

**Georges Wollants (2008): Gestalt Therapy: Therapy of the Situation. Turnhout, Belgium: Faculteit voor Mens en Samenleving. xvi, pp 205, (ISBN 9789081262316 [pbk]). € 28.**

*Gestalt Therapy: Therapy of the Situation*, by Georges Wollants, is a cri de coeur for Gestalt therapists to re-awaken to the field-theoretic vision of the Berlin School of Gestalt theory, which he identifies as the ultimate source of that therapeutic movement. The message Wollants wishes to re-assert is that “person and world are inseparable and interdependent parts of a dynamic whole” (p. 9). Given the “interactional field” as “the first reality,” “the ultimate client of our psychotherapeutic occupation” is “the interplay of the person and his phenomenal environment” (p. 9). The therapist’s ongoing challenge is thus toward full attunement to the client’s experiential world, through reliance upon phenomenology [“as naïve and full a description of direct experience as possible” (K. Koffka 1935, p. 73, in Wollants 2008, p. 159)] to maximize clarity and minimize distortions from the therapist’s preconceived ideas. Calling into question intrapsychic or “monopersonal” models of mental disorders [cf. contact-boundary interruptions (see p. 96), “safety operations (p. 108)] Wollants supports an interactionist view of psychopathology, as a potentially understandable attempt to “reorganize an impaired person-world relationship” (p. 66). “The overall goal of therapy is,” in his view, “to recover the wholeness of the client’s existence and restore the freedom that he lost through fixed forms of interaction with the environment” (p. 163). Throughout his book, Wollants encourages deep respect for clients, not only by taking seriously the reality of their experience and circumstance, and by recognizing sensibility and functionality implicit in even the most problematic adaptations, but also by keeping faith with the healing potential of self-organizing processes within their experiential worlds.

Wollants laments Gestalt therapy’s history of inconsistencies and misdirections in its representation of the interactional view, from mixed messages in its early formulations (e.g., Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951/1974), which, in his view, lapsed at times into intrapsychic psychology, to later, more systematic departures from relationality by the movement’s founder, Frederick Perls. (Perls’ depiction of the nature and goal of contact between person and world comes under sharp criticism here.) These problems prompt a further question for Wollants, which guided him in the writing of his book:

“What kind of Gestalt therapy would have been developed from the first hesitant elaborations of this method if . . . attempts . . . had been based on situational and interactional considerations and if, from the very beginning, the Gestalt-theoretical insights, principles and applications of the Berlin School had been incorporated into the practice of Gestalt therapy?” (p. 4)

Wollants' effort to "reconnect" Gestalt therapy to its putative roots in Gestalt theory rests upon the underlying premise that Gestalt therapy is indeed an expression, or extension, of Gestalt theory. I would be negligent in my role as reviewer if I did not acknowledge that this conclusion remains, at the very least, a matter of some controversy. Gestalt theorists themselves have been less than eager to accept parentage. Of the two Gestaltists who have addressed the matter in print, Rudolph Arnheim (1974) was brief but caustic in rejecting their relation. Mary Henle's (1978) lengthier analysis, focusing upon the work of Perls mainly from 1969 onward, sought emphatically to "disabuse" readers of any notion of "substantive relation" between the therapy and the theory. In light of these disclaimers, Wollants might well have taken more time to make a case for this major assumption of his book, rather than assert it largely as a given, particularly since he himself finds much in the work of Perls objectionable from a field-theoretic point of view. (Note that Wollants views Laura Perls as eventually the truer voice of Gestalt therapy, whose writings Henle did not consider.)

If indeed Perls' vision of psychotherapy was inspired by Gestalt theory, his work was certainly of questionable value in sustaining a coherent view consistent with those field theoretic principles. This is in fact a major thesis of Wollants' book: That Gestalt therapy as an articulation of field theory deserves a clearer and more consistent formulation than it got from its founder. On this point the views of Wollants and Henle join in significant agreement.

Hopefully here, past may be prologue. In acknowledging past problems and insufficiencies in Gestalt therapy's representation of Gestalt-theoretic views, Wollants seeks to redress former misunderstandings (amply articulated by Henle 1978) and to move the discussion forward, around a guiding question: What would a Gestalt therapy true to the vision of Gestalt theory look like?

This question I find extremely interesting, exciting, and important (for theorists and therapists alike) but also monumentally daunting. There are probably many factors that conspired to retard the progress of Gestalt theory into the realm of personality theory and psychotherapy, but among them is bound to be: the difficulty of the task. Wollants shows boldness in taking up the challenge to delineate an "authentic" Gestalt-theoretic psychotherapy. However the task he has undertaken also requires circumspection and care, if the mistakes of the past are not to be repeated in the future. Wollants' book is clearly aimed at Gestalt therapists, to awaken them to the transformative insights of Gestalt theory. If indeed it is Gestalt-theoretic insights that may serve to animate a psychotherapeutic movement, those insights should be recognizable as such by individuals within the Gestalt-theoretic community. Such was not the case in a previous generation, when for example Henle (1978) faulted Perls not only over matters of theoretical content, but also for "borrowing" Gestalt theory's terms, applying them "loosely," in ways that "concealed problems."

I am gratified that Wollants has undertaken this important work, as a valuable step in establishing constructive and mutually beneficial dialogue between intellectual communities, and I appreciate his efforts to give voice throughout his book to actual Gestalt theory. There are times, however, when I felt the subject areas called out for a more precise and consistent articulation of Gestalt theoretic thinking.

Consider Wollants' core message -- of person and world as "inseparable and interdependent parts of a dynamic whole" -- in relation to the Gestalt theory's oft repeated concern with the distinction between phenomenal and physical worlds, and the problem of naive realism that inevitably arises when this distinction is insufficiently recognized (e.g., Henle 1977, 1986, Chap. 2; Köhler 1938, 1947). Wollants notes the distinction (p. 10), and goes to some length to specify that the field to which he refers in describing self/world interaction is the phenomenal world, quoting Koffka (1935) and Kurt Lewin (1936, 1952) on this point to good effect. (He prefers the word "situation" to refer to the phenomenally present experiential field of self and world.) However at times he seems to overlook or garble the distinction between these different universes of discourse. [A suggestion here is to employ Köhler's useful terminology -- which distinguishes the physical *organism* from the phenomenal *body* (as percept) and/or the phenomenal *self* (see Köhler 1938, p 108; 1947, p. 211)]. Consider this statement from Wollants: "Our *psychical* environment, our world, does not consist of a sum of sensations, but of these things and *physical* settings" (p. 18, italics added). Here he appears simply to lose sight of the distinction. Another example on the subjective side: "The organism, as part of the situation, is not a mere physical entity, but the subjective, phenomenal person who behaves and invests the world with meaning" (p. 11). Here the question of the *nature of the relation* between organism and phenomenal self is lost in conflation of the two worlds. Another example, on the objective side: While Wollants explicitly identifies the phenomenal world as the context of perception, experience, and behavior, at other points he leaps without clarification outside this realm, as in the following case:

"The term Gestalt says exactly what therapy is about: focus on the 'gestalting' of the situation and intervention in those elements of the total situation that are most likely to be responsible for disturbing the functioning of the whole. These elements can be person-related, but also world-related (persons, groups, communities, structures and physical surrounding)." (p. 27)

Is Wollants' referring here to phenomenal or transphenomenal events? Failure to distinguish the physical (or social) environments of human organisms from the *experience* of those worlds, wherein the meanings of circumstances register to consciousness, poses not only theoretical problems, but also practical questions regarding the therapeutic task. As the quotation perhaps suggests, Wollants' vision of interactionism at times leaves the suffering individual at the sheer

mercy of an unsupportive world – as indeed he or she may often be. However, lack of clarity with regard to physical/phenomenal distinctions blurs the line between this problem and another. For example, at times when the person's environmental circumstances are not amenable to change, or at times when the problem involves a difficulty in one's way of relating to circumstances, then it can be more clearly seen that the interaction in question concerns the nature of the relation between one part of the phenomenal field (associated with the self) and another part of the phenomenal field (associated with the experienced world) -- phenomenal self and phenomenal other being interdependent parts comprising a broader phenomenal field. Where there is need to change one's way of relating to circumstances, the first step may involve a re-organization of the phenomenal field in ways that alter the experience of both phenomenal self and phenomenal world (as interdependent parts). Such 'revisionings' may provide direction and impetus for more concrete and behavioral changes with regard to outer circumstances. Wollants clearly knows this, but there is room for more clarity about it.

[Before going on, I must note that Wollants' term "gestalting" seems to represent an instance of the kind of imprecise use of borrowed terminology that Henle (1978) found problematic in Perls' work.]

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to constructive change is the naive realism (see also Henle 1986, p.17) that results from the failure to distinguish *perceptions* of reality from reality itself (whatever that is). This misapprehension represents a systematic failure of relational understanding, a blindness as to the contribution of subjective factors in the relational determination of perceptual experience, which leaves one no alternative but to assume that one's perceptions of things represent their objective and independent nature (whatever that is). Wollants does not address this issue, nor do I believe it has been sufficiently explored within Gestalt theory itself. I see in it a veritable goldmine of untapped possibilities for further development of personality theory.

Naive realism is traditionally described with reference to the perceptual world, but it (or something like it) operates with at least equal force on the subjective side of the phenomenal field. Thus we assume that the phenomenal self (presenting to consciousness as "I" or "me") is in fact who we absolutely are. Throughout the phenomenal worlds of virtually all of humanity, there appears to be an ongoing and obdurate failure to recognize the full relational determination of experience. Images and ideas about who we are and what the world is about thus harden into insular and absolute truths and categorical divisions. Wollants calls attention to the need to overcome the absoluteness of such hardened views, and the thwarted possibility they entail (see p. 66-67), but seems not to recognize it with reference to insular images of self. Thus while he asserts that "the self

should not be reified, as if it were an internal agency or entity" (p. 114), I believe he overlooks the fact that self *already has been reified*, (and by this means acquire needed agency) in routine daily experience, in ways that phenomenology would quickly substantiate.

Thus while I could happily agree with Wollants that ultimate reality is relational, I think he overestimates the extent to which this relationality is recognized in common experience. In this connection, he quotes Nuttin (1955) quite favorably:

"Consciousness does not refer to an internal world, but consists of the awareness and acknowledgement of person-world interactions, how we are affected by the world and how the relationship manifests itself at the moment, and what in this situation needs to happen." (Nuttin 1955, p. 350)

Would that this awareness of interactions were the general rule. The mere enumeration of instances of naive realism and its variants -- the default-setting for human experience -- calls this view into question. One final quotation from Wollants bears on the preceding comment's apparent rejection of inner life:

"Gestalt therapists avoid dichotomies such as conscious and unconscious, inner and outer, person and world, and mind and body. PHG [Perls, Hefferline & Goodman (1951)] are explicit about this: there is no such thing as inner conflict (p. 134). Every conflict is a conflict in the interactional person-world situation and every disturbance is a disturbance of the ongoing situation." (Wollants 2008, pp. 25f)

While I see nothing in this statement resembling Gestalt theory, and much contrary to it, I quote it in order to make another point. Wollants' Gestalt therapy seems to me quite preoccupied with the person-world relation, and equally resistant to exploring inner relations, or internal structure, within one important part of that interdependent field: the phenomenal self. In fact, Wollants acknowledges something of this sort: "Gestalt therapists," he writes, "place less emphasis on the individual as a separate unity than on the person-world relationship." (p. 114)

The self may abide in ongoing interdependent relation with the larger situation, but that is not to say that it does not possess, or represent, a differentiated organization itself. Selves are not just parts of contexts, they are contexts unto themselves. Moreover, at least in the phenomenal realm, the state of internal relations within the part-context will help to determine, or reveal, the nature and quality of relations of that part with other parts -- in this case, the (phenomenal) self's capacity to relate open-heartedly and open-mindedly to the (phenomenal) world. Note here that this phenomenal world is not (always) some fanciful play land. It is the only means we have of representing to ourselves the actual reality in which we are situated, the actual reality of the shared human condition. How we relate to it (as part of ourselves) is how we relate to those actual others.

I close with one final point of comparison between Wollants' Gestalt therapy and Gestalt theory. One of the most powerful attractions of Gestalt theory for me was the respect it showed to human beings, the credibility it found in human experience, and the faith it sustained in human possibility. One sees this on almost any page of Wertheimer or Köhler (the founders with whom I am most familiar). I experience in Wollants' book this same abiding respect for, and good faith in, our strange species. I suspect he is an extraordinary therapist.

*Edward S. Ragsdale*

## References

- Arnheim, R. (1974): "Gestalt" misapplied. *Contemporary Psychology* 19, 570.
- Henle, M. (1978): Gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 14, 23-32.
- Henle, M. (1977): On the distinction between the phenomenal and the physical object, in Nicholas, J. (ed.): *Images, Perceptions, and Knowledge*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel. [in Henle, M. (1986): *1879 and all that: Essays in the theory and history of psychology* (pp. 3-9). New York: Columbia University Press.]
- Henle, M. (1986): Episodes in the history of interactionism: On knowing what one is talking about, in Henle, M (1986): *1879 and all that: Essays in the theory and history of psychology* (pp. 10-21). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Koffka, K. (1935): *Principles of gestalt psychology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Köhler, W. (1947): *Gestalt psychology*. Rev. ed. New York: Liveright.
- Köhler, W. (1938): *The place of value in a world of facts*. New York: Liveright.
- Lewin, K. (1936): *Principles of topological psychology*. (Transl. by F. Heider and G. M. Heider). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lewin, K. (1952): *Field theory and social science: Selected theoretical papers*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Nuttin, J. (1955): Consciousness, behavior, and personality. *Psychological Review* 62, 349-355.
- Perls, F., Hefferline, R. & Goodman, P. (1951): *Gestalt therapy: Excitement and growth in human personality*. New York: Julian Press.
- Wollants, G., (2008): *Gestalt therapy: Therapy of the situation* Turnhout, Belgium: Faculteit voor Mens en Samenleving.

**Edward S. Ragsdale**, born 1948, is a psychologist in private practice in New York City. He completed his Ph.D. under Mary Henle at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research.

**Address:** 51 Fifth Avenue, Apartment 16D, New York, NY 10003

E-Mail: edragsdale@gmail.com