

Nourishing Notions or Poisonous Propositions? Can “New Phenomenology” Inspire Gestalt Therapy?

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ABSTRACT | According to some Gestalt therapists, the so-called “New Phenomenology,” created by the German philosophy professor Hermann Schmitz, should change essential components of Gestalt therapy. At first glance, Schmitz’s terms, such as “felt-body” [Leib] and “atmospheres” seem to be compatible with Gestalt phenomenology. Alas, his understanding of those key terms is not compatible. He distinctly separates the phenomenological felt-body from the physical body, tearing apart the field. Atmospheres, he claims, can grip a person, making the individual into a passive factor in the field. The term “contact” is to be replaced by a rather metaphysically defined felt-body resonance or “Einleibung” [incorporation], as “New Phenomenological” Gestalt therapists propose. By analyzing Schmitz’s publication about Hitler (1999), including his blatant lack of historic methodology and his penchant for quoting Nazi sources, this article concludes that Schmitz trivializes both Nazi ideology and the Holocaust. His anti-existential approach is quite indigestible for existentially-based Gestalt therapy.

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Based on the “New Phenomenology” as developed by Hermann Schmitz, former philosophy professor from Kiel, Germany, some Gestalt therapists have proposed to discard the idea of an integrative self (Zielke 2016, 41) as well as the term “contact”: “The contact model will be contrasted with the concept of felt-body of the new phenomenology. Perception is being described as felt-body communication. Felt-body resonance (i.e., incorporation) causes undivided, absolute contact at one’s own body, not at the boundary” (Matthies 2013, 77; see also Schmitz 2007, 37). Gianni Francesetti (2015a), for example, seems to agree partially with this notion in suggesting that Gestalt therapy’s phenomenological viewpoint “leads us to identify atmospheres, conceived as primary, emotionally charged presences, as the perceptive prius [antecedent, prior] beyond which nothing experientially is anterior” (10).

Introjection, we recall, “is identical with the food too hastily passing the oral zone” (Perls 1969, 165). In this context, Perls also refers explicitly to ideas and concepts. Gestalt therapists would be well advised to chew carefully on Schmitz’s terminology and concepts. This article attempts to assist the digestive process by focusing on key terms (felt-body, atmospheres, and emotions), describing the practical consequences of Schmitz’s ideas for Gestalt therapy, and questioning his moral and methodological foundations.

Felt-body: Experiential Process or Reified Agent of Experience?

“At the center of the New Phenomenology stands the corporal [das Leibliche] which becomes possible to experience through affective concernedness [Betroffensein]. It is relevant insofar as it decides what people care about” (Matthies 2013, 79). This view sounds compatible with Gestalt therapy, because we commence with “as naïve and full a description of direct experience as possible” (Koffka 1935, 73). Preconceived notions about resistance, clinical diseases, and so on, are to be handled

with extreme care, if at all. That is close to what the founder of philosophical phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1987), suggests: “What is required is not some demand to see with one’s own eyes, rather to not gloss over events under the compulsion of prejudices” (61).

Schmitz also seems to start out at that same place in asking how we acquire knowledge of ourselves. Centuries ago, René Descartes gave the classic answer to this conundrum: *cogito ergo sum*. This became the anchor for an overrating of rationality, above and beyond other means of cognition, such as feelings or body reactions. Philosopher Jens Soentgen (2002), a critical supporter of the “New Phenomenology,” describes Schmitz’s counter-position in this way: “A person realizes that they are concerned because of their own primary corporal impulses. Self-awareness in his philosophy is not being traced back to an active operation of the subject—to thinking or to doubt. . . . For Schmitz self-awareness is connected with being affectively concerned” [or affective “concernedness” in Schmitz’s neologizing language] (15). The sudden experience of fright (e.g., a car driver who sees an accident happening to him) constitutes irrefutable proof of one’s existence. In this situation, an individual realizes that he is undoubtedly “concerned,” without recourse to any further thinking (Matthies 2013, 81). In a way similar to Gestalt theory, Schmitz states that during those moments of shock, people do not put together single impressions, as in a puzzle, in order to get the picture; rather, they perceive a Gestalt. Yet, when Schmitz (2007) points out that reactions happen “without a noticeable pause” (30), he ignores studies suggesting that there are simple and complex reaction times.

“Ego,” Perls (1969) states, “is not identical with the whole personality. If ‘I’ command the motoric system, ‘I’ must be different or apart from it” (139). Although he did not suggest a dichotomy, the wording still implies a difference between some form of “I” and its physical/psychic fixtures. How those two aspects of an individual might be connected, or in which manner they might interact, is a work in progress engaging philosophers and psychologists alike. Schmitz (1999) repudiates an individual’s “incarceration into a monad without windows” (36), and asserts that the Cartesian view is unable to explain how internal processes interact with outside behavior. Rejecting rationalistic subjectivity, Schmitz cannot really solve the classic riddle, though. Whether one defines “I” as a

rational monad (in the brain) or a felt-body entity (Schmitz 2011, 8), both presuppose a number of faculties: (1) “I” needs to be able to differentiate between “I” and “Non-I” (i.e., it has the ability to “form” ego-boundaries when entering the frightening situation); (2) “I” is capable of correlating circumstances to itself, that is, able to draw on relevant field experience (Griffero [2016a] obscurely refers to it as “the co-perception of past and/or expected atmospheres that are not in act” [125]); (3) “I” has the sensory, motor, biochemical, and psychological means of processing information and of translating it into purposeful behavior.

“A person,” Schmitz (2008) writes, “according to my definition is a *cognizant-owner* [Bewussthaber] with the ability for self-attribution, i.e., to regard something as self” (164, emphasis added; see also 2011, 71). He does not discuss why this neologism might be helpful, given that “bewusst” in German means “conscious.” Given that Schmitz rejects Descartes, one could imagine that consciousness is of no relevance to him. In contrast, Gestalt rightly focuses its therapeutic processes on awareness [*Bewusstheit*]. Therefore, Schmitz’s term is rather a misnomer. In the second half of his definition, “owner” [Bewussthaber] is also at odds with Gestalt thinking. Where there is something to be had, there must be someone to possess it. From a Gestalt point of view, we might perhaps call a person an “awareness-being”: “We *are* a body. . . . So it’s the question of *being* rather than *having*,” states Perls (1992, 26, emphasis in original). He adds: “We *have* not a liver or a heart. We *are* liver and heart and brain and so on, and even this is wrong. We are not a summation of parts, but *coordination*” (25). Proponents of the “New Phenomenology” prefer to toy with semantics: “The idea is to see a human not as someone who *has* a “self,” but who *is* a cognizant-owner” (Zielke 2016, 43, emphasis in original). They subsequently try to get by with a circular argument: consciousness is to be the “having-conscious of a cognizant-owner, for whom something is conscious” (Zielke 2016, 47, citing Schmitz). Schmitz artificially splits the awareness process into subdivisions that make no sense in the Gestalt approach to a unified, interacting field. Moreover, the self in Gestalt therapy is a process, not an entity, so Zielke’s criticism is superfluous.

Schmitz’s focus on the felt-body does not improve our understanding of the “hermeneutic circle in which the field creates the subject that in turn creates the field” (Francesetti 2015a, 84), because he merely replaces

the Cartesian homunculus with another agent of perception: the felt-body. Missing in Schmitz's theory is a concise understanding of the field of which "I" is an integral part right from conception. As Gary Yontef (1993) claims: "The field is a whole in which the parts are in immediate relationship and responsive to each other and no part is uninfluenced by what goes on elsewhere in the field. The field replaces the notion of discrete, isolated particles. The person in his or her life space constitutes a field" (125). The "I" is neither a cerebral nor a corporal particle; it is *of* the field, not merely *in* the field. This prepositional difference marks a radically different proposition. Yontef continues:

"In the field" defines the organism or object in absolute terms, i.e., outside the field, and then adds the field for context. . . . The psychological field does not exist apart from the people; people do not exist apart from the field. It is not a case of simple relationship between a separate individual and an external environment. The individual is only defined at a time by the field of which he or she is a part, and the field can only be defined via someone's experience or viewpoint. (300)

Schmitz's consciousness-owner merely depicts another entity *in* the field.

Schmitz (2011) observes that the German language rather uniquely has "grown or ingrown two words, 'felt-body' [Leib] and body [Körper], which allow an unconstrained differentiation between what is felt and what is sensually perceptible in humans" (5). The word *Leib* stems from the Middle High German *lîp*, the Old High German *lib*, and the Germanic *leiba*, that is, "life." The word "body" usually refers to the physical "corpus" (derived from Latin). A similar representational difference purportedly does not exist in other languages. In English, for example, the term "felt-body" was created in translating the works of phenomenologist Husserl. While seemingly quite compatible with Gestalt thinking, the otherness of Schmitz's phenomenology becomes clear when looking at the *meaning* of the terminology he employs. "Felt-body" as a synonym for sensations of, near, on, beneath, above, by, and in the physical body has become common usage, not just among German-speaking psychotherapists (e.g., Petzold 1996, 69, 283). If felt-body is used as a synonym for the mode

of corporal experience, there are diverging opinions about how exactly physique and psyche interact. Frank-M. Staemmler (2003), for example, states: “Felt-body as the basis for the construction of human experience can never be reduced to the biological body” (31), because when a body is without a felt-body it is either unconscious, under anesthesia, or a corpse.

How does Schmitz define these terms? Schmitz (2011) states: “Corporal is what people can feel of themselves in the vicinity of their own material body, without availing themselves of the five senses (seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, tasting) and of the perceptive body scheme derived from their testimonial” (5). Although a body is three dimensional, Schmitz sees the felt-body existing in a nonextensive space (89). This could be taken as an unusual description of experiential phenomena. But for Schmitz “body” and “felt-body” are two disparately reified objects, not processes. Distancing himself somewhat from the hypostasis (i.e., underlying reality, essential nature) of the two terms that Schmitz strives for, Tonino Griffero (2016a) calls this a “dualism that we are willing to avoid” (121).

Gestalt supporters of Schmitz, too, segregate felt-body and body (e.g., Matthies 2015, 92), without explaining the connection between those entities. “New Phenomenology” implies that the felt-body is primal (Matthies, 94). According to Schmitz (2007), incorporation [Einleibung]—what Gestalt theory calls contact—occurs via felt-body-isles in the proximity of the body: “The felt-body is almost always . . . occupied by such felt-body-isles, a surging of blurry islands, which usually form fleetingly without constant coherence, reshape and dissipate, and yet in some cases persist with more or less constant accouterments, especially in oral and anal areas and at the soles of the feet” (16). If “New Phenomenologists” strongly criticize the dualism of mind and body, they introduce a new dichotomy; the question of how nonextensive “half-things” relate to three-dimensional objects, like physical processes, remains a mystery because body and felt-body are being separated “aseptically” (Soentgen 1998, 60). Schmitz (2011) admits that he does not understand how this process functions. In another context, he speculates that it might be “ground-in paths of the motor-based body scheme” (22). This could actually be aligned with scientific findings about neuronal networks.

But “New Phenomenologists” insist on a new dichotomy: the physiologically and neurologically functioning brain cannot be identical to

consciousness, which develops personally (Matthies 2013, 89). Alas, difference does not necessarily translate into contradiction: “There are also always two perspectives for the same entity” (Griffero 2016c). The physical body and felt-body experiences could simply be diverging perspectives, similar to what physicist Niels Bohr calls “complementary.” Accordingly, two methodologically different descriptions of (psychological) phenomena may exclude one another, yet are connected and complement each other (Linschoten 1961, 192). From a Gestalt perspective, “body” could be seen as describing the physical aspects, while “felt-body” could refer to an experience, that is, “a good dialectic between the two forms of life (from the outside or from the inside)” (Griffero 2016b, 12). Soentgen (1998) reckons: “Strictly speaking, a felt-body does not exist; what only exists is an individual corporal feeling [leibliches Befinden]” (61).

“New Phenomenologists” find it impossible to describe intersubjective communication without recurring to physical aspects: “In the professional context of psychotherapy the possibility to partake in the corporality of others plays an important role. Here the bridges of felt-body communication like gazes, touches, conversation, song, etc. are of great importance” (Matthies 2013, 84). Yet when Griffero (2016a) describes felt phenomena as happening “kinesthetically and not metaphorically” (119), he contradicts Schmitz’s (2011) dictum about corporality, which for him (Schmitz) happens *without* recourse to the five senses (5). At any rate, reifying the felt-body and removing oneself from scientific research can only thwart the development of new perspectives in Gestalt therapy.

Atmospheres: Is There No Need for Needs?

Schmitz (2007) depicts the human situation in mythological times in the following way: “The person who says ‘I’ is positioned in a concert of impulse activators which mostly are located corporally, without a power base [...] and these impulse activators are exposed to the intrusion of seizing powers—arousals like Eros and anger or the Gods” (13). Today, however, “New Phenomenologists” claim that atmospheres can seize cognizant-owners because they exist *independently* of subjective perceptions.

Jens Soentgen (2011) concludes that atmospheres are perhaps the “only non-subjective entity [in Schmitz’s thinking], while all else is bound to the subjectivity of being affectively concerned, even material things and reality” (3). Clearly, Schmitz’s understanding of atmospheres preceding perception contradicts his own definition of phenomena. Griffero (2016a) seems to agree and suggests that “phenomenological aesthetics of atmospheres must rehabilitate the so-called first impression” (29). But what happens after that first instance? Schmitz and Griffero categorize and catalog first contact incidents, but their respective descriptions lack attention to subsequent field processes, which leads Soentgen (1998) to suggest that phenomena are being titivated by Schmitz (107). Indeed, “New Phenomenologists” following Griffero disregard the development, creation, and possible disintegration of atmospheres as described, for instance, by Christoph Michels (2015, 261). Hence, Soentgen (1998) is on target when he argues that “Schmitz does not observe the *status nascendi* of feelings with enough precision” (116). This unphenomenological element in Schmitz’s philosophy stems from his “anthropological dogma” (Soentgen 1998, 116ff., 148), echoing the claim of German philosopher Ludwig Klages (1976)—who aimed to become the Nazi’s chief philosopher in the 1930s—that “reality can only be endured” (as cited in Griffero 2016a, 118). Unfortunately, Griffero agrees with both Schmitz and Klages to a certain extent. For Gestalt therapy, however, *experienced* phenomena and the *processes of experiencing* are essential. Thus, Francesetti (2015b) rightly insists on the “irreducible primacy of subjective experience” (7). How, then, could speculative metaphysics in the very foundations of Schmitz’s approach become a cornerstone of Gestalt phenomenology? Unrelated to needs, interests, and so on, human beings would be merely reactive particles *in* the field.

Phenomenology! Which One?

Not all proponents of *a* new phenomenology concur entirely with Schmitz’s reification of atmospheres. Griffero (2016a) starts out at that point, only to steer toward a middle ground: “Perceiving an atmosphere, therefore, means grasping a feeling in the surrounding space”

(5; see also 16). Similar to Schmitz, Griffero defines atmospheric quality as a quasi-thing: “It is a lived quality (in a transitive sense), not conjectured or analogically deduced but encountered in its anti-predicative Gestaltic organization, and at least initially foreign to the interior of the subject” (18). Leaving the question aside to which interior the anti-Cartesian author refers, he restates that there are two entities *in* the field. Occasionally, Griffero (2016c) seems to approximate field theory writing about “predualistic” atmospheres. More comprehensively, Francesetti (2015b) depicts the entire process of emerging figures rather than focusing on first impression alone; hence, for him, “the field is a third dimension, one that is neither subjective nor objective, but where subject and object emerge and are distinguished” (7). Unlike either Schmitz or Griffero, Francesetti is firmly rooted in Gestalt’s field theory.

Starting from Schmitz’s ideas, Griffero (2016a) takes a halfway position: “objective roots of an atmosphere” (134) do exist, while the subject is not a merely passive object: “The atmospheric thus exists ‘between’ the object, or rather the environmental *qualia*, and the subject, or rather the felt-body” (121). He leaves it open as to whether or not “qualia” are intrinsic qualities of their bearers (atmospheres and feelings). He does not answer the “chicken-or-egg” question: Are perceived phenomena objective elements in the field or mere projections of a subject? Yontef (1993) states: “In the mechanistic mode experiments can be devised to study this question in linear fashion. But the question as posed creates a false dichotomy that is more easily dealt with in field theory” (287). From that perspective, atmospheres are not “out there” but created by contact. Similarly, Griffero (2016a) talks about “quasi-objective atmospheres” (131): “While being rooted in objectual elements that are completely indifferent to what we think of them and hear in them, of course they mean something only for those who perceive them” (129). However, verifying atmospheric charges *before* perception will prove impossible to substantiate phenomenologically, as Griffero (2016c) seems to realize: “But to make an atmospheric feeling into a binding authority seems to imply the transformation of phenomenology into theology” (12).

Instead, it might be useful to look closer at the *process* of creating meaning. Griffero (2016a, 131) suggests some variability of subjective reaction; and that “the atmospheric feeling does not always survive cognitive penetrability” (2014, 202). He admits “that there are various types

of atmospheres” (Griffero 2016a, 144). This sheds light on some aspects, but does not illuminate the problem entirely: “This is a variability—the atmosphere is the object of a natural perception, but it is filtered through the ideas and evaluations of the perceiver—that common sense advises us to admit. But without ever embracing *in toto* projectivistic relativism” (Griffero 2016a, 137). While Griffero remains uncommitted, his idea of situational and “atmospheric anchor points” (138) might inspire further studies insofar as it might inform Gestalt therapy’s understanding of figure formation as predualist field processes.

For Schmitz (2007, 15) atmospheres curtail the freedom of the subject. Gestalt therapists, however, believe that a person’s existence precedes essence. “Up to now,” writes Jean-Marie Robine (2016), “I did not see yet the interest of looking at ‘atmosphere,’ as well as emotions or many other experiences, as almost things. . . . Why such a reification?” (2). Both positions refer to medieval times: drawing on Plato’s teachings, so-called realists contended that universals have an independent existence. Accordingly, ideas would be precursors of a particular (“universale ante rem”; see Klima 2016). Schmitz sees atmospheres as universals—or else they would not be able to seize people. (To contextualize this notion, let us repeat what was said earlier: “New Phenomenologists” claim that atmospheres can seize cognizant-owners because they exist *independently* of subjective perceptions. Soentgen [2011] concludes that atmospheres are perhaps the “only non-subjective entity [in Schmitz’s thinking], while all else is bound to the subjectivity of being affectively concerned, even material things and reality” [3]).

Nominalists have proposed a different view. According to medieval philosopher Roscelin of Compiègne (c. 1050–c. 1125), objects can be perceived by the senses, while terms are mere identifiers, “flatus vocis,” that is, breaths of air produced by the voice. In the fourteenth century, William of Ockham also rejected universals (Spade and Panaccio 2016). Schmitz (1999, 27) explicitly tries to prove nominalism wrong. Nominalists, for example, see a single rose as a real existence; “the rose” as a notion, however, exists only as a mental abstraction. However, Schmitz (2011) states rather incomprehensibly: “As soon as one smells in the status of excorperation, there can be no localization of a particular; one shouts then maybe, ‘It smells,’ ‘This smells strongly,’ ‘This smells enticing,’ or suchlike. ‘This’ no longer means a thing but something like the pure essence of the

scent of roses, apple- or wood scent” (53). How could that metaphysical approach be compatible with the existentialist–nominalist stance so fundamental to Gestalt therapy?

Sources of the “New Phenomenology”

In order to better understand the development of Schmitz’s notions, let us turn our attention to some of his sources, especially Klages (who, we recall, strove to become the Nazi’s chief philosopher in the 1930s). Schmitz (1974/1975, 1980/1981) calls Klages “congenial” (a kindred spirit, like-minded). Consequently, Klages’s ideas bear a striking resemblance to the “Philosophy of Life” [Lebensphilosophie], whose fundamental tenets emphasize what Schmitz developed in his ideas about atmospheres and feelings as “quasi-things” that exist outside and independently of human beings and act on individuals as well. Here are some of those ideas.

- “Life is the basis, which must form the origin of philosophy. This is what is known from the inside—it is—from which we cannot go back any further. Life cannot be brought before the bench of reason” (Dilthey 1992, 359). Likewise, Schmitz is concerned with what we know from inside our lived body.
- Schmitz and the “philosophers of life” share an anti-rational impetus. Whereas the one bemoans the “mirage of an autonomy of reason” (Schmitz 1999, 378), the others criticize rationalism: “In the veins of a realizing subject, which Locke, Hume and Kant constructed, there does not flow any real blood, but the diluted sap of reason as a mere ability to think” (Dilthey 1992, 18).
- Griffero (2016a, 2016c) confirms: “Klages’s phenomenology is undoubtedly precious to our approach, precisely as it addresses not things but significant contents, whether they give joy or are menacing” (24, 5). Klages holds that the “phenomenon itself is a bearer of meaning” (as cited in Griffero 2016a, 14): phenomena carry inherent meaning, which precedes perception by individuals, thus making them into independent entities in the field, that is, universals.

Experienced phenomena and the holistic formation of *Gestalts* are starting points for our theory and practice: “Body and soul are identical ‘*in re*,’ though not ‘*in verbo*’” (Perls 1969, 33). In contrast, “New Phenomenology” would like to make Gestalt theory and practice into a “science of elementary souls . . . appearing phenomenically” (Griffero 2016a, 24). How does that affect the inspirational value of Schmitz’s “New Phenomenology” to the further development of Gestalt therapy theory? According to Schmitz (2011), “emotions are half-things with both an interruptible duration and presence in the room” (91). Yet, if individuals really were to be seized by emotions, the Gestalt therapeutic understanding of needs would be dispensable. Criticizing Behaviorism, German Gestalt therapist Martina Gremmler-Fuhr (2001) writes: “Therefore we normally do not act based on stimuli . . . that elicit certain reactions, as was claimed by classic behaviorism in regard to all human behavior, but instead we act on the basis of relevance, which we grant to what we perceive” (354). Perhaps, we should also apply the former to Schmitz’s understanding of emotions. Of course, affective or motor impulses do not originate solely within the “organism.” Challenges, stimuli, and so on, arise from a situation (Griffero 2016c, 6). Thus, atmospheres could be seen as invitations, allowing for processes of decision-making: we chose the “objects [from the field], based on our interests” needs, and so on (Perls 1969, 41). Without any reference to these categories, individuals would indeed be positioned in a concert of impulse activators without a power base. Gestalt would be ill-advised to share the “desubjectification of feelings (even of atmospheric ones) promoted by Schmitz” (Griffero 2016a, 143).

Like in Gestalt therapy theory, “New Phenomenologists” suggest that feelings are not located inside an individual. Unlike in Gestalt therapy theory, “New Phenomenologists” do not define feelings as phenomena *of the field*. Schmitz rejects an introjection of feelings, but then he does not define a middle mode of the processes of self as we know it in Gestalt therapy, being neither completely active nor passive, but rather doer and done to at the same time. Instead, he defends the other extreme. He claims feelings to be universals drawing on Klages (1976), who saw feelings not as “something that I possess, because, if anything, it is the feeling that possesses me” (349).

Hermeneutics in Gestalt Practice

Soentgen (1998) states that phenomena are not “displayed in a fishbowl; on the contrary, they need to be properly uncovered. Their context is anything but inherent; it needs to be (re)created by the phenomenologist. The idea of phenomena being revealed openly, just needing to be charted, is wrong” (159). Soentgen, unlike Schmitz, makes a clear distinction between phenomena and their interpretation (86). Phenomenology cannot just unearth facts because relevant phenomena—like material objects—always imply meaning *for someone* (Zahavi 2007, 18). Phenomena and things are unalterably connected to the intentionality of the perceiver. Hence, we see the *sine qua non* of hermeneutics, because “when it is a matter of the interpretation of the human realm, a process of understanding is needed at the very least when there are structures, objects, symbols created by humans” (Jung 2001, 10).

In Gestalt therapy, the process of understanding relevance is a collaborative effort. The aim of joint experiments by client and therapist is not to produce comprehension of some inherent situational content. As Yontef (1993) puts it, in Gestalt therapy “the *process* of discovery through experimentation *is* the end point rather than the feeling or idea or content” (130). Significance is being cocreated; thus, clients become aware of their own processes of creating meaning (145). Therefore, Gestalt therapy insists that “existence precedes essence” (133, 297). As an experimental and existential approach, Yontef observes, it is in synch with Sartre’s philosophical ideas: Gestalt phenomenology sees humans as cocreators of essence, not as objects seized by universalist atmospheres charged with meaning.

How do Gestalt proponents of the “New Phenomenology” see the process of development and growth? “Personal regression is necessary for the developmental process in order to become assured of oneself. Persons needs certainty that they are concerned by events and, as the case may be, also touched” (Matthies 2013, 87). Leaving the unexplained difference between “being concerned” and “being touched” aside, “New Phenomenology” defines personal regression in terms of situations like the experience of fright mentioned above (i.e., a car driver who sees an accident happening to him), by which a person gains self-assuredness without reference to rational thinking. Matthies speaks of

personal regression as “affective concernedness in different stages” (87), again without elaborating on the nuances of this process. Clarification would be vital, though, because it might provide a spectrum of reactive options rather than an “automated process” (Soentgen 1998, 73). “New Phenomenologists” call a deep loss of all self-reflecting faculties “primitive presence,” defined as “entrapment in the corporal-affective concernedness. . . . While entrapped, a direct disassociation is impossible, or possible only in a limited fashion. The only thing the individual senses is that something is happening to him” (Matthies 2013, 87). Again, a difference between “impossible” and “limited” might make a world of difference in therapy, since a mainstay of Gestalt practice is enabling novel, alternative reactions to old dilemmas and supporting patients’ development of their ego functions: choosing what is appropriate to them and rejecting what is not.

“New Phenomenologist” Gabriele Marx (2008) claims that “personal regression is the necessary precondition for a person to have new experiences and for their effect to endure” (189). The present author disagrees that personal regression is a *pre*condition for something therapeutic to happen. In Gestalt therapy, aware contact in the here and now *is itself the full experience* and the key to paradoxical change. This may seem like a petty squabble, but it cuts to the heart of Gestalt practice. As a philosopher, Schmitz sees individuals merely fighting or acquiescing to whatever besets them (Soentgen 1998, 87ff.). Based on Schmitz’s notion of reified feelings, Matthies (2013) attempts to redefine the process of development; if the language here seems obscure, it is a reflection of Schmitz’s abstruseness: “In order to escape primitive presence, this absolute contact, a distancing [Abstandnahme] from the affective concernedness is needed. . . . By way of explication, individual elements of meaning are being pulled out of the initially diffuse situation. . . . The person can accept or refuse this meaning; or it remains ambivalent or diffuse” (88). During therapy, of course, clients need to disengage themselves from their old painful situations by cocreating new experiences with a therapist. So, it is expressly not a mere repetition of timeworn figures. The misunderstanding seems to be a direct result of Schmitz’s, and subsequently Matthies’s, insistence on focusing on artificially dissected parts of the contact process and the notion that independently existing atmospheres are able to seize defenseless individuals.

Gestalt hermeneutics encompass a broader process, recognizing that distancing happens *during* the old–new experience. If affective reactions were totally captured, clients would be re-traumatized. Friedhelm Matthies’s introduction of Schmitz’s concepts into Gestalt therapy would negate the dialogical, cocreating process of the patient–therapist field for which contemporary Gestalt therapy stands.

Based on Schmitz, another “New Phenomenological” Gestalt therapist, Olaf Zielke (2017), claims that there are two stages of development: personal regression plus distancing/explication: “Full contact only makes sense, when an adequate distancing takes place subsequently” (23). Certainly, during Gestalt therapy there are these two components: experience and integration. But they are neither two separate phases nor equally impactful. For “New Phenomenologists,” explication means to “explain or unfurl something to oneself” (Matthies 2013, 87)—*after* the regressive event! “Only through the process of integration (explication) can a conscious contact arise, because by explicating circumstances, single items can be accorded relevance” (Matthies, 88). Yet in Gestalt therapy, relevance is not conferred *ex post facto* but realized and assimilated during aware contact. Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman ([1951] 2013) did not see postcontact as a mere *conscious* insight, but as a “passage from aware contact to unaware assimilation” (422). So, it is neither a sequence of events nor a rational digestive process but a constantly flowing mix of aware and unaware aspects, of thoughts, emotions, and body activities. “The aftermath of contact is accomplished growth,” state Perls et al. (421): change and development happen *within* the entire field *during* contact. Yontef (1993) emphasizes that the goal of Gestalt phenomenological exploration is awareness, or insight, which “is a patterning of the perceptual field in such a way that the significant realities are apparent; it is the formation of a gestalt in which the relevant factors fall into place with respect to the whole” (124). It is about exploration by aware experimentation, not exposure plus distilled meaning afterwards: “The achievement of a strong gestalt is itself the cure, for the figure of contact is not a sign of, but is itself the creative integration of experience” (Perls et al., 232).

Gestalt therapy is certainly not a sequence of introspective steps; as Yontef (1993) states: “Gestalt therapy emphasizes that whatever exists is here and now and that experience is more reliable than interpretation.

The patient is taught the difference between *talking about* what occurred five minutes ago (or last night or 20 years ago) and *experiencing* what is now” (129). The following is sound philosophical phenomenology, too: “Only the present is alive, only in the present does something shows itself vividly as itself, and not as a temporal anticipation or as retrospect” (Alloa and Depraz 2012, 10). From a “New Phenomenological” perspective, Soentgen (1998) hints at an understanding more akin to Gestalt, suggesting that primitive and unfolded presence never gets to a “stable status” (62). A person can never disengage from the constant dialogue between constriction and wideness. Thus, personal emancipation and regression could be seen as poles of an ever-present spectrum rather than as a sequence of events. It remains to be seen whether this notion will exhibit inspirational qualities. Based on Schmitz’s anthropological dogma, growth is not a term that Matthies or Zielke seem to use. Their ideas are rather vague and elusive, focusing on “personal emancipation” (Matthies 2013, 88), defined only in terms of reacting to seizing forces (Zielke 2016, 49)—a rather pale and passive interpretation of the human potential.

If primitive presence absorbs the entire person, how can he or she change or grow? Ironically it is through *conscious* postcontact. Schmitz (2016) copiously attacks rationalism, yet “explication through speech, in the form of sentences” (21) is to be the fulcrum of change. Matthies (2013) applies this notion to his own version of Gestalt therapy: “In order to reach insight, a person (Schmitz calls him a cognizant-owner) must experience affective concern in his own felt-body, develop this affective concern in turn through distancing, neutralize it and ingest it into his personal world” (79, 88). So, Schmitz’s term “cognizant-owner” is not accidental after all. This classifying verbalization of experience does not sit well with Gestalt criticism of “aboutism” (Polster and Polster 1974, 9). Frederick Perls polemically calls concepts, ideas, and rational analyses “bullshit” or “elephant shit.” More seriously, Laura Perls (1992) cautions against overestimating intellectual insight: “*Gestalt is an existential, experiential, and experimental approach which takes its bearings from what is, not what has been or what should be. No interpretation is necessary as we work with what is available in the actual awareness of patient and therapist*” (131, emphasis in original).

In Gestalt therapy, awareness initiates change because experiences alter meaning here and now, as Erving Polster and Miriam Polster (1974) insist: “Instead of intellectual guessing games, we prefer that a patient gets inside his own experience” (17). Marx (2008) adds that in order to grow, clients need the “actualization of their set of problems” (188); more accurately, an *altered* actualization: “By this I mean a renewed non-overwhelming, yet upsetting living through of personally relevant experiences” (190). The crucial component in this process is *existential security*, that is, decidedly not some capturing of affects in a well-known constellation: “Only when the client has established contact with himself, his environment and to the persons present, ergo with the therapist as well, ‘dialogic diagnosis,’ exploration of self and others becomes possible” (Petzold 1996, 82). This we call a “safe emergency” (Perls et al. [1951] 2013, 286). Regression plus distancing as proposed by “New Phenomenologists” disregards the modulating presence of therapists and their influence on the clients’ field.

The Concept of Contact Is Not Superfluous to Gestalt Therapy

So, should Gestalt therapy replace “contact” with Schmitz’s philosophical concept of incorporation [Einleibung]? Contact, the Gestalt tenet says, happens at the boundary. This is not meant in any biological sense. Explicitly, contact takes place when “I” encounters something recognized as “Not-I.” Contact occurs at the Ego-boundaries, yet it is not restricted to the place of sensual perception. Polster and Polster (1974) state: “Contact is implicitly incompatible with remaining the same” (101). When two entities emerge from a field, something also happens “inside” those “sub-systems”: “Organism *and* field are being changed by this exchange process” (Gremmler-Fuhr 2001, 363). More precisely: A person *as well as* other elements of the field are being changed by the cocreative process when something that previously was “Not-I” becomes “I”—at least temporarily. This is what Perls et al. ([1951] 2013) call “creative adjustment” (447). Therefore, the introduction of a new term replacing “contact” is quite counterproductive. When Zielke (2016) writes—“The human being does not have the problem within himself.

The problem is the experiencing and/or appraisal [as Schmitz says], the explication *in* complex situations” (50, emphasis added)—he just seems to be unclear as to where “the problem” is at. “The problem” is only relevant if “I” and atmospheres are particles *in* the field. “The problem,” however, must emerge from a predualistic state during the process of contact, affecting all aspects *of* the field.

Based on Schmitz, Zielke (2016) replaces contact, Gestalt formation, and field with blurry descriptions of feelings seizing “cognizant-owners.” He concludes: “It is the responsibility of a human being if and how he expresses, for instance, his anger in a situation. The sensation of anger is one thing, and the expression of anger, for which there different possibilities, another” (45). Again, he dissects the field into particles because behavior becomes extrinsic and external to the individual. At best, he neglects self-establishing aspects of complex physical/affective field processes; at worst, he gives the proclaimed illusion of self the task of controlling its affective behavior. Zielke’s conclusion then is rather banal: therapist’s attention should be on the situation in which the person is embedded in his or her own here and now, and the way this person resonates with this specific situation (49). For some time, Gestalt therapists such as Robine (2016) have seen the delocalization of emotions, “which are not understood in GT as inner experiences but as contact-boundary experiences” and the “delocalization of self which is no more understood as a core, or as a kind of psyche, but as an emergent function from the contact with and in the world” (2). By eliminating contact as well as self, Zielke glosses over how meaning is created and who or what is actually resonating.

Schmitz on Hitler and Its Relevance for Gestalt Therapy

It is important to consider briefly Schmitz’s published perspective on Hitler, without implying any association of the Gestalt therapists mentioned above with Nazi ideology. Instead, I suggest that Gestalt therapists should not ignore Schmitz’s views on that historic matter, because they exemplify the methodological flaws of his phenomenology and create “alternative facts” which, ethically speaking, the present author finds quite repugnant.

Schmitz (2016) writes that his personal distaste for Hitler's regime led him to think about the traditions and developments of Occidental history (25ff.) His findings, however, are astounding; for example, Hitler supposedly fulfilled his role as a dispatch runner during World War I "with great virtuosity" (Schmitz 1999, 266). As evidence, Schmitz cites Adolf Meyer (1934, 65ff.). He does not discuss whether those descriptions depict any *experienced* phenomena, nor if that uncritical work is perhaps mere propaganda. This sort of use of sources is by no means an exception. Schmitz never reflects on historic circumstances at the time of publication, such as censorship by the Reich Literature Chamber (a government agency established by law in 1933, intended to gain control over the entire cultural life in Germany by creating and promoting Aryan art consistent with Nazi ideals). He uncritically quotes and then paraphrases many pages of both private and public statements by Nazi grandees without any textual criticism or source-critical methods. Could some of the declarations have been designed to have an effect on intended listeners? Might recollections have been distorted by subsequent experiences, before being written down? If a phenomenon is to convince that it is real, then any phenomenology needs to clarify how *communicated* phenomena represent real experiences, and how they are meaningful. In retelling secondhand descriptions, Schmitz presents no such evidence; he provides no phenomenological hermeneutics. Nor does he explain the significance of his sources as opposed to pronouncements by the same authors in different situations. Consequently, his selections seem arbitrary rather than phenomenologically sound. In delivering "an uncritical, decontextualized focalizing on self-statements by Hitler" (Landkammer 2000, n.p.), Schmitz often just repeats outdated, unsettling appraisals. For example, Schmitz (1999) sees the German Supreme Army Command during World War I as "driving into the disaster carelessly and inadvertently" (274), disregarding well-researched positions that contradict his interpretation (e.g., Mombauer 2014).

Schmitz (1999) does not refer to the industrialized murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis as the "Holocaust" (272, 274). Without any explanation, he reserves this word for the horrific experiences of soldiers in the trenches during World War I. Quoting Klages and Hitler, and calling both "thinkers" (294), he contorts Nazi ideas: "Race ideology only had

a small impact on Hitler's practical policies, with one large exception: the flagrantly derogatory, yes inhumanly vile, rating and treatment of Russians" (348). A strange verdict, indeed! Schmitz castigates the treatment of Russians, but he does not see the contradiction with regard to other statements he quotes, for example: "The southern part of the Ukraine, especially Crimea, we intend to populate exclusively with Germans" (313). If Nazis were convinced that the idea of *Lebensraum* (the territory that a state or nation believes is needed for its natural development) was real, why is that not a meaningful phenomenon for Schmitz?

Schmitz (1999) calls anti-Semitic persecutions "growing unkindliness"—a term that seems horribly trivializing—and quotes Hitler's table talk of January 27, 1942: "The Jew must be ejected from Europe! Best they go to Russia. I have no mercy for the Jews" (287). Once more Schmitz does not identify blatant incongruities: on the one hand, Jewish Germans were to leave for Poland and the Soviet Union, and on the other, Aryan Germans were to settle right there if the goal of *Lebensraum* was to be achieved. Hitler wanted "to remove the Jews, but he did not know where to put them" (287). Thus, Schmitz sees Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto, not as logical consequences of Nazi ideology, but merely as resulting from reduced options due to the war. What about the "Generalplan Ost" [Masterplan of the East], detailing the Nazis's extermination targets in Europe and the colonization of territories occupied by Germany during World War II in Central and Eastern Europe? Are those not relevant phenomena for someone intending to understand Hitler?

In other publications, too, Schmitz treats sources appearing during the Nazi regime just as any others (see Gutjahr 2016, 36). In his bibliography, Griffero (2016a, 151–69) does likewise in a more limited fashion, neglecting to provide a contextual critique. Schmitz is quoted as stating: "I was more sympathetic to Ludwig Klages because of the subtleties of his science of appearance as well as his skepticism towards modern dynamism. . . . Of the people I knew, Erich Rothacker . . . and Paul Lorenzen . . . have influenced me" (Apostolescu 2016, 230). The involvement in Nazi politics, before 1945, of authors cited by Schmitz can be gleaned from a number of sources: for example, Tilitzki (2002, 700) on Otto Friedrich Bollnow; Harten and Neirich (2006, 101) on Ludwig Eckstein; Faye (2009, 40) and Laugstien (1990, 113) on Schmitz's doctoral

advisor Erich Rothacker; Schneider (2001, 276), Lebovic (2013) and Klee (2007, 309ff.) on Ludwig Klages.

Fabian Heubel (2003) notes that Schmitz propagates a “revisionist affirmation of National Socialism” (46); for example, Schmitz writes: “The basic idea of ethnic community [Volksgemeinschaft] in Hitler’s sense is the preservation of the individual, while seamlessly integrating it into the collective. Their norms were not to be dictated to the individual from above, but instead engrafted onto his own volition” (321ff.). While Schmitz uncritically narrates about fictive individuals who devote themselves willingly to some greater good, he ignores all Nazi measures of enforced conformity [Gleichschaltung], thus distorting the oppressive nature of the Nazi regime.

Rhetorically, Schmitz (2016, 25) distances himself from Nazi crimes, while endorsing key elements of right-wing ideology: “When people today are intent on human sympathy, they commonly think of . . . comprehensive care-taking for mentally handicapped people (with a chance for them to propagate). . . . One should not be dissuaded by any anti-Nazi slogans from the moral obligation for eugenic endeavors” (Schmitz 1999, 387ff.). In plain terms: *Schmitz agrees with the goals of the Nazi Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases* (July 1933), which led to systematic sterilization of persons with “hereditary idiocy,” schizophrenia, manic-depressive insanity, hereditary epilepsy, hereditary Huntington’s Chorea, hereditary blindness and deafness, severe hereditary physical deformities, or severe alcoholism. Between 1933 and 1945 360,000 people were sterilized; many of the victims died from the effects of the procedure (Friedlander 1995). *Schmitz (1999) only disagrees with Nazi methods* because, in order to “preserve and raise the level of humanity,” he has his eyes on modern possibilities: “instead of the crude regulations of the Sterilization Act issued under Hitler, soon there should be more elegant methods for genetic interventions into the germline” (388). In my opinion, supporting forced sterilization and eugenic measures for the ill and handicapped is contrary to the foundations of humanistic psychology and of Gestalt therapy and should, at the very least, warrant the dissociation of “New Phenomenologists” from those views.

In sum, Schmitz’s book on Hitler cannot be excused as a gaffe. Similar overtones can be found in his earlier publication, *System der Philosophie* ([1964–1980] 2005), prompting critique from philosophers like Heubel

(2003): “I assume that the ideological misuse of the term situation in [Schmitz’s] book about Hitler is not superficial, but rather points to its inherent problems, moreover to grave defects of ‘New Phenomenology’ in general” (48). Amendt-Lyon (2018) reinforces this criticism:

Heubel demonstrates that these “implanting situations”—be they traditions, family, nation or mother tongue—could only create a “nation” out of the mass during National Socialism by guaranteeing human rights to its “own people” and aggressively ostracizing anyone deemed not to belong or not sharing the same folklore or “race” (46–49). To liken Schmitz’s notion of “situation” or “implanting situation” to the Gestalt therapy concept of “situation” is an abuse of our term. In Gestalt therapy theory, the interactional field or situation is considered to be the first reality; the focus of our therapeutic intervention. (323)

Conclusion

Integrating the “New Phenomenology” with our own Gestalt theory is not only “quite some task” (Jackson 2016, 46) but also an impossibility—and personally repugnant—when it comes to Schmitz’s anti-humanistic views. His approach is neither compatible with Gestalt therapy concepts of contact nor with the concept of perception as a complex process of meaning making, dependent (at least partially) on needs, motivation, and experience. Gestalt theory does not benefit from the concept of the felt-body as a (half-)thing *separated* from the physical body. Exploring the idea of felt-body (seen as a linguistic representation of field processes, and not as an agent of perception) might perhaps be inspiring. Even phenomenology cannot look at things as they are. The communication of significance (in therapy, too) requires hermeneutic methods which “New Phenomenologists” neglect because they see meaning as an inherent quality of atmospheres, not as the result of cocreative processes. Gestalt theory and practice defines individuals not as particles *in* the field but as integral aspects *of* it. Defining atmospheres and emotions as reified objects rips that field apart. Atmospheres do not seize individuals. There is a complex relationship vis-à-vis a person’s response, not just one type of situation with one kind of atmosphere.

One wonders how the “New Phenomenological” perspective is an improvement over what Gendlin (1978–1979) wrote years ago about “felt-sense”: “A quite different kind of psychology is possible, one that studies the process, rather than imputing a content-system” (23). There are many inspirations out there, less metaphysical than the “New Phenomenology,” more thoroughly phenomenological than Schmitz’s approach, more in tune with Gestalt therapy theory’s existential and experimental outlook, more adjusted to its humanist foundations, more conducive to relevant research. If introjection is identical to spiritual “food” passing through the oral zone too hastily, then some selected terms (such as Griffero’s “anchor points,” mentioned above) should be tasted very attentively, and then chewed rigorously with discernment.

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