't have to go up above. You can stay wherever you need to stay. Do you need to stay in the bed? [I suggest an alternative because Bill is starting to spin out, as people often do when they begin to re-experience trauma.]

Bill: I just need to feel a - That was like doing or going. . . . That was like losing myself or something.

Betty: And now? What does your body need to do to reverse that, come back into yourself?

Bill: Just feel the bed, feel the floor.

Betty: Yes, yes, so you feel the floor.

Bill: (*Feeling the floor with his right hand, then clenching and unclenching it in and out as a fist*) I need to feel everything.

Betty: Yes, yes. Let yourself feel it.

Bill: Feel everything.

Betty: That's good. Feel everything. (*As Bill touches his face*) Feel your body. Feel your face.

Bill: (*Whispers something inaudible*).

Betty: What's happening now? You're here, Bill. You've come through it, and you're here. All you have to do is just step in and let yourself be here.

Bill: That's the thing that. . . . You know. There's always this return, always the return. So I went somewhere, and I came back. And this somewhere was nowhere. It was like oblivion, over and over again into oblivion. Then I had to come back, you know. It's like I'm never here completely because I'm always..."

Betty: Partially there.

Bill: Yeah.

Betty: Uh huh, uh huh. How about right now? How much are you here?

Bill: I don't know.

Betty: Let yourself feel it. Feel your body and see how much of you is here. If you need to be more here, see what you need to do to be more here.

Bill: Okay. . . I don't know. I feel here (*touching the floor*). I feel here pretty good (*touching more solidly*).

This is the point where Bill starts to feel something new. As he continues, he realizes that he has rarely if ever felt this much "here." In working with trauma, it is important for the client to really feel that the traumatic experience is in the past, over and done with, so he can be "here now" rather than "there then."¹² Bill takes time to explore experiencing his body, being here, feeling the floor and his body on the floor, in a way that he had not allowed himself to be present before. As he continues, he begins to shake, a common experience in letting traumatic energy move through - or any new enlivening energy move through muscular blocks in the body.

He also feels sad and starts to cry as he comes more solidly to experience himself on the floor, to experience being grounded, presumably because this is so different from his usual life experience. I've noticed that clients often feel strong emotion about the past at the moment when things start to change - it is as though I can only recognize and weep over a loveless childhood, for example, when I start to experience something new.

As the working continues and Bill experiences his body in a new way, he says he feels "different" and "strange." I ask how he feels different. He says he feels like he has a "skin" now, followed by the statement, "There's just something different about it, about my body, about the way I feel." Bill is able to create and feel a healthy boundary between himself and the world. Without it there is no "I" who can connect with a "Thou." I have him stay with this experience for a while and then encourage him to make contact with the group from this new space. I ask how this feels. He says, "I just feel like somebody different." As I encourage him to continue making contact, the following interaction takes place with Diane:

Betty: How is it to make contact from this place?

Bill: It's kind of weird.

(*Laughter from the group.*)

Betty: Okay! And aside from "weird," how is it?

Bill: (*Looking at Diane*) You look really good right now.

He says this with conviction - and surprise. It is not a flirtation. Rather it is apparent that he really sees and experiences her now - the world changes as well as the self. I then invite him to look at the group members, whom he also experiences in a more immediate way. Bill says he feels vulnerable. He says, "I feel one minute old."

What Bill is experiencing on a bodily/interpersonal level is a radical reorientation of his way of being in the world. It is important that we recognize and support this. As I encourage him to continue making contact with others in the group, he begins to talk to Charlotte, another group member, saying, "I'm a little bit concerned about how you see me. I don't feel like I'm the same person. (*Gesturing outward to his old seat*) I'm not even over there anymore."

I ask, "Does it matter?"

He replies, "No, not very much," apparently feeling a kind of lightness and relaxation. He then continues the dialogue with Charlotte and others. He comments, "This feels like being born or something."

I say, "Born the right way this time?"

He continues to muse on this experience, "I felt like I was one minute old. I felt like I'd just been born." The group concludes the session by celebrating his "birth day" and singing "Happy Birthday." Bill begins to cry softly. He says that childhood photographs of his birthdays bring back terrible memories of who he was and what he suffered as a child. This new

experience, which might be thought of as the first day of the rest of his life, is an appropriate antidote to the horrific birth image from the dream.

In the session, we not only revisit Bill's early trauma, we also redo it and the current choices of avoiding contact that are based on it. I invite Bill to make a new choice, staying in the world, connecting with the floor, rather than disconnecting from his body as he had so understandably done as a young child in order to endure this awful situation. The interpersonal connection with me, Diane and the group was important to his being able to negotiate this. He ends with the existential piece, in which he feels new and strange and not like himself. He is not used to being so directly connected with his own body and with others. He is a new self in a new world. The group sees an enormous change in his degree of physical/psychological presence and aliveness at the end of the session. Members say they feel like celebrating - one person wants to take Bill out for margaritas.

4. Conclusion

Gestalt therapy fits well with the requirements for existential psychoanalysis as conceived by Sartre. It encourages the client to stay present in the moment to her world-making process. It takes into account moment to moment shifts and the importance of mutuality in the client-therapist relationship. Where it works with the past, it does so not as an archeological expedition (Freud's metaphor), but as an exploration of how what Sartre referred to as the "lived past" (in opposition to the "thematized past" of accessory reflection) is impinging on the present by distorting one's vision of self/world and curtailing one's possibilities for living more fully and authentically. It encourages the appearance of the "psychological instant" by challenging the client to deepen into what is and to feel her own agency in creating her world. In doing so, it encourages that playful rather than serious attitude that Sartre saw as the aim of existential psychoanalysis. Change in Gestalt therapy is not merely an intellectual shift, but a shift in bodily lived experience. Embodied consciousness is never ignored - and always explored - in Gestalt therapy.

Perls believed that good therapy provides a balance between safety and challenge. I think that Sartre along with most existential psychologists would agree. Many of the interventions of Gestalt therapy allow the client to engage in a deepening moment to moment awareness of her world-making process. They also challenge her to experiment with new possibilities - not as prescriptive behavioral changes but as new ways of opening to life's opportunities (and pitfalls). Making more use of the interventions of Gestalt therapy can help existential therapists to encourage clients to face those moments of choice that might lead to radical shifts in their ways of being in the world. I also think that Gestalt therapy might pay

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more attention to existential anxiety in order to become even more effective - just as my acquaintance with existential anxiety was important to helping Bill navigate the difficult waters of change.

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Notes

¹ Ludwig Binswanger (1963) and Medard Boss (1963) attempted to integrate the existential philosophy of Heidegger with psychoanalysis. Viktor Frankl (1959) modeled his version of existential therapy primarily on the work of Martin Buber (1958). Laing (1959; 1961) and his student, M. Guy Thompson (1985), combined British object relations theory with the philosophical ideas of Sartre and other existentialists. Eugene Gendlin (1978), who was Carl Rogers' research assistant at the University of Chicago, developed 'focusing' as a method for existential therapy. Many other existential therapists have simply adopted the non-directive listening techniques of Rogers with an attention to the depths of experience sometimes missed by humanistic psychologists. Ernesto Spinelli (2007) describes the stages of existential therapy together with interventions appropriate to each in his latest book. He believes that existential therapy must not simply borrow techniques from other approaches without considering the implications of the approach being imported - particularly whether or not it is compatible with existential premises. Kirk Schneider (2008) has recently edited a collection of essays suggesting a synthesis with other approaches that he calls "existential-integrative psychotherapy."

² See Sartre's Preface to the book that Laing wrote with D.G. Cooper on the later work of Sartre, entitled *Reason and Violence* (1964).

³ 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/contrast of Sartre with Buddhist thought, see Steven Laycock's book, *Nothingness and Emptiness: A Buddhist Engagement with the Ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre* (2001). For a discussion of differences, see Hazel E. Barnes (1967, pp. 211-77).

⁴ Sartre's description of human relations in this section of *Being and Nothingness* is often taken to represent his pervasively negative view of interpersonal possibilities - the idea that "hell is other people" as expressed by a character at the end of Sartre's play, *No Exit* (1944). Sartre has elsewhere said that the relations described in "Concrete Relations with Others" are all in bad faith. His idea of "reciprocity" in *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1984) further spells out this position, as does his idea of maternal love in the first volume of the Flaubert biography (1971). There he elaborates on the impact of the mother or first caregiver on infantile and early childhood development in terms of her looks, touches and words as an impetus to normal development or psychopathology. I have discussed some parallels between D.W. Winnicott's idea of early childhood development and Sartre's version of infantile development in the Flaubert biography in an essay soon to be published in *The Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* (Cannon, in press).

⁵ See Hazel E. Barnes article, "The Role of the Ego in Reciprocity" (1991), for a consideration of the potentially positive role of the ego. I have further discussed the ego in existential psychoanalysis, including the possibility of a positive orientation toward the ego as object based on Sartre's discussion in the Flaubert biography, in *Sartre and Psychoanalysis* (Cannon, 1991, pp. 223-54).

⁶ It is important to note the difference between these experiments and what is sometimes called in pop psychology and communications work "using 'I' language." "I language" is often prescriptive rather than experimental. Gestalt experiments are intended to call attention to what is actually going on, not to get the client to "say it right" for the therapist or others in her life or to become a good interpersonal "communicator." Deeper contact may result from shifting one's language in this way, but such shifts must not be introduced prescriptively or for the purpose of interpersonal manipulation. If the client views them as prescriptive, this needs to be addressed.

⁷ Perls studied theater with Max Reinhardt, the famous German director, and was friends with Julien Beck and Judith Malina, founders of the Living Theater in New York.

⁸ For example, the empty chair used in many behavioral contexts becomes a way of practicing for the future instead of exploring one's way of being in the world. As such, it is non-existential and non-Gestalt if it attempts to fix the future and thereby alleviate anxiety by suppressing spontaneity.

⁹ Because Gestalt therapy is so immediate and body centered in its disclosure of a client's world-making process, the client in the midst of such therapy often experiences existential anxiety over the possibility of making a new choice of a way of being in the world. I believe this is a place where Gestalt therapy could learn more from existential philosophy. Though Perls occasionally mentions existential anxiety, he is more likely to discuss neurotic anxiety as rehearsing for the future - "the gap between the now and the then," as he was fond of saying. For Freud, neurotic anxiety refers to the past - it signals the "return of the repressed." While I think all three forms exist in therapy (and elsewhere), existential anxiety is probably the most neglected of the three. It is important because recognizing it allows the therapist to avoid the mistake of regarding its appearance as a neurotic or psychotic symptom and instead to encourage the client to tolerate it in the process of making a new choice of a way of being in the world.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Dorian Kondas for his excellent transcription of this and other training sessions.

¹¹ Although the idea of the introject comes from Freud, it was Perls (1947) who noted the difference between taking nourishing material from the outside and assimilating it versus taking material from the outside that is indigestible and therefore unassimilable because it attacks (on a reflective level) what one moves toward on the level of basic need or desire (prereflective level). The nausea comes from this physical feeling that what one is trying to digest is indigestible, like a stone.

¹² For a discussion of current approaches to trauma work, see *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy* (2006) by Pat Ogden, Kekuni Menton and Claire Pain. I am grateful to Pat Ogden, Laurence Heller (2001) and Peter Levine (1997) for the training I received from them in working with trauma - and to Pat for our many discussions of trauma and related issues.

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