

By Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

# **FROM GUILT TO FALLIBILISM: overcoming the narcissistic position with the aesthetic attitude.**

**Comment to “My Other’s Keeper.  
Resources for the Ethical Turn in  
Psychotherapy” by D.M. Orange**

## Introduction

During the first joint AAGT/EAGT Conference in Taormina (september 22-25, 2016), on the topic “The Aesthetic of Otherness in a Desensitized World”, Donna Orange offered a plenary key word titled “My Other’s Keeper. Resources for the Ethical Turn in Psychotherapy”. She spoke of the importance for the therapists to be at the ethical service of others, while being connected to their “finitude” in front of the “infinite” other’s suffering.

Three senior Gestalt psychotherapists commented on Donna’s speech: Dan Bloom, Lynne Jacobs and Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb. The whole panel is published in the book edited by Spagnuolo Lobb M., Bloom D., Roubal J., Zeleskov Djoric J., Cannavò M., La Rosa R., Tosi S., Pinna V. (2018). *The Aesthetic of Otherness: meeting at the boundary in a desensitized world*, Proceedings. Siracusa (Italy): Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy Publ. Co. ([www.gestaltitaly.com](http://www.gestaltitaly.com)). It’s available in free access or printed format in this link <https://www.gestaltitaly.com/taormina-conference-proceedings/> What follows is Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb’s comment: she connects Donna’s speech with some relevant points for the development of Gestalt psychotherapy in contemporary society.

## Keywords

Gestalt therapy, psychoanalysis, fallibilism, ethical, aesthetic, relational, self, field, human experience

Donna’s approach has an immediate impact today: we work with people who are devastated. This is particularly appropriate in our world and in this land, which hosts thousands of migrants. They arrive here traumatized by political persecutions and tortures. They find in Sicily the stepping stone to Europe who in this moment is called to host this human wave, which reaches us with fullness of pain and hope. In this nation, Italy, where just a few days ago a serious earthquake has shocked and upset the life of hundreds of people. But more generally we are all called to change our therapeutic intervention and adjust it to the feeling of emergency and loss of ground that is everywhere. Why we Gestalt therapists want to dialogue with Donna Orange? Donna is a psychoanalyst. Gestalt therapy distanced itself from PA at its birth. But recently, both methods have developed towards phenomenology and aesthetics and have reached similar positions in certain respects. This is particularly true for intersubjective and relational psychoanalysts, who have focussed on the interactive movements between client and therapists, including the contribution of the therapists with a field perspective. Donna Orange stands against the authoritarian position that the clinician may take, in line with what has been called the ethical turn in psychoanalysis. As Gestalt therapists we might think “being authoritarian is something about psychoanalysts not about Gestalt therapists”. Allow me to disagree: even a Gestalt therapist can be authoritarian if she doesn’t overcome the narcissistic culture. Actually, it’s the culture in which GT was born, that needs to be re-thought even from us, Gestalt therapists.

Donna applies Lévinas' concept of ethical responsibility towards the other to clinicians, and this allows her to develop a new humanity of the therapeutic encounter, with the terrible awareness of the possibilities of good and evil. It's a new way to see evil: every human being is free and s/he can frustrate us. Being human implies the freedom to do evil, not only good, even if we do not intentionally want to.

We are fallible! We can do the evil.

Just think to the ethical and clinical consequences of this statement!

And it's just this ontological being fallible that allows us to be responsible in a new way, out of the narcissistic mode that requires us to always be great and able to take care and make the good. It allows us to take a human, humble and realistic responsibility, which doesn't detach from the other, and doesn't require a separation between the good and the bad, the ideal self and the real self, the good therapist (or mother or teacher, or whatever) and the guilty healer.

The ethical turn represented by Donna's thought switches the (clinical) problem of the client and (spiritual) problem of the therapist from the relationship with oneself, and her/his capacity of a strong ego, to the relationship towards the other, who is there, even when we don't want, challenging our total self. We cannot split in front of the other.

Donna says that being humble is not shaming: it's compassion to ourselves and acceptance of our limits.

Donna in my opinion has been able to finally overcome the narcissistic culture, which is based on the split between one's own responsibility and fragility.

We feel more radically involved with our fragility. A narcissistic mode could be: "I'm responsible while I'm in session, I can be another person when I'm out of my role". Donna reminds us that we cannot get rid from the whole presence of the other: we are what and how we are, we are never perfect and we fail in front of the other.

Today Donna has posed a further step:

"What do we need to keep responding, to keep working with the devastated?"

I will like to connect Donna's speech to a couple of points that are relevant to the growth of our method.

We could translate her question in Gestalt terms in this way: "How can I support you, how can I see the beauty that is still in your suffering and keeps you alive?"

### *1. The Switch from Humanistic Values to Relational and Aesthetic Values Nowadays*

Not "how can I support you to get rid of imposing social rules and find your autonomy and creativity", but "how can I find the life and harmony that is still there, in spite of your suffering".

The clinical value is changed in GT: the client doesn't need to be freed from social impositions, but to find her/himself in contact.

The Aesthetic Relational Knowledge (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2018) is our tool to support the intentioned harmony in the suffering other. Through my senses I can resonate with the other, offering the missing ground to create vivid figures: if I say for instance “I feel alone when you say that”, it’s not to offer an obvious feeling that the client has disowned, but to let a field emerge, from the “other side of the moon” of the client experience, which is the therapists aesthetic feeling. My esteemed colleagues have developed this idea with the concept of relational themes (Jacobs, 2017), and relational function of the self (Bloom, 2017).

Donna focuses on the most difficult part of our experience of this. How can we “live an ethic that never allows us to say that we have done enough?”

If there is not a goal to be achieved, but a presence to fullfill, can we accept that we are not perfect?

### *2. Today Overcoming Dichotomies Implies to Consider the Unitary Nature of Self/ Other – the Field*

The other is indissolubly part of our life. In Gestalt therapy terms, we speak of the unitary nature of organism/environment. The other is “the different” and together with us she makes a unit. The more we feel the difference from the other, the more we create the contact boundary, the more we grow in a given field.

We have to die to our ego (as Perls himself said) to be able to be with the other. In more modern language we wonder – in front of a borderline experience of the client for instance – how am I contributing to his ambivalence and not letting himself go. Or when the client tells us a dream, we wonder how have we contributed to the client’s telling of that dream (not to the dream in itself). This unitary perspective makes a change in the use of the empty chair and all the Gestalt techniques.

### *3. Contact as the Normal Condition of Human Experience (of the Self)*

The point for us is not if there is contact but how we are in contact: our ethic is to support what is already working in contact making, not to reach a different mode.

I give you an example with a borderline experience. After a good session, the client has called the therapist in the middle of the night. The therapist has not answered, and has felt disturbed. In the next session, the client says to the therapist: “I will never trust you any more, I felt bad the other night and you didn’t answer. Last session, when you said that you are close to me, you have lied to me”..

The therapist, using her aesthetic knowledge, feels the wish of the client to be unified and autonomous in front of her, and, in order to support the client's capacity to be integrated, not contaminated by the other, answers: "I appreciate the dignity by which you say that". We don't want to change the client's mode, we stay with it and support the good energy, the harmonic addressing to the other, which is the way the client has used to creatively adjust, while keeping the interest for the other.

Donna (Orange, 2011) reminds us the special ethics of fallibilism, always curious, humble and spontaneous. It's the same attitude that a researcher has, while s/he takes seriously every novelty she feels while in contact with the client/situation, since her aim is not to find the truth but to go on discovering always a new truth, contextualised in the situation.

I thank Donna for her revolutionary thoughts and for being a live example of this attitude of care and research. It's a good start to take our curiosities and questions seriously, in a deeply human and non evaluative way. I'm sure that in that attitude lies the source of research and of the advancement of any science, and the novelty for our therapeutic approach.

## References

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