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On Macaque Monkeys, Players, and Clairvoyants: Some New Ideas for a Gestalt Therapeutic Concept of Empathy¹

Frederick Perls's view was that empathy fosters confluence, that is, it blurs the distinctions ("boundaries") between the self and the other: "There can be no true contact in empathy. At its worst it becomes confluence" (1973, p. 106), he said in his rigorous way. Hence, "empathy" has been almost a dirty word for many gestalt therapists right up to the present. However, I am convinced that empathy cannot be relegated from gestalt therapeutic practice. It may be useful to think about a gestalt therapeutic understanding of empathy. Of course, on the one hand Perls's warning should be taken seriously (but not rigidly). On the other hand the danger of individualistic thinking, according to which the individual is locked in his inner world and in the end remains unreachable for the other, is to be avoided. In this paper I will offer some ideas about a notion of empathy that I think are in keeping with more recent trends in gestalt therapy (e.g., dialogue and field theory). I will also draw on sources such as phenomenology, gestalt psychology, hermeneutics, neurosciences, and others.

Key words: Empathy, confluence, inclusion, embodypathy, identification, intersubjectivity, joint situation.

The distinction between the healthy and the neurotic confluences is that the former are potentially contactful Yet obviously immense areas of relatively permanent confluence are indispensable as the underlying unaware background of the aware backgrounds of experience. (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, p. 451)

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