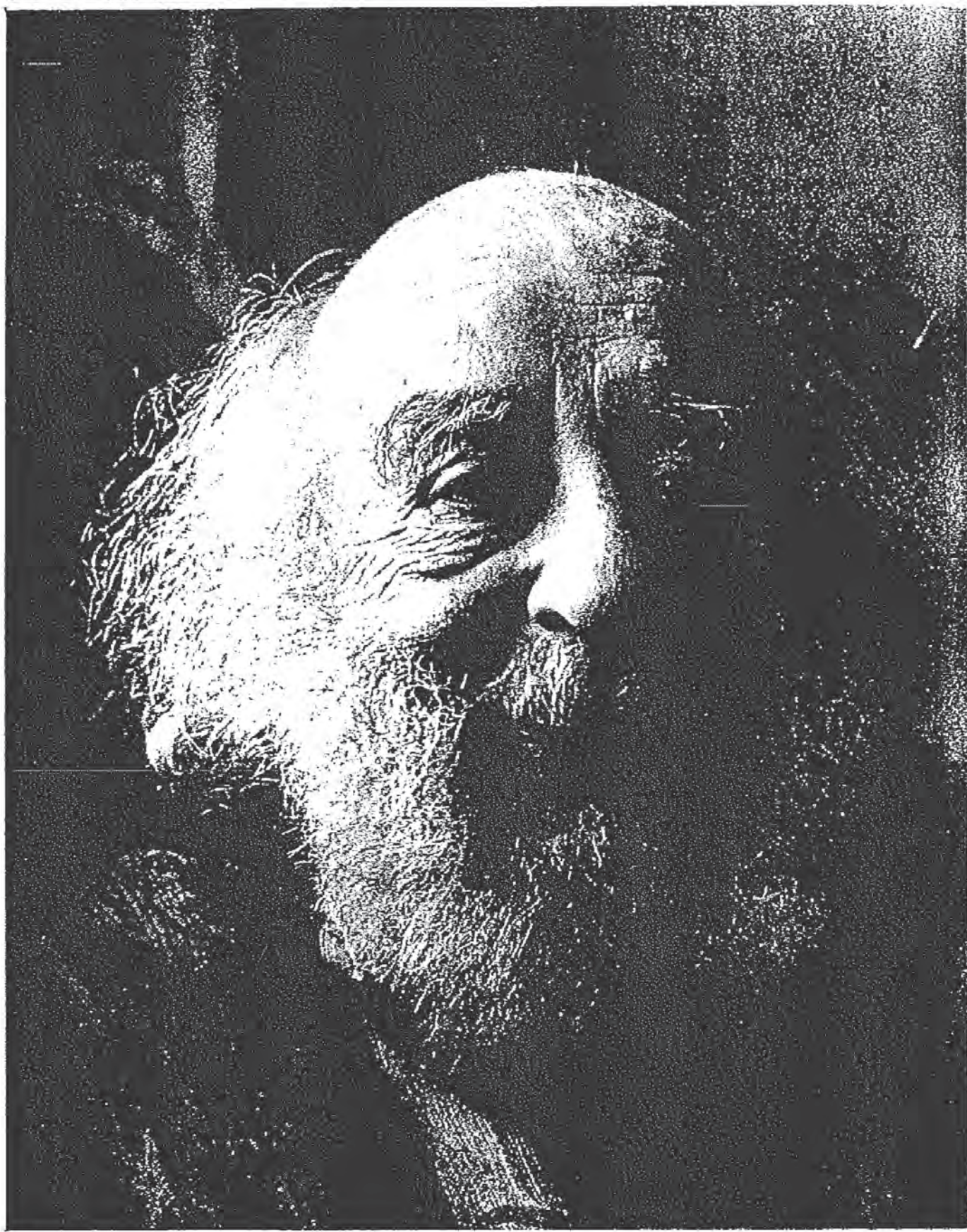


# F. Perls



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**FREDERICK S. PERLS**

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**CHAPTER 5**

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**FREDERICK S. PERLS  
AND  
GESTALT THERAPY**

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# FREDERICK S. PERLS

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Frederick S. Perls, the originator of Gestalt therapy, occupies a somewhat unique position in the framework of this text. Unlike Freud, Jung, Adler, James, and others, his contributions to a psychology of personality are primarily in the area of the practice of psychotherapy rather than in the area of personality theory. In recent years, however, the popularity of Gestalt therapy and its use in a wide variety of contexts other than specifically therapeutic, suggest that Perls and the Gestalt view of human beings are worth examining; they represent a current and major trend in the psychology of personality. In fact, the very lack of a strictly theoretical emphasis in most of Perls' later work reflects the direction in which he was attempting to move psychology; his conviction was that a genuinely holistic and productive view of people and psychotherapy would require substantial de-intellectualization, Western intellect having become, in his words, "the whore of intelligence . . . the poor, pallid substitute for the vivid immediacy of sensing and experiencing" (Perls, 1967, p. 15).

Toward the end of his life, Perls realized that the dangers of overintellectualizing notwithstanding, some theoretical statement of his approach was needed in order to prevent his ideas from being reduced to a set of gimmicks and attempts at instant psychotherapeutic cures. He never completed his last manuscript (*The Gestalt Approach*, published posthumously), but even in its unfinished form it provides, along with his other less specifically theoretical works, a basis for understanding the Gestalt view of the psychology of personality. Although it is certainly worth extrapolating the cohesive theory that underlies Perls' work in order to better understand the development and usefulness of Gestalt therapy, such an effort cannot begin to capture the charisma, force, and infectiousness of Perls' own personal style—a style which, in both Perls' life and writings, has undoubtedly contributed as much to the recent popularity of Gestalt therapy as have its more theoretical merits.

### PERSONAL HISTORY

Frederick S. Perls was born in Berlin in 1893, the son of lower-middle-class Jewish parents. In his autobiography, *In and Out of the Garbage Pail*, Perls describes himself as a black sheep son, often angry and scornful of his parents, who was expelled from school after twice failing seventh grade and in trouble with authorities throughout his adolescence.

He managed nonetheless to finish his schooling and received an M.D., specializing in psychiatry. While finishing his medical training he joined the German army and served as a medic during World War I. After the war he returned to Berlin and, entering into Berlin Bohemian society, he began to formulate some of the philosophical ideas which were to provide a basis for the development of Gestalt therapy. In 1926 Perls worked with Kurt Goldstein at the Institute for Brain-Injured Soldiers and developed, through his work with Goldstein, some sense of the importance of viewing the human organism as a whole rather than as a conglomeration of disparately functioning parts.

In 1927 he moved to Vienna and began psychoanalytic training; he was analyzed by Wilhelm Reich and supervised by several other major figures of the early psychoanalytic movement: Karen Horney, Otto Fenichel, and Helene Deutsch among them.

In 1933, with the approach of Hitler, Perls fled to Holland and then to South Africa where he established the South African Institute for Psychoanalysis. He returned to Germany in 1936 to deliver a paper at the Psychoanalytic Congress and to meet Sigmund Freud. The meeting was an immense disappointment to Perls; he recalls that it lasted for perhaps four minutes and offered no opportunity for exploring Freud's ideas, which Perls had for years anticipated.

Several years later Perls broke openly with the psychoanalytic movement and in 1946 he emigrated to the United States. He proceeded with the development of Gestalt therapy and established the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy in 1952. He moved to Los Angeles and then, in the early 1960s, to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, where he offered workshops, taught, and began to become widely known as the exponent of a viable new philosophy and method of psychotherapy. Shortly before his death his interest turned to the establishment of a Gestalt kibbutz. He died in 1970 on Vancouver Island, the site of the first Gestalt therapeutic community.

### INTELLECTUAL ANTECEDENTS

The major intellectual trends that directly influenced Perls were psychoanalysis (primarily Freud and Reich), Gestalt psychology (Kohler, Wertheimer, Lewin, Goldstein, et al.), and existentialism and phe-

*In and out the garbage  
pail  
Put I my creation  
Be it lively, be it stale  
Sadness or elation.*

*Joy and Sorrow as I had  
Will be re-inspected;  
Feeling sane and being  
mad,  
Taken or rejected.*

*Junk and chaos come to  
halt  
'Stead of wild confusion,  
Form a meaningful ge-  
stalt*

*At my life's conclusion.  
[Perls, 1969b]*

*My break with the  
Freudians came a few  
years later (after my  
meeting with Freud), but  
the ghost was never  
completely laid. . . . I  
had tried to make psy-  
choanalysis my spiritual  
home, my religion. . . .  
Then the enlightenment  
came . . . I had to take  
all responsibility for my  
existence myself. [Perls,  
1969b, pp. 59-60, paren-  
thesis added]*

nomenology. Perls also incorporated some of the ideas of J. L. Moreno, a psychiatrist who developed the notion of the importance of role-playing in psychotherapy. Somewhat less explicitly, Perls describes the philosophy and practice of Zen as an important influence, particularly on his later work.

### Psychoanalysis

#### Freud

The first book that Perls wrote, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, was not intended to provide a new theory of personality, but instead was to constitute a revision of psychoanalytic theory. In fact, a good part of Perls' work was devoted to developing what he saw to be an extension of Freud's work. Even after his formal break with Freud, Perls continued to view his own ideas as a revision of Freud's work, and, even more, a revision of psychoanalysis as interpreted by many of the psychoanalytic second generation. Perls' disagreements with Freud had primarily to do with Freud's psychotherapeutic treatment methods rather than with Freud's more theoretical expositions of the importance of unconscious motivations, the dynamics of personality, patterns of human relationships, and so on. "Not Freud's discoveries but his philosophy and technique have become obsolete" (Perls, 1969b, p. 14).

In discussing the influence of Gestalt psychology on Perls, the concept of the human organism as a whole was of immense importance. He felt that Freud's work was primarily limited in that it failed to stress a holistic approach to organismic functioning, in which the individual and the environment are viewed as constantly interacting parts of a single field. This holistic approach, in which every element of an organism's expression is intimately connected to the whole, led Perls to lay particular stress, in contrast to Freud, on *obvious* rather than deeply repressed material as being crucial to understanding and working through intrapsychic conflict. Similarly, Perls emphasized the importance of examining one's situation in the present *rather* than investigating past causes, which Freud suggested. Perls believed that the awareness of *how* one behaves, moment to moment, is more relevant to self-understanding and capacity for change than an understanding of *why* one behaves as one does.

Perls' initial departure from Freud's approach concerned Freud's theory of instincts and libido. As Perls began to formulate his own theory regarding what Freud called instinct, he suggested that an organism has myriad needs which are felt whenever the psychological and/or physiological equilibrium of that organism is disturbed. Just as there are thousands of kinds of disturbances of organismic balance, so there are

None of us, probably with the exception of Freud himself, realized the prematurity of applying psychoanalysis to treatment. . . . We did not see it for what it actually was: a *research project*. [Perls, 1969b, p. 142]

If the patient is finally to close the book on his past problems, he must close it in the present. For he must realize that if his past problems were really past they would not longer be problems—and they certainly would no longer be present. [Perls, 1973, p. 63]

thousands of kinds of instincts which become apparent as the means by which the organism attempts to rebalance itself.

In Perls' view, then, no instinct (for example, sex or aggression) is "basic;" all needs are direct expressions of organismic instincts. Perls suggested that the psychoanalytic methods of interpretation and free association constituted (particularly as they were generally being used, following Freud) avoidance of direct experience of the associated and interpreted material and were therefore inefficient and often ineffective methods of self-exploration.

Freud's emphasis on the importance of resistances is slightly shifted in Perls' approach to an emphasis on avoidance of awareness of any kind, particularly stressing the *form* that avoidance takes rather than the specific content of the avoidance. (For example, the relevant question is *how* am I avoiding awareness, not *what* am I avoiding.)

Freud described the transference relationship (of patient onto therapist) as central to the effectiveness of the psychotherapeutic process. Perls agreed that the phenomenon of transference occurs, and in fact he saw it as an important aspect of projection, a neurotic mechanism to which he assigned immense importance. He did not, however, give the working through of the transference the same major role in the therapeutic process as did Freud.

Perls disagreed with Freud's supposition that the important therapeutic task is the freeing of repressions, following which the working through or assimilation of the material occurs naturally. Perls thought that every individual, by nature simply of existing, has plenty of material readily available to him for therapeutic work; the difficult and important task is the assimilation process itself, the chewing and digesting and integrating of previously introjected (swallowed whole) traits, habits, attitudes, and patterns of behavior.

Perhaps most important of all, Perls and the Gestalt approach have increasingly come to represent an alternative world view, a different *weltanschauung*, to that from which psychoanalytic theory emerges. In this context, Freud and nineteenth-century rationalism offer a perspective on human nature that has substantially different emphases than Perls' more existential view. Yet, given an understanding of this difference in world view (which leads to the utterly different styles and characteristics of psychoanalytic and Gestalt work), a great deal of psychoanalytic theory finds its counterpart in Gestalt work.<sup>1</sup>

If an individual's survival is threatened because his blood sugar level is too low, he will look for food. Scheherazade's survival was threatened by the Sultan, and to meet the threat she told him stories for a thousand and one nights. Shall we then say that she had a story telling instinct? [Perls, 1973, p. 7]

<sup>1</sup>Briefly, some of the counterparts may be found in the following general pairs of concepts: Freud's cathexis and Perls' foreground; Freud's libido and Perls' basic excitement; Freud's free association and Perls' continuum of awareness; Freud's "consciousness" and Perls' "awareness;" Freud's focus on resistance and Perls' focus

### Reich

The other major psychoanalytic influence on Perls was one of his analysts, Wilhelm Reich. Reich developed the notion of "muscular armor;" he also stressed the importance of character (or habitual ways of reacting) in determining how a person functions. He suggested that character develops early in the individual's life and serves as a kind of armoring against internal or external stimuli which the individual finds threatening. This character armor is physiologically rooted (that is, *muscular armor*), and functions as resistance to insight or psychological change.

Shortly after Reich's exposition of the importance of muscular armoring, he put forward the concept of the orgone, an idea which Perls, as well as most other, more orthodox analysts, found difficult to support. Reich's early work heavily influenced Perls, particularly Perls' view of the body in relation to the psyche.

### Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt theory was first put forward in the late 1800s in Germany and Austria. It developed as a protest against the attempt to understand experience by atomistic analysis—analysis in which elements of an experience are reduced to their simplest components, each component is analyzed apart from the others, and the experience is understood simply as the sum of these components. The very notion of a "gestalt" contradicts the validity of this kind of atomistic analysis. Although there is no precise English equivalent for the German word *gestalt*, the general meaning is a pattern or configuration—a particular organization of parts which makes up a particular whole. The chief principle of the Gestalt approach is to suggest that an analysis of parts can never provide an understanding of the whole, since the whole is defined by the interactions and interdependencies of the parts. Parts of a gestalt do not maintain their identity when they are independent of their function and place in the whole.

Max Wertheimer published, in 1912, the paper that is generally considered to be the founding work of the Gestalt school. His paper described an experiment performed by Wertheimer with two of his colleagues—also central figures in the Gestalt movement—Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka. Their experiment was designed to explore

A gestalt is an irreducible phenomenon. It is an essence that is there and that disappears if the whole is broken up into its components. [Perls, 1969b, p. 63]

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on avoidance of awareness; Freud's repetition compulsion and Perls' unfinished situations; Freud's regression and Perls' withdrawal (from the environment); Freud's therapist who permits/encourages transference and Perls' therapist who is a "skillful frustrator;" Freud's neurotic defense-impulse configuration and Perls' rigid gestalt-formation; Freud's projection transference and Perls' projection . . . and so on.

certain aspects of the perception of motion. They flashed, in rapid succession, two closely spaced points of light in a dark room, varying the time intervals between the flashes. They found that when the interval between the flashes was less than  $3/100$  of a second, the flashes appeared simultaneous. When the interval was about  $6/100$  of a second, the observer reported seeing the flash move from the first point to the second. When the interval was  $20/100$  of a second or more, the points of light were observed as they actually were: two separate flashes of light. The crucial finding of the experiment involved the perception of motion when the flashes were approximately  $6/100$  of a second apart; the apparent movement was not a function of the isolated stimuli but was dependent upon the relational characteristics of the stimuli and the neural and perceptual organization of the stimuli in a single field.

The results of this experiment led to some major reformulations in the study of perception, and during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Gestalt theory was applied to the study of learning, problem solving, motivation, social psychology, and, to some degree, personality theory. One Gestalt view of personality theory was put forth by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin. Lewin represented behavior as a function of forces operating within an individual's psychological "life-space," which he defined as the total configuration, at any given moment, of an individual's psychological reality.<sup>2</sup>

The Gestalt school had enormous impact on the entire field of psychology; by the middle of the twentieth century, the Gestalt approach had become so intrinsic to the mainstream of psychology that the notion of a Gestalt movement per se was essentially dead. One major contribution of the Gestaltists involved, as we have briefly seen, the exploration of how parts constitute and are related to a whole. In addition, Gestalt theory offered some suggestions regarding the ways in which organisms adapt to achieve their optimum organization and equilibria. One aspect of this adaptation involves how an organism, in a given field, makes his or her perceptions meaningful, how he or she distinguishes figure and background. Figure 5.1 is an example of how a given stimulus may be interpreted as representing different things depending upon what is perceived as figure and what as ground.

If the white is viewed as figure and the black as background, a white chalice appears; if, on the other hand, the black is viewed as figure and white as background, we see two heads in silhouetted profile. The Gestalt school extended the phenomenon represented by this

<sup>2</sup>During the 1950s, Lewin's work was basic to the development of group therapy; somewhat later, it was applied to the encounter group movement. See the discussion of Lewin in Irving Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).



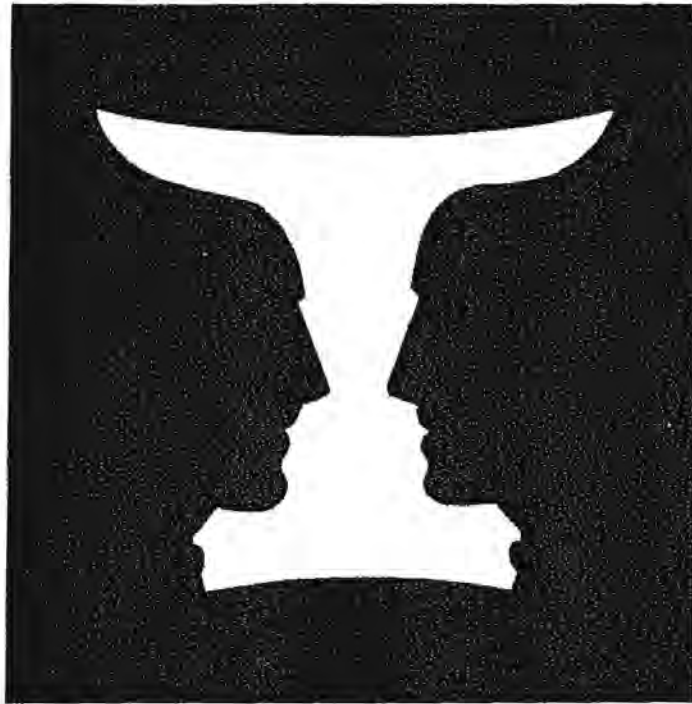


Figure 5.1 An Example of the Figure-Ground Phenomenon

picture to describe how an organism selects what is of interest to that organism at any particular moment. To a thirsty man, a glass of water placed in the midst of his favorite foods emerges as figure against the background of the food; his perception adapts, thereby enabling him to satisfy his needs. Once his thirst is satisfied, his perception of what is figure and what is ground will probably change in accordance with a shift in dominant need and interest.

Although by 1940, Gestalt theory had been applied in many areas of psychology, it had been for the most part ignored in examining the dynamics of personality structure and personal growth. And there was as yet no formulation of Gestalt principles specifically as psychotherapy. So it is at this point that we can begin to see the role of Fritz Perls in extending Gestalt theory to include psychotherapy and a theory of psychological change.

#### Existentialism and Phenomenology

Perls described Gestalt therapy as an existential therapy, based in existential philosophy and utilizing principles generally considered to be both existentialist and phenomenological. Although Gestalt therapy did not develop directly out of particular existential or phenomenological antecedents, many aspects of Perls' work closely parallel developments in various schools of existentialism and phenomenology. The influ-

Every organ, the senses, movements, thoughts, subordinate themselves to this emerging need and are quick to change loyalty and function as soon as that need is satisfied and then retreat into the background. . . . All the parts of the organism *Identify* themselves temporarily with the emergent *gestalt*. [Perls, 1969b, p. 115]

ence of these schools was diffuse but substantial; described below are some of the primary similarities between Perls' work and major trends in both existentialism and phenomenology.

Most generally, Perls objected strenuously to the notion that the study of human beings could be encompassed by an entirely rational, mechanistic, natural-scientific approach. Following from this, Perls aligned himself with most existentialists in insisting that the experiential world of an individual can only be understood through that individual's direct description of his or her own unique situation. Similarly, Perls held that the therapist's encounter with a patient constitutes an existential encounter between two people, rather than a variant on the classical doctor-patient relationship.

The idea that mind and body constitute two different and wholly separable aspects of existence was a notion that Perls, in company with most existentialists, found insupportable. In line with his objections to a mind-body split, Perls' application of Gestalt theory to understanding personality led him to abandon the idea of a subject-object split or even an organism-environment split. Rather than viewing each human being as encountering a world which that person experiences as entirely separate from himself or herself, Perls believed that people create and constitute their own worlds; the world exists, for a given individual, as his or her own disclosure of the world.

Basic to both existentialism and phenomenology, as well as Perls' work, is the concept of intentionality; mind or consciousness is understood as *intention*, and cannot be understood separate from what is thought or intended. The meanings of psychic acts or intentions must be arrived at in their own terms, phenomenologically, and in terms of their own particular intention. Thus the existentialist critique of Freud's notion of instincts is similar to Perls' criticism, which we mentioned earlier; in contrast to Freud's view, libido constitutes a psychic act, but not one that is more basic or universal than any other psychic act. Every psychic act is intention, and every intention must be understood in its own terms, not in terms of a more "basic" psychic act.

Two major themes in most existentialist thinking are the experience of nothingness and concern with death and dread. As we shall see in examining Perls' view of the structure of neurosis, these also constitute important elements in his theory of psychological functioning.

The phenomenological method of understanding through description is basic to Perls' thought; all actions imply choice, all criteria in making choices are themselves chosen, and causal explanations are not sufficient to explain one's actions or choices. And the phenomenological reliance on intuition in the knowing of essences resembles Perls' reliance on what he calls the intelligence or wisdom of the organism.

I feel rather desperate about this manuscript. I've got a view looking at a tapestry, nearly completely woven, yet unable to bring across the total picture, the total gestalt. Explanations don't help much towards understanding. I can't give it to you; you may take what I offer, but do I know your appetites? . . . I am still stuck and determined to get through this impasse. I am too easily inclined to give up and let go. . . . I would not be a phenomenologist if I could not see the obvious, namely the experience of being bogged down. I would not be a Gestaltist if I could not enter the experience of being bogged down with confidence that some figure will emerge from the chaotic background. . . . [Perls, 1969b]

Finally, the manner itself in which Perls puts forth his approach embodies (as any description of a phenomenological approach must) the existential and phenomenological characteristics described above. His books are not arguments delineating a particular viewpoint since, in an existentialist framework, argument is powerless unless the reader, out of the context of his or her own experience, chooses to accept Perls' premises from the beginning. Perls' style is imaginative and personal; his attempt is existential in that it is an attempt to suggest a theory of psychological development that is inextricable from Perls' own involvement with his own development.

### MAJOR CONCEPTS

#### The Organism as a Whole

A primary concept underlying Perls' work takes explicit formulation, as we have seen, from the work of the Gestalt psychologists. In Perls' theory, the notion of the organism as a whole is central—both in regard to intraorganismic functioning, as well as in terms of the organism's participation in its environment to create a single field of activity. In the context of intraorganismic functioning, Perls insisted that human beings are unified organisms, that there is no difference in kind between mental and physical activity. Perls defined mental activity simply as activity of the whole person which is carried on at a lower energy level than physical activity.

This conception of human behavior as consisting of levels of activity led Perls to suggest that any aspect of an individual's behavior may be viewed as a manifestation of the whole—the person's being. Thus in therapy, what the patient *does*—how he or she moves, speaks, and so on—provides as much information about the patient as what he or she thinks and says.

In addition to holism on an intraorganismic level, Perls stressed the importance of viewing the individual as being perpetually part of a wider field, which includes both the organism and the organism's environment. Just as Perls protested against the notion of a mind-body split, he protested against an inner-outer split; he viewed the question of whether people are ruled by internal or external forces as essentially meaningless, since causal effects of either are inextricable from causal effects of the other. There is however a *contact boundary* between the individual and his or her environment; it is this boundary which defines the relationship between them. In a healthy individual this boundary is fluid, perpetually permitting contact with, then withdrawal from, the environment. Contacting constitutes the forming of a gestalt; withdrawing represents its closure. In a neurotic individual the contact and withdrawal functions are disturbed, and the individual finds himself or her-

The organism acts with and reacts to its environment with greater or lesser intensity; as the intensity diminishes, physical behavior turns to mental behavior. As the intensity increases, mental behavior turns into physical behavior. [Perls, 1973, p. 13]

self faced by a conglomerate of gestalten which are in some sense unfinished—not fully formed or not fully closed.

Perls suggested that the cues for this rhythm of contact and withdrawal are dictated by a *hierarchy of needs*. Dominant needs emerge as foreground or figure against the background of the total personality; effective action is directed toward the satisfaction of a dominant need. Neurotics are often unable either to sense which of their needs are dominant or to define their relationship to the environment in such a way that their dominant needs are satisfied. Thus neurosis entails dysfunctional contact and withdrawal processes which cause the individual's existence as a unified organism to be distorted.

### Here and Now Emphasis

The holistic view led Perls to lay particular stress on the importance of an individual's present, immediate self-perception of his or her environment. Neurotics are unable to live in the present because they chronically carry with them unfinished situations (unclosed gestalten) from the past. Their attention is at least partially absorbed by these unfinished situations, and they thus have neither the awareness nor the energy to deal fully with the present. Since the destructive nature of these unfinished situations appears in the present, neurotic individuals experience themselves as unable to live successfully in the present. So the Gestalt approach to therapy is not to investigate the past for memories of trauma or unfinished situations, but to ask the patient simply to focus on becoming aware of his or her *present* experience, assuming that the bits and pieces of unfinished situations and unsolved problems from the past will inevitably emerge as part of that present experience. As these unfinished situations appear, the patient is asked to reenact them, to reexperience them in order to finish and assimilate them in the present.<sup>3</sup>

Perls defined anxiety as the gap, the tension between the "now" and the "then." The inability of people to tolerate this tension, Perls suggested, causes them to fill the gap with planning, rehearsing, and attempts to make the future secure. This not only absorbs energy and attention away from the present (thereby perpetually creating unfinished situations), it also prevents the kind of openness to the future that growth and spontaneity imply.

In addition to the strictly therapeutic nature of this focus on present awareness, an underlying current to Perls' work is that living with attention to the present, rather than the past or future, is in itself some-

Nothing is ever really repressed. All relevant gestalten are emerging, they are on the surface, they are obvious like the emperor's nakedness. Your eyes and ears are aware of them, provided your computer-analyzing thinking has not blinded you. [Perls, 1969b, p. 272]

<sup>3</sup>Although this focus on the present is particularly emphasized in Gestalt work, it derives from the psychoanalytic notion that one's past is neurotically *transferred* into the present. Thus in both psychoanalytic work and Gestalt work one attempts to "finish" in the present, unfinished situations from the past.

Anxiety is nothing but the tension from the *now* to the *then* . . . for instance, if I were to ask, "Who wants to come up here to work?" you probably would quickly start to rehearse "What shall I do there?" and so on. And of course probably you will get stage fright because you leave the secure reality of the *now* and jump into the future. [Perls, 1969a]

thing good, something leading to psychological growth. Here we see again how Perls' psychological work is strongly based in a philosophical context, in a kind of *weltanschauung* which assumes that one's present experience at any given moment is the only possible present experience and that the condition for being satisfied and fulfilled in one's life, moment to moment, is simply wholehearted acceptance of that present experience.<sup>4</sup>

#### Importance of How Over Why

A natural outcome of Perls' phenomenological orientation and his holistic approach is his stress on the importance of understanding experience in a descriptive rather than causal fashion. Structure and function are identical; if an individual understands *how* he or she does something, that person is in a position to understand the action itself. The causal determination—the *why*—of the action is, according to Perls, irrelevant to any full understanding of it; every action is multiply caused, and every cause is multiply caused, and explanations of such causes lead one further and further from understanding the action itself. More important, since every element of one's existence can only be understood as part of one or many *gestalten*, that element can never be understood as "caused" separately from the whole matrix of causes in which it participates. A causal relationship cannot exist among elements that make up the whole; every element both causes and is caused by others. Thus in the practice of Gestalt therapy, the emphasis is on constantly increas-

<sup>4</sup>As Claudio Naranjo has pointed out in his article "Present-Centeredness: Technique, Prescription and Ideal" (in Fagan and Shepherd, *Gestalt Therapy Now*, 1970), present-centeredness is an attitude leading to psychological development which is central to many Eastern psychologies. Buddha, in a passage of the *Pali Canon* suggests:

*Do not hark back to things that passed,  
And for the future cherish no fond hopes;  
The past was left behind by thee,  
The future state has not yet come.*

*But who with vision clear can see  
The present which is here and now  
Such wise one should aspire to win  
What never can be lost or shaken.*

[in Fagan and Shepherd, *Gestalt Therapy Now*, 1970, p. 67]

And in the Sufi tradition, Omar Khayyam suggests:

*Never anticipate tomorrow's sorrow  
live always in this paradisa! Now— . . .  
Rise up, why mourn this transient world of men?  
Pass your whole life in gratitude and joy.*

[*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, translated by Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah, p. 54]

ing one's awareness of *how* one behaves, rather than devoting energy to exploring *why* one behaves in such ways.

### Awareness

The three major concepts in Perls' approach that we have examined thus far—the organism as a whole, the here and now emphasis, and the importance of how over why—constitute a foundation for examining *awareness*, the focal point of his therapeutic approach. The process of growth is, in Perls' terms, a process of expanding areas of self-awareness; the major factor inhibiting psychological growth is avoidance of awareness.

Perls believed strongly in what he called the wisdom of the organism. He saw the healthy, mature individual as a self-supporting, self-regulating individual. And he saw the cultivation of self-awareness to be directed toward recognizing this self-regulating nature of the human organism. Following Gestalt theory, Perls suggested that the hierarchy of needs principle is always operating in the human individual. In other words, the most urgent need, the most important unfinished situation will always emerge if one is simply *aware* of one's experience of oneself, moment to moment.

Perls developed the notion of a *continuum of awareness* as a means of encouraging this self-awareness. To maintain a continuum of awareness seems deceptively simple—just be aware from second to second of what you are experiencing. Most people, however, interrupt the continuum almost immediately, and this interruption is generally caused by the awareness of something unpleasant. Then avoidance sets in—thoughts, expectations, memories, and associations from one experience to another. And none of these associated experiences are actually *experienced*; they are grazed over in one flash after another, leaving all the material unassimilated, with the initial unpleasant awareness as unincorporated as the rest of the material. This avoidance of continued awareness, this self-interruption, prevents the individual from facing and working through the unpleasant awareness. He or she remains stuck with an unfinished situation.

To be aware is to pay attention to the perpetually emerging foreground of one's own perception. To avoid awareness is to rigidify the naturally free-flowing delineation of foreground and background.

Perls suggested that for every individual there are three zones of awareness: awareness of self, awareness of the world, and awareness of what lies between—a kind of intermediate fantasy zone. Perls saw the exploration of this last zone (which prevents awareness of the other two) as Freud's great contribution. He suggested, however, that Freud focused so completely on understanding this intermediate zone that he ignored

I believe that this is a great thing to understand; that awareness *per se*—by and of itself—can be curative.  
[Perls, 1969a, p. 16]

the importance of working to develop the capacity to be aware in the other two zones of the self and the world. By contrast, much of Perls' approach includes a very deliberate attempt to gain awareness of and direct contact with oneself and the world.

## DYNAMICS

### Psychological Growth

Perls defined psychological health and maturity as the capacity to emerge from environmental support and environmental regulation to self-support and self-regulation. The therapeutic process represents an effort toward this emergence. The crucial element in both self-support and self-regulation is balance. One of the basic propositions of Gestalt theory is that every organism possesses the capacity to achieve an optimum balance within itself and with its environment. The conditions for achieving this balance involve an unimpeded awareness of the hierarchy of needs, which we described earlier.

A full appreciation of this hierarchy of needs can only be achieved through the awareness that involves the whole organism, since needs are experienced by every part of the organism and their hierarchy is established through their coordination.

Perls views the rhythm of contact with and withdrawal from the environment (which we mentioned previously) as the major component of organismic balance. Immaturity and neurosis imply either an inappropriate perception of what this rhythm constitutes or an incapacity to regulate its balance.

Self-regulating, self-supporting individuals are characterized by freely flowing and clearly delineated figure-ground formations (definitions of meaning) in expression of their needs for contact and withdrawal. They recognize their own capacity to choose the means of fulfilling needs as such needs emerge. They are aware of the boundaries between themselves and others and are particularly aware of the distinction between their fantasies of others (or the environment) and what they experience through direct contact.

In stressing the *self-supporting, self-regulating* nature of psychological well-being, Perls does not suggest that an individual can exist in any sense separate from his or her environment. In fact, organismic balance presumes a constant interaction with the environment. The crucial thing for Perls is that we can choose *how* we relate to the environment; we are self-supporting and self-regulating in that we recognize our own capacity to determine how we support and regulate ourselves within a field that includes much more than ourselves.

Perls describes several ways in which psychological growth is achieved. The first involves the finishing of unfinished situations or ge-

Any disturbance of the organismic balance constitutes an incomplete gestalt, an unfinished situation forcing the organism to become creative, to find means and ways to restore that balance. . . . And the figure/background foundation which is the strongest will temporarily take over the control of the total organism. Such is the basic law of organismic self-regulation. [Perls, 1969b, pp. 79, 92]

stalten, which we described earlier. He also suggests that neurosis may be loosely viewed as a kind of five-layered structure, and that growth (and eventually freedom from the neurosis) occurs in the passage through these five layers.

Perls calls the first layer the *cliche layer*, or the layer of token existence. It includes all the tokens of contact: "good morning," "hello," "nice weather, isn't it?" The second layer is the *role layer*, or *game-playing layer*. This is the "as-if" layer where people pretend to be the person they would like to be: the always competent businessman, the perpetually nice little girl, the very important person.

Having reorganized these two layers, Perls suggests that we reach the *impasse layer*, also called the *anti-existence layer* or *phobic avoidance layer*. Here we experience emptiness, nothingness; this is the point at which, out of avoiding the nothingness, we generally cut off our awareness and retreat back to the role-playing layer. If, however, we are able to maintain awareness of ourselves in this emptiness, we reach the death or *implosive layer*. This layer appears as death or as fear of death, because it consists of a paralysis of opposing forces; in experiencing this layer we contract and compress ourselves—we implode.

But if we can stay in contact with this deadness, we reach the last layer, the *explosive layer*. Perls suggests that becoming aware of this level constitutes emergence into the authentic person, the true self, the person capable of experiencing and expressing his or her emotions. And he warns:

Now, don't be frightened by the word *explosion*. Many of you drive a motor car. There are hundreds of explosions per minute in the cylinder. This is different from the violent explosion of the catatonic—that would be like an explosion in a gas tank. Also, a single explosion doesn't mean a thing. The so-called breakthroughs of the Reichian therapy and all that, are as little useful as the insight in psychoanalysis. *Things still have to work through.*  
[Perls, 1969a, p. 56, emphasis added]

There are four basic kinds of explosions that an individual may experience when emerging from the death layer. There is the explosion of *grief* which involves the working through of a loss or death which was previously unassimilated. There is the explosion into *orgasm* in people who are sexually blocked. There is the explosion into *anger* when the expression of anger has been repressed. And, finally, there is the explosion into what Perls call *joie de vivre*—joy and laughter, the joy of life.

The structure of our role-playing is cohesive because it is designed to absorb and control the energy of these explosions. The basic miscon-



ception that this energy *needs* to be controlled derives from our fear of emptiness and nothingness (the third layer). We interpret the experience of a void as being a sterile void rather than a fertile void; Perls suggests that Eastern philosophies, particularly Zen, have a good deal to teach us about the life-giving, positive experience of nothingness and about the importance of permitting the experience of nothingness without interrupting it.

Throughout his descriptions of how an individual develops, Perls maintains the notion that change cannot be forced and that psychological growth is a natural, spontaneous process.

### Obstacles to Growth

Perls views avoidance of awareness and the resultant rigidities in perception and behavior as the major obstacles to psychological growth. Neurotics (those who interrupt their own growth) cannot see their own needs clearly, nor can they make appropriate distinctions between themselves and the rest of the world. Consequently, they are unable to find and maintain the proper balance between themselves and the rest of the world. The form this imbalance generally takes is that one feels that social and environmental boundaries extend too far into oneself; neurosis consists of defensive maneuvers designed to protect oneself against and balance oneself in this impinging world.

Perls suggests that there are four basic neurotic mechanisms—boundary disturbances—which impede growth: *introjection*, *projection*, *confluence*, and *retrofection*. (In the five-layered structure of neurosis referred to earlier, these defensive mechanisms operate primarily at the second and third layers.)

### Introjection

*Introjection* or "swallowing whole" is the mechanism by which individuals incorporate standards, attitudes, and ways of acting and thinking which are not their own and which they do not assimilate or digest sufficiently to make their own. One of the ill effects of introjection is that introjecting individuals find it very difficult to distinguish between what they really feel and what others want them to feel—or simply what others feel. Introjection can also constitute a disintegrating force in the personality, since when the concepts or attitudes that are swallowed are incompatible with each other, the introjecting individuals will find themselves torn.

### Projection

Another neurotic mechanism is *projection*; it is, in a sense, the opposite of introjection. Projection is the tendency to make others respon-

sible for what originates in the self. It involves a disowning of one's impulses, desires, and behaviors, placing what belongs to the self outside.

#### Confluence

The third neurotic mechanism is (pathological) *confluence*.<sup>5</sup> In confluence, individuals experience no boundary between themselves and the environment. Confluence makes a healthy rhythm of contact and withdrawal impossible, since both contact and withdrawal presuppose an *other*. Confluence also makes tolerance of differences among people impossible since individuals experiencing confluence cannot accept a sense of boundary and thus differentiation between themselves and other people.

#### Retroreflection

The fourth neurotic mechanism is *retroreflection*. Retroreflection means, literally, "turning back sharply against;" retroreflecting individuals turn against themselves and, instead of directing their energies toward changing and manipulating their environment, they direct those energies toward themselves. They split themselves and become both subject and object of all of their actions; they are the target of all of their behavior.

Perls points out that these mechanisms rarely operate in isolation from each other, although people balance their neurotic tendencies among the four mechanisms in varying proportion. The crucial function that all of these mechanisms fill is the confusion of boundary discrimination. Given this confusion of boundaries, an individual's well-being—defined as the capacity to be self-supporting and self-regulating—is severely circumscribed.

Perls' view of these four mechanisms is basic to much of his psychotherapeutic approach. For example, Perls saw introjection as being central to what he called the topdog-underdog struggle. The topdog consists of a bundle of introjected standards and attitudes; Perls suggests that as long as the topdog (or, according to Freud, superego) remains introjected and unassimilated, the demands expressed by the topdog will continue to feel unreasonable and imposed from outside. Projection, Perls suggested, is crucial in the formation and understanding of dreams. In his view, all parts of a dream are projected, disowned fragments of ourselves. Every dream contains at least one unfinished situation which involves these projected parts. To work on the dream is to re-own these projected parts and thereby to close the unfinished gestalt.

<sup>5</sup>Perls notes that the experience of confluence is not always pathological; he is talking here, however, of *neurotic* confluence.

The introjector does as others would like him to do, the projector does unto others what he accuses them of doing to him, the man in pathological confluence doesn't know who is doing what to whom, and the retroreflector does to himself what he would like to do to others. . . . As Introjection displays itself in the use of the pronoun "I" when the real meaning is "they"; as projection displays itself in the use of the pronouns "it" and "they," when the real meaning is "I"; as confluence displays itself in the use of the pronoun "we" when the real meaning is in question; so retroreflection displays itself in the use of the reflective [sic], "myself." [Perls, 1973, pp. 40-41]

I especially prefer to work with dreams. I believe that in a dream we have a clear existential message of what's missing in our lives, what we avoid doing and living, and we have plenty of material to re-assimilate and re-own the alienated parts of ourselves. [Perls, 1969a, p. 76]

## STRUCTURE

### Body

Perls views the mind-body split of most psychologies as both arbitrary and misleading. Mental activity is simply activity that is carried on at a less intense level than physical activity. Thus our bodies are direct manifestations of who we are; Perls suggests that by simply observing our most apparent physical behaviors—posture, breathing, movements—we can learn an immense amount about ourselves.

### Social Relationships

Perls views the individual as participating in a field from which the individual is differentiated but inseparable. Contact and withdrawal functions are crucial in determining an individual's existence; one aspect of contact and withdrawal from the environment includes relationships with other people. In fact, the sense of relatedness to a group is, Perls suggests, our primary psychological survival impulse. Neurosis results from rigidities in defining the contact boundary with regard to other people and an inability to find and maintain proper balance with them.

### Will

Perls lays a good deal of stress on the importance of being aware of one's preferences and being able to act on them. Knowing one's own preferences entails knowing one's needs; emergence of the dominant need is experienced as preference for what will satisfy the need. Perls' discussion of preference is very close to what is generally called will. In choosing to use the term "preference," Perls is emphasizing the organismic, natural quality of healthy willing. Willing is simply one of various mental activities; it entails the limiting of awareness to certain specific areas in order to carry through a set of actions directed toward satisfying certain specific needs.

### Emotions

Perls views emotion as the force that energizes all action. Emotions are the expression of our basic excitement, the ways and means of expressing our choices as well as satisfying our needs. Emotion is differentiated according to varying situations—for example, by the adrenal glands into anger and fear or by the sex glands into libido. The emotional excitement mobilizes the muscular system. If muscular expression of emotion is prevented, we build up anxiety, which is the bottling up of excitement. Once we are anxious, we try to desensitize our sensory systems in order to reduce the built-up excitement; it is at this point that symptoms like frigidity, not listening--what Perls calls the "holes in our personalities"—develop. This emotional desensitizing is at the root of the avoidance of awareness that Perls finds basic to neurosis.

Emotions are the very life of us . . . emotions are the very language of the organism; they modify the basic excitement according to the situation which has to be met. [Perls, 1973, p. 23]

### Intellect

Perls believed that intellect in our society has been overvalued and overused, particularly in attempts to understand human nature. He believed strongly in what he called the wisdom of the organism, but he saw this wisdom to be a kind of intuition, based more in emotion than in intellect, and more in nature than in conceptual systems.

The intellect, Perls frequently asserted, has been reduced to a computer-like mechanism used for playing at a series of fitting games. Preoccupation with asking *why* things happen prevents people from experiencing *how* they happen; thus genuine emotional awareness is blocked in the interest of providing explanations. Explaining, according to Perls, is the property of the intellect and constitutes something much less than understanding.

Perls felt that verbiage production, one expression of intellect, is particularly overvalued in our culture; he suggests that there are three levels of such production: chickenshit (social chitchat), bullshit (excuses, rationalization), and elephantshit (theorizing, particularly of a philosophical/psychological sort).

### Self

Perls had no interest in glorifying the concept of self to include anything beyond the everyday, obvious manifestations of who we are. We are who we are; maturity and psychological health involve being able to claim that statement, rather than being caught by feeling that we are who we should be or we are who we would like to be. Our self-boundaries are constantly shifting in interaction with our environments. We can, given some level of awareness, rely on our organismic wisdom to define those boundaries and to direct the rhythm of contact with and withdrawal from the environment.

The notion of "self" or "I" for Perls is not a static, objectifiable notion; "I" is simply a symbol for an identification function. The "I" is identified with whatever the emerging foreground figure experience happens to be; all aspects of the healthy organism (sensory, motor, psychological, and so forth) identify themselves temporarily with the emergent gestalt, and the experience of "I" is this totality of identifications. Function and structure are, as we saw earlier, identical.

### Therapist

Perls suggests that the therapist is basically a projection screen on which the patient sees his or her own missing potential; the task of therapy is the patient's re-owning of this potential. The therapist is, above all, a skillful frustrator. While offering the patient satisfaction through offering attention and acceptance, the therapist frustrates the patient by refusing to give the patient the support which the patient is lacking

With full awareness you become aware of this organismic self-regulation, you can let the organism take over without interfering, without interrupting; we can rely on the wisdom of the organism. And the contrast to this is the whole pathology of self-manipulation, environmental control, and so on, that interferes with this subtle organismic self-control. [Perls, 1969a]

In Gestalt Therapy we write the "self" with lower case "s" not capital S. Capital S is a relic from the time when we had a soul, or an ego, or something extra special; "self" means just yourself—for better, for worse, in sickness, in health and nothing else. [Perls, 1969a, p. 76]

When I work I am not  
Fritz Perls. I become  
nothing—no thing, a  
catalyst, and I enjoy my  
work. I forget myself  
and surrender to your  
plight. And once we  
have closure I come  
back to the audience,  
a prima donna demand-  
ing appreciation. I can  
work with anybody. I  
cannot work success-  
fully with everybody.  
. . . In this short week-  
end I will not touch you  
if you are deeply dis-  
turbed. I would stir up  
more than you can  
handle by yourself.  
[Perls, 1969b, pp. 228-  
229]

within. The therapist acts as a catalyst in helping the patient break through avoidance and impasse points; the therapist's primary catalytic tool is helping the patient see *how* he or she consistently interrupts himself or herself, avoids awareness, plays roles, and so forth. (The projections that are involved in the patient's relationship with the therapist provide one highly significant aspect of the patient's avoidance, but as we mentioned earlier, aspects other than the transference elements of the patient's relationship with the therapist are also considered important.)

Finally, the therapist is human, and the therapist's encounter with a patient involves the meeting of two individuals, which includes but also extends beyond the role-defined therapist-patient encounter.

Perls believed that individual therapy was obsolete, both inefficient and often ineffective. He suggested that work in groups had a good deal more to offer, whether the work explicitly involved the entire group or took the form of interaction between the therapist and one individual within the group. He suggested that the group can be enormously valuable in providing a microcosmic world situation in which people can explore their attitudes and behavior toward each other. Group support in the "safe emergency" of the therapeutic situation also can be extremely useful to an individual, as can identification with other members' conflicts and their working out of those conflicts.

### EVALUATION

Gestalt therapy is, above all, a synthesis of approaches to understanding human psychology and behavior. This does not take away from either its uniqueness or its usefulness; in appropriately Gestalt fashion, uniqueness and usefulness lie in the nature of the whole rather than in the derivation of parts.

As such a synthesis, Gestalt therapy has usefully incorporated a great deal from psychoanalytic and existential psychology, as well as bits and pieces from behaviorism (the emphasis on behavior and the obvious), psychodrama (the enacting of conflicts), group psychotherapy (work in groups), and Zen Buddhism (minimum intellectualization and focus on present awareness). The spirit of Gestalt therapy is a humanistic, growth-oriented one which, in addition to Perls' associations with the Esalen Institute, has made Gestalt therapy a major force in the human potential movement. The commonsensical, conversational nature of the literature of Gestalt therapy, as well as the attitudes of many Gestalt therapists, is beginning to contribute to a demystification of psychotherapy which many people are finding welcome.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Perls' work was more explicitly focused around the practice of psychotherapy than around a theory of personality. Not surprisingly, this leaves certain holes

in any attempt to extrapolate a cohesive theory out of his work. Yet this is in itself consistent with his view of the usefulness of theory as theory. If the attitude and the experience which are the Gestalt approach fit in some basic way with our own attitudes and experience, the Gestalt approach offers us a great deal in the realm of extending our own awareness.

Clearly, there are dangers in this atheoretical approach. Some of them are apparent in many of the current applications of Gestalt therapy. The approach, when applied in a therapeutic situation, easily becomes gimmicky, simplistic, reductionistic, or simply an imitation of Perls' particular personal style.

One aspect of Gestalt therapy that has drawn considerable criticism entails the implications of Perls' Gestalt approach in social and political terms. The notion of the capacity to make choices, to take responsibility for one's life, to become a "self-supporting, self-regulating" individual is premised on a relative freedom in terms of societal constraints, which is certainly unavailable to many people. Similar criticisms have been made regarding the use of Gestalt techniques with psychotic individuals; Gestalt therapy presupposes a substantial capacity to take responsibility for the choices one makes, and Perls himself questioned the advisability of using Gestalt therapy with psychotics.

Gestalt therapy developed in reaction to what Perls saw to be an increasing tendency toward rigidity and dogmatism in psychology, particularly psychoanalytic psychology. A major evaluative question that must be asked about the Gestalt approach (or any other) is that having gained a certain currency in psychological thinking, how easily will it become lodged in the same kinds of rigidity and dogmatism against which Perls was rebelling? Certainly the ease with which the Gestalt approach is translated into series of psychotherapeutic tricks and apparently instant psychotherapeutic cures does not help maintain it as the serious, vital endeavor that Perls intended. But such problems in the application of the Gestalt approach aside, Perls has made a significant contribution to a holistic psychology of the human organism and to the psychology of human awareness.

### THE THEORY FIRST HAND

This is the introduction to *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. It is a compressed and direct example of the way Fritz Perls presented his point of view.

I want to talk about the present development of humanistic psychology. It took us a long time to debunk the whole Freudian crap, and now we are entering a new and more dangerous phase. We

Most people take explaining as being identical with understanding. There is a great difference. Like now, I can explain a lot to you. I can give you a lot of sentences that help you build an intellectual model of how we function. Maybe some of you feel the coincidence of these sentences and explanations with your real life, and this would mean understanding.

Right now I can only hypnotize you, persuade you, make you believe I'm right. You don't know. I'm just preaching something. You wouldn't learn from my words. Learning is discovery. . . . And I hope I can assist you in learning, in discovering something about yourself. [Perls, 1969a, p. 25]

are entering the phase of the turner-onners: turn on to instant cure, instant joy, instant sensory-awareness. We are entering the phase of the quacks and the con-men, who think if you get some breakthrough, you are cured—disregarding any growth requirements, disregarding any of the real potential, the inborn genius in all of you. If this is becoming a faddism, it is as dangerous to psychology as the year-decade-century-long lying on the couch. At least the damage we suffered under psychoanalysis does little to the patient except for making him deader and deader. This is not as obnoxious as this quick-quick-quick thing. The psychoanalysts at least bring good will with them. I must say I am *very* concerned with what's going on right now.

One of the objections I have against anyone calling himself a Gestalt Therapist is that he uses technique. A technique is a gimmick. A gimmick should be used only in the extreme case. We've got enough people running around collecting gimmicks, more gimmicks, and abusing them. These techniques, these tools, are quite useful in some seminar on sensory awareness or joy, just to give you some idea that you are still alive, that the myth that the American is a corpse is not true, that he *can* be alive. But the sad fact is that this jazzing-up more often becomes a dangerous substitute activity, another phony therapy that *prevents* growth.

Now the problem is not so much with the turner-onners but with the whole American culture. We have made a 180-degree turn from puritanism and moralism to hedonism. Suddenly everything has to be fun, pleasure, and any sincere involvement, any really *being here*, is discouraged.

*A thousand plastic flowers  
Don't make a desert bloom  
A thousand empty faces  
Don't fill an empty room*

In Gestalt Therapy, we are working for something else. We are here to promote the growth process and develop the human potential. We do not talk of instant joy, instant sensory awareness, instant cure. The growth process is a process that takes time. We can't just snap our fingers and say, "Come on, let's be gay! Let's do this!" You can turn on if you want to with LSD, and jazz it up, but that has nothing to do with the sincere work of that approach to psychiatry which I call Gestalt Therapy. In therapy, we have not only to get through the role-playing. We also have to fill in the holes in the personality to make the person whole and complete again. And again, as before, this can't be done by the turner-onners. In Gestalt Therapy we have a better way, but it is no magic shortcut. You don't have to be on a couch or in a Zendo for twenty or thirty years, but you have to invest yourself, and it takes time to grow.

The conditioners also start out with a false assumption. Their basic premise that behavior is "law" is a lot of crap. That is: we learn to breathe, to eat, we learn to walk. "Life is nothing but whatever conditions into which it has been born." *If*, in the behaviorist reorganization of our behavior, we get a modification towards better self-support, and throw away all the artificial social roles we have learned, then I am on the side of the behaviorists. The stopping block seems to be anxiety. Always anxiety. Of course you are anxious if you have to learn a new way of behavior, and the psychiatrists usually are afraid of anxiety. They don't know what anxiety *is*. Anxiety is the excitement, the *élan vital* which we carry with us, and which becomes stagnated if we are unsure about the role we have to play. If we don't know if we will get applause or tomatoes, we hesitate, so the heart begins to race and all the excitement can't flow into activity, and we have stage fright. So the formula of anxiety is very simple: anxiety is the gap between the *now* and the *then*. If you are in the *now*, you can't be anxious, because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing spontaneous activity. If you are in the *now*, you are creative, you are inventive. If you have your senses ready, if you have your eyes and ears open, like every small child, you find a solution.

A release to spontaneity, to the support of our total personality—yes, yes, yes. The pseudo-spontaneity of the turner-onners as they become hedonistic—just, let's do something, let's take LSD, let's have instant joy, instant sensory-awareness—*No*. So between the Scylla of conditioning, and the Charybdis of turning on, there is something—a person that is real, a person who takes a stand.

As you know, there is a rebellion on in the United States. We discover that producing things, and living for things, and the exchange of things, is not the ultimate meaning of life. We discover that the meaning of life is that it is to be lived, and it is not to be traded and conceptualized and squeezed into a pattern of systems. We realize that manipulation and control are not the ultimate joy of life.

But we must also realize that so far we only have a rebellion. We don't have a revolution yet. There is still much of substance missing. There is a race on between fascism and humanism. At this moment it seems to me that the race is about lost to the fascists. And the wild hedonistic, unrealistic, jazz-it-up, turner-onners have nothing to do with humanism. It is protest, it's a rebelliousness, which is fine as such, but it's not an end. I've got plenty of contact with the youngsters of our generation who are in despair. They see all the militarism and the atomic bomb in the background. They want to get something out of life. They want to become real and exist. If there is any chance of interrupting the rise and fall of the United States, it's up to our youth and it's up to you in supporting this youth. To be able to do this, there is only one way through: to be-



come real, to learn to take a stand, to develop one's center, to understand the basis of existentialism: a rose is a rose is a rose. I am what I am, and at this moment I cannot possibly be different from what I am. That is what this book is about. I give you the Gestalt prayer, maybe as a direction. The prayer in Gestalt Therapy is:

*I do my thing, and you do your thing.  
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations  
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.  
You are you and I am I,  
And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.  
If not, it can't be helped.*

[Perls, 1969a, pp. 1-4]

## EXERCISES

### CONTINUUM OF AWARENESS

In discussing Perls' concept of awareness, we mentioned his use of a *continuum of awareness* as a means of encouraging self-awareness. Paradoxically, the continuum of awareness is an exercise which requires immense discipline in its practice, although it has as a goal the development of one's capacity for spontaneity. The notion behind the continuum of awareness is that spontaneity and self-awareness depend on really understanding the meaning of the words "how" and "now." It works on the Gestalt principle that, given an individual's capacity to maintain a continued awareness of his or her experience, the most important unfinished situation (the dominant need) will always emerge to be dealt with.

The instructions are simple: Just be aware, from second to second, of what you are experiencing—*how* you experience your existence *now*. Observe the progress of your awareness. When do you interrupt yourself with planning, rehearsing, fantasizing, remembering? Do you evaluate rather than permit pure awareness? What does the discipline of awareness feel like? *Pay particular attention to the ways in which you sabotage your own attempts at sustained awareness*; are these ways in which you habitually prevent yourself from fully contacting the world and your own experience? You might also try to prolong and stay in contact with the moment at which you want to avoid continued awareness. Can you get a sense of what you are avoiding; does a situation emerge with which you feel unfinished?

The attempt, in this exercise, is to enhance your capacity for experiencing by developing the capacity to fully experience what *is*. The assumption is that by *paying attention* to our experience, moment to moment, we can avail ourselves of what we need to live fulfilled and meaningful lives.

## WORK WITH DREAMS

Perls suggests that dreams are existential messages which can help us to understand what unfinished situations we are carrying around with us, what we are missing in our lives, what we are avoiding doing, and how we are avoiding and disowning parts of ourselves. He describes the opportunities for growth through work with dreams as follows:

In Gestalt Therapy we don't interpret dreams. We do something more interesting with them. Instead of analyzing and further cutting up the dream, we want to bring it back to life. And the way to bring it back to life is to re-live the dream as if it were happening now. Instead of telling the dream as if it were a story in the past, act it out in the present, so that it becomes a part of yourself, so that you are really involved.

If you understand what you can do with dreams, you can do a tremendous lot for yourself on your own. Just take any old dream or dream fragment, it doesn't matter. As long as a dream is remembered, it is still alive and available, and it still contains an unfinished, unassimilated situation. When we are working on dreams, we usually take only a small bit from the dream, because you can get so much from even a little bit.

So if you want to work on your own, I suggest you write the dream down and make a list of *all* the details in the dream. Get every person, every thing, every mood, and then work on these to *become* each one of them. Ham it up, and really transform yourself into each of the different items. Really *become* that thing—whatever it is in a dream—*become* it. Use your magic. Turn into that ugly frog or whatever is there—the dead thing, the live thing, the demon—and stop thinking. Lose your mind and come to your senses. Every little bit is a piece of the jigsaw puzzle, which together will make up a much larger whole—a much stronger, happier, more completely *real* personality.

Next, take each one of these different items, characters, and parts, and let them have encounters between them. Write a script. By "write a script," I mean have a dialogue between the two opposing parts and you will find—especially if you get the correct opposites—that they always start out fighting each other. All the different parts—any part in the dream is yourself, is a projection of yourself, and if there are inconsistent sides, and you use them to fight each other, you have the eternal conflict game, the self-torture game. As the process of encounter goes on, there is a mutual learning until we come to a oneness and integration of the two

opposing forces. Then the civil war is finished, and your energies are ready for your struggles with the world.

Each little bit of work you do will mean a bit of assimilation of something. In principle, you can get through the whole cure—let's call it cure or maturation—if you did this with every single thing in one dream. Everything is there. In different forms the dreams change, but when you start like this, you'll find more dreams will come and the existential message will become clearer and clearer . . .

We find all we need in the dream, or in the perimeter of the dream, the environment of the dream. The existential difficulty, the missing part of the personality, they are all there. It's a kind of central attack right into the midst of your non-existence.

The dream is an excellent opportunity to find the holes in the personality. They come out as voids, as blank spaces, and when you get into the vicinity of these holes, you get confused or nervous. There is a dreadful experience, the expectation, "If I approach this, there will be catastrophe. I will be *nothing*." I have already talked a bit about the philosophy of nothingness. This is the impasse, where you avoid, where you become phobic. You suddenly get sleepy or remember something very important you have to do. So if you work on dreams it is better if you do it with someone else who can point out where you avoid. Understanding the dream means realizing when you are avoiding the obvious. The only danger is that this other person might come too quickly to the rescue and tell you what is going on in you, instead of giving yourself the chance of discovering yourself.

And if you understand the meaning of each time you identify with some bit of a dream, each time you translate an *it* into an *I*, you increase in vitality and in your potential. [Perls, 1969a, pp. 68-70]

#### DREAMWORK SAMPLE

LUNDA: I dreamed that I watch . . . a lake . . . drying up, and there is a small island in the middle of the lake, and a circle of . . . porpoises—they're like porpoises except that they can stand up, so they're like porpoises that are like people, and they're in a circle, sort of like a religious ceremony, and it's very sad—I feel very sad because they can breathe, they are sort of dancing around the circle, but the water, their element, is drying up. So it's like a dying—like watching a race of people, or a race of creatures, dying. And they are mostly females, but a few

of them have a small male organ, so there are a few males there, but they won't live long enough to reproduce, and their element is drying up. And there is one that is sitting over here near me and I'm talking to this porpoise and he has prickles on his tummy, sort of like a porcupine, and they don't seem to be a part of him. And I think that there's one good point about the water drying up, I think—well, at least at the bottom, when all the water dries up, there will probably be some sort of treasure there, because at the bottom of the lake there should be things that have fallen in, like coins or something, but I look carefully and all that I can find is an old license plate. . . . That's the dream.

FRITZ: Will you please play the license plate.

LINDA: I am an old license plate, thrown in the bottom of a lake. I have no use because I'm no value—although I'm not rusted—I'm outdated, so I can't be used as a license plate . . . and I'm just thrown on the rubbish heap. That's what I did with a license plate, I threw it on a rubbish heap.

FRITZ: Well, how do you feel about this?

LINDA: (quietly) I don't like it. I don't like being a license plate—useless.

FRITZ: Could you talk about this. That was such a long dream until you come to find the license plate, I'm sure this must be of great importance.

LINDA: (sighs) Useless. Outdated. . . . The use of a license plate is to allow—give a car permission to go . . . and I can't give any more permission to do anything because I'm outdated. . . . In California, they just paste a little—you buy a sticker—and stick it on the car, on the old license plate. (faint attempt at humor) So maybe someone could put me on their car and stick this sticker on me, I don't know . . .

FRITZ: Okeh, now play the lake.

LINDA: I'm a lake . . . I'm drying up, and disappearing, soaking into the earth . . . (with a touch of surprise) *dying*. . . . But when I soak into the earth, I become part of the earth—so maybe I water the surrounding area, so . . . even in the lake, even in my bed, flowers can grow (sighs). . . . New life can grow . . . from me (cries). . . .

FRITZ: You get the existential message?

LINDA: Yes. (sadly, but with conviction) I can paint—I can

create—I can create beauty. I can no longer reproduce, I'm like the porpoise. . . . but I . . . I'm . . . I . . . keep wanting to say I'm *food* . . . I . . . as water becomes . . . I water the earth, and give life—growing things, the water—they need both the earth and water, and the . . . and the air and the sun, but as the water from the lake, I can play a part in something, and producing—feeding.

FRITZ: You see the contrast: On the surface, you find something, some artifact—the license plate, the artificial you—but then when you go deeper, you find the apparent death of the lake is actually fertility . . .

LINDA: And I don't need a license plate, or a permission, a license in order to . . .

FRITZ: (gently) Nature doesn't need a license plate to grow. You don't have to be useless, if you are organismically creative, which means if you are involved.

LINDA: And I don't need permission to be creative . . . Thank you. [Perls, 1969a, pp. 81-82]

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