

# PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

## CORPORAL CONCERNEDNESS OR CONTACT? GESTALT THERAPY AND THE ‘NEW PHENOMENOLOGY’

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“The German language has the outstanding and quite unusual good luck, to have 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” (Schmitz, 2011, p.5). The word ‘Leib’ stems from the Middle High German ‘lîp’, the Old High German ‘lîb’ and the Germanic ‘leiba’, i.e. ‘life’. In colloquial language there are quite a few composite words such as ‘Leibrente’ (life annuity), ‘Leibesumfang’ (girth), ‘Mutterleib’ (womb), or ‘der Leibhaftige’ (the devil). A few adjectives are also in use: ‘leiblich’ (corporal), ‘beleibt’ (portly), ‘fettleibig’ (obese), etc. Strangely there are only two verbs: ‘einverleiben’ (to swallow up) and ‘entleiben’ (to disembody). Perhaps it is also interesting to note, that Germans talk about an ‘Oberkörper’ (upper part of the body) and an ‘Unterleib’ (abdomen) not vice versa.

The word body (‘Körper’) usually refers to the physical ‘corpus’ (from Latin). It is of course the Christian tradition in particular which laid the foundations of a dualism between body and soul: “From the first he was the Word, and the Word was in relation with God and was God.” (John 1,1) Afterwards God breathed life into Adam’s body. The representational difference between body and felt-body is available in German yet does not exist in other languages – as far as I know. In English for example, felt-body or lived body are not colloquially used words. They were created when translating the works of another German phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl.

Hermann Schmitz, a former philosophy professor from Kiel, Germany presents his ‘New Phenomenology’ as a ground-breaking holistic approach. He intends to revise historic mistakes dating back to the Greek philosopher Democritus about 2500 years ago: “The New Phenomenology created by me, takes the credit for seeing through the truncation, artification and distortion of life experiences by the psychological-reductionist-introjectionistic offences

[of the Occident] and for overcoming this through consistent re-working on a deeper level of abstraction”(Schmitz, 1999, p.379). Recurring statements like this have been criticized as “bombastic self-affirmations, which unfortunately scare people off many pages of his writings and which make it hard to stay cool-headed while reading”(Soentgen, 2000, p.2). Yet, the discussion should be about concepts and meaning.

At first glance Hermann Schmitz's theory seems to be highly compatible with Gestalt phenomenology. Supporters claim it could provide an improved basis for Gestalt phenomenology. For instance Gestalt therapy should discard the term contact. Laura Perls and others have often repeated the tenet: “Yes, the experience, the realization happens at the contact boundary, where ‘You’ and ‘I’ meet” (in Wegscheider, 2015, p.9). Because of Schmitz's writings this would change: “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 (incorporation) effects undivided, absolute contact at one's own body, not at the boundary” (Matthies, 2013, p.77). Schmitz himself puts it this way: “What a meaningful impression has to say, one senses at one's own felt-body. Thus, i.e. through perception by means of incorporation, we also understand other people before any interpretation or empathic process, as we feel something at our own body that does not belong to it”(Schmitz, 2007, p.37). So is it advantageous to describe the holistic processes of contact in terms of felt-body reactions? Are the two German terms really ‘good luck’ or is the debate just a German problem?

### **The agent of experience: body, felt-body, psyche, I?**

“At the centre 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 on what people care about” (Matthies, 2013, p.79). A phenomenological approach is an unalterable fundamental tenet of Gestalt therapy. Without it Perls's form of psychotherapy would not be what it is. Phenomena i.e., individual experiences are the starting point of perception, awareness, meaning and change – they are of Gestalt's essence in a very real way. Schmitz, too, seems to start out from subjectively experienced phenomena, when he asks the question, how we acquire cognition of ourselves: How can I be sure that it is me who is affected? Centuries ago René Descartes gave a classic answer to this conundrum: Cogito ergo sum – I think, therefore I am. His historic dictum became the anchor for an overrating of rationality, above and beyond other means of cognition, such as feelings or body reactions.

“It is the primary corporal impulses, by which a person realizes that it

is about them. Self-awareness in his [Schmitz's] 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 affective concernedness" (Soentgen, 2002, p.15). This constitutes a phenomenological counter-position to Descartes. Schmitz's starting-point is phenomena, experienced individually and holistically. For him it is not any thought process that constitutes an irrefutable proof of one's own existence, but the sudden experience of fright. Time and again he refers to this exemplary situation: the sudden fright of a car-driver, who sees an accident happening to himself. In this fundamental situation of fright the individual realizes that s/he is undoubtedly concerned – without recourse to any further thinking or analysing. This "fright immediately encompasses the entire felt-body and cannot be divided into positions and distances. ... Fright enters the bones. ... What is felt is indivisible – hence absolute" (Matthies, 2013, p.81). "The driver has no time to first register sensual information" (Schmitz, 2007, p.30). Instead a reaction occurs "without a noticeable pause" (Schmitz, 2007, p.30). Modifying Descartes' sentence, Schmitz's position could be summarized as 'terreo ergo sum' (I get frightened therefore I am). Similar to Gestalt therapy, Schmitz states, that people especially during those moments of shock, do not put together single pieces of impression, like in a puzzle, in order to get the picture. They perceive a Gestalt. Starting phenomenologically, i.e., from real experience, Schmitz points out that reactions happen without a noticeable pause. Of course this leaves a question unanswered: Does the fact that a frightened individual has no impression of any delay in his or her reaction really prove that there is no interval? It certainly describes the subjective experience. At the same time scientific studies about neuronal pathways and mobility research seem to suggest otherwise: reactions may appear extremely quickly, yet there is what colloquial language calls reaction time (Hatfield et al, 1994; Wirtz, 2014; Stiller, 2005).

Asking how we can be sure about our individual existence probably is as old a question as the human race – and ever since the answers have been far from definitive. Fritz Perls wrote: "Ego is not identical with the whole personality. If 'I' command the motoric system, 'I' must be different or apart from it" (Perls, 1969, p.139). Horney provided a similar point of view: "...it is that part in us, which wants to expand, grow and fulfil itself ..." (Horney, 1975, p.176). Although Perls did not suggest a dichotomy, his wording still suggests an obvious difference between some form of 'I' and its physical and psychic fixtures. How those two aspects of an individual might be connected or in which manner they interact is being disputed. For some, the psyche is a superior, controlling agent. For others soul and body (or felt-body) are merely different aspects of a holistic entity. Defining self, ego, etc. in Gestalt therapy still seems to be a work in progress.

Based on his holistic claim, Schmitz strongly rejects Descartes' dichotomy of psyche and physique. The idea of an 'I', that can be localized in the body – possibly in the brain – he finds absurd. He repudiates “the incarceration into a monad without windows” (Schmitz, 1999, p.36), and asserts that in the dualistic view the interactive process between inside and outside remains unexplained:

In what manner do perceptions become thoughts or feelings and vice versa? How do internal processes turn into outside behaviour? Schmitz criticizes the “confinement of a person in their inner world away from other creatures, especially from fellow human beings. This line of thinking mystifies how an individual can emerge from his inner world” (Schmitz, 1999, p.36).

Schmitz suggests a different approach: “Therefore the New Phenomenology endeavours to fill the gaping interval between comprehension and concernedness with precise and elastic terms, through theoretical analyses of the involuntary experience of life” (Schmitz, 2007, p.12). Unfortunately Schmitz remains vague on some fundamental premises of (self-)awareness: Irrespective of how one defines the 'I', if this subject is to gain existential certainty through experiencing fright, the process presupposes a number of faculties. The perception of imminence by someone who can say 'I', postulates that

(1) this 'I' is already able to differentiate between 'I' and 'Non-I' i.e., ego-boundaries already exist;

(2) there is something or someone (the 'I') that is capable of correlating different types of circumstances to 'I' and understands what it means to be in danger.

(3) that 'I' has the faculties for reacting, i.e. sensory, motor, bio-chemical and psychological means of processing information and translating those into purposeful behaviour.

Precisely how do we see the connection between 'I' and self-awareness? In what way does Schmitz's view improve our understanding of “the hermeneutic circle in which the field creates the subject that in turn creates the field?” (Francesetti, 2015, p.84).

“A person”, Schmitz writes “according to my definition is a cognizant-owner (“Bewussthaber”) with the ability for self-attribution i.e., to regard something as self” (Schmitz, 2008, p.164 and Schmitz, 2001, p.71). Schmitz does not discuss or describe why this term might be a helpful synonym for 'person'. And why should we use the word 'cognizant' when the German word (“bewusst”) is the same as conscious? Rejecting Descartes' dichotomy, the 'New Phenomenology' strongly rejects human consciousness as a decisive factor, and it disapproves of the division between interior and exterior. Hence, for Schmitz consciousness should be of no interest. Why then does he coin this

term? Additionally: Does the second half of his definition, the owner ('Bewusst-Haber') really express Schmitz's basic tenets? Where there is something to be had, there must be someone to have it. Schmitz's terms exhibit an unfortunate ambivalence by implicitly repeating the old rationalistic dichotomy. Ever since Gestalt therapy began it was understood: "We are a body. . . . So it's the question of being rather than having" (Perls, 1992, p.26). In a different context Fritz Perls wrote: "An organism is not independent from its environment. . . . the organism always works as a whole. 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" (Perls, 1992, p.25). From a Gestalt point of view it might perhaps be more apt to call a person a cognizant-being – if at all.

The otherness of 'New Phenomenology' becomes clearer when looking at the meaning of Schmitz's terminology. Using the term felt-body as a synonym for sensations of, near, on, beneath, above, by, and in the physical body has become quite common amongst German-speaking psychologists. It is the verbal description for the *modus operandi* of individual experiences. One example should suffice: "Felt-body is being defined as the totality of all sensory, motor, emotional, cognitive and social-communicative schemes as well as styles in their actual, intentional relationality to the field and as the mnestically archived deposition of their enactments, which constitute the felt-body-subject as a synergem through their coaction" (Petzold, 1996, p.283). Without delving into details of this definition, it is immediately apparent, that it is holistic and very compatible with Gestalt therapy in as much as it overcomes the Cartesian dichotomy (Staemmler, 2003, p.27). In this understanding the term felt-body rejects any kind of superiority of the mind.

When felt-body is used as a synonym for a corporal experience, it describes different avenues of realization. There are diverging opinions about how exactly physique and psyche interact: "Felt-body as the basis for the construction of human experience can never be reduced to the biological body" (Staemmler, 2003, p.31). Staemmler even maintains: "From a neuroscientific, evolutionary psychological, developmental psychological and phenomenological point of view the somatic or corporal dimension is both chronologically primary as well as structurally basal" (Staemmler, 2003, p.32). Often enough both terms (body and felt-body) are being used indiscriminately in German psychological debates: "Have I lost my body, then I have lost myself. When I find my body, I find myself. Without this felt-body I am not, and as my felt-body I am" (Iljine in: Petzold, 1996, p.14). The general trend seems to be, that 'body' denotes a physical object (including its measurable processes), while 'felt-body' is a linguistic representation for subjective experiences.

How does Schmitz see these terms? "The proposition of the New

Phenomenology is essential, that any involuntary affective concernedness is corporal” (Matthies, 2013, p.78). In his view the felt-body (not the physical body) is the central agent of perception. Based on a corporally “meaningful impression” (Marx, 2008, p.184) we recognize not only ourselves, but others and anything else in the environment field. So far – so good. Schmitz continues: “Corporal is, what someone 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” (Schmitz, 2011, p.5). According to Schmitz, body and felt-body are “two disparate objects” (Schmitz, 2015, [video]). While a body is three-dimensional, Schmitz sees the felt-body existing in an expanseless space. This could be taken as an unusual description of experiential phenomena. But it appears that for proponents of the New Phenomenology the terms body and felt-body are not two different modes of a person but completely different things: “Felt-body communication supersedes the signal transition via sensory organs by means of single physical stimuli between secluded inner and outer worlds” (Matthies, 2015, p.94).

“Schmitz consistently segregates felt-body and body” (Matthies, 2015, p.92). This of course begs the question of the relationship between the two. Most of Schmitz’s remarks imply that the felt-body is primary or more fundamental. Incorporation (‘Einleibung’) – what Gestalt 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, which reshape and dissipate, yet which in some cases persist with more or less constant accoutrements, especially in the oral and anal area and at the soles of the feet” (Schmitz, 2007, p.16). How does he arrive at this statement? What does he mean by ‘some cases’ or ‘usually’? How can (or do) such expanseless things relate to three-dimensional objects? Schmitz does not explain this. Nor does he provide empirical evidence to support his account of lived phenomena. Does he build on his own personal experience? Does he draw on reports from others? Are his statements based on data such as inquiries or surveys? For Schmitz’s theory to reach beyond a speculative delineation of assertions, his descriptions need thorough substantiation.

Some sequences in his publications seem to suggest that Schmitz himself finds it hard to persevere with his understanding of felt-body: On the one hand he says each felt-body-isle has “a blurry pre-dimensional volume without expanse or rims” (Schmitz, 2011, p.8). On the other hand: “Every person has two ways to the conviction that he is in the here and now. The one path lies in touching and looking at one’s own body. [The other path:] It is clear through

its affective concernedness, which imposes itself into a state of freight when threatened” (Schmitz, 2011, p.1f). Or: “There is no doubt: the perceptible felt-body is spatially expanded. Stomach-aches and headaches are enough evidence. ... In contrast the space of the perceptible felt-body is expanseless” (Schmitz, 2011, p.7). Is it expanseless or spatially stretched-out? Is the felt-body the path to realization or does it exist beside others? If so, how do the two interact? And why the strict separation?

Schmitz strongly criticizes the dichotomy of mind and body which for him has dominated Western thinking since Democritus (who died in 370 B.C.). But how do body and felt-body interact? “How this [the motor-based body scheme] steers the body based in the felt-body, I do not know” (Schmitz, 2011, p. 22). Schmitz speculates it might be “ground-in paths of the motor-based body scheme” (Schmitz, 2011, p.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 and consciousness which develops personally cannot be identical” (Matthies, 2013, p.89). Of course the one describes a physical entity, while the other refers to an experience. But difference does not necessarily translate into contradiction. It could simply be diverging perspectives, approaches or aspects; similar to what the physicist Niels Bohr called ‘complementarity’. According to his principle, observations or descriptions of an event (or a phenomenon) that are methodologically different, may exclude each other, yet they are connected and complement each other. Bohr generalized his understanding of complementarity to encompass fundamental polarities and paradoxes in other areas, including psychology: “Especially because of psychological topics we are used to the need to resort to complementary or better reciprocal kinds of descriptions in this sense” (Bohr, 1929, p.484f).

For Gestalt therapy there are a number of promising approaches which could complement our phenomenological point of view. Unfortunately, in this context I can only hint at some. For example ‘emotional contagion’ – a term from Elaine Hatfield and others – describes a very clear correlation between body, psyche and field which can both be experienced and described phenomenologically, as well as measured by means of natural science: “The perception of another face is not just an information transfer, contended [Paul] Ekman, but a very literal means by which we feel the sensations the other feels” (Hatfield et al, 1994, p.53). For spokespersons of the New Phenomenology this is by no means an alien thought: “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, p.84). Why then insist

on a dichotomy of phenomenology and science? What is the advantage in objectifying the felt-body (i.e., its separation from the physical body) and its distancing from scientific research?

Gestalt therapist Friedhelm Matthies rightly states: “Even though the yawning or laughing person calls on no one, yawning and laughing still have prompting qualities” (Matthies, 2013, p.84). Hatfield delivers the empirical data for this assertion and calls it emotional contagion: people imitate the body language expressions of others using their own facial expressions, muscles, posture, etc. Feelings of another person are felt in and by one’s own body – not just at a physical boundary such as the skin. This approach is compatible with ideas of Gestalt therapy, because the processes described by Hatfield and other researchers, substantiates holistic body reactions (sensual perception, motor behaviour and biochemical activities). The basis for these reactive processes is a human ability – possibly a genetic disposition – to ‘catch’ other peoples’ emotions.

Neuroscientists like Thomas Fuchs and Hans Jürgen Scheurle exhibit a similar proximity to the Gestalt approach: “The corporal, mental and intellectual achievements of humans do not originate in the brain, instead they emerge instantaneously in the interactive space, in the Gestalt-circle of organism-field. They arise directly from the organs of perception and movement” (Scheurle, 2013, p.190). For those scientists experience and measurable data are complementary. Phenomenology and natural science need not to be seen as antipodes. Shouldn’t those favouring a holistic approach focus on using both types of insights effectively? How can speculations about expanseless felt-bodies help?

### **The role of atmospheres and needs**

“The person who says ‘I’ is positioned in a concert of impulse activators which mostly are located corporally, without a power base [...] and s/he is exposed to the intrusion of seizing powers – arousals like Eros and anger or the Gods” (Schmitz, 2007, p.13). With these words Schmitz depicts the human situation in mythological times. And today? “An atmosphere in this sense is a rimless, indivisibly stretched out occupation of an expanseless space” (Schmitz, 2011, p.89). For him, “atmospheres capture or creep over a person and make themselves felt corporally” (Schmitz, 2007, p.15). And herein lays the crux of the matter: The New Phenomenology alleges that atmospheres can seize or even ensnare people; atmospheres thus have an existence independent of subjective perceptions. As one critic wrote: “Emotions – like the forest mood – ‘do not wait’ for humans to feel them, but are present even before. Thus [Schmitz] writes: “There are no feelings that I have, only feelings that have me; they are not subjective acts, but rather hyper-subjective powers, which



quasi atmospherically pervade the vastness, in which we live, assail us and sweep us away like the winds” (Soentgen, 2002, p.47).

In Schmitz’s view it is “the dignity of the atmosphere itself, the authority of sadness, which holds back the cheerful person” (Schmitz, 2007, p.25). The ‘cognizant-owner’ is thus being captured or pushed by some force from the field i.e., separate from the ‘I’. Does this not alter a person from an active (or co-active) agent into a passive object, which is merely able to either go along or resist otherness? Schmitz writes: “Joy itself [is] an atmosphere that the merry person has blundered into in a corporally perceivable way, which for his corporal feeling extinguishes the oppressive heaviness. As by a magic swoop all oppressive vectors are reversed, so that the person is quasi being pulled along by the atmosphere, which allows him to override the heaviness” (Schmitz, 2007, p.24). What is meant by this magic swoop? Would therapists – based on Schmitz – tell clients who suffer from their situation that they are being dragged along by an atmosphere? What about violent clients, for example, who beat their spouses? Their subjective experience often enough is exactly this: to be dragged away by some alien force. Are we to give up notions of projection?

For Schmitz, atmospheres exist before being perceived by people. Their existence curtails the freedom of the subject. Those, however, like the founders of Gestalt therapy, who believed that a person’s existence precedes their essence, refer back to a debate from medieval times: nominalists versus realists. Drawing on Plato’s teachings about ideas, the latter contended that universals have an independent existence. Accordingly, ideas were thought to be antetypes of tangible things. Ideas would be immutable and a precursor of any particular (‘universale ante rem’). Thomas Aquinas said: “When a thing is being named by what it and many others have in common, one says, that such a name denotes a universal, because the name thus identifies a nature or disposition shared by many things” (Ritter, 2007, Vol. 11, p.180). For Schmitz, atmospheres seem to be universals – or else they would not be able to seize people.

Nominalists have proposed an opposing view: According to Roscelin for example, objects can be perceived by the senses. Terms however – which realists see as ‘real’ i.e., existing things – he sees as mere identifiers, ‘flatus vocis’, i.e., breaths of air produced by the voice. William of Occam wrote: “Each universal is a single thing and thus it is only a universal by dint of denomination” (Summa logicae, quoted after: Ritter, 2007, Vol. 11, p.182).

As a nominalist he was also a forerunner of semiotic analyses: Universals are names, mere linguistic signs or representations. General terms are the sum of singular things. For example: A single rose is a real existence; ‘the rose’ per se, as a notion however exists only as a mental abstraction. Nominalist ideas have also been a great influence in modern times. For instance Thomas Hobbes

wrote: "A general term can be attributed to many things due to a likeness in regard to a quality or another accident (of those singular objects)" (Hobbes, quoted after Schuhmann). Or John Locke: "The general does not belong to the range of existing things; moreover it is a fabrication and product of the mind, which manufactures it for its own use; what is general only refers to signs, be these words or ideas" (Locke, III, 3 and IV, 21).

Schmitz explicitly tries to prove nominalism wrong (Schmitz, 1999, p.27). He asserts: "That in which people belong together holistically, is lost sight of" (Schmitz, 1999, p.391). He bases his thinking on realist ideas, on universals. Another quotation makes that even clearer: "Several times I have distinguished between abstract universals ... and concrete kinds" (Schmitz, 2011, p.52). Specifically he contends: "As soon as one smells in the status of excorporation, localizing is omitted; one shouts then maybe 'It smells', 'This smells strongly', 'This smells enticingly' or suchlike. 'This' does not mean a thing any longer but something like the pure essence of the scent of roses, apple or wood scent" (Schmitz, 2011, p.53). How can this universalist phenomenology be combined with existentialist-nominalist Gestalt?

Which pre-existing ideas does Schmitz draw on? Again and again Schmitz cites Ludwig Klages, a proponent of the philosophy of life ('Lebensphilosophie'). He calls him 'congenial' (Schmitz, 1975 and 1981). Here are just a few hints at the similarities between the philosophy of life and the New Phenomenology:

- The philosophy of life starts from the practical experiences of a person, which include intuition, instincts, desires and will, which are formed by historic circumstances. Dilthey wrote: "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" (Groethuysen, 1992, p.359). And Ortega y Gasset: "My life is not, what happens in my cells..." (Ortega y Gasset, 1967, p.216). Schmitz also shows an overt scepticism of rationality and positions his understanding of phenomenology against science.

- Both Schmitz and proponents of a philosophy of life share an anti-rational impetus – where the one bemoans the "mirage of an autonomy of reason" (Schmitz, 1999, p.378), others, like Dilthey 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" (Groethuysen, 1992, p.18). Only when philosophers draw on the "whole, full, unmutated experience", they could "capture the whole, full reality" (Groethuysen, 1992, p.171). Life can only be understood from within, Dilthey maintained; Schmitz talks about affective concernedness which can

only be experienced through the felt-body.

- Schmitz writes about atmospheres of the forest or the wind. Klages wrote: “The falling of a stone, the formation of clouds, the pouring down of rain, too, are expressions of life, namely of the earth primarily, secondly also of the larger contexts: the planetary system and the fixed star sky” (Klages, 1973, p.38).

- “Consciousness and materiality prove to be radically different and even conflicting forms of existence, which enter into a modus vivendi and which come to terms with each other after a fashion” (Bergson, 1919/2013, p.188). For Schmitz, body and felt-body are two separate things in different forms of reality; also the brain (which can be scientifically researched) is opposed to phenomenological consciousness.

- “Life is precisely, what nobody can do for me – life is non-conferrable – it is no abstract term, it is my individual being” (Ortega y Gasset, 1967, p.205). New Phenomenology claims just that.

Let me repeat: phenomenology remains the firm basis of Gestalt therapy. However, there are diverging types and interpretations. New Phenomenology takes felt-body phenomena as its starting point and preeminent form of contact. Yet, the lack of empirical evidence and the closeness of its ideas to the philosophy of life suggest that the proclaimed phenomena are not based in empirical data but mere ideas, i.e., universals. This becomes quite apparent when Schmitz – on the basis of a German typology from the 1940s – aspires to a “holistic characterization of his [the human] personality” (Schmitz, 2011, p.46). Hence my question: Can Schmitz’s hypostatization be incorporated into the existential-nominalist approach of Gestalt therapy? Partially? In its entirety? How would that be compatible with Perls’ view: “Man is a living organism, and certain of his aspects are called body, mind and soul” (Perls, 1969, p.31). “Body and soul are identical *‘in re’*, though not *‘in verbo’*” (Perls, 1969, p.33).

### ***Emotions as atmospheres***

For Schmitz, emotions too are atmospheres. They are supposed to be rimlessly poured out and they may seize a person, “so that he feels an affective corporal concernedness” (Marx, 2008, p. 184). In universalist fashion Schmitz claims: “Emotions are challenging atmospheres, which, due to their locationless spread, pose a total demand in each current setting and which lead to conflict, when contrary atmospheres clash” (Schmitz, 2007, p. 25). Thus emotions are not expressions of the ‘I’ (or the person) but rather phenomena of the field affecting the cognizant-owner. According to Schmitz: “emotions are half-things with both an interruptible duration and presence in the room. They disappear and reappear like a voice; reasonably one cannot ask after their condition in the intervening

time or in the interval” (Schmitz, 2011, p.91). At this point the initial question comes up again: To what purpose does Schmitz coin an abundance of terms? Do they really enlighten the approach or do they cloud the New Phenomenology’s reference points? Let’s focus again on the content: if individuals really were to be seized by atmospheres (including emotions), wouldn’t the understanding of needs then be dispensable? Criticising Behaviourism, Gremmler-Fuhr wrote: “Therefore we normally do not act based on stimuli ... that elicit certain reactions, as was claimed by classic behaviourism in regard to all human behaviour, but instead we act on the basis of relevance, which we grant to what we perceive” (Gremmler-Fuhr in Fuhr et al., 2001, p.354). Perhaps that also applies to Schmitz’s understanding of atmospheres and emotions? This is by no means to say, that all affective or motor impulses originate solely within the organism. Challenges, stimuli, etc. can of course arise from the field or the situation. Yet, in any case there is this agent of decision-making: the ‘I’ chooses the “objects [from the field], based on our interests” (Perls, 1969, p.41).

Individuals would indeed be positioned in a concert of impulse activators without a power base if the category of needs or interests is neglected. Are an individual’s actions merely reactions to outside occurrences? More specifically: Does the New Phenomenology see traumatised violent patients, for instance as mere victims of seizing agents outside themselves? How can that be combined with an experimental and experiential approach to therapy? (L.Perls, 1989, p.93).

### ***Effects: the practice of Gestalt therapy***

How do proponents of the New Phenomenology see the process of therapy? “Personal regression is necessary for the development process, in order to become assured of oneself: A person needs certainty, that s/he is concerned by events and, as the case may be, also touched” (Matthies, 2013, p.87). Leaving the unexplained difference between ‘being concerned’ and ‘being touched’ aside, New Phenomenology defines personal regression as situations like the fright mentioned above, by which a person gains surety that s/he is being addressed. In this type of situation rational thought processes such as analytical skills and the awareness of details in the field have ceased. New Phenomenology defines perception as holistic and immediate. At the same time Schmitz and others seem to suggest nuances in this process of comprehension: personal regression is to be “affective concernedness in different stages” (Matthies, 2013, p.87). Which degrees of personal regression do they see? An answer to this question could be vital, because if there was more than one path to gain self-assuredness, the uniqueness of the frightening situation would be obsolete. A deep loss of all self-reflecting faculties New Phenomenology calls “primitive

presence” defined as “trappedness in the corporal-affective concernedness. ... In this trappedness a direct disassociation is not possible or only in a limited fashion. The person solely senses that it is about him” (Matthies, 2013, p.87). A difference between ‘impossible’ and ‘limited’ disassociation might make a world of difference in therapy – hence it needs to be clarified if it is to change theory and practice of Gestalt therapy.

“Every enduring concernedness is personal regression, too. Every personal regression is a sinking from the level of personal emancipation towards primitive presence” (Matthies, 2013, p.86f). As an aside: What does ‘too’ mean – what else is it? Anyway, the conclusions based on Schmitz are much more relevant to the discussion: “Therefore personal regression is the necessary precondition for new experiences to arrive [at the person] and for their enduring effect” (Marx, 2008, p.189). Is it? Is personal regression a *pre*condition for something therapeutic happening *afterwards*? My current understanding of Gestalt therapy is somewhat different: personal regression (if I may use Schmitz’s wording), i.e., the client’s capture within a corporal-affective concernedness here and now is itself the full experience, the key ingredient of therapy. This may seem like a petty squabble about details of theory, but it cuts to the heart of Gestalt theory and practice. Based on an unclarified relationship between personal regression and primitive presence and due to a rather ambiguous understanding of the relevance of experience, further steps in the process of therapy are proposed: “In order to escape primitive presence, this absolute contact, a distancing (‘Abstandnahme’) from the affective concernedness is needed. ... By way of explication, single elements of meaning are being prescinded from the initially diffuse situation. ... The person can accept or refuse this meaning; or s/he remains ambivalent or diffuse” (Matthies, 2013, p.88). Again: is the individual seen in a merely reactive position – not as a co-creator in the field?

Of course, during therapy clients need to disengage themselves from their old wearing situations by way of making new experiences in the presence of a therapist. So it is expressedly not a mere repetition of an old figure, else a client would just regress into a well-known, harmful (and often painful) state of affairs. Based on Schmitz’s terms, the understanding of the therapeutic situation would change: personal regression and distancing would be seen as consecutive phases in the process of therapy. Does Gestalt not (implicitly) maintain that contact, full contact *during* the experience, is necessarily divided? A client or patient is not to drown in old patterns. If the client’s affective reactions were captured s/he would merely repeat stressful or even traumatic constellations. Would that not constitute the opposite of therapy, i.e., a severe re-traumatization?

If we were to think of therapy as consecutive stages of a) regression plus b) distancing / explication, what would be the practical consequences?

Certainly, during therapy there are these two elements: experience and integration. But neither are they necessarily separated in two phases nor are they equally important. Explication for proponents of New Phenomenology means, to “explain-unfurl something to oneself” (Matthies, 2013, p.87), after emerging from the regressive situation. “Only through the process of integration (explication) can a conscious contact arise, because by explicating circumstances, single items can be accorded relevance” (Matthies, 2013, p.88). Was it the conscious evaluation that made the difference for Perls? With Hefferline and Goodman he described the “passage from aware contact to unaware assimilation” (PHG, 1951, p.422). In this view contact is a constantly flowing mix of aware and unaware aspects “The aftermath of contact is accomplished growth” (PHG, 1951, p.421), i.e., change and development happen within the contact; continuously it is being integrated on *different levels*: physiologically, psychologically etc. Following Perls, does Gestalt therapy not focus on awareness of what happens in the current contact rather than on any conscious understanding of it?

In Gestalt therapy any prescinding of singular meanings happens *during* the experience, by *means* of the process, which necessarily encompasses going through an old situation in a new way including immediate physiological and affective-emotional reactions as well as a varied thought and communication process. Change does not happen *ex post*. The renewed and now aware contact, the altered living-through of a painful situation means that new elements of the situation can (and will) emerge from the field. Using Schmitz's vocabulary perhaps one could call the field “diffuse within”. But according to the New Phenomenology atmospheres (including feelings) happen to individuals, primitive presence absorbs the entire person. How can a person – a cognizant-owner – then react or even change? Ironically it is through *cognizant* post-contact. Schmitz explicitly attacks Democritus, Descartes and Occidental rationalism, yet explication through speech in the form of sentences (Schmitz, 2016, p.21) – i.e., rational thinking and communication – is to be the fulcrum of therapy? “In order to reach insight, a person (Schmitz calls them cognizant-owner) experiences affective concernedness at their own felt-body, unfurls this in turn through distancing, neutralizes it and ingests it into their personal world” (Matthies, 2013, p.79). Yes, clients need to re-experience oppressive situations, psychologically and physiologically – alas with a twist: “The goal of experience-oriented work is, to convey intensive emotional experiences” (Petzold, 1996, p.88). Is the decisive factor for success in therapy, some kind of reflective distancing after the fact, or an altered quality of the experience itself, an old-new Gestalt?

“For the unfolding and neutralization of affective concernedness, the

ability for a personal response (explicative speech) is needed; for without distancing, neither reflective development nor the separation of one's own material (personally owned world – 'persönliche Eigenwelt') and alien material (personally extraneous world – 'persönliche Fremdwelt') is possible" (Matthies, 2013, p.88). So, perhaps the terminology 'cognizant-owner' is not accidental after all, but rather essential. Based on Schmitz's New Phenomenology rational verbalization, which collocates experience is resurrected. How does that relate to Perls's objections against Freud: "All explaining stands in the way of understanding" (Perls as cited in Franz, 1980, p.203). Concepts, ideas and rational analyses Perls polemically called 'bullshit' or 'elephant shit'. More seriously he cautioned against overestimating intellectual comprehension: "Let me warn you, there is only one big mistake, which you can make. That is, to interpret. When you begin to interpret, you are lost. You make it into an intellectual, Freudian game, and at best you will file some interesting insight in an intellectual archive and along the way you can be sure, that nothing important happens. Don't interpret, just be the object, be the plate, be the pot, be that friend of yours" (Perls as cited in Clarkson, 1995, p.164).

For Gestalt therapy, it is awareness that initiates change; it does not work because of ex post explanations, but rather through the experience 'hic et nunc': "Instead of intellectual guessing games we prefer the client to enter his own experience" (Polster & Polster, 1995, p.17). In order for change to happen, clients need the "actualization of their set of problems" (Marx, 2008, p.188) – better: the actualization of experiences in an altered setting. In the words of an advocate of New Phenomenology: "By this I mean a renewed non-overwhelming, yet upsetting living through of personally relevant experiences. If you like, that's another approximation to primitive presence" (Marx, 2008, p.190). The crucial component in this process is existential security, which is decidedly not some capture 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, p.82). Perls called this a "safe emergency" (Taylor, 2014, p.65).

What are the consequences for Gestalt therapy? The fulcrum of any meaningful therapeutic process is the client's aware immersion into his or her own present situation, which in turn leads to an expansion of his or her realization of aspects in the field. S/he is able to do this due to a multidirectional contact. Using Schmitz diction, in the course of personal regression, the cognizant-owner needs an awareness of his/her current environment including the therapist; thus s/he becomes able to recognize emotions as well as needs and act differently in the situation. Change-inducing experience only becomes

possible through aware contact with the therapist and with altering perceptions / emotions / thoughts in the current situation. It happens during contact – not just during post-contact. “Gestalt therapy is phenomenological; its only aim is awareness” (Yontef, as cited in Blankertz/Doubrawa, 2005, p.286). Therapists are companions in a process of increasing the client’s awareness (Doubrawa/Staemmler, 1983, p.28ff) and affective-physical anchors at the same time.

So what about the term contact? Does it make sense to jettison this supposedly obsolete word and replace it with Schmitz’ incorporation (‘Einleibung’)? Contact, the Gestalt tenet says, happens at the boundary. This in no way is meant in a biological sense. Explicitly, contact is not seen to happen at a physically defined border. It takes place where the individual saying ‘I’ meets something that s/he does not recognize as ‘I’. Contact occurs at the I-boundaries. It happens physically and psychologically, i.e., both this and that side of body frontiers. Contact is not restricted to the place of sensual perception. Gestalt therapists emphasize: “Contact is implicitly incompatible with remaining the same” (Polster & Polster, 1995, p.101). When two ‘systems’ meet in the field, something also happens inside their ‘sub-systems’: “Organism *and* field are being changed by this exchange process” (Gremmler-Fuhr in Fuhr et.al., 2001, p.363). Something that was previously ‘Not-I’ becomes ‘I’ – at least temporarily: “During the processes the organism alters its own structure” (Gremmler-Fuhr in Fuhr et.al., 2001, p.371). That is what Piaget called accommodation and Goodman “creative adjustment” (Gremmler-Fuhr in Fuhr et.al., 2001, p.377). By comparison the term organismic self-regulation includes a faulty reference to physiological processes (Gremmler-Fuhr in Fuhr et.al., 2001, p.376f). If you like, this is the only point where Perls sometimes sounds overly biologicistic. Yet, even he already pointed out, that there is no “organism in isolation” (Gremmler-Fuhr in Fuhr et.al., 2001, p.377). Therefore: Is the introduction of a new term –incorporation (‘Einleibung’) – replacing contact really necessary or helpful?

### ***A Universalist phenomenology?***

Let me preface the following comments by stating that my subsequent remarks in no way imply any association of Gestalt therapists with crimes of the Nazi regime or their ideology! This would constitute a gross misrepresentation of their point of view as well as mine. However, when analysing Schmitz’s ‘New Phenomenology’, his published views on that historic matter should not be ignored. Explicitly Schmitz sees his book *Adolf Hitler in der Geschichte* as an application of his methodology and terminology to that subject. Schmitz himself contends that his New Phenomenology is applicable to all kinds of scientific disciplines. He sees himself not only as a philosophy professor but as a qualified



(‘ausgewiesener’) historian: “It needs a philosopher ... a philosopher, who at the same time is a historian and who has objectified his perspective, reviewing the facts of history with precision and attention to detail. I am qualified as a historian of ancient philosophy and the philosophy since Kant” (Schmitz, 1999, p.9). No philosophy has hitherto been up to the task of analysing Hitler’s role in history, Schmitz asserts (Schmitz, 1999, p.10).

His personal distaste for Nazi ideology and Hitler’s regime, Schmitz proclaims, led him to think about traditions and developments of the Occidental history of ideas (Schmitz, 2016, p.25f). His published findings however are... astonishing. The first surprise in Schmitz’s book about Hitler is his consistent tone of adulation. One example should suffice: Hitler fulfilled his role as a dispatch runner during World War I “with great virtuosity” (Schmitz, 1999, p.266). As evidence of his assessment he quotes a book by Adolf Meyer published in 1934. Schmitz neglects to ask whether those descriptions depict real experienced phenomena or if that acritical publication is mere propaganda. Schmitz in no way ever reflects on historic circumstances at the time such as the censorship by the ‘Reichsschrifttumskammer’, the Reich Literature Chamber (see Barbian, 1995). Schmitz’s use of sources is symptomatic for his methodology in that book. He quotes pages and pages of both private and public statements by various Nazi grandees. Subsequently he paraphrases those selected proclamations. Yet, at no point does Schmitz use any textual criticism or source-critical methods. He does not ask questions about the specific reliability of a chosen source nor does he scrutinize any individual quotes he uses. Could some of the declarations possibly have been designed to have an effect on intended audiences? Might the authors’ recollections have been distorted by subsequent events – i.e., before being committed to paper? And more fundamentally: Are all quotes really expressions of experienced phenomena? Why does Schmitz see the stated views as relevant phenomena while he ignores other proclamations? Schmitz is unable to prove convincingly that his selection of quoted statements really describes felt reactions. Instead Schmitz accepts his chosen sources at face-value. Because of absent methodology, Schmitz’s positions can often not be distinguished from those of the quoted sources.

The industrialized murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis and their henchmen, Schmitz surprisingly does not call holocaust (Schmitz, 1999, p.270 and p. 274). For him the term is exclusively reserved for the terrible experiences of soldiers in the trenches during World War I. Schmitz does not explain this rather exotic terminology. When Schmitz once again quotes Ludwig Klages (an ideological precursor of the Nazis, by the way – see Lebovic, 2013) and when he calls both him and Hitler “thinkers” (Schmitz, 1999, p.294), it testifies to

Schmitz's uncritical proximity to his subject and to a lack of qualified historic understanding. The consequences of this approach are expressed by Heubel: "Without any sign of distancing and deploying his entire terminological vocabulary Schmitz becomes Hitler's ventriloquist" (Heubel, 2003, p. 48f).

Schmitz draws on sources published during the Nazi-regime like they were any other – without any reflection on the fact:

- In his book 'Der Leib' from 2011 Schmitz develops a typology based on Ernst Kretschmer's term constitution (Schmitz, 2011, p.81ff). Kretschmer, an associated member of the SS, became a judge at the Hereditary Health Court ('Erbgesundheitsgericht') and endorsed sterilizations of so-called defective people ('Schwachsinnige'). Remarkably Schmitz himself uses this derogatory term in exactly that context (Schmitz, 2011, p.71). His source of reference, Kretschmer participated in a meeting of the advisory board for the T4 program designed to kill handicapped people (Berenbaum: T4 Program, <https://www.britannica.com/event/T4-Program>). In 1955 he argued that there are no neuroses due to persecution (Klee, 2005, p.339).

- In the same book from 2011, Schmitz draws on a publication by Ernst Carl Friedrich August Braun dating 1933 (Schmitz, 2011, p. 178 and 185). From 1934 to 1936 Braun taught as an associate professor for psychiatry and neurology at the University of Kiel. He also conducted studies about genetic biology funded by the Reich Research Council. From 1936 until the end of 1945 he was director of the mental hospital in Rostock-Gehlsheim. Additionally he was head of the polyclinic for neuropaths and the emotionally disturbed. A trial in 1950 could not conclusively prove that he had actively participated in the T4 program; however at least 30 patients were verifiably sent from his hospital directly to a killing facility. Unfortunately the forced sterilizations conducted by the institution he headed were not part of the trial.

- Again in the same book Schmitz quotes Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß' publication 'Rasse und Seele' in its version from 1943. Clauß was an assistant to the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and in 1921 he wrote his doctorate there. At that time Clauß was already a member of an anti-Semitic movement. Husserl offered Clauß a habilitation dissertation (a post-doctoral qualification or academic degree based on independent scholarship), about the language philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Originally Clauß had intended to habilitate at Husserl's with his writing *Die Nordische Seele* (1923), (Pöggeler, 1994, p.78). Yet, the blatant attacks on 'phenomena of Jewish degenerateness' triggered Husserl's unwillingness. Husserl declined to accept this pamphlet as a dissertation (*Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, issue 45, No. 8, August 1997, p. 757).

This is not to mean that Schmitz endorses the Nazi regime. Yet, is his

use of sources a coincidence? “By all means affirmatively, [Schmitz] refers to Paul Natorp’s ‘pure National Socialism’ which was [supposedly] free of aggressive traits; in doing so, Schmitz’ presentation of the demarcation vis a vis the real National Socialism often comes up frighteningly vague” (Heubel, 2003, p.45 and Schmitz, 1999, p.253). This wording constitutes a rather restrained criticism. Following another critic one could say: Schmitz propagates a “revisionist affirmation of National Socialism” (Heubel, 2003, p.46), while repudiating the deeds of the Nazi regime. For example: “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 into his own volition” (Schmitz, 1999, p.321f). Confusing ‘pure’ and real NS-ideas this statement completely misunderstands the murderous and oppressive nature of the Nazi regime. Schmitz’s flash of unification between individual and community ignores the Nazi measures against anyone who was opposed to their ‘unification’. In plain English: they enforced conformity.

“Later revelations about their misdeeds brought little that was new for me, and provided no cause to join in the equally, coarsely simplified demonization of the regime as an embodiment of evil on earth” (Schmitz, 2016, p.25). How can Schmitz’s reconcile those views distancing himself from Nazi-crimes while at the same time feeling free to endorse set pieces of the self-same ideology? There appears to be an undercurrent in Schmitz’s thinking that draws on romantic folkish thoughts (‘völkisch’) which yearn for a pre-Enlightenment idyll. Quoting Hitler approvingly Schmitz reveals his views of humankind: “Our bliss is the feeling for our duty. ... In this idea of happiness, there lays a great insight on the part of Hitler. People become happy, when a ‘Nomos’, i.e., when a program segment within the significance of an implanting common situation provides orientation and a direction for their volition and which thereby relieves them” (Schmitz, 1999, p.323). Schmitz’s ideas about implanting common situations, derived from tenets of the New Phenomenology ascribe leadership to atmospheres implanting themselves, i.e., seizing the individual. That might be an apt description of what many Germans felt during mass party conventions. Yet, is it really a helpful approach to understand this part of German and European history?

“Does that invalidate the New Phenomenology? The book on Hitler cannot be excused as a gaffe by a philosophy professor in his ivory tower, because overtones of similar positions can already be found in his [earlier publication] ‘System der Philosophie’” (Heubel, 2003, p.45). The same philosophical critic of Schmitz also states: “I assume, that the ideological misuse of the term situation in the book about Hitler is not superficial, but rather points to

its inherent problems, moreover to grave defects of the New Phenomenology in general” (Heubel, 2003, p.48). Are there set pieces of a romantic folkish ideology implanted in the foundations of Schmitz’s ‘new’ phenomenology? And if so: what are the consequences? Endorsements of a misanthropic perspective certainly shimmer through: “When people today are intent on human sympathy, they commonly think of the ... thorough taking care of mentally handicapped people (with a chance to propagate) ... One should not be dissuaded from the moral obligation for eugenic endeavours by any anti-Nazi slogans” (Schmitz, 1999, p.387f). In plain terms: Schmitz shares the goals of the Nazi law from July 1933 (‘Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses’). This statute allowed – and led to – systematic sterilizations of persons with a number of various diseases, for which genetic causes were presumed at the time: for example ‘hereditary idiocy’, schizophrenia, manic-depressive insanity, hereditary epilepsy, hereditary Huntington’s Chorea, hereditary blindness and deafness, severe hereditary physical deformities or severe alcoholism (Birk, 2005). Between 1933 and 1945 360,000 people were sterilized; many of the victims died from the effects of the procedure (see Friedländer, 2010). In order to “preserve and raise the level of humanity”, Schmitz has his eye 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” (Schmitz, 1999, p.388). Calling the inhuman Nazi law merely crude measures, why can Schmitz not see anything inhuman in forcibly sterilizing a human being?

### ***Tentative conclusions – and more questions***

Can Schmitz’s ideas as a whole provide an improved basis for Gestalt phenomenology? Are there perhaps some selected ideas of the New Phenomenology, which might be interesting for Gestalt therapy? If elements of the New Phenomenology are to be incorporated, some further discussion of Schmitz’s ideas seems to be quite necessary, because:

- his view of phenomena seems to be rooted in the philosophy of life and at least partially in romanticizes ideas of a pre-industrial and pre-Enlightenment idyll;
- it remains an open question whether Schmitz’s hypostatized understanding of felt-body (‘Leib’) as a half thing can or should replace the term contact;
- theoretical as well as praxeological benefits of atmospheres that seize individuals are not comprehensively understood nor are they sufficiently related to the category of needs;
- integration of New Phenomenology into the practice Gestalt therapy

appears to be far from seamless.

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