

Review  
By Alan Meara

# Self:

**A polyphony  
of contemporary  
Gestalt therapists**

Jean-Marie Robine (Ed.)  
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In his introduction Jean-Marie Robine explains the purpose behind the book as inviting 20 well known and well published Gestalt therapy theorists to contribute their understanding and use of the concept of 'self' and how they may have been influenced by it and extended it. This invitation followed his teaching experiences in many countries where the term self is rarely used in commenting on clinical work. Each chapter is a substantial piece of writing addressing complex philosophical, theoretical, and practice issues, although with a range of writing styles. The result is indeed a polyphony, a population of 'selves' and implications. I began the review by attempting to summarise the contributions, in order to seek out affinities and differences across the various voices. This led to many pages of notes, and needing to record page number references as the only way to be able to relocate particular content, given there is no index. I have chosen to present some selected key themes and their contexts. I will refer to authors by last names, with a list of full names at the end.

The first chapter by Bandín includes a useful overview of the full theory of self as expounded the foundation text *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, F., Hefferline, R., and Goodman, P., 1951), hereafter referred to as PHG, which may assist in orienting readers who are not familiar with all aspects of the theory.

### **The varieties of self**

The concept of 'self as process' is widely heralded as a defining and distinguishing characteristic of Gestalt therapy, yet as Robine, Staemmler and others point out, there exists a counter tendency for reification, i.e. self as an entity, present both in PHG and in contributions. Távora and others refer to the work of a British philosopher Stephen Toulmin who adds '-self' and 'self-' treated as reflexive, auxiliary prefixes or postfixes in everyday colloquial language as a third use of self (p.44). Robine notes the difficulties in translating 'self' as an isolated term into French and other languages (pp. 214-5), and he and others explore the relevant grammar of middle voice. Miller's chapter in fact asks the question "do psychological theories and the clinical practices derived from them really need the self?" (p. 291). Olsen (2016/1998) agrees "... we can easily do without the word 'self'" (p. 2), noting that the ambiguity of the term has been challenged as long ago as 1893. Olsen's list of associated philosophical issues (p.12) fits well, I believe, with the broad range of views on self presented by contributors, and includes questions such as: does the self exist; is the self an object; is the self identical with the body; can a human being can have more than one self at once; can animals have selves; and does the first-person pronoun equate to self?

Wheeler offers a view on where the Gestalt version of 'self' arose, claiming that Goodman shrank the whole of psychology to Gestalt making (creative adjustment), appropriated Kurt Lewin's orientation to social situations and simply named this whole Lewinian process: self. Other contributors emphasize the important influence of American Chicagoan pragmatists on Goodman, and Meyer points to several parallel formulations between Mead's work and passages in PHG (p. 241), although various terms such as 'mind', 'personhood', 'social object' and 'reflective consciousness' don't equate easily to 'self'. Delisle and Girard identify confusion in meanings of 'self' in psychodynamic literature, which is not useful in clinical practice (p. 177).

The entity vs process issue is also referenced through the ubiquitous circle diagrams, where placing self inside the boundary risks equating self to an entity, rather self as the boundary representing dynamic interaction between organism and environment. While some suggest using person – environment, retaining 'organism' would accommodate the various references by authors to non-human animal interactions. Along with Staemmler and Meyer, Miller refers to the impermanence of self as a parallel to 'no-thing-ness', as described in Mahayana Buddhism, and doubts that the use of 'selfing' is satisfactory candidate for a more processual term. Miller also warns against other reifications such as 'the' contact boundary (p. 293).

From other perspectives, Wollants considers the 'client' to be the situation rather than the person, and therefore a need to re-conceptualise the relation of person and environment (p. 137). Meyer notes a difficulty in accepting the complementarity of self as the organiser, and the same time what is organised. Távora proposes several understandings of self: as the result of both affective and conceptual clinical interaction with the client; as the active process of organization and integration; and as in conflict between autonomy and interdependence. Frank emphasizes the importance of recognising the notion of self as emergent process in moving through the world (p. 371). Jacobs argues that self is a description of a certain function of being-in-the-world (p. 251), believes the focus on self is a distraction from a focus on meeting the other, and suggests replacing 'self' with Wollheim's 'leading a life'. Polster is idiosyncratic in proposing that a person has a community of selves that vie for ascendancy (p. 85), and which provides the potential for dialogue between selves to create a synthesis in diversity. Perhaps this is a fitting metaphor for this book.

Several authors shift the focus to the development of a 'sense of self': Jacobs as a result of Mead's social interaction; Brownell as a result of embodied interoception and brain studies; Staemmler in part on the basis of Damasio's work; Spagnuolo Lobb on the basis of differentiating between self as process perhaps an ontological assumption and the development of a sense of self, how we experience the world, an epistemological issue.

Given the various propositions about what is meant by self, it is not surprising that the concept is absent from clinical and supervisory conversations as well as presenting difficulties for educators, students and researchers in maintaining the favoured process orientation. What are the implications then, for other aspects of Gestalt theory?

### Part functions of self

Robine argues that the founders did not believe in reducing the self to the id, ego and personality functions (or modes) alone, choosing these since they contribute to organising the figure/background process (p. 216). Several contributors question whether modalities of contact (introjection etc) contribute to loss of ego function or emerge as result of loss of ego function; and whether therapy supports ego function (as From would say) or would better be focussed on supporting id and personality functioning (Spagnuolo Lobb). Such questions challenge the coherence of the theory. Wheeler, cites Taylor Stoehr as adamant that Goodman was not interested in being a consistent thinker, but rather a provocateur (p. 203) and who in practice referred to id, perhaps, but not ego and personality, preferring to address people's wants.

Several authors expand on Wollants's the 'id of the situation' for which he states there is no other word (p.137). Alvim points out that the term is mentioned only once in PHG and could be replaced by the more commonly used term in PHG: "the given" in the organism-environment field. In a detailed analysis of the works of Merleau-Ponty she introduces an alternative: an experience of the world which is given, the pre-reflexive or unreflected that is not produced by reflection, but that sustains it (p. 320). Others use this relatively new terminology: Brownell writes that the first person given-ness of experiential phenomena is accounted for by a pre-reflective self-consciousness (p. 354); Bloom redefines the id and personality functions as emerging from the pre-personal, pre-reflective and pre-known lifeworld (p.73); Miller proposes 'stagings' not necessarily in sequence, for how the self is manifested, describing a forming self as similar to the id function with some elements of the ego function; a reflexive self, containing more continuous self-creation than the personality function; and a post-self which allows being absorbed in the world rather than in oneself (p.297).

Delisle and Girard argue that the self doesn't grow, it just happens, but rather, it is the personality that grows and develops, in accord with the subtitle of PHG. They incorporate aspects of Object Relations and describe a multi-factorial matrix that replaces the personality function, where representations of self and the world accumulate over time along with the development of neurological structures (p. 178). Meyer links Mead's analysis of the statement that 'I cannot turn around quick enough to catch myself' to 'I' as the self process at work, and 'me' [myself] as equivalent to the personality function (p. 240).

Philippson and others provides lists of what the personality function 'contains', I wonder perhaps too long, as if a repository for 'everything else' to do with socio - cultural contexts and physiological developmental processes (see Wheeler at p.202).

Regarding temporality - sequences, stages and processes, there is a trend to incorporate non-linear dynamics and complexity theory concepts. For example: Philippson to avoid a stage/sequence dichotomy (p. 343); Spagnuolo Lobb to propose modes of contacting as domains of concurrent interaction over different time scales (p. 274); and Távora to propose a definition of self as emergent process (p.371).

### **Expanding the functions of self**

Goodman called for "the ... exhaustive classification, description and analysis of the possible structures of self. This is the subject matter of Phenomenology" (PHG, p. 156). Bloom proposes a relational function, based on his formulation of relational contacting, different to the intentionality for contact with the material world (p. 77), similar to Buberian dialogue, but secular. Robine proposes an aesthetic function combining sensory knowledge and sensitivity, separate to the id- function, and the organisation of disparate forms into a meaningful whole that may be experienced as beautiful (p. 228). These are welcome yet what form of phenomenological investigation is appropriate? Clinical implications

These vary in terms of complexity of background theory, clinical field of application, and ease of translation into readers' own practice, yet all demonstrate a commitment to relational practices.

Some aim to expand beyond PHG's focus on neurosis, all giving examples of their approach: Francesetti with a three-fold typology of psychopathology, aimed at modulating a client's presence and absence at the contact boundary (p. 159); Delilse and Gerard oriented to cycles of reproduction- recognition- repair of experiential dead ends within several practice frameworks in working with personality disorders (p.183); Spagnuolo Lobb with a typology of five perceptive styles (p. 278) based on various types of anxious ground experiences.

Others emphasise body process, with Jacobs' therapeutic process essentially embodied dialogue while attending to the patient's dignity (p. 258). Bandín refers to 'tuning' through embodied micro- macro movements (p. 27), and proposes therapy oriented to the future. Frank argues for kinesthesia and kinesthetic resonance as ways therapists can understand the dynamics of the unfolding relationship (p. 374), within a developmental frame based on six fundamental movements.

Brownell proposes that contact with God (p. 359) is a kind of touching, an interoception (felt awareness) of the spirit, a capacity of the self, and describes requirements for a therapist's competence to work with spiritual issues.

### **The implications of the experiment**

Robine's hope in inviting this polyphony was to get closer to the spirit of the founders, appropriating their proposals, far from any idea of orthodoxy (p.12). While this has been achieved to a large extent, there is also a degree of challenge to such proposals with their inherent ambiguity. One of the benefits of this book is the opening up of several European and South American streams of thought to the English speaking world, although some bibliographies contain references that are not available in English. Like many collected works, the value of the book for particular readers will vary, and in this case the most value may be for Gestalt oriented training institution libraries, advanced students, educators, researchers and writers with an interest in the theory/practice nexus. For practitioners, practical applications may be limited. It would be interesting to gain feedback from a non-Gestalt audience. Another benefit is the emerging engagement with potentially compatible contemporary sciences and philosophies (particularly developments in phenomenological approaches) of our time, as the founders did in their time, to allow new insights into our theory and practice (see Meara, 2015). Perhaps this engagement could be progressed in any future endeavours.

The contributors:

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