

**IS GESTALT THERAPY COMPATIBLE WITH  
FEMINIST THEOLOGY?  
A STUDY OF "PRACTICAL-VALUES"**

**BY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Interdisciplinary work is of the essence of pastoral theology, most obviously where theology and the human sciences interact. Such work carries with it a number of risks that are not always addressed or even recognised. The principal risk is that a facile attempt to forge links between disciplines may lead to serious distortions of the meanings of both. This thesis examines gestalt therapy and feminist theology as possible candidates for interdisciplinary work. By reading and interrogating the literature of both disciplines, it identifies their origins and analyses their core ideas. The thesis affirms disputed links between gestalt philosophy, psychology and the later therapy, and examines other contributors to the development of gestalt and its core ideas. It next examines the development and scope of feminist theology before analysing core ideas across the range of voices in feminist writing. From these core ideas it is possible to establish the values that writers and practitioners find important in their lives (practical-values). On this basis, it is shown that these two disciplines, despite differences of history and purpose, are compatible with each other and therefore suitable candidates for interdisciplinary work.

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Aim of thesis and its context

The aim of this thesis is to establish that a particular school of (psychotherapeutic) psychology is compatible with the theological discipline of feminist theology. It seeks to establish this compatibility on the basis of what are termed "practical-values". The question of compatibility is expanded to include a wider question about interdisciplinary work in pastoral theology.

The thesis is written at a time when there is an increasing and ongoing critical public debate about science and religion. This is often discussed as a clash of two cultures although it is more exact to see it as a philosophical clash entailing ontology and epistemology. What is at stake is the reality or otherwise of important propositions about the way the universe is and about how we can know what we know. One of the major themes of the public debate about science and religion is a question about the status of religious language and thought. This question becomes figural in the mass media principally when it is seen against the background of (the public understanding) of scientific thinking. Is too much reliance placed upon scientific enquiry and theory, and, if so, where are the limits of the authority of the scientist? This question is of particular importance for pastoral theology where people are engaging simultaneously in disciplines as diverse as politics, economics, sociology and psychology as well as theology.

This thesis concerns interdisciplinary work entailing psychology and theology. For some time, and particularly since the end of the Second World War, an increasing number of writers engaged

in pastoral ministry and pastoral theology, have developed new ideas and practices related to their understandings of theology and to the psychology of counselling and psychotherapy. Demands for training in pastoral counselling in the USA rose dramatically during the 1950s and remain high. In the UK, this same phenomenon appeared in the early 1960s, and demand is still high, especially in ministerial training courses and colleges where it is often seen as the most practical and appealing element of practical or pastoral theology.

To assert that there is common ground between the disciplines of theology and psychology is nowadays to make a commonplace observation. To state that, in some circumstances, the two disciplines may be addressing the same situation and even saying the same things, albeit in different languages, requires justification. Such an argument has important implications for both disciplines at the levels of theory and of practice<sup>1</sup>.

Given the wide scope of this subject area, it is necessary to set some boundaries around the work. The foci for this thesis are those of gestalt therapeutic psychology and feminist theology. There are a number of reasons for defining the area in this manner. First, these two disciplines fit an overall aim of the thesis to make a contribution that may offer critical support to interdisciplinary work in the field of pastoral theology. To further this aim, it is arguably more useful to focus on two subjects with at least a *prima facie* likelihood of compatibility than to search for compatibility where it seems improbable. Conclusions derived from the former can later be applied in other contexts of interdisciplinary enquiry.

Second, the chosen methodology for the thesis - that of studying two bodies of literature - has

only recently become possible from the gestalt side. In its early days (1960s), gestalt was notorious for its scepticism about intellectual enquiry, so that the connections, established later in the thesis, between gestalt philosophy, psychology and therapy might have been impossible to establish at an earlier date.

Third, it is arguable that feminist theology is now so firmly established that it is no longer possible to dismiss it as a protest theology. It is an established discipline critically engaged with a number of other disciplines including that of psychology, though, admittedly, principally with psychoanalysis. As will be seen, this focus on psychoanalysis is by no means an obstacle when considering gestalt therapy.

Fourth, as will be shown, there is a critical chronological and geographical coincidence between second-wave feminism and the development of gestalt therapy. Although both have long roots, they both emerged into public consciousness in the USA in the early 1960s.

The thesis shows that these two disciplines are not monolithic entities, but that each has drawn on – and continues to draw on - many sources in its development. Partly because of this varied and complex background, each discipline speaks with many voices and promotes a range of viewpoints. It is nonetheless possible to identify within each discipline certain core ideas. These core ideas are analysed and certain values are derived from them that are central to each discipline. These values are more than ideas, in the sense that they inform the practice and lives of those to whom they are important. They are therefore termed practical-values<sup>2</sup>. Because of their centrality in the practice of those for whom feminist theology and gestalt therapy are of

crucial importance, they offer means by which the two disciplines can be compared and their similarities and differences noted.

The thesis is founded upon the argument that compatibility in the matter of practical-values is a positive and sufficient test of compatibility for the purposes of interdisciplinary study and practical work. The development of a practical-values approach, though devised for the purposes of this thesis, has applications for people whose primary concern is getting theory into practice. However, as will be seen, the elements of practice and theory are inseparable.

Now it may be argued that a more usual approach would be to examine the history of the two disciplines and the ways in which they have been brought into proximity in the past. But such an approach would not address, for example, Pattison's criticism concerning the potential for skewedness or sheer arbitrariness in interdisciplinary work that can produce unreliable juxtapositions or syntheses<sup>3</sup>. This is a valid criticism that points up the uncritical way in which pastoral practitioners have sometimes looked for support in disciplines outside theology without interrogating their theoretical or other bases or contexts. The historical approach may prove helpful, but what is more useful as a basis for doing pastoral theology is not an argument from what has been, but an argument about the basis on which two disciplines operate in practice. We cannot assume, for example, that the words and phrases used in one context will carry the same range of meanings in the other. What is important here is a correspondence between disciplines at the level of such vital elements as their scope, or range of interests. Other key factors would include their views of what it is to be human, of what it is to live in community, and of what might transcend the more obviously quantifiable goods for an individual or a community. This is

the realm of practical-values.

This promotion of practical-values represents both a novel basis for compatibility (contrasting, for example, with a Faith and Order approach to beliefs held) and a potentially useful tool for those engaged in pastoral theology in other areas of study and practice. Although the term "practical-values" is a neologism of this thesis, it has its ancestry in biblical wisdom ("by their fruits shall ye know them") as well as in Christian ethics and pragmatism. It entails the analysis of core ideas in each of the partner disciplines, from which practical-values may be deduced.

The thesis concludes that the identity or the complete convergence of the two disciplines studied here is impossible and, for practical purposes, unnecessary. The methodology developed provides a useful and powerful means of examining compatibility in this instance and may provide means for testing compatibility between other disciplines within the fields of practical and pastoral theology.

Methodologically, the thesis proceeds by examining the literatures of gestalt therapy and feminist theology. The decision to adopt this approach rather than, say, an empirical one based upon questionnaires and interviews, reflects the new situation in which it has recently become possible to speak of a growing body of gestalt literature to be set alongside that of feminist theology. This is a further original feature of the thesis, in that, so far as can be ascertained, no other such work has been undertaken.

As was stated above, this is a large area to study in depth and each of its contributory disciplines is intrinsically complex. Therefore it is necessary to focus on defined areas. For present purposes, therefore, reference is made to feminism and feminist theology in Europe and North America.

Feminism, what people mean by it and what they do about it, has been one of the drivers of social change in the past century. Its impact is perhaps comparable to the industrial "revolutions" which have transformed societies since the late eighteenth century. Legislation, working practices, pay structures, shopping patterns, child-rearing, educational syllabi, ecclesial governance, the fashion industry, understandings of literature, history, biology, health and medicine have all been influenced by feminist critiques. This chapter continues with some introductory comments concerning ways in which feminism has influenced theology and psychology, the two disciplines most central to the thesis.

## **1.1 Theology**

First, let us consider theology. In the present context, the term refers to the theologies of mainstream Western Christians. Feminist critiques have exposed the patriarchal nature of the church and of its theologies and have shown that theology, like all other aspects of ecclesial life, is a gendered discipline. Feminist theologians offer radical critiques of Christian thought and practice. To understand how such critiques have so radical an effect upon theology, they must be seen in context. This is not to dilute the impact of those critiques but to demonstrate some contextually important antecedents.

In the past fifty years, theological activity has been influenced by a number of historical processes. The main processes are identified here and each is briefly illustrated in turn. Each has a direct bearing on theological discourse as well as on much else in the cultures concerned.

First, in the past fifty years, there have been major political changes involving the collapse of empires, de-colonisation and realignment around new political and trading relationships. For example "the kingdom of God" was once understood by imperialists to be more or less coterminous with the *status quo*. This view became untenable as political changes altered the mind-set of once colonised peoples and colonisers.

Second, the post-Holocaust situation has caused many Christians to re-examine Jewish-Christian relations<sup>4</sup>. Dyson, challenged by Ecclestone's *The night sky of the Lord*, asserts that there is something unidentified in Christianity which is inimical to Jews, something intrinsic that gives rise periodically to anti-semitism, pogroms and the Holocaust<sup>5</sup>. Yet Christian theology, which claims to address the question of evil, says little or nothing about its own capacity for spawning evil<sup>6</sup>.

Third, theology, at its most healthy, engages with the philosophical and other influences that shape human cultures. One such philosophical influence is existentialism<sup>7</sup>. In particular, one should consider the influence of Martin Buber's *I and thou*<sup>8</sup> and linked to Buber, Paul Tillich. Tillich was, in the late 1920s, Professor of Philosophy in the University of Frankfurt, a principal centre of European existentialism. Ronald Gregor Smith points to an intricate connection between Buber's work and that of Tillich although he eschews "mere 'influence'" in that

connection<sup>9</sup>. There are clear echoes of the holism of *I and thou* in Tillich's work<sup>10</sup>. Buber's and Tillich's existentialism had a profound influence in theological circles which widened with the publication, in 1963, of *Honest to God*<sup>11</sup>. In undermining the hegemony of traditional metaphysics it paved the way for further critiques in philosophical theology and ethics that feminists (and others) were able to develop.

Fourth, existential theology's God-as-ground-of-being fed into the "death of God" movement whose putative leader, Thomas J.J. Altizer, was certain that his thinking was founded on the more radical teachings of Tillich<sup>12</sup>. The death of God theologians were part of a broad spectrum of what are sometimes termed post-Christian or post-religious movements. What they have in common is a perception that the metaphysics that were the vehicle of Christian communication into the twentieth century could not carry it into the twenty-first. There are some parallels with the post-Christian positions occupied by writers such as Daphne Hampson whose critique of Christianity offers a serious challenge to those who stay within the fellowship of the Church<sup>13</sup>.

Fifth, and under the same broad heading, one might include Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith network. But it may be more useful to see Cupitt's thinking<sup>14</sup> in the light of the *The myth of God incarnate* debate<sup>15</sup>. Now, it may be argued in this latter case that the loss of confidence in earlier metaphysics was not the major influence and that the growing impact of other religions upon the consciousness of previously Christian cultures constituted the greater impulse. But the Preface states that the need for the book

arises from growing knowledge of Christian origins, and involves a recognition that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2.21) "a man approved by God" for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second

Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us.<sup>16</sup>

The changes that came out of the end-of-metaphysics coincided with the work of second-wave feminist theologians who were challenging received images of God as gendered and patriarchal<sup>17</sup>. The critique of Hick and others is neither coterminous with nor intrinsically inimical to feminist approaches: it serves to undermine a specious metaphysical hegemony and affirms some new work on imaging God.

Another major influence on theological thinking, sixth in this account, has been the ecumenical movement. The 1910 World Missionary Conference focused on relations between missionaries, their sending churches and “native” churches<sup>18</sup>. The reports of some of the 1200 participants (although only eighteen were from the new churches<sup>19</sup>), mark the beginning of a new consciousness about interfaith and intercultural relations. Attitudes of openness, respect and generosity for other traditions and viewpoints laid the foundation for ecumenical work at local, national and international levels. They opened the way for agreements between churches that support joint witness and service<sup>20</sup>. Ecumenical work at the international level has enabled churches to engage politically in, for example, South Africa, Cambodia and Chile. Some of the politics have been explicitly gender politics, and cultures more open to the leadership of women have influenced faith, order and worship in the World Council of Churches and in Europe.

Seventh, and linked to the ecumenical dynamic, is a growing awareness of religious pluralism. This has led to changes in religious and secular life. Religious education in schools has changed, and some departments of theology in universities (certainly in the UK) have become departments

of religious studies. The history of church relations with people of other faiths is a mixed one. The gospels show both a tendency to Christian exclusivity as well as an openness to people of goodwill as exemplars of the Kingdom of God. In recent times, liberal theologians have taken very seriously the claims of other religions<sup>21</sup> to the point where they can induce in the student a sense of the arbitrariness of Christian belief<sup>22</sup>. Ninian Smart's essay in *Soundings* was a provocation to many Christians who felt that, if Christianity were not the final revelation, then it had no salvific power<sup>23</sup>. What was not so evident at the time of *Soundings* was that the entry into dialogue with other religions also entailed a dialogue with other elements of the cultures. Each faith community has, for example, its own traditions concerning sexuality and gender, and the new dialogue began to open up gender issues. The ethics of inter-sexual relationships in Western cultures may not have exact equivalents in other cultures<sup>24</sup>.

Eighth, there is the dialogue with the human sciences<sup>25</sup>. Theology is a discipline in a living context, which is the subject of other disciplines including anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics and politics. Once it is accepted that theology does not have a monopoly on understanding human experience, the need for dialogue is apparent. Dialogue between two parties, if we are to follow Buber, suggests that both are opening themselves to the possibility of change. This is not to suggest that they had previously been wrong in their ideas and practices, but rather that dialogue promotes new thinking and practice that, *ipso facto*, constitutes development.

The ninth important influence on the recent development of theology is that of liberation theology. This wave of theological praxis arose in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America.

Stephen Pattison defines it thus:

...liberation theology is complex, subtle, and pluriform. At its base, however, it is relatively easy to identify and define. All liberation theology is theology done from a position of active involvement with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Liberation theology starts with an *a priori* commitment to the liberation struggle and option for the poor. In Gutiérrez's graphic term, it is theology done from the perspective of the "underside of history" where the poor are attempting to become subjects of their own destiny. It is a second order activity which accompanies and reflects upon the experience of the struggle for liberation in the light of faith - action and commitment first, theological reflection afterwards. Its purpose is to fortify, inspire and inform Christian action within the overarching struggle of the poor.<sup>26</sup>

Pattison argues that liberation theology is not to be regarded as a "there and then" movement which happened in the 1970s and can now be consigned to the past. Its importance reaches beyond the base communities<sup>27</sup> where it first developed. Pattison places it in the category of those great ideas and movements that have yet to be understood and taken up with sufficient seriousness<sup>28</sup>.

When feminism made its first impact on theology, it seemed to be another form of liberation theology. The intellectual and action critiques of women obliged theological writers and practitioners to heed their criticisms. Theologians who understood theology as constituting a reflection upon engagement in a changing world were bound to respond. Church and world are not watertight compartments and feminist pressures were exerted from within the church as well as from outside it. During the 1960s, for example, the ratio of women to men undertaking formal theological training began to increase. During the 1970s and 1980s this trend increased and, as feminist consciousness also increased, theology began to change. This was evident across the various sub-disciplines such as Old and New Testament studies, historical theology, church history, pastoral theology and ethics.

Feminist theological critiques spring from and shape understandings of Christian faith and life as shaped by historical forces, chief of which is that of privileging men and masculinity. In 1960, Valerie Saiving published an article on the Christian interpretations of sin and love. In it she wrote:

It is my contention that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience and that feminine experience reveals in a more emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men. Contemporary theological doctrines of love have, I believe, been constructed primarily upon the basis of masculine experience and thus view the human situation from the male standpoint. Consequently, these doctrines do not provide an adequate interpretation of the situation of women -- nor, for that matter, of men ....<sup>29</sup>

From such a perspective, familiar intellectual and emotional landscapes look different. Old standard (actually, masculine) responses to such a critique would have missed the point, because the critique starts from the premise that theology, like everything else which human cultures have created, is inevitably gendered.

Much of the new theological work came from the universities and seminaries of North America, although Christian feminists in Europe were soon mobilised to do their own work. There is now a large body of literature marking new thinking and practice that has arisen out of feminist experience and reflection<sup>30</sup>. Elaine Graham points out that:

Critical theories of gender confront fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of human existence, agency and social organization: whether it is possible to talk about a single or universal 'human nature' (ontology); what are the foundations and sources of personal consciousness and selfhood (subjectivity); whether knowledge of the world is innate or phenomenologically - or even politically - constructed (epistemology); how purposeful and everyday transformation of the world around us effects the material and symbolic relations that underpin social systems (agency); and what might be the possibilities and grounds for an emancipatory knowledge and action based on some notion of ultimate good (teleology).

Finally, such a perspective portrays a 'human nature' that is not essential, but existential..... Whatever human nature may be, it is inaccessible to our understanding beyond the medium of our own culture and agency.<sup>31</sup>

Graham's account of areas of discourse impacted by such critiques encompasses most of what theology engages in. It suggests a fundamentally different perspective, one that parallels the process of liberation theology in which theologians were also establishing a new hermeneutic. The liberation theologians were looking at everything in solidarity with and from the perspective of poor and oppressed people<sup>32</sup>. Many of the liberation theologians have remained, with whatever private difficulties, within the fold of a church that is often shaken by the secular and ecclesiastical political fallout they occasion<sup>33</sup>.

Feminist theologians have often been treated with hostility and suspicion by the church. References to gender studies and to the experience of women have frequently elicited hostility and suspicion rather than curious interest. Some theologians, for example Hampson, find that the structures of theology, like those structures of the church, are irredeemably patriarchal in nature, and they move across the boundaries of the church into other religious practices or none. Other feminist theologians such as Fiorenza, Heyward, Plaskow and Ruether, have found ways to stay within the church and, working from within, seek to change ecclesiastical structures and, more importantly, to change the theological (including the sexual-social-political) ground from which they have grown.

## **1.2 Psychotherapeutic psychology**

By contrast with the ancient discipline of theology, psychology, as the term is used here, is of more recent origin. One could argue that Plato and Aristotle had important things to say about psychology, or that psychology became a conscious discipline in the work of Descartes. However, the term is used here to denote that discipline that developed in the late nineteenth century with the work of people such as Wundt, Stumpf and their colleagues. The word psychology is used to indicate a scientific discipline that emerged in the 1890s as a discipline in its own right. Moreover, in this thesis the use of the word indicates, unless otherwise stated, that branch of psychology concerned with psychotherapy and its adjuncts such as psychological understandings of human development.

The history of modern psychotherapeutic psychology begins with Freud. Psychoanalysis is the oldest of modern psychotherapies and its story is paradigmatic for others. Freud's thinking and writing, with that of the International Psychoanalytic Congress, has exercised a profound influence upon psychoanalysts and other therapists, and also upon wider cultures. It has contributed to current understandings of self and society, and has helped to shape attitudes to relationships, suffering, health, and personal and social good.

At first reading, it may seem that the developments of which Freud and his colleagues wrote, grew solely from reflection upon clinical data. The reality is more complex. Referring to the work of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, J.A.C. Brown shows that sociology and anthropology have influenced Freudian and post-Freudian thinking.

..[I]f the observations described are even approximately valid, then clearly they give a much more optimistic view of the possibilities for the human race than one obtains from Freud and Melanie Klein. The Neo-Freudian schools too reject Freud's biological

approach and are more concerned with the influence of society and culture in building personality than with its instinctual foundations, and amongst psychologists today one finds at the one extreme the orthodox Freudians with their biological theory of a relatively fixed personality dependent upon the instinctual drives and originating in the early years of life, and at the other extreme the thoroughgoing sociological schools ..... which assert that personality traits are not to be viewed as "inside" the individual, being merely consistent modes of behaviour organized around the roles the individual plays in society.<sup>34</sup>

Freud himself, as a creature of his time, was influenced by contemporary events. One of the great developments of his thinking was published in 1920<sup>35</sup>. In "Beyond the pleasure principle", he recognised that the earlier instinct and drive theories (which located the origins of neuroses in the traumas of early childhood, and especially in the modifications of sexuality) were inadequate to account for the repetitive nightmares of ex-combatants from the First World War. It was the war and its impact on those engaged in it, which led him to take seriously aggression - as well as sexuality - as formative of personality, and its repression as correspondingly significant in neurosis. He also took seriously the repetitive nature of the war-related nightmares and began to see them as a means of dealing with aggression. Indeed the war, which had nearly destroyed a generation of men, is directly linked to Freud's proposing the Life and Death "instincts" and to his later definition of the self-structure of id, ego and super-ego<sup>36</sup>.

Another influence on the development of psychology is that of national and cultural difference. Brown points to some of the developments of psychoanalysis that took place outside Germany and beyond Freud's immediate influence. He shows how contemporary American psychotherapy is evident in the psychoanalytic work of H.S. Sullivan, J.F. Brown and their colleagues. For example, Karen Horney set up in New York City a Society for the Advancement of

Psychoanalysis which, whilst considering itself neo-Freudian, was unlike its German counterparts in its avowedly sociological flavour. Sullivan's approach to psychoanalysis is heavily indebted to Freud, but contains novel elements from his own practice and thinking. These concerned social theories of child development, the place of culture and society in the formation and satisfaction of the self, and the centrality of empathy in child development. There are foretastes here of the so-called Third Wave or humanistic psychologies which developed thirty years later in the USA<sup>37</sup>. Brown, charting these developments, notes that neither Sullivan's nor Horney's work seems to have taken root elsewhere<sup>38</sup>. In an analogous development, the British school most closely related to psychoanalysis is that of object-relations. In his doctoral thesis, Guntrip follows the development of this school. It is, to many minds, an ingenious and elegant structure that gives both theoretical satisfaction and is also of great importance in practice<sup>39</sup>, and yet it is barely found outside Great Britain. It is reasonable to suppose that there is something about these schools that indicates some elements of the cultural peculiarities where they have grown.

A further example of important influences on the development of psychotherapeutic psychology can be seen in the process which psychoanalysts referred to as "the great debate"<sup>40</sup>. In the 1930s, Melanie Klein and others engaged with Freud and others in a debate concerning the differences between women and men, the aetiology of psychological sexual difference and what one would nowadays call gender construction. These considerations arose in part out of dissatisfactions on the part of some analysts with the theoretical constructs that they brought to their work. Whilst these dissatisfactions arose in part from clinical considerations, there was also discontent with the way in which women were plainly thought to be secondary to men. The early psychoanalytic theories were based upon male assumptions. The development of children was discussed as

though all children were male, and the central doctrine of the oedipal conflict was articulated, as the name suggests, with a focus on a male child. Later, thought was given to girl children whose development was considered in the light of an adjusted oedipal phase: in other words, girls were treated as boys *manqués*. Klein sought to establish an understanding of child development that had at its heart the assumption that girl children and boy children develop in ways that are similar and also significantly different, and with an assumption that both have to be understood on a basis of parity.

The assumptions that Freud and his colleagues made in their original formulations have exposed them to criticism, particularly from feminist writers. It must be conceded that, in his early thinking about the development of girls and in his understanding of women, Freud made many mistakes. He was also willing to accept the limits of his own awareness, and was open to the criticisms of Klein and her supporters. The "great debate" led to theoretical developments within psychoanalysis that influenced most modern psychological theories about development, sexuality and gender<sup>41</sup>.

As in the field of theology, so in psychology, what seemed (and often was) a male preserve<sup>42</sup> was affected by the input of women. From the beginning of psychoanalysis, large numbers of women came into therapy<sup>43</sup> and into the routes then open to practise psychotherapy. Their evidence as patients and their understanding as practitioners opened up the discipline and triggered further development. Second wave feminism has brought further changes of which four have especial importance in theory and practice.

First, most schools of therapy understand the nature and historical significance of patriarchy as a form of social oppression shaping the personalities and consequent lives of women and men<sup>44</sup>. Second, psychotherapeutic practice and theory increasingly acknowledge power as an important factor not just between therapist and patient but between women and men in therapeutic and other contexts. Third, there is an increasing awareness of the joint responsibility of male and female parents in bringing up their children. There are some discrete foci in this area, for example, clearer understandings about the ways in which power can be abused in families, including the abuse of power in sexual ways<sup>45</sup>. Fourth, feminist critiques have led to the development of specific therapeutic approaches for women including feminist therapies<sup>46</sup>.

The psychotherapeutic school at the centre of this thesis is not psychoanalysis, but gestalt, although gestalt therapy, in terms both of its theory of the self and of its historical antecedents, is closely related to psychoanalysis<sup>47</sup>. Gestalt was first developed in the late 1940s by Laura and Fritz Perls and came to public notice on the West coast of California in the late 1960s. Since that time, there has been both consolidation of an earlier charismatic movement, some revision and much conceptual and technical development. Some of that development has been a growth over time, analogous to growth from brash youth to a more reflective adulthood. Other change is, as might be expected, cultural: that is to say, one would not expect a psychotherapeutic approach developed in New York City and California to flourish unchanged in European countries. In all of these places, there have been other forces for change, shaping the wider culture and, with it, gestalt.

One of those forces has been feminism and, in the theory and practice of gestalt, as in

psychoanalysis, feminism has made its mark. There are both internal and external reasons for this. The internal reasons arise from the nature of the underlying gestalt philosophy and psychology that militates against an individualistic therapeutic approach and favours a view of the person as a point or focus in a fluid and complex field of events and relationships. A gestalt approach is socially and politically contextual, and feminism is part of the current social and political process. A more external reason for the impact of feminism is, as in the case of psychoanalysis, the participation and leadership of feminist women. The majority of practitioners of gestalt therapy in Great Britain are female<sup>48</sup>. Initially, their critical contributions were focused upon such matters as the dominant styles then adopted by male practitioners and teachers<sup>49</sup>. These were based upon an over-masculine understanding of power and, moreover, were incongruent with the overt liberationist aspirations of the gestalt approach. More feminine styles of leadership have contributed to a change in the climate of training institutes as well as group and individual therapeutic practices. This effect should not be underestimated: it is the style of a person's early teachers that tends to shape the experience, learning and later practice and teaching of a psychotherapist. Many of the influential gestalt teachers since the 1980s are women. In the gestalt network in the British Isles, more women than men are publishing about gestalt theory and practice<sup>50</sup>. It is also true to say that the teaching of gestalt therapy nowadays has a critical stance which assumes that it is no longer necessary to spell out feminist arguments. The absence of such arguments on teaching handouts and syllabi is evidence of their acceptance.

### **1.3 Scope of the project**

As these preliminary remarks have indicated, this thesis examines theory and practice in the

fields of theology and psychology. Both of the disciplines may be understood as clusters of interconnected sub-disciplines. The sub-discipline of pastoral or practical<sup>51</sup> theology is interdisciplinary. In this instance, pastoral theology consists in the meeting of Christian traditions and practice with other aspects of human experience. These aspects can arise in any part of the life of an individual, a community, a state or a race, and they may be treated within one or more definable areas of discourse. In the present study, pastoral theology entails engagement with gestalt philosophy, psychology and therapy. None of these three sub-disciplines is itself pastoral theology. It is the dialogue between the (sub-) disciplines that constitutes pastoral theology<sup>52</sup>.

This consideration indicates one dimension of the complexity of the task ahead. However, there is more. As was noted in the Introduction to this chapter, Pattison warns<sup>53</sup> of the danger of unawaresly skewed choices in the selection of that other discipline (or school within a discipline) that could lead to an unbalanced view of life and to some unwarranted conclusions. Given these strictures, close attention will be paid later in the thesis (chapter 7) to the compatibility or otherwise of the two central disciplines involved.

The practical-values of gestalt are derived from its core ideas. It has been necessary, therefore, to examine carefully the roots of gestalt therapy. Because gestalt is closely related to many other schools of psychotherapy, care is taken to indicate these links. As was stated above, gestalt owes most, among its psychological forbears and siblings, to psychoanalysis. This debt is not only to Freud and some of his colleagues, but also to current psychoanalytic theorists<sup>54</sup>.

But the roots of gestalt do not lie only in psychoanalysis, for it is itself a changing amalgam of

ideas. Many practitioners hold that to call gestalt a therapy is to limit unduly its scope. Some prefer to describe gestalt as a philosophy, others as an educational method, and yet others as a process-orientated psychology<sup>55</sup> of particular relevance in organisation development.

Opinions vary as to the strength or significance of the links between gestalt therapy and gestalt psychology<sup>56</sup> and little work has been done on the links further back into gestalt philosophy until the research for this thesis. One necessary part of the thesis is to test these links and to show how gestalt therapy is rooted in those - and other - disciplines. The picture of gestalt that emerges is of a discipline that is fluid, dynamic, multi-faceted - and of most meaning and worth when it interacts with other aspects of human experience.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

The method used in this thesis relies on research into the literature and applying the findings to the disciplines of theology and psychology. This method involved a literature review, but, on the gestalt side, has also required searches for books and papers long out of print and often referred to obscurely or erroneously. The choice of a literature-based approach is governed by the nature of the thesis. Each discipline addresses itself, for example, to human relationships as they are lived in small groups as well as larger communities and nation states. They are concerned with the phenomenology of everyday life and with the spiritual aspirations and potential of people.

The aim is to examine the compatibility or otherwise of gestalt therapy and feminist theology as two disciplines concerned with fundamentally important areas of human existence. The first step

in the method is to represent each discipline as concisely as possible. This is done differently in each case since the intellectual history of gestalt is little known and contested, whereas the difficulties of representing feminist theology are more connected with the wealth of available material and its great variety. In both cases, the second step is to analyse from the presentations, the core ideas of each discipline. In the third step of the method the core ideas of the two disciplines are examined for practical-values upon which the compatibility of gestalt and feminist theology is established. This approach is a means of interrogating both gestalt and feminist psychology, not simply as examples of intellectual discourse, but as lived experiences. The term practical-value also suggests possible further applications in the field of pastoral studies and practice.

The method begins by focusing on gestalt. Much of the material presented in Part One of the thesis is referred to in text books of gestalt therapy. A critical reading of the literature demonstrates, however, that some of these references do not stand scrutiny. For example, little work has been done on the links between gestalt philosophy, gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy. Some writers, indeed, deny that there are any significant links, while others suggest links but do not examine their significance. Some work has been done in German on the links between gestalt philosophy and gestalt psychology, and there is other work in German on links between gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy. What was lacking, from the point of view of English readers, was a comprehensive study of the links between all three.

Before gestalt can be compared with feminist theology, its own qualifications as a world-view of comparable breadth and depth must be established. This is done by a detailed examination of its

roots in gestalt psychology and, ultimately, in gestalt philosophy. But that task alone would not be sufficient to satisfy a theologically informed reader that gestalt has the complexity and cultural elaboration required of a discipline that seeks to encompass the matters that concern feminist theology. Gestalt is a hybrid with many parents. Part of the work of Part One is to identify and, where necessary, argue what is inherited from each of those sources. In this way, it can be shown that gestalt has a broad scope and cultural riches, not simply as a therapeutic approach but as what may be called a philosophy of life.

In Part Two, where the focus changes to feminist theology, the task is different to that undertaken with regard to gestalt. In the past thirty years, many writers have written about the roots, the importance and the necessity of feminist theology. The argument of this part of the thesis is built upon their work. Due references are made as the thesis moves forward. In the case of feminist theology, and because of the greater *corpus* of literature available, attention is paid to a number of conflicting voices with the field: this is especially the case where core ideas are analysed since it is these that lie at the core of the thesis. It is from the core ideas that the practical-values of feminist theology are deduced. Some of these practical-values are also problematic and require critical evaluation.

The thesis engages with two disciplines but a number of discourses. Both terms are imprecise, but for the purposes of the thesis their distinction is useful in what follows. The term “discipline” is used to denote theology or psychology, within both of which one can discern both sub-disciplines (e.g. New Testament studies) and also schools of thought (e.g. psychoanalytic psychology). The term “discourse” is reserved for the mode or tenor of the language in which that

discipline most commonly proceeds. Thus, some sub-disciplines of psychology, e.g. artificial intelligence, are part of a scientific discourse, whereas theology might be part of a philosophical, historical or literary discourse.

Even within the apparently unitary structure called gestalt therapy, it is necessary to venture into philosophical discourse, most obviously when exploring the gestalt philosophy of the late nineteenth century. Gestalt was first articulated at a time when philosophy and psychology were not discrete disciplines, but psychology was one sub-discipline within a philosophical discourse and a discipline concerning Mind. Furthermore, the practice of gestalt therapy, as with much of psychology, rests upon philosophical assumptions and raises philosophical questions.

The discussion about gestalt, most especially where it touches upon perception, necessitates some reference to the discipline of neuroscience which is part of the discourse of science. Whilst this aspect of gestalt constitute only a small part of the work, it is nonetheless an indication that, throughout the thesis, there is an assumption that the discourse of, for example, philosophy may connect directly to that of (medical) science. Certainly, it is assumed that the discipline of psychotherapeutic psychology is and must be compatible with that of medical science. Some branches of psychology, e.g. neuropsychology, are contiguous with neuroscience, and the history of modern psychotherapy began with the work of a neuropsychiatrist with a biological turn of mind. Moving from one discourse to another is part of the challenge of interdisciplinary research.

There are other discourses relevant to this thesis. If feminism may be described as a discipline, then it is a complex one, embracing, for example, historical considerations, philosophical ones,

practical concerns, political thought and action, social theory and literary studies. It may be better to think of feminism as a movement of the human spirit, bridging all disciplines and partaking in several discourses. If that is true of feminism, then it might also be true of theology - or, to be more accurate, of some theologies. In practice each discipline is conducted across a number of different discourses, and each discipline, closely examined, contains much that is multidisciplinary. This is very much the case where theology connects with psychotherapy in the field of pastoral theology.

Pastoral theology is intrinsically a process. It represents points of contact, conflict or convergence between different disciplines and discourses. The method of this thesis entails bringing together the relevant discourses and disciplines in dialectical fashion. The movement from Part One to Part Two represents a boundary between disciplines. There are boundaries between discourses within both Part One and Part Two. Care is taken when moving between discourses and disciplines to establish the legitimacy of the connection<sup>57</sup> and acknowledgement is made of the boundary crossed.

## **1.5 Pattern and main lines of argument**

The thesis is in three parts. Part One concerns gestalt philosophy, psychology and therapy. Part Two examines feminism and feminist theology. In Part Three the two disciplines are brought together and tested for their compatibility. Some conclusions are drawn.

The present chapter introduces the thesis and the disciplines under consideration. In chapter 2,

there is an extended examination of gestalt philosophy, psychology and therapy. This opens the way for consideration of the major influences in the formation of gestalt therapy (chapter 3). Part One ends with a chapter that deals first with the self and then goes on to analyse core ideas in gestalt (chapter 4). This paves the way for a derivation of the practical-values of gestalt that support the principal argument of the thesis, namely that compatibility between gestalt and feminist theology can be established on the basis of compatible practical-values.

Part Two opens with a chapter on feminist perspectives and feminist theology (chapter 5), followed by one (chapter 6) which analyses core ideas in feminist theology. These will later be used to derive practical-values of feminist theology.

In the third Part of the thesis, the two disciplines, gestalt therapy and feminist theology, are brought together. In chapter 7, practical-values are drawn from the core ideas of gestalt and of feminist theology in order to assess the compatibility or otherwise of the two disciplines. From this discussion flow the conclusions that make up chapter 8.

What follows now is an outline of the principal arguments of the thesis, chapter by chapter. The aim of this thesis is to establish that a particular school of (psychotherapeutic) psychology is compatible with the theological discipline of feminist theology. It seeks to establish this compatibility on the basis of what are termed "practical-values". As was stated above, the discussions of developments and debates within each of the two disciplines studied lead towards the analysis of some core ideas. It is not proposed that such core ideas command unanimous support from every writer in each disciplines. Rather, out of the arguments and voices heard, key

themes emerge. Although they do not necessarily command universal support, they are Highest Common Factor rather than Lowest Common Denominator ideas. Where they remain controversial or problematic, those contrary voices are considered.

The present chapter explains the structures and methods employed and outlines the overall argument. The argument is about the possibility and the legitimacy of bringing together two different disciplines. They have some *prima facie* similarities, in that both seek to deal with human experience, both are of value to particular constituencies, and both have developed ideas and norms. Some people find both disciplines important, and they tend to move in their thinking and talking from one to the other, often with apparent ease<sup>58</sup>. The chapters that follow lay out the grounds for bringing together these two expressions of human experience.

In chapter 2, it is asserted that a nineteenth century exploration into the nature of mental acts led to a scientifically minded philosophical enquiry which encompassed what today would be called perception. That exploration led to formulations about the ways in which people perceive and drew attention to the role of the perceiver in the experience. On the basis solely of observation and reflection, the gestalt philosophers formulated ideas about the interplay of subject and object. At one extreme, these take the reader back to Plato's notion of forms and shadows and, at the other, to the epistemological doubts of Berkeley and the more empirical abolition of cause and effect in the field theory of Kurt Lewin<sup>59</sup>. There is a direct connection between these philosophical enquiries and the empirical enquiries of gestalt psychologists which continued the quest to understand the nature of mental acts. More contentious, but demonstrably tenable, is the connection between gestalt psychologists and the later proponents of gestalt therapy. The

difference here is that gestalt therapy is not simply a development of gestalt psychology but rather its heir. This heir had many parents, of which gestalt psychology is clearly one. Other inherited strains are also discernible and they are dealt with in chapter 3. Chapter 2 concludes, however, with a consideration of the several disciplines and discourses discernible in gestalt therapy.

Chapter 3 opens with a consideration of the nature of psychotherapeutic language. This serves to underline the ways in which any psychological theory rests upon philosophy, the more so when philosophy concerns itself so much with language. It also serves as a caution against the reification of psychological language and keeps the focus firmly on human experience. Next follows an examination of the influence on Perls and on gestalt therapy of the major contributors - Freud, Reich, Smuts, Friedlaender, Goldstein, the gestaltists, Lewin and, finally, the existentialists.

The way is then clear for a specifically gestalt (therapy) understanding of the human person. This is set out in chapter 4 as a view of the self and the process of contact through which the self is constituted. This is the heart of the gestalt approach, both as a therapy and also as a personal “philosophy of life”, and it forms the basis of several types of professional practice. This chapter continues by analysing, from all the preceding material, the core ideas found in gestalt. That concludes Part One of the thesis.

Part Two opens with chapter 5, in which are introduced the range of schools of thought found in second-wave feminism. These schools of feminist thought are not tightly boundaried areas of discourse, but tend to overlap each other. Nor do they correspond exactly to individuals or groups

in the field of feminist theology. Rather, the overall picture of second wave feminism provides a context that supports the range of work that constitutes Christian feminist theology. After an introductory section on feminist perspectives on theology and the church, some sub-disciplines are examined in depth. These concern specific feminist contributions to Old and New Testament studies, pastoral theology, christology and spirituality. In chapter 6, the focus moves to an analysis of core ideas found in feminist theology - and that will, in turn, provide the matrix from which practical-values can be deduced. A great deal of work has been done by feminist scholars and by feminist theologians on these core ideas, so that there are many voices, some of them offering conflicting critiques. Part of the task of chapter 6 is to weigh these arguments and to decide how far they affect the reliability or usefulness of the core ideas for the purpose of establishing compatibility with gestalt. The chapter ends by looking forward to this test of compatibility and it concludes Part Two of the thesis.

Part Three opens with chapter 7, in which practical-values are further defined and those of gestalt and feminist theology are set out in a form that facilitates their comparison. The object of this comparison is to see if these values are compatible not merely at the level of their language but more importantly as values that inform practice. This is a crucial stage of the thesis. On the basis of this comparison, the aim of the thesis is realised, namely that, in terms of their practical-values, gestalt and feminist theology are shown to be compatible and thus suitable candidates for interdisciplinary work.

What is also evident is that there are important differences between the foci or interests of gestalt and feminist theology and that these differences are reflected in their practical-values. The

process of deriving practical-values and comparing them is problematic since at several points there are countervailing voices. In the discussion of these problems, it is shown that, despite some continuing differences, there remains an overriding sense that gestalt and feminist theology are, on the basis established, compatible disciplines.

The thesis concludes with chapter 8 in which are set out the conclusions of the whole work.

Unresolved problems and areas for possible further research are identified.

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical implications include the philosophical (e.g. what are the epistemological bases of the two disciplines and how may they be compared?), as well as the more speculative (e.g. is there a hidden metaphysic in psychological theory?). Much work has been done on both sides of the dialogue, for example LAKE, F. *Clinical Theology*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966; HALMOS, P. *The Faith of the Counsellors* London: Constable, 1965; WILBER, K. *Up from Eden: a transpersonal view of human evolution*. New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1981; as well as numerous papers in the writings of Freud (e.g. "The future of an illusion" *In Civilisation, society and religion*. London: Penguin, 1985, vol. 12 of the Penguin Freud Library). Jung is often cited by Christians as an ally in the dialogue of psychology and theology since he uses many religious ideas and images. His archetypes and dream analysis are shot through with Christian terminology, e.g. JUNG, C G (ed.). *Man and his symbols*. London: Picador, 1978, pp.60-61. Jung apparently saw no contradictions in this, although he might be thought of as using the Christian traditions in a somewhat eclectic manner. LINDBECK, G A. *The nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age*. London: SPCK, 1984, takes a different view. Adopting a "cultural-linguistic" approach (p.18), he warns specifically against assuming that different religious groups share some core religious experience. The experiences arise in different cultures and may not be taken as equivalent (pp.39-40). It is not Lindbeck's purpose to discuss the experience and language of psychotherapy, but his argument may be extended to the same conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> The term is more closely defined in chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup> PATTISON, S. "The use of the behavioural sciences in pastoral studies" *In* BALLARD, P (ed.). *The foundations of pastoral studies and practical theology*. Cardiff: The Board of Studies for Pastoral Studies, The Faculty of Theology, University College, 1986, p.80

<sup>4</sup> PATTISON, S with WOODWARD, J *A vision of pastoral theology: in search of words that resurrect the dead* Contact Pastoral Monograph No.4, Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust Ltd, 1994, pp.16-17 points up the necessity for (pastoral) theology to face reality, however painful and however much in conflict with wishful views of how the world should be. It is apophatic in character and "lives close to the dark, unexplained and unacceptable parts of life and treats of a God whose face is hidden in reality....."

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- <sup>5</sup> In view of the long history of persecution by Christians (nominal and otherwise) of Jews in successive centuries, it has become inadequate to see the Holocaust as another of those times of madness which occasionally seize (Christian) cultures. DYSON, A. This is a reference to an *unpublished lecture to the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology, 1995*. ECCLESTONE, A. *The night sky of the Lord*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980: "For a very long time the Christian churches not only accustomed themselves to not asking questions about a great many aspects of life and human behaviour, but discouraged those who felt moved to do so." (p.10) .
- <sup>6</sup> Anti-semitism has been addressed as though it were the stance and activity of wicked persons who do not heed the Christian message: it is disowned. But theology is forged in a context by contextualised people. Unless one is content with a theology which is ultramondane and speculative, it is difficult to imagine how that could be otherwise. Even when a scholar struggles for objectivity, adheres strictly to text and eschews eisegetical tendencies, that person can only write out of a living context. Thus SIMON, U. *A theology of salvation: a commentary on Isaiah 40-55*. London: SPCK, 1953, notes in his Introduction: "A commentary written in this atomic age must add the burden of its era, must take into account such facts as could only figure as a great unknown to those who wrote before 1914 or even 1944. These years, few in number, have not been ordinary years for the understanding of the Scriptures. Our catastrophic history is now part of the prophecy which we wish to expound; it may explain much, but it must not dominate the exegesis". The focus is deutero-Isaiah: the context is the writer's consciousness of the holocausts of Europe and Japan.
- <sup>7</sup> Existentialism is not the only or even the principal philosophical movement affecting theology in the past fifty years. The point here is that existentialism as represented by Tillich and others made an impact on specifically theological thinking, most of all during the 1960s.
- <sup>8</sup> BUBER, M. *I and Thou*. English translation, second (revised) edition, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Preface, p.2.
- <sup>10</sup> E.g. TILLICH, P. *The courage to be*. London: Fontana, 1962, where the author sets out his understanding. "The existential attitude is one of involvement in contrast to a merely theoretical or detached attitude. "Existential" in this sense can be defined as participating in a situation.... with the whole of one's existence. This includes temporal, spatial, historical, psychological, sociological, biological conditions..... This seems to contradict the necessary objectivity of the cognitive act and the demand for detachment in it." Here are echoes of the indivisibility of *I-Thou* as distinct from *I-It* (Buber, 1958, pp.15-16).
- <sup>11</sup> Later in the same year, John Robinson wrote in *The Honest to God debate*: "To stress this existential, experiential element behind all the Christian's affirmations is not in the least to say that they are purely subjective, in the sense that they represent merely his way of looking at things, his resolve to think or live in a certain manner. The "promise to pay" is a two-way process. They are expressions of trust in a Reality which is trust-worthy; and the clauses of the Creed, the doctrines and forms of the church, *describe this Reality, not just the individual's inner state*. But they *are* subjective in the sense in which Kierkegaard said that "Truth is subjectivity". For truth beyond the level of mere information cannot, he insisted, be apprehended in a purely objective, "spectator" relationship, but only as a man is prepared to

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- stand, as subject, in an I-Thou relationship of engagement, trust and commitment. It is in this sense that Tillich can say (in his *Systematic Theology* vol. 1, 1953, p.299), that "all theological statements are existential": they have all in the last resort to be referred back to this relationship, and their cash value tested by it". (Reproduced in BOWDEN, John (ed.) *Thirty years of honesty: Honest to God then and now* London: SCM, 1993, p.15 *et seq.*)
- <sup>12</sup> ALTIZER, T J J. *The gospel of Christian atheism*. London: Collins, 1967, p.10. It should be noted, however, that Altizer actually cites Hegel, Nietzsche and William Blake more than any other authors including Tillich and Kierkegaard.
- <sup>13</sup> HAMPSON, D. *Theology and feminism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- <sup>14</sup> CUPITT, D. *Taking leave of God*. London: SCM, 1980; and *The religion of being*. London: SCM, 1998. There is a sense in which Cupitt (1980) picks up from Robinson's *Honest to God*, arguing for taking leave as part of a journey begun in post-war existentialism, whereas Cupitt (1998) is more avowedly postmodern in his tone and philosophical argument.
- <sup>15</sup> HICK, J (ed.) *The myth of God incarnate* London: SCM, 1977.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid* p. ix. HICK, J. *The metaphor of God incarnate*. London: SCM, 1993 is evidence that the "growing knowledge" referred to undoubtedly exists and has developed further since the publication of Hick (1977). However, the loss of confidence in metaphysics is also there. For example, the reference to the second person of the Trinity is to a metaphysical notion. Also, the continuing debate is about a need to say something about Jesus that does justice to what, in a post-metaphysical age, we have either discovered recently or can now know (but could not previously know because our eyes were not attuned to see what was there).
- <sup>17</sup> BØRRESEN, Kari Elisabeth. "Women's studies of the Christian tradition: new perspectives" In KING, U (ed). *Religion and gender*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. "... I have prepared an extensive review-article on women's studies of the Christian tradition. This study covers 533 books and articles published since about 1970, which I have found of special value...." (p.245)
- <sup>18</sup> This conference marks the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. The 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh set up a Continuation Committee with a remit to bring into being the International Missionary Conference, forerunner, partner and finally integral part of the World Council of Churches.
- <sup>19</sup> NEILL, S. *Men of unity*. London: SCM, 1960, p.22.
- <sup>20</sup> An example of this may be seen in *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*, a Faith and Order paper of the World Council of Churches, 1982. It may be described as "a consensus paper" (the Revd Donald Reece, General Synod Council for Christian Unity: personal communication), setting out the common ground of member churches and with the participation of the Roman Catholic Church. The paper is known as "the Lima document" and is a landmark theological achievement that generated hundreds of volumes of response from constituent churches.
- <sup>21</sup> For instance, SMART, N. "Christianity and other religions" In VIDLER, A.R. (ed). *Soundings: essays in Christian understanding*. Cambridge University Press, 1962. His closing paragraph sums up a position typical of the time: "I have tried to sketch out the answers to one or two vital problems.... But I would be distressed if anyone, upon reading this essay, should think: "Isn't it nice that we have a fellow here who knows a bit about Buddhism and all that and who has dealt with these Orientals? He has shown how Christianity can answer these other religions, so I don't need to worry further about it. What

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would the Church come to if she couldn't rely upon a few hired eggheads to keep atheists, Hindus, Marxists and all enemies at bay?" Of course, I could interpret such thoughts as a compliment to me. Would they not imply that my "answers" were rather convincing? But are they? People ought to ponder and to be worried by these things. Reading the Buddhist scriptures may sometimes be a cure for anti-religious feelings, but it doesn't always conduce to Christian orthodoxy." (p.121)

<sup>22</sup> For example, HICK, J. *God has many names*. London: Macmillan Press, 1980. "In the past, Christians have generally accepted the established language about Jesus as part of their devotional practice without raising the question of its logical character. They have not asked what kind of language-use one is engaging in when one says that "Jesus was God the Son incarnate"..... The big question today concerning this doctrine is whether it has any non-metaphorical meaning" (pp.70-71).

<sup>23</sup> This position can be seen in forms such as the protests of Tony Higon and A Biblical Witness to Our Nation, over the matter of multi-faith observances in Westminster Abbey. Indeed there is a case to be made, although it lies outside the scope of the thesis, for the view that modern so-called fundamentalist evangelicalism (also loosely called "Bible Christianity") is, in part, a unilateral reaction against religious and theological pluralism. The phrase "unilateral reaction" denotes two aspects of this social phenomenon. "Unilateral" refers to the dichotomous nature of fundamentalist thinking and is the hallmark of an inherently unstable evangelical position. It entails the psychological splitting off of what Jungians refer to as one's "shadow" self. This darker side may be experienced in the pre-conversion or pre-baptism-in-the-Spirit state and is then rejected as of the devil. Thus labelled as evil, a large part of one's humanity is associated with people outside one's fold - a social splitting - and becomes the object of spiritual warfare. To call such a theological position a "reaction" is again to employ a psychological term. In gestalt usage, for example, a "reaction formation" implies an equal and opposite affect to that which, were it awarely experienced, would be the cause of intolerable anxiety. Such reaction formations become automatically repeated and eventually constitute a character trait or permanent aspect of personality. Despite its inherent instability, such a position has nonetheless certain advantages. It can appeal to insecure people precisely because of its zero/one simplicity: you are for God or you are for the devil. Its psychological concomitant in the view of FROMM, Erich *The fear of freedom* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, e.g. p.195, is fascism.

<sup>24</sup> For example, behaviour such as the arrangement of marriages by families may seem to others outside that culture to be absolutely oppressive and sexist. The view from within such a culture may be mixed, but it will almost certainly seem different.

<sup>25</sup> For example, FREUD, S. "[The man] Moses and monotheism" *In The Penguin Freud library* Vol. 13, pp.243-386; and JAMES, W. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985, for example his relativising treatment of the conversion of Stephen Bradley (Lecture IX). These are writings whose findings have, in many ways, been superseded by subsequent psychoanalytic thought. They are remarkable now because they gathered together and gave voice to contemporary thoughts and feelings. They offered a phenomenological view of religious ideas and practices that, once it began to be integrated into theological thinking had, as inevitable consequence, a relativising or contextualising effect.

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- <sup>26</sup> PATTISON, Stephen *Pastoral care and liberation theology* Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.29.
- <sup>27</sup> *Comunidades eclesiales de base* are the fundamental unit of resistance communities in the countries where liberation theology is practised. They are small groups, informally organised, but sharing a common lot socially and politically. They are often lay-led and thus beyond the immediate control of anxious church leaders. The proponents of liberation theology and its privileging of the poor in the gospel account argue that the theological approach of the base communities is traceable to the earliest stratum of the messianic community and, before that, in the history of the prophetic tradition in Israel.
- <sup>28</sup> *Op cit.* Preface, p.xi. Even so, there has been a proliferation of literature, much of it translated from Spanish originals, which indicates a keen interest in the churches of the northern hemisphere. The links between Marxism and liberation theology and the suspicions of church hierarchies have meant that liberation theology has been cautiously received in European and North American churches. It would be idle to pretend that every theological department - let alone every local church - has been radicalised by a sense of solidarity with resistance communities. What is argued here is that once this new idea has been articulated in theological language, it cannot be un-thought. The arrival of liberation theology has moved the thinking of many Christians away from a discussion about how the poor may be helped. They ask instead how God is biased in favour of the poor and oppressed and what therefore the Church should be doing in response. Part of the importance of liberation theology in the present context, is its methodology of dialogue between theological traditions and an analysis of socio-political situations (from a Marxist perspective).
- <sup>29</sup> SAIVING, V. "The human situation: a feminine view" *In Journal of religion* **40**: 100-112, 1960. Quoted in the Introduction to PLASKOW, J. *Sex, sin and grace: women's experience and the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*. London: University Press of America, 1980.
- <sup>30</sup> This literature is of recent origin. Writing in 1990, GRAHAM, E "Pastoral theology, feminism and the future", *Contact* **103** p.2, comments on the (then) past fifteen years of "significant transformation" in pastoral theology. She adds that "it comes .. as a surprise to consider that the influence of Feminism has been negligible during this most recent stage of development. No definitive work has been done to incorporate feminist perspectives into the emerging 'renaissance' of Pastoral Theology ..... no substantive literature as yet exists."
- <sup>31</sup> GRAHAM, E. *Making the difference: gender, personhood and theology*. London: Mowbray, 1995, pp.222-223.
- <sup>32</sup> Graham (*ibid.* p.2) sees liberation theologies as profoundly significant in the development of pastoral theology and as a dynamic leading to a 'renaissance'. Such a renaissance would issue in an inclusive pastoral theology (*ibid.* pp.5-8), one which is not only responsive but also proactive and prophetic. It would engage in critical dialogue with the human sciences and generate new visions of what it is to be human. These processes should lead to new understandings of God and of God's activity in the world.
- <sup>33</sup> SOBRINO, J. *Christology at the Crossroads*. London: SCM, 1978, provides an example. He argues that his approach is both (safely) Trinitarian in its approach and consistent with the church's *magisterium* (especially chapter 10). Other theologians working in similar contexts took their critique of the church and of theology further, presumably because they could not

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- square the dogmatic tradition with the spirit of self-determination and of trust in the guidance of the Spirit.
- <sup>34</sup> BROWN, J.A.C. *Freud and the post-Freudians* London: Pelican Books, 1961, p.119.
- <sup>35</sup> FREUD, S. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" *In Pelican Freud Library* Volume 11 London: Penguin Books, 1984. Brown *op cit* pp.26-27 sees this paper as pivotal in the development of Freud's theories.
- <sup>36</sup> Freud "The Ego and the Id" *In ibid* especially pp.359-371.
- <sup>37</sup> Sullivan's institute was founded in Washington and Baltimore and also in New York City, where Erich Fromm took a leading role. It was (the psychoanalyst Fromm) who invited the Perls to leave their South African psychoanalytic institute and come to New York City. It is a mark of Fromm's openness to novelty and to his sympathy for American approaches to psychotherapy that he was instrumental in facilitating the development in New York of the first gestalt institute.
- <sup>38</sup> Brown *op cit* pp.9, 161-8, 197.
- <sup>39</sup> GUNTRIP, H. *Personality structure and human interaction*. New York: International Universities Press, 1961.
- <sup>40</sup> This debate was originally (and in some quarters is still) referred to as the "Freud-Jones debate" because Ernest Jones figured prominently, with others such as Karl Abraham and Karen Horney, in its early stages. It later engaged the energies of other women including Helene Deutsch, Marjorie Brierley, Joan Rivière and Ruth Mack Brunswick. The debate moved from being one about the significance - and reality - or otherwise of the castration complex to being a more global one about female sexuality. MITCHELL, J & ROSE, J (eds). *Feminine sexuality: Jacques Lacan & the école freudienne*. London: Macmillan Press, 1982, p.8; 99-121.
- <sup>41</sup> For examples, CHODOROW, N. *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989; MITCHELL, J. *Psychoanalysis and feminism: a radical reassessment of Freudian psychoanalysis*. London: Pelican, 1975.
- <sup>42</sup> Karen Horney and Helene Deutsch were important members of Freud's professional circle. His famous question "what do women want?" was no mere rhetorical gesture.
- <sup>43</sup> HD (Hilda Doolittle). *Tribute to Freud*. Revised edition, Manchester: Carcanet, 1985 is the account of her experience by a "fine creative artist" (Ernest Jones).
- <sup>44</sup> There are a number of important feminist critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis. Some writers, e.g. Mitchell (1975), take the Freudian text and show how it may be re-read in the light of modern feminist understanding. On the other hand, there are arguably more radical feminist critics who focus sharply on Freud's misogyny and contempt for women: for example, CHODOROW, N. *The reproduction of mothering: psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. London: University of California Press, 1978, especially p.141 *et seq*. Also (same author) *Femininities, masculinities, sexualities: Freud and beyond*. London: Free Association Books, 1994, pp.27-28.
- <sup>45</sup> Freud had been criticised over his assertions about sexual dealings between parents and children, so much so that he had felt obliged to retract his original theory. It is in large part due to feminist activity that survivors of such inappropriate sexual activity are increasingly able to speak out; and the current public awareness of the prevalence of illicit sexual contact between adults and children might not have arisen but for feminist consciousness raising.

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- <sup>46</sup> In Great Britain, a focus for feminist therapy is the Women's Therapy Centre founded in London in 1976 by EICHENBAUM, Luise and ORBACH, Susie. Their second joint book, *What do women want?* London: Fontana/Collins, 1984, illustrates this approach.
- <sup>47</sup> There is currently an interest in Jungian concepts also, for instance, CLARKSON, P. *Jungian gestalt - conceptual convergence and experiential divergence* (1989a) referred to in CLARKSON, P. *Gestalt counselling in action*. London: Sage (1989b), pp.11-12. This comment about Freudian psychoanalysis does not exclude other important antecedents (examined in chapters 2 & 3), nor does it imply that psychoanalysis has only antecedent value.
- <sup>48</sup> Personal communications while the author was a participant in development workshops (1993-1997) for gestalt teachers in the UK.
- <sup>49</sup> This is exemplified in the ways in which modern gestaltists deal with the criticisms of Perls, for example, CLARKSON, P. and MACKEWN, J. *Fritz Perls*. London: Sage, 1993 (Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy series).
- <sup>50</sup> E.g. HOUSTON, Gaie. *Being and belonging: group, intergroup and gestalt* London: Wiley, 1993 and her earlier *Red book of gestalt* London: Rochester Foundation, 1980; O'LEARY, Eleanor. *Gestalt Therapy: theory, practice and research* London: Chapman & Hall, 1992; Clarkson, Petruska (1989b); PAGE, Faye. "Gestalt therapy" In DRYDEN, W (ed.). *Individual therapy in Britain* London: Harper & Row, 1984.
- <sup>51</sup> For the purposes of this thesis "pastoral theology" and "practical theology" are treated interchangeably, although they are not synonymous. Each has its own history and connotations. The use of the word "pastoral" in the thesis does not indicate a preoccupation with occasional offices nor activities such as counselling, valuable as these activities may be. GRAHAM, E *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty* London: Mowbray, 1996, pp.11-2, gives an account of the history and associations of the terms.
- <sup>52</sup> Paul Ballard points out that the classical scheme of theological education was under four headings - Bible, history, systematics and practical (which includes not only considerations of practice in, say, a local church setting, but also ethics, i.e. the application of Christian ideals to practical situations (Ballard, 1986).
- <sup>53</sup> Pattison, in Ballard *op cit* (1986) p.80.
- <sup>54</sup> Current writers of particular importance for gestalt theory and practice include SANDLER, J *et al.* "Frames of reference in psychoanalytic psychology: X. Narcissism and object-love in the second phase of psychoanalysis" In *British journal of medical psychology*. **49** (3):267-274, 1976; and STERN, D. *The first relationship: infant and mother*. London: Open Books, 1977, and *The interpersonal world of the infant*. New York: Basic Books, 1985, on child observation. This indebtedness is not, of course, confined to gestalt. Experienced psychotherapists whose theory owes something to psychodynamics are likely to have a working knowledge of psychoanalytic theory and to have gone some way to integrating or generating a response to such work.
- <sup>55</sup> This should not be confused with the Process Oriented Psychology (POP) associated with the neo-Jungian teacher and psychotherapist Arnold Mindell, although POP and gestalt have many points of convergence.
- <sup>56</sup> For example, SHEPARD, M. *Fritz* New York: Bantam, 1976, p.34: "Gestalt psychology had little in common with what Fritz was later to call *Gestalt Therapy*. The Gestalt

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psychology that Lore studied and Fritz was marginally exposed to was of academic interest only."

<sup>57</sup> An example of boundary crossing without acknowledgement, often cited in mass media, is Stephen Hawking's comment, on the basis of his scientific research, on the mind of God. (HAWKING, S. *A brief history of time*. London: Bantam, 1988 pp.166, 174). The *canard* is really that of the media people who exploit a passing remark in this way. Their approach contrasts sharply with the work of, for example, John Polkinghorne or Russell Stannard who have made this interdisciplinary field their own.

<sup>58</sup> WALKER, J. L. *Body and soul: gestalt therapy and religious experience*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971. Also DAVIDSON, I. *Here and now: an approach to Christian healing through gestalt*. London: DLT, 1991.

<sup>59</sup> LEWIN, K (ed. CARTWRIGHT, D). *Field theory in social science: selected theoretical papers*. London: Tavistock, 1952; de RIVERA, J (compiled) *Field theory as human science: contributions of Lewin's Berlin group*. New York & London: Gardner Press (distrib. Wiley), 1976. Also section 3.8.

## **GESTALT: ORIGINS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONSIDERATIONS**

### **2. Introduction**

This chapter examines the history of gestalt as a philosophical development arising in the late nineteenth century that laid a foundation for modern scientific psychology. That psychology provided a basis for one of the humanistic schools of psychotherapy that emerged in the 1960s. The forging of these links is a vital stage in an argument that exposes the roots of gestalt therapy in a philosophical movement that has influenced much of scientific thinking since its inception. Gestalt, though frequently unheralded, has formed a crucial part of the intellectual structure of the twentieth century and continues to do so. This argument is important for this thesis because it demonstrates that gestalt, in its depth and breadth, is a discipline whose scope is equivalent to that of feminist theology and thus a suitable candidate to be considered for compatibility.

In this advancing argument there are three types of discourse, or three types of quest. Moving between discourses is at the heart of interdisciplinary work and, of particular interest here, of pastoral theology. The fundamental problem is that of language and meaning as we move between the discourses of theology and psychology, but the same difficulties occur even within the discipline of gestalt. These difficulties are discussed in section 2.1, most particularly by reference to psychoanalytical theory of the late twentieth century. Next comes an examination of the (gestalt) philosophical quest (section 2.2), followed by an examination of the (psychological) scientific quest (section 2.3). Section 2.4 explores the psychotherapeutic quest. The way is then open for a consideration of the origins of gestalt as it was first defined in philosophical circles

(section 2.5). The development of the Berlin school of gestalt psychology is described in section 2.6 and it is contrasted with the Graz school with its countervailing theories. It was from the Berlin school that F S Perls and L Perls derived their gestalt psychology, and the links are explored between their gestalt therapy and gestalt psychology and philosophy (section 2.7). Section 2.8 identifies some philosophical issues inherent in gestalt thinking, leading to a consideration (in section 2.9) of ideas from gestalt philosophy which are seminal for gestalt therapy. These are grouped as follows: the subject as part of the *Gestalt* (2.10); the relationship of the whole and the parts (*von oben nach unten* - from the top downwards) (2.11); the breadth and inclusiveness of gestalt thinking (2.12); the relatedness of philosophy and psychology, including the views of the founder of experimental psychology, Carl Stumpf (2.13). The conclusion to this chapter (section 2.14) contains a summary of the linkages demonstrated between the three disciplines bearing the name gestalt, and it looks forward to an examination in chapter 3 of other influences on the development of gestalt therapy.

## **2.1 Interdisciplinary considerations**

Gestalt therapy is often defined as one of the new, humanistic schools of psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>. And yet, towards the end of this thesis, it is compared to the older and ostensibly wider discipline of theology. Theology claims to address a broad spectrum of issues concerning persons, community and the cosmos: as a discipline, it has deep philosophical foundations. Since gestalt is to be juxtaposed with theology, it is important to take account of the philosophical and historical bases that shape its concerns, its resources and its practical approach, and to establish the integrity of these with each other. Only then can the ideas and values of the two disciplines be usefully

compared.

The history of gestalt began in Prague in the late nineteenth century in the philosophy department of the German University. It is noteworthy, however, that some of that department's post-graduate students (e.g. Mach and Einstein) are known today as scientists. A few were psychologists whose work led to new developments in what became known as psychotherapy. Their work pre-dates the creation of separate faculties of physical sciences, psychology and philosophy. Over a century later, interdisciplinary work is increasing, but the clock has not been rolled back. Interdisciplinary work today requires that the researcher examine the validity of connections made between different types of discourse or quest. So far as gestalt is concerned, there are three principal types of discourse or quest entailed. Each quest has its particular focus<sup>2</sup>, and each is illustrated by an assertion. First is the philosophical quest that has at its heart a quest for certainty. Second is the scientific quest (including the enquiries of the gestalt psychologists) whose purpose is to answer specific questions. Third is the psychotherapeutic quest, which is about a negotiated and common reality recognised by the therapist and the patient. Each of these assertions is considered in the following three sections.

## **2.2 The philosophical quest**

The dialogue between experiencing and thinking (retrospectively or speculatively) about experience is one of the most sophisticated achievements of the circuitry of the human cerebral cortex<sup>3</sup>, i.e. it is fundamental to the development of our species individually and collectively. It forms the basis of all philosophical discourse including that of gestalt philosophy. But, before

examining gestalt philosophy, it is necessary to consider some of the problems intrinsic to such discourse. The dialogue between experiencing and thinking is a way of looking at awareness and reflective thought (crucial in gestalt therapy), but it suggests some problematic dimensions of the philosophical quest that are examined in recent critical thinking.

We ask ultimate questions about being because we are the kind of creatures that are able to ask such questions<sup>4</sup>. Gone are claims to absolute status for ultimate questions: it is no longer enough to state that ontology is a form of enquiring into God, the source of all that is. Nor has the removal of God from any agreed frame of reference left a space for some new absolute or transcendent entity or subject. In fact, since the end of the medieval period it has not been possible to establish an intellectual consensus founded on belief in a simple cosmos under an agreed transcendent God. In times when those conditions did exist, there was the possibility that a philosophical Archimedes might recognise: it might have been possible to use those conditions as a fulcrum and to conceive of ideational levers with which to move or manipulate the cosmos. Now, no matter what levers one constructs, there is no accepted fulcrum on which they may rest.

It can be argued that many philosophical systems are, in fact, attempts to find such a fulcrum or basis. This point can be argued by considering three examples. If one considers, for example, Whitehead and Russell's *Principia mathematica*<sup>5</sup>, one can see how far the radical empiricism of William James or the idealism of Immanuel Kant had failed to satisfy some important intellectual needs in the period under consideration<sup>6</sup>. Whitehead and Russell were writing at a time of rapid scientific development: thus it was that mathematics seemed, especially to Russell, to be the tool of more fundamental thinking and of a more powerful logic. However the quest for a surer basis

and for greater certainty did not stay with mathematics, but turned to other types of language, to words and syntax. Out of this enquiry grew the schools of logical positivism and of linguistic analysis. However, this same fascination with language and its meanings as possible foundations for a new philosophical approach - that is, for a baseline upon which to erect reliable intellectual structures - found expression in yet other ways. In France, for example, Lacan directed attention to primitive human experience and to a revision of Freud's psychoanalytic theory which created a new framework of and about language. Because, as will be shown, gestalt relies so heavily upon psychoanalysis in terms of its theoretical structures, this critique of Freudian theory is of particular significance for this thesis. There is one further reason for following the work of Lacan - and later of a colleague and critic, Julia Kristeva - and that is because both Lacan and Kristeva focus attention on the experiencing subject. It is that experiencing subject who is at the heart of later considerations in the thesis about both gestalt and feminist theology.

A strong sense of ambiguity about language and especially about psychological discourse is evident in Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud<sup>7</sup>. With his focus on language and meaning, he pointed out how Freud has been misunderstood and mistranslated. But his concern took psychotherapeutic terminology much further than an apparently simple search for certainty in the form of agreed meaning with overtones and undertones. Commenting on Lacan's terminology, Eagleton focuses on the notion of the infantile ego<sup>8</sup>. It is constituted, he says, by the infant's misrecognition of itself in the mirror of an experienced self, i.e. the mother. In the primary symbiosis of mother-infant, the infant has a sense of itself by identifying with the symbiotic unit. Put another way, it has an emerging sense of itself by experiencing its mother as an extension of itself. Clinically speaking this is what Freud recognised as primary narcissism<sup>9</sup>, and Eagleton

comments:

For Lacan, the ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify.<sup>10</sup>

Lacan's development of the term ego does not stop at that point. For, as the child develops in this primary ("mirror") stage, the development is given fresh impetus and direction by the intervention (or by its growing awareness) of a third party in its life. It is the father who makes up the third corner of the oedipal triangle. Father introduces into the child's life a new principle, that of "law" - specifically a law that forbids the continuance or further development of the libidinal symbiosis of mother and child. Law for Lacan is an aspect of the phallus. It is this phallic principle or dynamic which simultaneously creates awareness of sexual difference, creates the unconscious by showing up some impulses as forbidden and to be repressed, and which begins the process of socialisation.

Lacan, in using the term phallus, does not mean the penis of the child's father<sup>11</sup>. Rather, phallus is a signifier: the signified is, *inter alia*, law, separation of one from another, necessary repression, and differentiation - not just of the sexes, but as the essence of the ordering of life and society. The phallus is for Lacan the supreme signifier in that its signifieds are fundamental to every aspect of post-oedipal life. It is no accident that this critical transition occurs around the time that language is developing, for language is about the ordering of life and being able to manage that order. As the child learns language, so it moves away from a stage in which all is experienced in terms of images (the "imaginary" world order of the child) to a symbolic order, one in which experience comes in terms of language and is manipulated by language. Whilst there are gains in

this development, there are also losses. What is lost, in Lacan's view, is the direct apprehension of reality, of mother's self. In its place is the attempt to connect with experience by using signifiers. We are cut off from the "real" (our primary, if narcissistic, state). Eagleton comments that our "imaginary" lives may be seen as "metaphorical", by which he means having stable meaning: whereas our "symbolic" lives are "metonymic" by which he signifies unending chains of signifiers which suggest yet other signifiers and whose signifieds may be repressed or otherwise unascertainable<sup>12</sup>.

A different view of such matters can be found in the work of Kristeva, a feminist philosopher who brings together political and psychoanalytic theory. She takes issue with a number of Lacan's central tenets including the archetypal masculine notion of the symbolic order founded on the transcendental phallic signifier. In her view, such a scheme is the rationale of a masculine and patriarchal society and represents the wherewithal of women's oppression. Further, such a masculine view does not offer a satisfactory account of the existence of different, i.e. feminine, aspects of persons, nor does it take into account direct experiences that we undoubtedly have of others and ourselves where we do not appear to be alienated by language. From her viewpoint as a feminist writer, a fuller understanding of human development must take account of both masculine and feminine characteristics. She does not deny the centrality of language in our lives, and accepts that the oedipal conflict does resolve in ways suggested by Lacan. However, within language itself - its usage and the richness of inherited meanings and associations - other dynamics are evident that challenge attempts at tight meaning, and that overthrow attempts at definition and fixity. Within the symbolic order Kristeva identifies something more fluid and anarchic which she called the "semiotic"<sup>13</sup>. In accepting Lacan's assertion of the symbolic order,

she distinguishes:

....*two modalities* of what is, for us, the same signifying process. We shall call the first "the semiotic" and the second "the symbolic". These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called "natural" language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are non-verbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But, as we shall see, this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by indebtedness to both.<sup>14</sup>

In the notion of semiotics (from the Greek *semeion*, a sign, mark, token or pledge), there is a clear link between the "imaginary" and what follows in normal development. It is a feminine principle - not confined to women, but arising from a stage before sexes were distinguished. The difference of sexes is not the only phallic distinction to be challenged: all the usual polarities of experience (e.g. sane vs. mad) are called into question. The semiotic function is often described as the antithesis of the symbolic order<sup>15</sup>, but to state it thus is to define it negatively and to suggest that it is secondary or dependent on the symbolic. The reality, however, is that it is continuous with the earlier state where direct access to experience is a possibility, and where the experience of relatedness (rather than difference and separateness) is primary. It stands directly on the foundation of our being and represents also our life's striving and its end or goal.

In the area of psychic structure and function, Kristeva obliges us to imagine an ego at once divided and united within itself. For the semiotic function exists within Lacan's symbolic order. It is contained by the symbolic order and exists in opposition to it. In practical experience, it is

often the factor that disrupts plans and schemes: and it may well prevent the masculine function from acting contrary to the interests of relatedness and other fundamental considerations. Even though the feminine is present in both male and female persons, it is probably this last observation more than any other which has led women and men to comment that women are a civilising influence relative to men. And it is probably the very chaotic or anarchic aspects of our semiotic selves which has led to the marginalising of femininity and the marginalising of women as representing that aspect of humanity. Thus, in the ego envisaged by Kristeva, we can see masculine and feminine, the phallic / symbolic and the feminine / semiotic in an unending tension. Kristeva's "I" is thus more complex and more dynamic still than Lacan's and Freud's.

Much of the criticism levelled at Lacan and, to a lesser extent at Kristeva, turns on the difficulties in understanding what they are communicating. In their attempts to pin down something about the nature of human beings and of experience, they present images that are ambiguous, sliding and allusive. The visions of Lacan and Kristeva are at once intriguing and unsatisfying because, whatever the intellectual ferment of a particular age or culture, the philosophical quest remains demonstrably one to discover a basis for further construction. In this instance, the quest is to discover if it is possible to articulate, in something more than a private language, what it is to be conscious, what knowing is, how we know what we know, and how to recognise the limits of our knowing. In short, it is, in at least two senses, a search for certainty. The first of these senses of certainty concerns what is reliable, sure and not to be doubted. Philosophers need to start from somewhere, preferably somewhere where others can also start. The second sense is a more interior one, linked to the first. It seems to be a human requirement that we have some (even arbitrary) certainties in our lives. Human beings cannot live without some fixed points: if

everything were unfixed and changing we should probably be unable to function and have to withdraw to some imaginary certainties, which would be a movement into irrationalism, fundamentalism or even psychosis. Somewhere between the polar extremes of everything being known (or, at least, defined) and nothing being known or knowable is the saving observation that sceptical philosophers have often been the most conservative of people. Technically doubting the substantiality of the material world, they have been content to own houses and take up gardening..

One implication of Lacan's understanding of the various "I" agencies is that the quest for certainty in the present age is unlikely to prove fruitful. The appeal to language has brought philosophers to a point where the *glissement* between the signifier and the signified renders tentative all foundations and *a fortiori* all conclusions. In the existentialist movements of the 1930s - 1950s, this uncertainty led some to conclude that death was the only certainty upon which a person might rely<sup>16</sup>. Philosophy may develop through the present period of postmodern relativism and discover - if not certainty - then some reliable intellectual basis for being human and being in relationship. The danger in a period of uncertainty is of reactive movements away from what may be a logically and morally necessary uncertainty into, for example, religious fundamentalism or political fascism. These, if one is to follow Fromm's thesis, are the likely consequences arising out of existential anxiety<sup>17</sup>.

This mood of uncertainty and negative expectation regarding the future should be set against some countervailing work. Examples of a more pragmatic - perhaps more human - certainty are found in the moral consensus basis of Etzioni's Communitarianism and in Habermas' notion of

civil society<sup>18</sup>. These both represent attempts to define a new vision for human living. They are part of an ongoing quest for a basis for living which gives a necessary degree of certainty, offers an intellectual and moral basis for community and governance, and points to epistemological and hermeneutical tools for testing outcomes and directing future development.

### **2.3 The scientific quest**

Science (derived from the Latin *scientia*, knowledge) has overall the meaning associated with its Latin root. That is to say, science denotes knowledge. It also signifies something studied and learned, a discipline to be pursued. In the definitions of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, the so-called Natural Sciences of physics and chemistry are not indicated until one reaches **&4**:

A branch of study which is concerned either with a connected body of demonstrated truths or with observed facts systematically classified and more or less colligated by being brought under general laws, and which includes trustworthy methods for the discovery of new truth within its own domain, 1725.<sup>19</sup>

The date in this dictionary entry sets this familiar and current meaning in the context of what is referred to as the Enlightenment. That period of intellectual and cultural development in Europe represents, amongst other features, the ground recovered from (or lost by) metaphysics, and the lengthy end process of a *Weltanschauung* (world view) that includes a realm of absolutes. These absolutes had been held to be, by definition, beyond reason and deduction. Reason had been secondary, and its function had been to infer or induce whatever was consequent or dependent on those absolutes. The Enlightenment represents an end product of philosophical and scientific thinking from Descartes to Hume. Of immediate concern here is the impetus it gave to the scientific quest.

One may demonstrate that impetus by referring to two important figures in philosophical and scientific thinking, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. It was Hobbes (1588 – 1679) who, in contrast to his near contemporary Leibniz, asserted the empirical basis of human knowledge<sup>20</sup>. He had met Galileo, an empirical scientist, and Descartes, upon whose rationalism his own thought relied. Hobbes regarded science as a deductive discipline and mathematics (a species of reason) as its principal tool for proofs. Both Hobbes and Locke were opposed to what they saw as absolutism in contemporary thinking. Both were politically conscious and informed. At the time of the Restoration in England in 1669, they opposed any notion of monarchy that was not founded upon a contractual understanding of government and governed. This is a political analogue for other areas of their thinking, including, for example, theology<sup>21</sup>. It was Hobbes who laid down a scientific principle (one which could be upheld today only in a metaphorical sense<sup>22</sup>), when he asserted that all sensation derives from motion, and that philosophy is the study of effects arising from causes and of the causes underlying effects. His mathematical and physical view of the universe came too late in life for a full development, and anyway the physical sciences were not his primary interest. Locke (1632-1704), though he differed in important political respects from Hobbes, saw that the kind of philosophical empiricism they both promoted had material and scientific implications. He was confident that his own work supported and was supported by that of many eminent contemporaries<sup>23</sup>.

In sum then, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries represented an important turning point in philosophy. The Enlightenment gave new value to human understanding<sup>24</sup>, and offered scientific learning both a philosophical basis and the stimulus of liberation from metaphysical

trammels that had previously undermined or discouraged confidence in empiricism and reason<sup>25</sup>.

The expansion of science in its modern and more popular sense was a rapid one, and the nineteenth century brought about a further divergence into discrete sciences, e.g. physics, chemistry, and biological and medical sciences. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century marked the emergence of the human sciences, e.g. anthropology, psychology and sociology. These new “soft” sciences based their claim to be sciences (rather than humanities such as literature or philosophy) upon their methods and standards. That is to say, their work is based upon reason and deduction, upon empirically verifiable data and, often, upon repeatable experiments and falsifiable hypotheses. Arguments that they are not sciences must therefore be treated with caution since they contain the polemics of rival interest groups. To be sure, psychology is not the same discipline as chemistry. But, in the field of psychology as in chemistry, any theory must be based upon reason. It must, at the least, be consistent with empirical observation and be compatible with data from other workers in the field and from other sciences. It must also be sufficiently developed to interface with other disciplines touching on the same field of endeavour. There would be, for example, little point in clinging to a psychological theory that contradicted what is known about human physiology or neurological behaviour.

There can be no doubt that, for many people, science is seen as that quest which should be able to offer satisfactory answers to all of life's questions. However, science in the narrow sense in which **&4** of the Oxford English Dictionary entry defines it, is not the whole of science. The so-called "natural sciences" such as mathematics, physics, chemistry are not, by their very nature, able to offer answers to all questions that are important to those who ask them. If a person asks if life has any meaning, that is not something for which mathematics has answers. That is rather a question

that, however imprecise, suggests emotional need as well as intellectual curiosity. It might be a question for a philosopher to answer, although, on the face of it, philosophy on its own is unlikely to satisfy the implicit emotional search. If, however, the enquirer were to ask about the meaning of time, then, although philosophers, theologians and psychotherapists might have things to say, the most satisfying answers (to the face value of the question) are likely to come from mathematicians or physicists who have specialised in cosmological questions. The question about time is (again, at face value) a specific question about what appears to people as a phenomenon of the cosmos. It may contain or mask another (philosophical) question about a basis for certainty, but it does not present in that way and may be dealt with specifically.

The scope and limits of the scientific quest is illustrated by Stephen Hawking's *A brief history of Time*. It was an attempt by a mathematician and cosmologist to open the eyes of non-scientists (and other scientists) to the debate about relativity and cosmological theories. These theories are, of course, more than mere speculations. For a speculation or idea to be accorded in scientific discourse the status of a theory, it must conform to certain criteria. For example, a theory must rest on a base of non-selective data, i.e. it must fit the known facts. It must also be intellectually satisfying without reference to unknown or unknowable third terms. The *deus ex machina* of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, for example, would not be acceptable, nor would the introduction of some other scientific entity, e.g. introducing a new sub-atomic particle, unless, of course, the existence of such a particle can be demonstrated and is the point of the theory.

Hawking's book may well contain some of the answers to the specific questions of scientific cosmology: only an experienced cosmologist could offer useful criticism on that score. In the

present context, however, his book is open to criticism where he enters the province of the philosophy of religion. His notions of (the mind of) God may well indicate an attitude of reverence for some cosmic creator, initiator or conductor. They do not, however, do service as theoretical contributions to the ongoing debate about the nature of God, since Hawking demonstrates little experience of that debate. Theories about the nature of God are part of another discipline whose written corpus and oral tradition has been built up over centuries<sup>26</sup>.

In his reference to the mind of God, Hawking moves from one discourse to another as though that were unproblematic. There is no apparent recognition that cosmological theories are not of the same order as onto-theological ones, even if, as in this instance, both appear to be about teleology. To illustrate this, one could say that the creation narratives of the Bible were not intended to be scientific treatises opening the way for the emergence of 'string' theory and so are not invalidated by such an omission. By the same token, the absence in the Genesis accounts of clear references to background radiation should not be taken as a serious challenge to those whose business is the measurement of that radiation.

The disciplines of science are important for this thesis because gestalt therapy owes much to the science of experimental psychology as well as to the phenomenological enquiry and theories of gestalt philosophy. As a branch of psychological science, gestalt must meet the criteria of scientific discourse. As a scientific discipline, it attempts to answer the kinds of questions for which people sense that there are specific answers. Like some other branches of scientific discourse, it also finds itself facing ultimate questions that push its methodology into further development.



## 2.4 The psychotherapeutic quest

The philosophical quest is ultimately one for certainty, while the scientific quest is for answers to specific questions about how we experience the world and what it is that we experience. The two quests are about different types of reality. The interactions in the psychotherapist's consulting room involve yet another kind of reality, one that can be perceived - and is framed and described - by the patient and therapist together. The therapeutic dyad is involved in a quest that is in part philosophical. There are implicit philosophical questions about whatever transcends the immanent details of our lives, about what constitutes reality and about how we know what we know. It can also be argued that there is a search for certainty, perhaps here more than in most areas of human endeavour. However, the psychotherapeutic search is not one which can usefully be carried out in philosophical terms, for the answers of philosophy would not meet effectively the needs of most therapy patients. Philosophical reasoning, as John Stuart Mill discovered in his depressive illness, cannot be expected to deal effectively with emotions and matters of the heart<sup>27</sup>. Mill's life offers a powerful illustration of this point. He had been stunted through a lack of emotional nourishment in spite of his father's care and the extraordinary philosophical and scientific education he gave his son. In his anxiety and melancholy, Mill had struggled to build up intellectual structures in an attempt to grapple with the realities of his life. The intellectual structures did not break down, but Mill did, and he found his healing in the warm and passionate relationship he made with Harriet Taylor. He had needed to find a different reality that could bring new meaning to his life and heal old wounds.

Perhaps the scientific approach would have something to offer a sufferer. Neuroscience, for

example, has much to offer in our understanding and treatment of emotional pain and mental illness<sup>28</sup>. The scientific quest also has much to offer to psychotherapy as a discipline. For example, the approaches and outcomes of various schools of psychotherapy are usefully subjected to scientific scrutiny. This is because it is not yet possible to define how psychotherapy works in the same way we know how the internal combustion engine works or how plants function. However, as those analogies suggest, there are limits to such methods: there is a conflict between psychotherapeutic approaches based on an understanding of healing relationships and approaches which arise from the scientific quest and which assume that most questions are susceptible to a scientific approach. It is, for example, unsatisfactory to the scientific psychologist to be told that people get better "because of the therapeutic relationship". It also comes as unwelcome news to medical insurance companies when they are told that measurement of successful outcome is something between difficult and impossible. That is one important reason why, in recent years, there has been excitement in the psychotherapeutic press about newer, shorter and what are sometimes held to be more effective types of psychotherapy<sup>29</sup>. It is suggested that NHS managers could countenance the provision of "brief therapies" because of their cost / benefit profile.

However much one sympathises with the concerns of service providers, that language is sufficient to remind one that this presents another example of blurring the boundaries between different discourses. It may be right (morally and practically) for health economists and health service managers to operate as part of a scientific quest. But questions about what psychotherapy is for, what it does and how it works do not belong primarily in the discourse of economics and management. They stand as questions in their own right, and the answers to such questions

should be seen first in the context of the work done by therapists and patients, i.e. in the healing of those who suffer. There is thus a way in which the scientific quest may not hold sway in the discipline and practice of psychotherapy. The psychotherapeutic quest has its own methods and its own goals. This may be illustrated by a brief consideration of the goals of its practitioners.

The goals of psychotherapists are limited. They hope that, at the end of therapy, their patients will be able to live their lives with other people in ways that are mutually enhancing. They hope they may suffer no more anxiety than any healthy person may should in a stressful culture, and that their sufferings should be the normal ones of changing relationships, of loss and other vicissitudes. They hope that the therapy has been effective in promoting the growth in their patients' personalities previously arrested or deformed by overwhelmingly negative experiences. One way of describing the work of therapy is to say that patient and therapist have met and compared realities. Such meeting suggests a dialogical view of therapy that relies on Buber's notion of the I-Thou encounter. This was developed by Perls and his early colleagues and continues in the work of, for example, Yontef<sup>30</sup>. It is a view central to the theory and practice of gestalt therapy, although not confined to that school. The assertion that therapy entails meeting - and meeting in such a way that the parties involved compare their realities - does not imply that the therapist is the one in touch with "real" reality while the patient is in touch with "unreal" reality. It is more accurate to state that the therapist is trained to register where the patient's reality does not accord with her own. There are many ways in which this might happen. An example will serve to make the point.

A patient, N., has had many appalling experiences throughout her childhood of being sexually

molested and violated by men. So much has this been the case, that she has concluded (i.e. reached a position from which it is apparent) that all men are rapists. This conclusion is real to her. That is to say: she is being realistic in her assertion because it comes from a life made up of pain and fear. Her reality is not the only reality open to people, but it is inescapable for her. It would be insulting, as well as useless, to argue with her that her conclusion is unrealistic (in the sense of being unreasonable or untrue). The object in the gestalt psychotherapeutic encounter is not to persuade N. by use of logic to think in some different way, although some cognitive approaches contain large elements of this. The dialogical approach requires first of all a meeting, and that meeting must be, insofar as it lies in the powers of the two parties, based on mutual respect, a meeting of an I and a Thou. This implicit acceptance of the reality of N. by the therapist, C., is not a technique. Indeed, were that to be the case, N. would feel patronised and the work would be unlikely to proceed. C. is a man, and at times feels uncomfortable because it was men in N's family who violated her. It is important therefore that he is able to hold on to other realities besides that of N. For example, he should be aware of his own capacity for trespass against women and children, even if that has never amounted to what could be termed an abuse. He should equally be aware of his own development as a man who wishes women and children well, and who confronts not only gross violations but also lesser trespasses against other people - whether they emanate from others or from himself. He needs sometimes to remind himself that he is not a rapist. And, at times, he notices and is gladdened by recognising other aspects of N.'s reality, e.g. that she is consulting him, and seeking at some level to meet him. This seeking may contain unaware masochistic impulses to repeat a bad experience, but, more likely when seen from a gestalt perspective, it represents N.'s attempt to put right the wrongs of the past. In other words, this may be N.'s latest attempt to prove that her reality is not the only reality, nor one to

which she wishes to cling. Over time, an atmosphere of trust, arising from shared safe experience, makes it possible for one or other party to focus their joint attention on the phenomena of their meetings. Any healing of the past hurts that make up N.'s reality can only happen as that reality is both taken seriously and also confronted dialectically by an alternative reality. That other reality is, in part, the reality held by C., but it is most of all a reality which N. and C. have created between them.

So far as the psychotherapeutic quest is concerned, N.'s reality was modified when she began to lose her fear, to express her anger at past injustices, to grieve for the loss of her childhood, to uncover and to heal the shame she had borne. C.'s reality also changed. In experiencing at close quarters the harm that boys and men can do, he had to revisit his own development, and was challenged afresh in his dealings with women in his life. He was also encouraged in his work with other men in his professional life and in his dealings with male friends and colleagues. These outcomes - for N. and for C. - are not separate events. They are aspects of a shared reality at which the two of them arrived over the course of eighteen months. That shared reality was characterised by their recognition of the personal, social and cultural factors in the rearing of men that require women to operate a practical hermeneutic of suspicion. It also entailed detecting where trust may be built and developing tools with which to do that. In the meeting of N. and C. there was often a playfulness and lightness which had been impossible at first but which enabled further therapeutic progress to be made, as when N. checked out with C. something that puzzled her about a man she was getting to know. She found that anything could be disclosed and discussed.

The psychotherapeutic quest overlaps the philosophical and the scientific quests. It is concerned with the search for certainty and for fundamental understandings that underpin and give coherence to much else. It is also concerned with the scientific interest in answers to specific questions and it espouses some of the epistemological and methodological interests of science. Psychotherapy has, however, its own disciplines and methods that relate to the dyad of patient (or group of patients) and therapist in their search for a practical or liveable reality. It is important for patient and therapist that this reality is philosophically coherent and does not fly in the face of scientific knowledge and methods. A gestalt approach to therapy emphasises the phenomenological and dialogical nature of reality and it is this approach which will inform the later work of establishing and comparing practical-values.

## **2.5 Gestalt philosophy**

The three quests examined above arise from three different types of discourse and have different frames of reference and aims. In the present context the focus of each quest is the examination of gestalt as a discipline. First, we shall pursue the philosophical quest. The story of gestalt philosophy began in 1890 with the publication in Vienna of a paper entitled "On 'Gestalt Qualities'"<sup>31</sup> by Christian von Ehrenfels, a philosophy professor in the German University in Prague. Von Ehrenfels, like many of the early gestalt philosophers, was a keen musician. His paper was a response to one written by an influential contemporary philosopher of science<sup>32</sup>, Ernst Mach. Mach had, in accordance with his aims, attempted a definition of sensation (*Empfindung*) which was a key term in the whole of his work<sup>33</sup>. Von Ehrenfels found the definition logically contradictory, although useful in its turn as it pushed him towards a deductive

understanding about sensations and the perception of entities (such as a spatial shape or a musical melody) which became fundamental to gestalt psychology<sup>34</sup>. Both papers triggered prolonged debate. The fundamental question at the centre of the debate was an ontological one about the nature of experience. Taking into account the concerns of Mach and von Ehrenfels, this fundamental question may be refined and restated in this manner: what are complex perceived formations such as spatial figures or (musical) melodies?

The fact that the question could be asked in this acute way owes much to von Ehrenfels' principal teacher, Franz Brentano, and also to another teacher and friend, Alexius Meinong. Brentano had a profound influence on contemporary ways of thinking. He was teaching at a time when atomistic thinking, perhaps best understood as a reductionist extension of the implicit and explicit analytical philosophies of the Age of Reason, had failed to give more than merely logical answers, i.e. answers wholly determined by the questions which they were framed to resolve. The direction of answers in such a positivistic, materialistic context always pointed further down the reductionist scale. In short, such answers could not satisfy what were, in the philosophical circles of the German University, then being seen as primarily ontological enquiries.

Brentano taught at a time when science, philosophy and psychology were not so discrete in the minds of educated people as they are today. The structures of university schools and departments reflected this integrated understanding. Brentano schooled his students in philosophical experimentation, in the use of subjective and objective observation of the phenomena of behaviour and of things, and in the differentiation of types of psychic phenomena. His overriding interest was in an ontology of mind, and that led him into the fields of intentionality and of

perception<sup>35</sup>, although it must be said that he repudiated the notions of "Gestalt quality" later associated with both Meinong and von Ehrenfels.

Von Ehrenfels had set out from a point of agreement with Brentano. His questions were Brentano-type ontological ones, seemingly disingenuous in their form. He was, for instance, interested in the nature of sensations (*Empfindungen*), the subject of Mach's book and of Brentano's then unpublished lectures (*Deskriptive Psychologie*) on the matter. Mach had used the example of a musical melody in some of his work and had sought to analyse the ontological status of what is signalled by the term "melody". Von Ehrenfels put the question thus: "Is a melody (i) a mere sum [*Zusammenfassung*] of elements, or (ii) something novel in relation to this sum, something that certainly goes hand in hand with, but is distinguishable from, the sum of elements?"<sup>36</sup>.

As a composition student with Anton Bruckner, von Ehrenfels was in his element with this enquiry. His answer to the melody question was firmly in favour of (ii). He saw that, from the atomistic-reductionist point of view, music is "a sum of tones..... brought to presentation", but it does not tell us what constitutes melody as such. He illustrated this point by reference to a folk tune which he quotes<sup>37</sup>: he points out that anyone, musician or not, can recognise a tune, no matter what its key (and in some keys, none of the notes in certain other keys would be employed). Nor is the recognition of melody simply a matter of rhythm, nor an assembly of the "right" notes in a different order, nor solely of the musical intervals. Rather what is perceived is a complex set of relationships on the analogy of spatial relationships. It was that set of relationships - and not just the aural impact of certain tones - which constituted the particular *Gestalt*. One

could change all the tones in the "sum of tones" by a simple shift of key and yet the melody would still be recognisable: and, if it were played to one on a first occasion wrongly, one might have a strong suspicion that this was the case. He came to the conclusion that something else is "given" in the experience of melody which is over and above the mere "sum of tones", which he referred to as *Gestaltqualität*.

The word *Gestalt* has a long history in the German language and has accrued a range of meanings. It derives by metaphorical extension from the Old High German "*stalla*", meaning "a place to stand" (cognate with the English "stall"). By further extension it came to mean form or shape (as in Goethe's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, "*Sein hoher Gang, Sein' edle Gestalt*" – "His stately gait, His noble figure") and can be applied both to people and things. Figuratively, it can mean something else, as in "*sich in seiner wahren Gestalt zeigen*" (to show oneself in one's true colours - literally, one's true shape). Thus it was that, in discussion of Mach's paper on the perception of spatial and musical figures (the latter a metaphorical extension of the former), the word *Gestalt* was available. Indeed, one might suggest that, for von Ehrenfels, the term *Gestalt* was given in that process whereby the units of the overall experience of his thinking were brought to presentation.

Whether or not that is so, he believed that, in addition to the elements constituent of a visual presentation and their spatial or quasi-spatial determinants, there is concomitant with them a further quality or attribute. This occurs in such a way that we must say of our visual or quasi-visual experience that we do not experience a mere sum or complex of sensory elements but a unity. Further, von Ehrenfels' syntax, in common with that of the school of Brentano,

suggests quite clearly that this is not simply a matter of our subjective perception, but that this experience is indeed "given" in (e.g. aural or visual) presentation. He states specifically that "Gestalt qualities are given in consciousness simultaneously with their foundations<sup>38</sup>, without any activity of mind specifically directed towards them". One could even ask if there exist *Gestalt* qualities quite independently of observers, or one might enquire if these qualities exist in conjunction with the observer as another *Gestalt*.

If von Ehrenfels' writing and illustrations are complex when he deals with simple sensory data, the complexity increases as he attempts to show how the theory may be applied to abstract levels of activity and to multi-sensory experiences. One important insight emerging from these illustrations is that events which involve different aspects of reality<sup>39</sup> are not correlates of different mental faculties, but are whole events or experiences that involve, potentially at least, the whole of us in one unified movement. Von Ehrenfels – without using the language of holistic perception or holistic experience - was defining a key aspect of what was later recognised as right-hemisphere (or, more accurately, sub-dominant hemisphere) brain function<sup>40</sup>. However, it took the work of his student, Wertheimer, and other members of the Berlin school of gestalt psychology, to offer satisfactory theories connecting brain function and gestalt perception. Even then, it was a further thirty years before more detailed physiological data would be available.

Von Ehrenfels was not, of course, working in a philosophical vacuum. His notion of gestalt qualities is paralleled, for example, by Husserl's notion of "species". Husserl, influenced as he was by his teacher Carl Stumpf (also an associate of Brentano), was working on an ontology which could illuminate the commonplace observation that persons tend to take in configuration

(*Gestalt*) at one glance, that we do not see one bird and another and another ....., but a flock of birds: we see "flock-ness" as a phenomenon. By giving the notion of "flock" an ontological status, Husserl extended von Ehrenfels' concept of a *Gestalt* quality in perception and added to subsequent debate about different orders of *Gestalt* - rather than, for instance, different levels of abstraction.

Von Ehrenfels' paper continued with a section on orders of *Gestalt* qualities in a way not paralleled by Husserl. He gave as his example a geometric pattern in which a great many shapes offered themselves (were indeed apparently present) but in which one overall pattern seemed to predominate. It was this predominance which fascinated him and led to his brief speculation about orders of *Gestaltqualitäten*. His last paper on the matter of *Gestaltqualitäten* was dictated to his wife shortly before his death in 1932<sup>41</sup>. In it he takes further the matter of orders, approaching as he does so, a Platonic sense of Ideas, hinting perhaps at a progression of *Gestalten* toward some infinite or even absolute *Qualität*.

Although von Ehrenfels was the first to write of *Gestaltqualitäten*, he used common terminology when he wrote of "foundations" or "*fundamenta*" (what we might today call "bits of data") and thus of "founded contents", a term which describes what he more elegantly called *Gestalten*. The language of *fundamenta* and founded contents provided the thinking tools for a number of disciplines of which psychology and linguistics are only two examples<sup>42</sup>. Educated and enquiring minds responded readily to a philosophical approach that opened up scientific thinking and directed it to broad cosmological enquiries. Those enquiries led to and then built upon the theories of relativity, the uncertainty principle and quantum mechanics. It seems curious therefore that such a profound shift in philosophical basis as that of von Ehrenfels and his

colleagues should be so little known or taught today.

The penultimate section of von Ehrenfels' original paper concludes with a further complication: "the illusion-forming powers of imagination can however succeed ..... in varying the foundations themselves, and thus also indirectly the corresponding Gestalt qualities"<sup>43</sup>. In this he anticipated the work of the Berlin school of Wertheimer and others.

## 2.6 Gestalt psychology

Von Ehrenfels' comment foreshadowed a more extreme view which came to be held by Max Wertheimer in which the latter claimed that, in his most quoted phrase, our perception is organised "*von oben nach unten*", that is, from the top downwards<sup>44</sup>. What this means in effect is that what is given in experience is *Gestalten*: the perceptual sensations or *fundamenta* we recognise are, in this view, derived from or are in some way secondary to the *Gestalten*. This view differs from that of, say, Stumpf who described how we may perceive (in whatever combination of modalities) either a complex (an aggregate of *fundamenta*) or a *Gestalt* (something else given in the experience of the relations between the *fundamenta*). However, Stumpf asserts that *Gestalten* cannot be given in experience except in relation to some given content, suggesting that these contents are far from being secondary to their corresponding *Gestalt*.

In order to understand Wertheimer's departure from the general line of gestalt philosophy, we should consider a number of important facts outside the immediate field of philosophical enquiry.

Wertheimer explored the phenomena of experience through the academic disciplines of psychology and of neurology as well as philosophy. One of his major contributions was the work that led to his defining what he called "phenomenal motion" - as distinct from the absolute motion, or substantial transport, of a body from A to B<sup>45</sup>. The "moving lights" advertisements in Piccadilly Circus offer a convincing example of Wertheimer's phenomenal motion. His famous experiment was subsequently abbreviated and translated into English by Shipley who comments that this paper is generally regarded as the launch of the new *Gestalt* psychology. Shipley is particularly interested in what he terms "the cosmic meeting grounds" of religion and ethics. He examines the contributions of Jung and Freud to these grounds and continues

All great philosophies must come to stand or fall upon them. A rapprochement, on these issues, between the two great movements in modern psychology, - Gestalt and Psychoanalysis, - is probably the most important challenge in the field today. There are elements in each, which ... should eventually blend into a more healthy and a more generous description of the human personality than we have yet been able to comprehend".<sup>46</sup>

Wertheimer engaged two of his students, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler in the phenomenal motion experiments and their follow-up. He showed them two lights that flashed alternately. Under certain conditions it appeared that there was a movement of light between two points. The conditions of the experiment, e.g. the distance apart of the lights, the duration of illumination, and the frequency of alternations, are of critical importance. The eidetic trick depends on the conditions. But the eidesis obviously resides in the observer, although it also became evident that individual observers may vary in what they see. In a series of experiments, Wertheimer and his team<sup>47</sup> began to establish a series of what he called phi-phenomena<sup>48</sup>, i.e. purely phenomenal experiences. The phi-phenomenon referred to above he called "across" and suggested that we see, independently of the movement of bodies, "across" (although not, at this stage, a more abstract

order of, say, "across-ness").

Wertheimer's theorising about phi-phenomena was primarily in psychological and philosophical terms, but his students, Köhler and Koffka, focused sharply on cerebro-cortical events, and on the interface of neural endings with their environment. Their shift of language and change of conceptual framework represent the break from the development of gestalt philosophy as a theoretical enquiry founded on introspection and focused upon intellectual construction. The latter continued to occupy the contemporary philosopher Benussi and his philosophical-psychological colleagues of the Graz school<sup>49</sup> of gestalt philosophy who promoted what they termed a "production theory" of *Gestalten*. One of the points of divergence between the schools came in a paper by Koffka<sup>50</sup> as part of a reasoned criticism of Grazian notions about phenomenal motion<sup>51</sup>. The criticism turned on an understanding of the ambiguous nature of *Gestalten*. Such ambiguity, from a production theory viewpoint, suggests that *Gestalten*, far from being given in the sensory experience, are the outcomes of data processing, i.e. the building up of complex images by a process of agglomeration of "bits" of sensory information. The fundamental axiom of Benussi's position is that there is constancy in sensory information that privileges objective experience over subjective. Koffka, however, argued that what makes a stimulus out of sensory data cannot rest absolutely in the data themselves, but rather in the relation of the data to the subject.

This is the point at which the later gestalt therapy theories of gestalt formation and contact process (Perls *et al*, 1973) are incipient<sup>52</sup>. Koffka had undermined mechanistic notions of cause and effect and had, so to speak, founded a field theory<sup>53</sup> in whose terms it may be said that

context determines meaning. It is this determination, so central to the Berlin school's formulation of gestalt theory, which forms one of the operating assumptions in therapeutic practice. Field theory and the associated understanding of top-down organisation of perception, are notions absent from Grazian understandings about meaning. In looking for the psychological roots of gestalt therapy, one must look, therefore, to the Berlin school, exemplified by Koffka and Köhler, rather than to Benussi and the Graz school. The early literature of gestalt therapy does not make this point explicitly, although there are acknowledgements of a debt to Wertheimer<sup>54</sup>. Perls was perhaps most explicit about the link with Wertheimer when he criticised psychoanalysis for its reliance on "association psychology"<sup>55</sup>. He believed that association psychology would have disappeared but for being given a new lease of life by Freud. He considered that Freud's discoveries were made almost despite his reliance on association psychology, and that Freud discovered intuitively a number of *Gestalten* behind the associations on which he focused. In this Perls is nailing his colours firmly to the mast of gestalt psychology and specifically to the work of Köhler and Wertheimer<sup>56</sup>.

## **2.7 Links between gestalt therapy and gestalt philosophy and psychology**

Another link between the Berlin school - especially Köhler - and the founders of gestalt therapy is found in the work and person of Kurt Goldstein. Goldstein worked with brain injured soldiers after the First World War in a clinic he had founded in Frankfurt. He was a physician and described himself thus, but he was also a philosophically minded person and had initially been undecided which discipline he most wished to pursue in his first degree. His work, both in clinical papers and in larger and more general works, shows a preoccupation with dimensions

beyond the immediate physical exigencies of his patients. He was familiar with the work of von Ehrenfels, Wertheimer, Koffka and Köhler<sup>57</sup>. His general approach to pathology and to normal functioning was an holistic one which viewed the events and processes of his patients' lives as aspects of wider wholes. A loss of function in part of the brain was an insult to the whole person or else a stimulus towards a different homeostatic resolution for a whole life. As will be seen in chapter 3, Goldstein's work was not only at the then cutting edge of neuroscience, but it was also radically different in its holistic approach to perception, learning and consequent re-educative possibilities for patients with acquired brain injury<sup>58</sup>.

One of Goldstein's associates was a psychology graduate named Lore Posner. It was her clinical observations and theoretical grounding in gestalt psychology which *prima facie* represent the single strongest link between gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy. It seems that it was she, rather than her (eventual) husband Friedrich Perls, who had deep roots in gestalt<sup>59</sup>. Perls met Posner at Goldstein's clinic, but it may be too simple to conclude that his stay of only a year in Frankfurt means that he had little grasp of gestalt psychology. In reconstructing the events of that time, one should not overlook the excitement which the gestalt school was generating nor its pre-eminence as the principal approach to experimental psychology in Germany and thus the world. Just as it would be hard for a philosophically educated person there to avoid the existentialist influence of Tillich in Frankfurt and Buber in Berlin, so it is unlikely that a psychologically educated person would be unfamiliar with the gestaltists. For present-day practitioners of gestalt therapy, there is sometimes some heat in the debate about the relative contributions of Fritz and Laura Perls, and the foregoing is not intended in any way to detract from the undoubted genius of the latter. However, her collegial relationship with Goldstein – though it undoubtedly makes a

strong link between clinical applications of gestalt psychology and the development of gestalt therapy - should not be viewed as an apostolic succession. Goldstein's work was widely known and thought to be as exciting then as when it was "re-discovered" by Jonathan Miller and Oliver Sacks<sup>60</sup>.

Interestingly, gestalt philosophy and psychology are not much acknowledged in current discourse, even though they are fundamental to sociological theory. In various forms they have an implicit role in social psychology, in the language of intrapsychic, interpersonal and group dynamics, field theories, systems theories and theories of perception<sup>61</sup>. Gestalt theory is also found in the language of aesthetics - in music, visual arts and literature. It seems likely that the achievements of the gestalt philosophers are here to stay<sup>62</sup>. No doubt the development of gestalt therapy as a force in the field of therapeutic psychology, and its establishment throughout the Americas, Europe, South Africa and Australasia would have surprised Brentano and von Ehrenfels. There is nonetheless a coherent line from Brentano to Perls and beyond.

## **2.8 Some philosophical issues in gestalt**

In the earliest days of gestalt thinking, during the era of Brentano and his students, the questions they were asking were ontological ones: they were questions about the nature of mental acts and the nature of the stimuli on which such acts were focused or which they reflected. These ontological questions gave rise in due course to epistemological ones about how we know, and how we think of that as true. As philosophical discourse developed, linguistic interrogation raised the matter of meaning, and the new question became: what does it mean when we say that we

hear a melody or see a geometric shape<sup>63</sup>.

Brentano, von Ehrenfels and the rest were attempting to create an intellectual base upon which all human experience could be shown to rest. They did this by studying the activity of human perception<sup>64</sup>. At first sight this seemed to offer a surer epistemological basis than, say, Descartes' "*cogito*". The Cartesian position, of logical necessity, forces people to turn in on themselves. The beginning and end of that process is what philosophers recognise as solipsism, and what psychotherapists might construe as narcissism or even psychosis. Of course, Cartesians were not all mad or narcissistic. Like the early gestaltists and the phenomenologists, they checked their experiences against those of other people, and sought common realities. But their philosophical position was a weak one. To the epistemological question, how do you know what is true? (or even, how do you know what you know?) they could only answer, I know because it is what I think. The gestaltists, by contrast, could answer that they had carried out certain sensory experiments to arrive at their conclusions, and that these conclusions were commonly perceived and repeatable. They rested on a philosophical basis derived from empirical science.

And yet there is a paradox in this position that emerges if one presses the epistemological enquiry a little further. The enquiry is fundamentally a quest for certainty, and yet one of the chief fruits of the gestalt approach is to establish that *Gestalten* are characterised often by their ambiguity and shifting qualities! Could it be that this "hard science" approach is actually "woolly science"? Wertheimer tried to answer this question and proposed that the *fundamenta* of our experience may, in reality, be abstractions from the *Gestalten* given in experience. This is a notion so close to Platonic Ideas that it is remarkable in a 1920s philosopher-psychologist<sup>65</sup>. However, more

important and more surprising than the apparent resort to philosophical history is the way that Wertheimer puts the perceiver, once more, at the centre of the knowable universe. He does not say this explicitly. But, by stating that *Gestalten* are given in experience, are primary, and that sensory *fundamenta* are or may be abstractions from them (i.e. are secondary), he makes the human brain the defining organ or fundamental reference point of all that is, or is knowable. In a curious way, he foreshadows the "anthropic principle" discussed by Hawking<sup>66</sup>. Hawking suggests as a definition for the principle "We see the universe the way it is because we exist". In its emphatic or "strong" form, the principle amounts to a question and answer. The question is "Why is the universe the way it is?" and the answer "...is then simple: if it had been different, we would not be here!"<sup>67</sup>

The shift from Brentano to Wertheimer and then Hawking indicates one of the problems attending any attempt to proceed in more than one discipline, and it highlights some of the problems involved in defining a philosophical basis for gestalt psychology.

## **2.9 Gestalt therapy and gestalt philosophy**

Philosophy is as important in gestalt therapy as it is in gestalt psychology. However, although it is commonplace to assert that every counsellor and psychotherapist has an underlying philosophy, this is often the area in which, upon examination, psychotherapy and counselling students have greatest difficulty. Quite rightly, the emphasis in educational programmes<sup>68</sup> for therapists rests firmly upon their ability to think, feel and act clearly and appropriately in the practical situation with a client. It may be inevitable in new professions that little attention is paid to the intellectual

infrastructure of the programmes or indeed to the breadth of the students' previous education, let alone their philosophical orientation. Some may argue that what matters is that the therapy is effective, whatever its psychological and philosophical basis. But there is a case for more educational energy to be expended on conceptual frameworks as well as practice.

The case turns on two main points. The first is indicated in the metaphor of foundations. If one has strong foundations, one may expect to put up a sound building which, provided the construction is carried out well, should stand and serve its purpose. If, on the other hand, the foundation is not properly constructed, then subsidence and structural faults will occur, no matter how good the rest of the construction. If, for example, a school of therapy were founded on the premise that all people are intrinsically kind and wish well to their neighbours, the practitioners might find that some people were helped, but most would not be. That is because the therapeutic philosophy does not take into account much of their experience of themselves and of others. The second point on which this case turns is as a device for measuring other philosophical approaches (to see, for example, how they match or conflict), and for exploring compatibility with other disciplines in which therapists may need to co-operate.

New ideas in one discourse often influence experience in others. For example, Freud's ideas about the unconscious have had considerable impact on plastic and graphic arts, on films, on theatre and literature, and on advertising and commerce. Or, to take another example, Schleiermacher's emphasis on subjective experience and the corollary move away from neo-platonism is implicated in changes in theological and political thinking. From the perspective of the field theory that characterises the thinking of gestalt therapists, one cannot say strictly that

a particular shift in philosophy causes changes elsewhere, nor that changes in theology or politics make possible certain shifts in philosophical discourse. What is observable - and this is consistent with field theory - is simply that these events or changes seem to go hand in hand, or, as Jung put it, they are "synchronous"<sup>69</sup>. Whether an apparent cause or an apparent effect, it seems that changes in philosophy go hand in hand with other changes. Philosophy and not theology is "the queen of the sciences" in the sense that it underpins *a priori* or *a posteriori* other forms of discourse and knowing.

The underlying assumptions of a therapeutic approach lie in the province of philosophy. As has been noted above, there was a time less than a century ago when mathematicians, philosophers, physical scientists and psychologists worked together, without concern for the boundaries of their disciplines, on matters of common interest<sup>70</sup>. Whatever the historical or cultural reasons for this, they plainly recognised that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory"<sup>71</sup>.

The practical uses of gestalt philosophy in gestalt psychology and therapy are summarised and illustrated in the following three sections. First, the subject is part of the gestalt. The second heading is *von oben nach unten*, a consideration of the whole and the parts. The third is the breadth of the gestalt idea. This is followed by a brief account of Stumpf's (corroborative) view of philosophy-psychology<sup>72</sup>.

## **2.10 The subject is part of the *Gestalt***

The clearest early statements from a gestalt source about the interdependence of observer and

observed come from Koffka<sup>73</sup>. Koffka himself marks a boundary between gestalt philosophy and gestalt psychology<sup>74</sup> and is usually thought to be on the psychological side of that boundary. In his critique of Benussi and others over phenomenal motion, he took an important philosophical step when he challenged the notion of external stimuli as constant or absolute. He concluded that stimulus is not an absolute property of an object or process, but rests on its relation to the subject. This statement emphasises the Berlin view that the subject is active in the formation of the gestalt. Borrowing a term from Oswald Külpe<sup>75</sup>, he spoke of the subject's mind-set (*Einstellung*) as contributing to the *Gestalt* rather than the subject's mind being simply instrumental in the process of *Gestalt* formation. Von Ehrenfels had not addressed this problem directly although Wertheimer's work, as we have seen above, supports such a position. In the debate on phenomenal motion, Wertheimer's experiments and early conclusions made certain assumptions about cortical functioning. Grazian theories about cerebral "production"<sup>76</sup> prompted his further thinking on the matter. In contradicting those theories Wertheimer made a radical break from allegedly objective scientific thinking. This kind of thinking, usually termed atomistic, was characteristic of much natural science at the time<sup>77</sup>. Wertheimer's critique of atomism rested on his empirical work but must also be seen as a philosophical confrontation. Put in the most general terms, his position may be summarised thus: who we are and what we experience are inseparable. This is a fundamental statement, but it is in a weak form. A stronger version of the same statement might run thus: the universe that exists is - in part at least - the universe we make. In its provisional form ("in part at least"), that is certainly a fundamental assumption in the practice of gestalt therapy, and it is rooted in (one strand) of gestalt philosophy and psychology and it relates to feminist assumptions about the epistemological status of experience.

## 2.11 *Von oben nach unten: the whole and the parts*

Wertheimer's view of human experience was that it is organised, in an eventually famous gestalt tag, *von oben nach unten*<sup>78</sup>. In this, as we have seen, he opposed production theories. He justified his position empirically, citing evidence from his experimental work in perception. However, he was also arguing the philosophical principle that the whole is not simply the sum of the parts<sup>79</sup>. He was indicating that what is given in experience is not a series or mass of data, no matter how simple or how complex, but rather complexes of data. These complexes are wholes rather than bits, and the bits (which may not even be complete) are dependent on the whole. Thus one may say, with Smith<sup>80</sup>, that "a collection of data (or any other psychological formation) does not *have* a Gestalt: it *is* a Gestalt, a whole whose parts are themselves determined as being such that they can exist only as parts of a whole of this given kind". It is in this sense that the whole is more than the parts<sup>81</sup>, about which von Ehrenfels used the word *Gestaltqualität*. It is this "more than" which is represented in Wertheimer's *von oben nach unten*. The phrase asserts the primacy of the *Gestalt* in perceptual experience. It serves not only in the arguments of gestalt philosophy but in the day to day work of gestalt therapists. In opposing the Grazian approach, it warns against a simplistic use of computer analogies for human mental activity.

*Von oben nach unten* does not, of course, necessarily suggest that the bits of data given in experience are so secondary as to be irrelevant. On the contrary, it may be argued that they are of the essence of the *Gestalt*, contributing to a field that is the *Gestalt*. Wertheimer argued that the *Gestalt* is what we experience, and Koffka showed that the *Gestalt* is what we make in the act of perception - so much so that the *Gestaltqualität* can fill in missing data, demonstrating the power

of this function and its omnipresence in experience.

As a philosophical assumption, *von oben nach unten* says something about human beings. For example, it supports a view of people as creatures who operate from whole perceptions, complex understandings and interpretations, and it rejects the (potentially reductionist) notion that we are data processing, logical producers - without of course denying our capacity for such activity. It also sets the scene for gestalt therapists to approach the therapeutic encounter as a whole event involving both parties (and others), and as something which will reorganise (some aspects of) the lives of both participants. This inheritance from gestalt philosophy is thus of importance for therapy as well as for psychology. And it has wider implications. In political life, for example, people who seek to govern must decide whether it is the *Gestalt*, the overall vision of society, which organises the experience of the electorate, or whether improved services work *von unten nach oben* (from the bottom upwards) to create a sense of a good society.

## **2.12 The breadth of the gestalt idea**

The illustration of two different political directions is suggestive of the breadth of the gestalt idea. Paradoxically, it is probably this breadth combined with its simplicity that has led some people to overlook its fundamental importance. Four aspects of that importance are considered here.

First, the work of the Berlin school, and indeed other gestalt schools, in psychological research drove and continues to drive research into perception, leading, for example, to the generation of

psychometric instruments and tests. The institute in which Wertheimer and his students worked is acknowledged as the first of its kind, and at the forefront of the development of scientific, i.e. experimental, psychology

Second, in a period when scientific writing for the general public enjoys prestige, gestalt philosophy can rightly claim to have begun as a philosophy of science<sup>82</sup>. Because their roots are in empirical observation and deductive logic, the ideas of the gestalt philosophers are important for modern science. For example, the notion of non-causal dependence about which both von Ehrenfels and Mach developed (differing) theories is integrated into modern physics.

Third, Lewin's field theory, deriving directly from the work of Stumpf and of the Berlin school, represents a psychological application of a physical theory regarding non-causal dependence. It finds echoes in, for example, catastrophe theory and chaos theory. Field theory is currently a fundamental idea in the development of (social) systems theory, family therapy, group dynamics theory and some management theories<sup>83</sup>.

Fourth, von Ehrenfels' original idea included the assertion that there are orders of *Gestalten*<sup>84</sup>. Wertheimer developed a notion of certain kinds of orders in perceptual experience and used the term *Prägnanz* to describe what he deduced. The word does not admit easily of an English equivalent, though it has overtones of the English "pregnancy" in the sense of fullness. However, it is used principally to describe the tendency of perceptual phenomena (and thus of the components of memory) to organise themselves or to be organised (the ambiguity is both in the idea and the experience) in the direction of equilibrium<sup>85</sup>. This idea has been developed not only

in gestalt philosophy and psychology, but also in gestalt therapy<sup>86</sup> and, in modified form and by other names, in other schools of therapy. *Prägnanz* concerns the internal ordering of the *Gestalt*; and that in turn indicates what order of *Gestalt* it is, i.e. what is its level on a scale of simplicity and complexity.

Gestalt theory is both simple and complex in its intellectual history and in its constructions. In chapter 7, in the examination of gestalt therapy and feminist theology for their compatibility, it is asserted that each has its world view (or more than one), and that each is a broad discipline resting upon firm philosophical foundations. It could be said of gestalt that it is an apparently simple idea, but one which has its own *Prägnanz* or self-optimising potential.

### **2.13 Stumpf's view of philosophy and psychology**

No account of the development of gestalt should omit some reference to an outstanding figure of the time, Carl Stumpf. Stumpf studied under Brentano<sup>87</sup> in Prague<sup>88</sup>, and he supervised the doctoral studies, including the experimental work, of Köhler, Koffka and Lewin. Wertheimer also studied under Stumpf. There are two principal reasons for including his name at this point in the thesis and they concern his influence on the development of the founders of the Berlin school. First is his principled adherence to the views of Brentano on experimental work, namely that philosophical or psychological theories should be based on empirical evidence and rational deduction. The second important area of influence is Stumpf's insistence that psychology and philosophy should not be split<sup>89</sup>.

His is not an unqualified support for Wertheimer and his colleagues: Stumpf's position in the matter of *Gestaltqualitäten* represents a halfway house between them and Brentano. This can be seen in, for example, his insistence on contextualising mental acts as parts of or abstractions from some greater process of consciousness, something which later gestaltists characterised as seeing every *Gestalt* as part of a wider *Gestalt* leading outward ultimately to the cosmos. It can also be seen in Stumpf's deductions about the phenomena of mental fusing of sensory data, which is a precursor of von Ehrenfels' observation about seeing wholes rather than series of parts. In these matters he prefigured much of what his students discovered or formulated. But he was highly critical, on philosophical grounds, of gestaltist claims such as Wertheimer's *nach oben zu unten*. In particular he asserted that it is ontologically erroneous to suggest that *Gestalten* exert or could exert causal influences on *fundamenta*<sup>90</sup>. In his supervision and his criticisms, Stumpf played an important part in the development of the gestalt philosophy- psychology upon which gestalt therapy drew. His work and attitudes also lend support to Perls' occasional claim that gestalt (therapy) is not just another psychotherapy, but a philosophy<sup>91</sup>. The "philosophy" to which Perls refers owes much to Stumpf in what he says about wholes and parts, and about the perception of *Gestalten*, their completion and their ambiguity.

## **2.14 Conclusion**

The work of pastoral theology requires movement between disciplines. The movement considered here is between gestalt and feminist theology. The choice of disciplines in such work is of crucial importance if we are to avoid skewed choices and, thus, unreliable conclusions. Since gestalt is juxtaposed with feminist theology, it is imperative to demonstrate that these two

disciplines are of equivalent breadth and depth. Whilst, on its own, this is not a sufficient test of compatibility, it is a *sine qua non* before proceeding to more specific assessments.

However, even within the apparently single discipline of gestalt, it is evident that a number of discourses are involved. Therefore caution is required in moving from one discourse to another. The consideration of the roots of gestalt in this chapter takes place within three discourses or quests. Philosophical, scientific and psychotherapeutic quests have been considered. Gestalt philosophy and psychology represent a starting point in the history of gestalt therapy. Despite the occasional suggestions in gestalt literature to the contrary, there is an unbroken line stretching from Brentano to the Berlin school of gestalt psychology. This Berlin school, led by Wertheimer, influenced and continues to support the development of gestalt therapy. One of the implications of this is that gestalt therapy has its roots in a sound philosophy of science. This is not to propose infallibility either by descent or association, but it illustrates a solid infrastructure underlying a therapy that claimed international attention in the anti-intellectual days of hippies, flower power and the Esalen Institute<sup>92</sup> whose invitation was to "lose your mind and come to your senses". The Esalen phenomenon was more than a new confidence in physicality and spirituality: it was also part of an intellectual revolt and refreshment. The big (if heavily edited<sup>93</sup>) workshops of those days were a prime way in which gestalt therapy became known both to the American Psychiatric Association, many of whose members participated in them, and also to a lay public. The edited transcripts make the link back to Wertheimer and beyond him to the gestalt philosophers. They also point to a number of other important influences. These include Freud and psychoanalysis, Smuts and holism, Friedlaender and his philosophy of "creative indifference" as well as the existential philosophers to whom passing reference has already been made. The next chapter

explores each of these in turn and gives an in-depth account of the development of gestalt therapy as a discipline that is well-founded, coherent, comprehensive and sufficiently robust to stand comparison with feminist theology.

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- <sup>1</sup> The psycho- prefix is problematic. Some protagonists of gestalt therapy are insistent in their rejection of the prefix since, in their view, it supports a culturally widespread dichotomy of mind or spirit and body. All gestalt therapists would probably unite behind a standard that proclaimed an holistic understanding of persons and the essential unity of mind, body and (increasingly) spirit.
- <sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Rex Ambler for the distinctions made in these statements.
- <sup>3</sup> KOESTLER, A. *The ghost in the machine*. London: Hutchinson, 1967 and Arkana, 1989, gives a non-technical treatment of this phenomenon. The title of the book is a reference to his understanding of the Cartesian view of human functioning. More technical exposition of the mechanisms of awareness and reflection are found in GOMES, G "Self-awareness and the mind-brain problem" *In Philosophical Psychology* **8** (2) 155-165, Jun 1995; MORIN, A "Characteristics of an effective internal dialogue in the acquisition of self-information" *In Imagination, cognition and personality* **15** (1) 45-58, 1995-6; -- "Self-talk and self-awareness: on the nature of the relation" *In Journal of mind and behaviour* **14** (3) 223-234, Sum. 1993; -- *et al* "Le dialogue intérieur comme médiateur cognitif de la conscience de soi privée: une mesure de l'activité consistant à se parler à soi-même à propos de soi et une étude corrélationnelle" *In Revue Québécoise de Psychologie* **14** (2) 3-19, 1993; LLOYD, D "Consciousness: a connectionist manifesto" *In Minds and machines* **5** (2) 161-185, May 1995; GIBSON, K "Toward an empirical basis for understanding consciousness and self-awareness" *In Consciousness and cognition: an international journal* **1** (2) 163-168, Jun 1992; SIMONOV, "The bright spot of consciousness" *In Journal of Russian and East European psychology* **30** (2) 5-12, Mar-Apr 1992; MILLER, L "Brain and self: toward a neuropsychodynamic model of ego autonomy and personality" *In Journal of the American Academy of psychoanalysis* **19** (2) 213-234, Sum.1991.
- <sup>4</sup> This assertion is a form of the "anthropic principle", illustrated by HAWKING, S. *A brief history of Time*. London: Bantam Press, 1988, pp. 124-126.
- <sup>5</sup> WHITEHEAD, A N and RUSSELL, B. *Principia mathematica (2nd edition)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927. The first edition was published in 1907.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, the closing words of RUSSELL, B *History of Western philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1946. "In the welter of conflicting fanaticisms, one of the few unifying forces is scientific truthfulness, by which I mean the habit of basing our beliefs upon observations and inferences as impersonal, and as much divested of local and temperamental bias, as is possible for human beings. To have insisted upon the introduction of this virtue into philosophy, and to have invented a powerful method by which it can be rendered fruitful, are the chief merits of the philosophical school of which I am a member. The habit of careful veracity acquired in the practice of this philosophical method can be

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extended to the whole sphere of human activity, producing, wherever it exists, a lessening of fanaticism with an increasing capacity of sympathy and mutual understanding. In abandoning a part of its dogmatic pretensions, philosophy does not cease to suggest and inspire a way of life" (p.789).

<sup>7</sup> For example LACAN, J. *Écrits: a selection*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1977, reprinted London: Routledge, 1989, in particular chapter 3, "Function and field of speech and language"; and, in that context, p.83 for a worked through example of concern for language.

<sup>8</sup> EAGLETON, T. *Literary theory: an introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, chapter 5, and especially p.164.

<sup>9</sup> FREUD, S. "On narcissism: an introduction (1914)" in *The Pelican Freud Library, Vol 11*. London: Pelican Books, 1984, p.84.

<sup>10</sup> Eagleton *op cit* p.165.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan's writing on this as, on many other matters, is so complex as to suggest that he is little concerned to communicate in clear sentences the kernel of his ideas. To pursue the point about the phallus, for example, it is necessary to use the editor's "Classified index of major concepts" (*op cit*. p.326 *et seq*), although a key part of Lacan's overall argument in this matter appears on pp. 198-199.

<sup>12</sup> For Lacan, language can only be an unending process of desire, for desire is what we call the never wholly successful attempt to reach the signified, to attain that unitive sense we once had. In our attempts, he says, the signified slides beneath the signifier - often because the signified is in fact repressed and thus inaccessible. Any sense we have of being ourselves, of knowing who we are and engaging with others is a practical convenience credible only to pre-Freudian persons. Such an illusion is the "imaginary" aspect of the ego. Eagleton expands this point: "The ego is a function or effect of a subject which is always dispersed, never identical with itself, strung out along the chains of the discourses which constitute it. There is a radical split between these two levels of being - a gap which is dramatically exemplified by the act of referring to myself in a sentence. When I say "Tomorrow I will mow the lawn," the "I" which I pronounce is an immediately intelligible, fairly stable point of reference which belies the murky depths of the "I" which does the pronouncing. The former "I" is known to linguistic theory as the "subject of the enunciation", the topic designated by my sentence; the latter "I", the one who speaks the sentence, is the "subject of the enunciating", the subject of the actual act of speaking. In the process of speaking and writing, these two "I's" seem to achieve a rough sort of unity; but this unity is of an imaginary kind. The "subject of the enunciating", the actual speaking, writing human person, can never represent himself or herself fully in what is said: there is no sign which will, so to speak, sum up my entire being. I can only *designate* myself in language by a convenient pronoun. The pronoun "I" *stands in* for the ever-elusive subject, which will always slip through the nets of any particular piece of language; and this is equivalent to saying that I cannot "mean" and "be" simultaneously. To make this point, Lacan boldly rewrites Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" as: "I am not where I think, and I think where I am not." (Eagleton *op cit* pp. 169-170).

<sup>13</sup> KRISTEVA, J. *La révolution du langage poétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1974. This is her doctoral thesis, translated by M. Waller as *Revolution in poetic language*, New York: Columbia

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- University Press, 1984. The relevant sections are quoted in MOI, T (ed). *The Kristeva reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. Her chapter 4 gives an example of the semiotic.
- <sup>14</sup> Moi, *op cit* pp 92-93.
- <sup>15</sup> Semiotics, from this perspective, might be regarded as the philosophical licence of surrealism and Dadaism, of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Buñuel's *bouleversement* of bourgeois normality.
- <sup>16</sup> For example, the trilogy of SARTRE, J-P *Les chemins de la liberté* published in translation as *The age of reason*, *The reprieve* (both trans. Sutton, E), and *Iron in the soul* (trans. Hopkins, G) London: Penguin, 1961, 1962, 1963 respectively. The books explore experiences of meaninglessness, anxiety, despair and (the almost arbitrary nature of) commitment. For one of the central characters, a philosophy teacher named Mathieu, the conclusion is to find within himself hatred and a willingness to kill which alone confers on him a sense of freedom (Sartre, 1963 p.225). The trilogy concludes, nonetheless, with a sense of alienation and emptiness (*ibid.* p.349).
- <sup>17</sup> Fromm *op cit*.
- <sup>18</sup> ETZIONI, A. *The spirit of community: rights, responsibilities and the communitarian agenda*. London: HarperCollins, Fontana Press, 1995; HABERMAS, J. *Communication and the evolution of society* (translated and with introduction by McCarthy, T) London: Heinemann Educational, 1979.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- <sup>20</sup> In this he follows Descartes whose work is founded on a conscious deductive method which takes into account then novel ideas of individuality, subjectivity and reason as a basis for philosophy. It was Descartes' dualism of body and mind that offered or perhaps simply reflected a new freedom for rational, deductive enquiry based upon empirical observation.
- <sup>21</sup> For example, LOCKE, J. *The reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures*. 1695 (Bodleian Library, Vet.A3 f.937 *et al*). This book called into question the fully divine nature of the Christ and tended, rather, to emphasise the humanity of Jesus. This bias brought him into conflict with Church authorities who charged him with Socinianism (a doctrine whose name derived from Lelio and Fausto Sozzini a century earlier and which survived as a founding influence in the Unitarian movement). LESLIE, C. *A brief account of the Socinian Trinity*. London, 1695 (a letter in the Bodleian Library, 8'K.31(8)Th) gives more details.
- <sup>22</sup> One such application of this principle would be in wave and particle theory as it might apply in neuroscience as well as in more obviously physical sciences.
- <sup>23</sup> "The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without Master-Builders, whose mighty Designs, in advancing the Sciences, will leave lasting Monuments to the Admiration of Posterity; But every one must not hope to be a Boyle, or a Sydenham; and in an Age that produces such Masters as the Great Huygenius, and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some other of that Strain; 'tis Ambition enough to be employed as an Under-Labourer in clearing Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge; which certainly had been very much more advanced in the World, if the endeavours of ingenious and industrious Men had not been much cumbered with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible Terms, introduced into the Sciences, and there made an Art of, to that Degree, that Philosophy, which is nothing but the true

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- Knowledge of Things, was thought unfit, or incapable to be brought into well-bred Company, and polite Conversation... To break in upon the Sanctuary of Vanity and Ignorance, will be, I suppose, some Service to Human Understanding:..." LOCKE, J. *An essay concerning human understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; the Epistle to the Reader, pp.9-10. First published 1689. This quotation is not to be taken only at its face value since it contains an irony, in that Locke's concern with empirical science, though real, was subservient to his concern for human conduct. It is in this context that these laudatory references should be read (p.xviii of the Foreword)..
- <sup>24</sup> The French *Encyclopédistes* associated with Diderot and Voltaire in the eighteenth century were directly engaged in this project. Voltaire, during his time in London, had been much influenced by Locke.
- <sup>25</sup> It is perhaps only in the twenty-first century that one can look at that rift to discover if there are gains to be had from some *rapprochement* between empirical science and metaphysics and its successors. The advent of quantum mechanics, chaos theory and the uncertainty principle open up areas for potentially fruitful dialogue and possible convergence.
- <sup>26</sup> Hawking, *op cit.*, in particular the *deus ex machina* references on p. 166.
- <sup>27</sup> MILL, J S. *Autobiography*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1873.
- <sup>28</sup> What is intended here is an acknowledgement of advances in scientific understanding which have a bearing on emotional life and behaviour. For example, some of the findings of the Human Genome project bear upon conditions such as schizophrenic illnesses. Research in brain chemistry and discoveries in neuroimaging are suggesting novel lines of treatment for a range of conditions.
- <sup>29</sup> For examples, MANN, J. *Time-limited psychotherapy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973; MANN, J and GOLDMAN, R. *A case-book in time-limited psychotherapy*. New York & London: McGraw-Hill, 1982 (although pp.72 *et seq* indicate a need for selection of patients, and some problems of diagnosis); MALAN, D. *The frontier of brief psychotherapy: an example of the convergence of research and clinical practice*. New York: Plenum Medical Book Co., 1976 (Malan emphasises the need to match the therapy to the patient and not *vice versa*, pp.3-6); MALAN, D H. *Toward the validation of dynamic psychotherapy: a replication*. New York & London: Plenum Medical Book Co., 1976. (Malan claims that he proves the case for effectiveness on psychodynamic criteria for brief psychotherapy, p.21); MALAN, D & OSIMO, F. *Psychodynamics, training and outcome in brief psychotherapy*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1992; GUSTAFSON, J P. *The complex secret of brief psychotherapy*. New York & London: Norton, 1986; RABKIN, R. *Strategic psychotherapy: brief and symptomatic treatment*. New York: Basic Books, 1977; and RYLE, A *et al*. *Cognitive-analytic therapy: active participation in change. A new integration in brief psychotherapy*. Chichester: Wiley, 1990.
- <sup>30</sup> This point is further noted in section 3.9 in connection with existentialist influences in gestalt therapy.
- <sup>31</sup> Von EHRENFELS, C. "Über 'Gestaltqualitäten'". In *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, **14**, 249-292 (1890). An English translation by Barry Smith is in SMITH, B (ed.). *Foundations of gestalt theory*. München - Wien: Philosophia, 1988. References to Ehrenfels' paper are to this latter.
- <sup>32</sup> MACH, E. *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen*. Jena: Fischer, 1886. There is an English

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- translation of this first edition, *Contributions to the analysis of the sensations* by Williams, C.M. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1897. The 5th edition English translation by Waterlow, S. (same publisher), 1914, was published as *The analysis of sensations and the relation of the physical to the psychical* (a translation of the later 1890 German title) in which the earlier ideas, with little correction, are expanded and illustrated.. Mach (*ibid* p.viii) described himself as a physicist and laid no claim to being a philosopher. His translator, S. Waterlow, did however use that term (p.vi).
- <sup>33</sup> Mach's book is about far more than the issues addressed by von Ehrenfels and does not fall on that single criticism. For example, Mach was working to establish clear distinctions between "teleological" and "causal" scientific arguments (pp.86 *et seq*). At a time when the physiology of the senses was only beginning to be understood in physical and chemical terms, and when present day monitoring and imaging was only a dream (p.242), he looked forward to a time when physicists could learn about the physical basis of memory (p.238). Mach was concerned to grapple with the ontological and epistemological implications of an emerging psychobiology.
- <sup>34</sup> Von Ehrenfels' principal criticism centred on Mach's scepticism about the part played in the perception of sensory wholes (shapes, melodies etc) by some integrative process in the perceiver, and his emphasis on what is given in the act of perception with little engagement of an integrative process in the perceiver. Von Ehrenfels' commitment to the former position made logically necessary the coining of some such term as *Gestalt*.
- <sup>35</sup> BRENTANO, F C. *Kategorienlehre, mit unterstützung der Brentano-gesellschaft in Prag herausgegeben, eingeleitet und mit anmerkungen und register versehen von Alfred Kastil*. Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1933. English translation by Chisholm, R M and Guterman, N *The theory of categories*. den Haag: Hjhoff Press (1981). An edition of Brentano's lectures on the ontology of experience was edited by Chisholm, R M *et al* (eds.) *Deskriptive Psychologie*. Hamburg: Meiner, 1982.
- <sup>36</sup> SMITH, B (ed). *Foundations of Gestalt theory*. München - Wien: Philosophia, 1988, p.83.
- <sup>37</sup> *ibid*. p.90.
- <sup>38</sup> The words "foundations" and "*fundamenta*" in his writing signify the basic elements of sensory data.
- <sup>39</sup> E.g. space and time, not seen at that time as aspects of the same cosmological continuum.
- <sup>40</sup> For example Levy-Agresti, J and Sperry, R W. "Differential perceptual capacities in major and minor hemispheres" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the USA*, 1968, **61**: 115-119. There has been, since the publication of this and other early papers, a great deal of research into lateralism in the brain. Such research has expanded and is elaborating upon these early findings. Examples are in ABOITIZ, F *et al*. "Individual differences in brain asymmetries and fiber composition in the human corpus callosum" *In Brain Research* **598**(1-2):154-61, Dec 1992; BALE, T L & DORSA, D M. "Sex differences in and effects of estrogen on oxytocin receptor messenger ribonucleic acid expression in the ventromedial hypothalamus" *In. Endocrinology* **136** (1):27-32, Jan 1995. HUTCHISON, J B *et al*. "Brain formation of oestrogen in the mouse: sex dimorphism in aromatase development" *In Journal of steroid biochemistry and molecular biology* **49** (4-6):407-15, Jun 1994; KULYNYCH J J *et al*. "Gender differences in the normal lateralization of the supratemporal cortex: MRI surface-rendering morphometry of Heschl's gyrus and the planum temporale" *In*

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*Cerebral cortex* 4 (2):107-18, Mar-Apr 1994. These papers are among many that indicate qualitative and quantitative support for this view of brain lateralism.

41 Von EHRENFELS, C. "On Gestalt Qualities (1932)" *In Psychological Review* 44:521-524, 1937. This version was edited and translated by Mildred Focht from the original published in Belgrade in *Philosophia* 2:139-141, 1937.

42 Mach had been involved some twenty-five years earlier in the same debate as a philosopher of science, and his ideas were influential in Einstein's thinking.

43 Smith, *op cit* p.114.

44 *ibid.* p.114.

45 WERTHEIMER, M. "Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung" *In Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 61: 161-265, 1912. The abbreviated and translated version is in SHIPLEY, T (ed.). *Classics in psychology*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1961, pp. 1032-1089.

46 Shipley *op cit* p.16.

47 Köhler did a number of experiments with non-human primates that supported the findings referred to here.

48  $\Phi$  = φ, the first letter of the Greek word *phenomenon*.

49 This Austro-Italian tradition of philosophical-psychological enquiry continues today and is sometimes called a (neo-) gestalt approach. It is adopted by some cognitive psychologists.

50 KOFFKA, K (ed.). "Beiträge zur Psychologie der Gestalt III. Zur Grundlegung der Wahrnehmungspsychologie: eine Auseinandersetzung mit V. Benussi" *In Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 73, 11-90 (1915) Also his *Principles of Gestalt psychology*. New York; Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1935.

51 Vittorio Benussi (a student of Meinong, who was yet another student of Brentano and a colleague of von Ehrenfels) was a leading member of the Graz school and an exponent of the "production" theory of *Gestalten*. One aspect of this theory is that one of the most characteristic features of *Gestalten* is their ambiguity - now you see it, now you don't, you see something else instead. Examples of this phenomenon are found in the ambiguous drawings produced in manuals of gestalt psychology or gestalt therapy, e.g. PERLS, F S *et al.* *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and growth in the human personality*. (originally published 1951) London: Pelican Books, 1973, pp.51-56. Also Smith *op cit* p.39.

52 These are examined in chapter 4.

53 This term is derived from relativity theories and, according to Perls (1969, publication details below), first suggested for use in this context by THOULESS, R H *In* STOUT, G F (ed). *A manual of psychology*. London: W B Clive for University Correspondence College, 1899. Perls gives no details except for the title and a publication date of 1928. This book was then edited and republished with preface by ROBINSON, D N. Washington: University Publications of America, 1977 as volume IX of their series *Significant contributions to the history of psychology, 1750-1920*. It has not been possible to find any early use in English of the term "field theory" nor such a usage by Thouless in that context. However, the idea of field theory is spelled out in the 1977 edition, pp.404 *et seq.*

54 PERLS, F S. *Ego, hunger and aggression*. Originally published 1947. References are to a later edition, New York: Vintage Books, 1969, p. 27 and the dedication on the flyleaf "To the memory of Max Wertheimer". Also POLSTER, E and POLSTER, M. *Gestalt therapy*

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- integrated*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1973, pp. 28-29; and ZINKER, J. *Creative process in gestalt therapy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978, pp. 92-93.
- 55 Perls is referring here to terms coined by WERTHEIMER, M used in the latter's "Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt" In *Psychologische Forschung*, 1922, **1**, 47-58 (especially p. 49).
- 56 Perls *op cit* p.27.
- 57 GOLDSTEIN, K. *The organism: a holistic approach to biology derived from pathological data in Man*. Published in English with foreword by SACKS, O. New York: Zone Books, 1995, ch. VIII. This book was written in a few weeks and published as *Der Aufbau des Organismus: Einführung in die Biologie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen am kranken Menschen*. Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1934. Publication was in the year after Goldstein's institute was closed and he had to flee from National Socialism to Holland. He reached the USA and the book was translated into English and published with a foreword by LASHLEY, K S. New York: American Book Co, 1939.
- 58 For example his work with the Gestalt psychologist Gelb in GELB, A and GOLDSTEIN, K. "Zur Psychologie des optischen Wahrnehmungs und Erkennungs-vorgangs" In *Zeitschrift für gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, **41**, 1-142, 1918; and their "Zur Frage nach der gegenseitigen funktionellen Beziehung der geschädigten und ungeschädigten Sehsphäre bei Hemianopie. Psychologische Analyse hirnpathologischer Fälle. XI" In *Psychologische Forschung* **6**, 187-214, 1925.
- 59 This despite the assertion of ASH, M G. *Gestalt psychology in German culture, 1890-1967: holism and the quest for objectivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.xi "Gestalt therapy was founded in America in the 1950s, and had only tenuous connections with Gestalt theory".
- 60 Goldstein (1995), p.7.
- 61 HENLE, M. "Some new gestalt psychologies" In *Psychological Research*, 1989, **51**, 81-85. Where gestalt psychology is most explicitly present in everyday psychological reference is in psychometry, e.g. the Bender-Gestalt tests.
- 62 Ash (1995), pp.1-14.
- 63 This pattern of a developing enquiry is not, of course, unique to the fields studied by gestaltists. The pattern of "infinite regress" is common to many disciplines.
- 64 They were not alone in this. Mach (1914), for example, devoted much of his work to anomalies in perception, both visual and auditory, and gave examples, pp.209 *et seq.*
- 65 Ash (1995) points out, however, that the Berlin school did not go so far as to suggest that they "attributed perceived wholes and structures to inherited structures in the brain" (p.4) which he finds to be a common misunderstanding of gestalt theory.
- 66 Note 4 above.
- 67 *Op cit* pp.124-125.
- 68 Courses for counsellors and psychotherapists are usually described as "training" rather than "education". The words are not synonymous and the difference signifies a more technical approach to practice, with less emphasis on formation and, therefore, upon philosophy.
- 69 Field theory, Kurt Lewin *et al* are discussed in chapter 3. JUNG, C G. "Synchronicity: an a-causal connecting principle" In *Collected Works* vol.8. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,

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1960. Jung believed that synchronicity (*sic*) is more than a subjective experience and that it is a quality of out-there events.
- 70 In recent years, a number of important projects have required practitioners of separate disciplines to co-operate and to work at the interfaces of their disciplines. Examples of such projects include the Human Genome Project and PSYCHE, an international programme started by a mathematician at Kings College, London, to map human consciousness. PSYCHE engages mathematicians, physicists, philosophers, biologists, neurologists, psychologists and others.
- 71 A remark attributed to Kurt Lewin in a number of sources but with no precise provenance.
- 72 Smith *op cit* pp.44 *et seq.*
- 73 Koffka (1915) pp 24 ff, referred to in Smith (1988) p. 39. See also KOFFKA, K "Perception: an introduction to the *Gestalt-theorie*" *In* Shipley (1961), pp.1128 *et seq.*
- 74 ASH, M G. *The emergence of gestalt theory: experimental psychology in Germany 1890-1920*. (A thesis presented to the Department of History at Harvard as part of his PhD, 1982, p.338 (British Library, microfilm). Smith (1988) cites Ash, p.38 in this connection. Koffka's views, reflecting a Wertheimian or Berlin perspective, were opposed to the Grazian school exemplified by Benussi and so do not represent all strands of gestalt thinking at the time.
- 75 Koffka (and Wertheimer) both studied at the Würzburg (Psychology) Institute under Külpe. (Smith,1988, p.75, note 44 and its reference to Ash (1982); also Ash (1995) especially p.78). (Smith puts Wertheimer's graduation in 1905 while Ash (1995, p.34) places it in 1904: it seems likely that Ash's profound study of the primary sources, and his later date of publication, privilege 1904).
- 76 They might be summarised thus: one sensory datum arises from a unitary aspect of the perceived object or process and gives rise to a corresponding - though unverifiable - intrapsychic equivalent which is assembled in the cortex with other such bits of purely sensory impulse in order to construct a *Gestalt*.
- 77 It is exemplified in the work of Ernst Mach, and it is evident (in, for example, Smith (1988) p.11, pp 124 *et seq*) that it was Mach's atomistic views which influenced Ehrenfels in the writing of his 1890 paper (*op cit* pp.82 *et seq*).
- 78 Wertheimer (1922).
- 79 Smith (1988, p. 45) quotes Ash (1982) to the effect that this influence in Wertheimer's life may owe much to his "youthful enthusiasm for Spinoza" (he was given Spinoza's books for a tenth birthday present!) and that philosopher's interest in non-additive wholes. There is background information regarding the cultural origins of Wertheimer and his colleagues in Smith (1988), p.45-46. In particular, he cites a paper by LUCHINS, A S and E H. "An introduction to the origins of Wertheimer's gestalt psychology" *In Gestalt Theory*, 4:145-171 (1982). Ash (1995, pp. 104 *et seq* and 197 *et seq*) gives similar details. The overall picture of Wertheimer is of a person who from childhood developed "a profound metaphysical vision" (Ash *op cit* p.198) based upon a radical Jewish sensibility that saw God in every daily act.
- 80 *op cit* p.13.
- 81 The English idiom which speaks of the whole being greater than the parts can be misleading. It would be more accurate to say that gestaltists notice that the whole and the sum of the parts are not the same thing. The difference lies in their organisation.

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- 82 MULLIGAN, K and SMITH, B. "Mach and Ehrenfels: the foundations of gestalt theory" *In*  
Smith *op cit.* pp 124-125.
- 83 YONTEF, G M. *Awareness, dialogue and process: essays on gestalt therapy.* Highland, NY:  
Gestalt Journal Press Inc, 1993. Chapter 8 summarises the theoretical significance for gestalt  
therapy of field theory.
- 84 Von Ehrenfels (1988) p.105.
- 85 WERTHEIMER, M. "Über das Denken der Naturvölker. I. Zahlen und Zahlgebilde" *In*  
*Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, **60**, pp. 321-378, 1912. This paper introduces Wertheimer's use  
of the term *Prägnanz*.
- 86 Instances are given in Yontef (1993) p. 147; WHEELER, G. *Gestalt Reconsidered: a new*  
*approach to contact and resistance.* New York: Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press, 1991,  
pp. 21 & 37.
- 87 Brentano held his chair in Prague from 1879 to 1884.
- 88 According to Smith (1982, p.46), Stumpf later moved to Halle where he "came into contact  
with Husserl", a note which further broadens the context of the development of gestalt. The  
move toward an avowedly phenomenological philosophy was central to the development of  
the Berlin school. Ash (1995) gives details of this (e.g. pp.72-79).
- 89 Smith (*op cit.* p.44) tells a story to illustrate the point:  
(Stumpf).... provided a thorough initiation into psychological methods and a hard training,  
which were meted out to his students always with an explicit *philosophical* intent. When his  
"Psychological Seminar" was incorrectly described by the Ministry in Berlin as a "Seminar  
for Experimental Psychology", Stumpf complained that  
he had specifically suggested the former name... "to avoid giving the impression that *only* experimental work is  
planned, when I am also planning to link such work to theoretical exercises in philosophy". [Stumpf's] lectures  
were entitled "simply psychology" and not "experimental psychology" for the same reason. The narrower  
designation, Stumpf feared, could keep talented students away and "instead attract a certain sort of American,  
whose whole aim is to become Dr. phil. in the shortest possible time with the most mechanical work  
possible". Ash(1982),p. 47.
- 90 The work referred to is STUMPF, C. *Erkenntnistheorie.* Leipzig: Barth, 1939/1940. This  
edition was edited by Felix Stumpf. The observations above rely on Smith's (1988) reading  
of Stumpf.
- 91 For example, Perls (1969), p.16: "What is important is that Gestalt Therapy is the first  
existential philosophy that stands on its own feet" (compared with what he termed  
"aboutism" and "shouldism". It is also the case that he writes (p.2) of "that approach to  
psychiatry which I call Gestalt Therapy". Overall, however, the thrust of Perls' approach is  
away from psychiatry and in support of gestalt as a philosophy and a way of life.
- 92 The Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California was the leading proponent of the third wave  
therapies of the 1960s and 1970s. It is associated principally with the names of Bernhard  
Gunther, Will Schutz, Michael Murphy, Alan Watts, Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls: less  
central, but perhaps equally important, were the names of Ram Dass and Rollo May.
- 93 Shepard (1976) p.165.

## INFLUENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GESTALT THERAPY

### 3. Introduction

Chapter 2 showed how the roots of gestalt therapy lie in the gestalt philosophy of von Ehrenfels and his colleagues in the German University of Prague in the late nineteenth century. Their work contributed directly to the development of experimental psychology and to the Berlin school of gestalt psychology. There are, however, many other influences in the development of gestalt therapy. In the comparison of the practical-values of gestalt with those of feminist theology in chapter 7, these other influences play an important part: for this reason they now are now identified and critically assessed. This assessment culminates, in the next chapter, in a resultant picture of the self in gestalt thought and practice and to the analysis of core ideas in gestalt.

As a prelude to the examination of other major influences, section 3.1 carries forward a discussion on language (developing some themes from section 2.1). The section discusses the nature of psychological language, with particular reference to Freud whose theories were especially important in Perls' work. The chapter then examines major influences in the development of gestalt therapy acknowledged by Fritz Perls, and some others not so overtly acknowledged but demonstrably formative<sup>1</sup>. Section 3.2 therefore focuses on Perls and Freud, examining Perls' reliance on and his critique of psychoanalysis. Whilst his criticisms are not the same as those of some feminist writers, there are some overlapping concerns about the ways in which they image the person.

Section 3.3 discusses the influence of Reich. There is no evidence that Perls adopted all of Reich's ideas, but it is argued that, as a therapist and a teacher, Reich's influence on Perls was profound. This is most obviously the case in his view of the body as being far more than the container or even a key aspect of the self. We may therefore anticipate both convergence and divergence between gestalt and some feminist writers on these points. Section 3.4 identifies the close links between Perls and Smuts in the matter of holism, something that figures large in the core ideas of both gestalt and feminist theology. Section 3.5 examines the claims made by Perls concerning the importance of the philosopher Friedlaender. This is particularly important since there is no written source that goes beyond a simple assertion of such connection: the work conducted here is thus essential for the intellectual integrity or coherence of gestalt (therapy) theory<sup>2</sup>.

Section 3.6 describes the significance of Goldstein for Perls. Again, Perls was generous in his admiring references to Goldstein's work but he never made clear how he relies on him. Since the "rediscovery" of Goldstein by Miller and Sacks, it has become possible to show clearly that this connection is more than an acknowledgement by Perls of his former chief. In section 3.7, there is an assessment of the contribution of the gestalt psychologists. To Perls, this was obvious, but since the connection with gestalt psychology is challenged by writers within and without the gestalt therapy camp, the argument must be clearly resolved.

The following section (3.8) discusses the significance of Lewin's work for gestalt therapy. The importance of this stage lies largely in Lewin's deployment of (physical) field theory in the psychological domain and, in particular, in his understanding of the importance of context and

need in determining perception. In breaking away from narrow understandings of causality in human behaviour, Lewin paved the way for a view of the person as a feature or focus in a network of relationships. Such a view subverted earlier individualistic views of human being that were also heavily criticised by, amongst others, feminist writers. The next section (3.9) examines the importance of the existentialists in the development of gestalt therapy. This philosophical standpoint, arising in the period following the First World War, challenged old certainties and sought a way forward in a world disillusioned by gods, empires and rulers. With its focus on "being" and on the "crisis" of the present moment and situation, it not only fitted precisely the crisis of the consulting room but also opened up the possibility of dialogue with other viewpoints that seek to deconstruct the intellectual structures of the modern (western) world.

The material of chapter 3 serves as a ground<sup>3</sup> for explaining in chapter 4 the gestalt notion of contact and thence an understanding of the self and what it is to be a person. That in turn opens the way for an analysis of core ideas in gestalt.

### **3.1 The language of psychotherapeutic theory**

All language is symbol, and the language of psychology is arguably more symbolic than many other languages. Let us consider, for example, the language of bricklaying. The words used in bricklaying, e.g. "joint", are not themselves things. The word "joint" refers to the planes at which bricks meet when set in a structure. The signifier "joint" is not the same as the signified. The signified is better understood as an event, albeit one which is continuous and apparently unaltered in time. To speak of a joint in brickwork is a process dissimilar to that of joining bricks with

mortar. The making of a "joint", of itself, has no material component. And yet it is a process intrinsic to the construction of buildings. To talk of joints is, however, in some sense to reify them; it is as though joints exist in themselves rather than as sensory (visual, tactile) experiences of the observer. To complete the present example, we may all agree as to what of our experiences constitutes the entity we refer to as a joint in brickwork. And we can point to the same co-ordinates and substances on a wall in such a way as to bolster up our sense of a shared reality.

In this example, there is a gap between the signifier and the events or materials signified, but it is not so great as the corresponding gaps which can occur in other disciplines such as that of psychotherapy. The shared reality is more difficult to arrive at in the field of psychological and psychotherapeutic theory. Let us consider an example from psychotherapeutic discourse. However good a definition may be offered of the Freudian Ego, nobody can claim to have seen or touched an Ego, and all would have to agree that the term is a way of talking about certain kinds of phenomena in human experience. Of course, there might not be agreement about those phenomena. Observers might take a structuralist view of events and not seek explanations outside whatever meaning may be adduced in the events themselves. Such events would then be understood as paradigmatic of existence, as statements about what is. But even if all the observers expected to view events in a chronological or historical perspective, or as intentional or purposive, it would be more difficult, in the nature of the case, to agree the very phenomena than was the case in the example of joints in brickwork. It might prove impossible to agree the psychological equivalents of spatial co-ordinates or planes or even relationships of (psychological) proximity. Given these difficulties, agreements for practical purposes and a sense of shared reality can present grave difficulties. Nonetheless, over many centuries in a range of

human cultures, people have found and agreed ways of talking about their experience and that of others. These ways of talking become codified, disputed, adjusted, reformulated and re-examined.

The problems of language in psychotherapy are not confined to the pragmatic ones concerning the gap between the signifier and the signified. When Freud began to speak of the Ego (*das Ich*) he meant to signify the everyday "I" of personal experience. However, the English translations of Freud's work use the Latin terminology familiar to readers of English - ego, id, superego. Although it is true that Freud authorised the Standard (English) Translation, it is evident that it did not accord with his own preference for German readers. Bettelheim<sup>4</sup> quotes Freud's *The question of lay analysis* (1926) thus:

We base ourselves on common knowledge and recognize in man an organization of the soul which is interpolated between the stimulation of his senses and the perception of his bodily needs on the one hand, and his motor acts on the other, and which mediates between them for a particular purpose. We call this organization his I. Now there is nothing new in this, each of us makes this assumption without being a philosopher, and some although they are philosophers.<sup>5</sup>

For Freud, Ego is a homely reference to that aspect of ourselves with which we feel most immediately in touch, which we can know fairly fully. It is not the whole of ourselves, nor even the whole *Seele* (soul) for he continues:

But we don't believe that by recognizing this part of the apparatus of the soul we have exhausted the description. Besides the I we recognize also another region of the soul, more extensive, grander, and more obscure than the I, and this we call the it.<sup>6</sup>

Freud was sure that, in his definitions and explanations of psychoanalysis, he was outlining a scientific system of analysis, classification and therapeutic procedure that was grounded in

human biology. He seems nevertheless deliberately to have used imprecise terminology - at least in the areas of the present examples

Bettleheim also points out that the usual French translations of Freud's terms are *le moi*, *le ça* / *soi*, *le surmoi* and that the same applies in Spanish. The thesis of his book is that Freud has been consistently mistranslated in English and cites as a key example the seemingly deliberate mistranslation of the German *die Seele* as the Mind rather than the soul.. Bettleheim offers this comment on the imprecise nature of Freud's language regarding *die Seele*:

“I suspect that he chose the term *because* of its inexactitude. Its ambiguity speaks for the ambiguity of the psyche itself, which reflects many different, warring levels of consciousness simultaneously. To have attempted a clinical definition of such a term - a definition that Freud's English translators would no doubt have welcomed - would have robbed it of its value as an expression of Freud's thinking.....By "soul" or "psyche" Freud means that which is most valuable in man while he is alive. Freud was a passionate man. For him, the soul is the seat both of the mind and of the passions, and we remain largely unconscious of the soul. In important respects, it is deeply hidden, hardly accessible even to careful investigation. It is intangible, but it nevertheless exercises a powerful influence on our lives. It is what makes us human; in fact, it is what is so essentially human about us that no other term could equally convey what Freud had in mind.”<sup>7</sup>

Lacan also noted how Freud has been misunderstood and mistranslated<sup>8</sup>. In his own re-working of Freudian theory, his concern for language went far beyond a search for agreed meanings. He showed that the language of (psychoanalytic) psychotherapy is highly abstracted and a matter requiring the closest attention<sup>9</sup>. In fact, the instance of Lacan illustrates a frequent combination of factors regarding language used in psychotherapeutic discourse, i.e. philosophical complexity combined with translation from one culture and / or language to another. With these provisos in mind, attention is now given to the development of gestalt therapy.

### 3.2 Perls and Freudian psychoanalysis

In defining the gestalt therapy which, with his wife Laura (Lore), he "rediscovered", Fritz Perls acknowledged his indebtedness to a number of sources. Most obvious of all is his debt to Freud and to psychoanalysis. In *Ego, hunger and aggression*<sup>10</sup> he considered that much of gestalt is a "revision of psycho-analysis". This is hardly surprising when one recalls that Perls had been educated in psychoanalysis<sup>11</sup>. He had entered a personal analysis with Karen Horney in 1926, although only for a short time as, on Horney's advice, he moved from his native Berlin, choosing instead to live and work in Frankfurt. He had qualified in medicine in Berlin in 1920 and worked in both Berlin and New York City as a neuropsychiatrist. The move in 1927 began a momentous time in Perls' life. He worked under Kurt Goldstein at his clinic for former soldiers with acquired brain injury. Perls was a broadly educated man, greatly influenced by literary and theatrical developments of his time. He was aware of the presence in Frankfurt of Paul Tillich, then teaching existential philosophy at the university. Tillich and Martin Buber (who held a chair in philosophy in Berlin) were major influences on contemporary German philosophy. This philosophy formed the cultural basis of much of Europe's intellectual life at the time. Whilst in Frankfurt, Perls entered analysis with one of Horney's students, Clara Happel. After a year of treatment, Happel declared his analysis complete<sup>12</sup> and recommended he begin control work, i.e. supervised practice of analysis.

One member of Goldstein's staff was a psychology graduate who had studied gestalt, Lore (later Laura) Posner. After only a year in Frankfurt, Perls moved on to Vienna, leaving Goldstein but not Lore Posner whom he subsequently married. Perls moved to Vienna where he worked under

the supervision of Helene Deutsch and Edward Hitschmann. He was educated in analytic theory by, amongst others, Paul Federn, and was open to the many other influences offered by this cosmopolitan city. He took a clinical assistantship at a psychiatric hospital, but the job lasted only a year, and by the end of 1928 he was back in Berlin and in practice as a psychoanalyst. He continued in analysis himself, this time for eighteen months with Eugen Harnik. Given his immersion in the world of psychoanalysis, it is hardly surprising that his language - and the structure of his thinking - is close to that of his contemporary analysts.

He had discovered, however, that psychoanalysis was not a homogeneous discipline, nor were all its practitioners alike. When he spoke to Horney about his dissatisfaction with Harnik's approach, she recommended that he see Wilhelm Reich. He did so (probably in 1930), and remained in therapy with Reich until 1933 when the burning of the Reichstag prompted Reich, a noted communist, to seek temporary refuge in Norway. Reich had caused a stir in the psychoanalytic community with his novel focus on "character analysis"<sup>13</sup>. Put briefly, he had concluded that Freudian *libido* was to be understood physiologically as the sexual or "orgone" energy within the body. Resistance to the natural flow of this energy would give rise to frozen musculature which, in time, would produce idiosyncratic habits of posture and movement that were not simply expressions of but actually the basis for character (i.e. fixed aspects of the personality). Analysis of a person need not therefore consist of purely verbal enquiries focused on the partially repressed past or on dreams through which the unconscious life might be glimpsed. Instead, careful attention to present behaviour (in its most observable and palpable modes) would yield the necessary information. Moreover, physical intervention in the life of the patient would bring about changes as resistances were worked through, frozen energy would be released and the

patient's maximum "potency" realised<sup>14</sup>.

Perls admired Reich's vitality and the energising potential of his approach. Two things were particularly exciting. One was the focus on the present situation of the patient, and the other the necessity of physical contact. Both were prominent in Perls' eventual formulation of gestalt practice.

Perls' break with psychoanalysis came about through a series of personal and political upheavals, not least of which was the National Socialist persecution of Jewish people that drove him and his family out of Germany<sup>15</sup>. After an indirect journey, the Perls family arrived in South Africa where they lived from 1935 to 1947. During that time, Fritz and Lore built up their practices and together founded the South African Psychoanalytic Society. Perls also attempted to contribute to the expanding theory of psychoanalysis. He offered a paper to the 1936 International Psychoanalytic Congress in Czechoslovakia on the subject of oral resistances. The paper was received coolly by the Congress, and Perls was virtually snubbed by Freud. He left for a brief tour of Europe, disillusioned by the failure of his attempt. But that rejection fed into creative critical activity. In 1947, Perls offered the psychological world a critique of psychoanalytic theory and practice in his *Ego, hunger and aggression*.

In South Africa, the two Perls developed the "concentration therapy" referred to in Fritz's book<sup>16</sup>. Their approach marked a technical as well as theoretical departure from the orthodoxy of the International Congress. The theoretical changes that most concern this thesis are those which bear upon the notion of the self<sup>17</sup>. Chief among these is Perls' argument that *libido* theory is shot

through with internal confusions, and that a structure founded upon *libido* theory will not stand up to practical examination<sup>18</sup>.

He supports Freud's understanding of neurosis as

....a disturbance of development and adjustment; the instincts and the Unconscious play an immeasurably greater part in man than was ever dreamt of. Neuroses are the outcome of a conflict between organism and environment. Our mentality is determined more by instincts and emotions than by reason.<sup>19</sup>

But he goes on to comment that

On the other side of the balance sheet we find that Freud over-estimated the causality, past, and sex instincts, and neglected the importance of purposiveness, present, and hunger instinct.<sup>20</sup>

His focus on hunger was based both on personal experience (he was then the father of two young children) and on his critical ability to move beyond adherence to the thoughts of his undoubtedly great and original teacher. His critique of *libido*<sup>21</sup> led him to maintain that Freud's understanding of the interrelation of ego, id, personality and self (or self-function as he preferred to call it) were erroneous. He concluded that psychoanalytic self-theory "makes the self otiose", i.e., idle or tending to inertia<sup>22</sup>. In his later writing, Perls criticises Freud for his "faulty theory of repression" but reserves his main critical assaults for Anna Freud and Paul Federn<sup>23</sup>.

Other principal differences with Freud himself are those concerned with creativity and the id and thus with Freud's notions of the unconscious and of repression. Freud held that much id material (including some of the "deep" instincts - a notion he himself later criticised) was unconscious and, in the economy of the self, had to be so. There were two reasons for this consignment to or location in the unconscious. One was that some id material was forbidden by parents and society

and thus repressed (Freud says in the same essay that "the repressed is a part of the unconscious"). The other reason is that one can observe that, in any psychological act, much else that might form part of another psychological act is not currently conscious. What has happened to it? Freud's answer is that it is part of the unconscious, and may become conscious again as required. He asserted that our unconscious becomes apparent in dreams and parapraxes (e.g. slips of the tongue, things or words forgotten or mistaken)<sup>24</sup> in healthy people, as well as in our pathology. He was equally adamant that the unconscious was a necessary hypothesis to explain such commonplace phenomena as solving problems without the intervention of conscious rational process.

Perls had little patience with Freud's "faulty view of repression"<sup>25</sup>. He held that it is not necessary to posit an unconscious. He talked instead of fundamental notions in gestalt psychology, namely figure and ground. Everything is ground unless it is figure. Our creativity – function of ego - lies in the *Gestalten* we make out of the infinite possibilities in the ground that is our cosmos. Perls was profoundly influenced by psychoanalysis, but he transformed his inheritance in formulating gestalt therapy. One more example may serve to illustrate this point, that of reaction-formation. The differences in understanding and emphasis between Freud and Perls on this matter are characteristic. The definitions and arguments, though detailed, can be summarised with some precision. Freud understood reaction-formations to be mechanisms or even states which the ego acquires, "to begin with in making its repressions and later... when it rejects unwished-for instinctual impulses"<sup>26</sup>. Reaction-formations are created as one possible anxious response to forbidden or impossible impulses toward some gratification (Freud wrote in terms of cathexes and, in reaction, anti-cathexes). What is formed is a reaction against that impulse: there are thus

two parts or two energies, one toward the gratification of the impulse or desire and the other contrary to it<sup>27</sup>. That reaction, in Freud's understanding, may become fixed as part of the structure of the ego and act therefore as part of a person's character.

Perls takes a different line. He states that

Reaction-formation is the avoidance of the anxiety threatened by breakdown of the repression (through increase of the inhibited excitation or relaxation of the inhibition) by further attempts to annihilate the excitation or the temptations to it, and by strengthening the inhibition. The repression avoids the excitement; the reaction-formation avoids the anxiety of the throttled excitement - for this anxiety excitement seems even more dangerous than the original excitement was.<sup>28</sup>

That summary reveals three features of reaction formation<sup>29</sup>. First, Freud tends to see reaction-formation as part of the defence system of the ego, whereas Perls characteristically sees it as aggression. Second, Freud sees it as a contributor to overall character, a more static view than Perls'. Perls emphasised not only the fixities of character (though he wrote in terms of personality which he regarded as normally adapting), but equally the reactions in the present moment that may be observed as they occur. Third, Perls' example where he explains his position, is typically one to do with eating<sup>30</sup>: it indicates his focus on hunger rather than *libido* as a psychological prime mover, although he does cite more fixed reaction formations such as that of sexual prudery.

Finally, it may be noted that the connections between Freudian psychoanalytic theory and gestalt therapy are such that the syllabi of courses in gestalt psychotherapy increasingly require or furnish a working knowledge of Freudian thought. This is not surprising when one reflects that early gestalt therapists, including those who argued that one should leave behind the (assumed)

limitations of psychoanalysis, were well grounded in it. The reaction against psychoanalytic theory has largely worked itself out, and one may now discern a more serious re-evaluation of it<sup>31</sup>. Later in this thesis, we shall see how a number of feminist writers have criticised Freud - though some wish to restructure and use psychoanalytic theory - on grounds that are very different to those of Perls.

### 3.3 Perls and Reich

Perls was generous in his acknowledgement of the debt which gestalt therapy owes to the work of Reich<sup>32</sup>, whom he had come to know as his analyst and as a teacher and seminar leader. His adoption of Reichian theory was, however, selective and critical. The Introduction to Perls *et al* (1973) states that Reich's orgone theory "successfully extends *ad absurdum* the most doubtful part of Freud's work, the libido theory". The same passage also puts forward a characteristic gestalt criticism concerning references by Reich and others to "defence" as part of personality. Gestaltists generally dispute the reactive or passive tone of "defence", since it is evident that "defences" are active and aggressive, or even hostile. What is valuable (to gestalt) from Reich's work arises from his early discoveries and technical innovations concerning the armouring functions of musculature and posture and the connection between them and repression. The debt owed by gestalt to Reichian character analysis is most clear at two points.

.....[W]e are deeply indebted to Reich for having brought down to earth Freud's rather abstract notion of repression. Reich's idea of the motoric armour is doubtless the most important contribution to psychosomatic medicine since Freud.<sup>33</sup>

This is a reference primarily to Reich's *The function of the orgasm*<sup>34</sup>. In it, Reich describes how, in his work with the repressed aspects of his patients, he

...collected the countless minor and major experiences which, taken together, pointed in one direction: it is the patient's total "personality" or "character" that constitutes the difficulty of cure. "Character armor" is expressed in treatment as "character resistance".<sup>35</sup>

In Reich's discussions with Freud, it became clear that the two men were diverging in their understanding on a number of issues, most especially the nature of anxiety<sup>36</sup> and the nature of repression<sup>37</sup>. Reich's position was that

The task of psychoanalytic therapy was to uncover and eliminate resistances. It was not supposed to interpret unconscious material directly. Hence, the analyst had to proceed from the psychic warding off of unconscious impulses by the moralistic ego. But there was not just one layer of ego defenses to break through, behind which lay the great realm of the unconscious. In reality, instinctual desires and defense functions of the ego are interlaced and permeate the entire psychic structure.<sup>38</sup>

He took this argument further. Citing the case of a man with whom he had worked, he showed how the work had been with a succession of resistances. As patient and therapist continued, Reich began to see that repression was not a single lid that could be lifted off the unconscious. He came to appreciate "the antithetical *functional unity between what wards off and what is warded off*" - the interlacing referred to above. Later, Reich states that

The "antithetical functional unity between instinct and defense" made it possible to comprehend contemporary and early childhood experiences simultaneously. There was no longer any dichotomy between historical and contemporary material. *The entire world of past experience was embodied in the present in the form of character attitudes. A person's character is the functional sum total of all past experiences.*<sup>39</sup>

There are three important components in these links between Perls and Reich. The first to be discussed is that Reich is sure he is describing psychic structures that are not merely psychological hypotheses, but biological structures. In his thinking, these arise from the thwarting of sexual desires whose therapy consists in working towards effective genital functioning. So much is this physical, sexual need the basis of his thinking - especially about the genesis of the

neuroses - that he calls his basic schema of human character "the sex-economy". All creative work and our love of others arise from our sexuality, and our sexuality is no vague psychological notion. He states that "The sex-economic conception of the psychic apparatus is not of a psychological but of a biological nature"<sup>40</sup>. By the same token, the inhibitions of those sexual needs are described in terms of instinct and defence, and in terms of muscular activity, so that the cases he cites are full of the physical details that constitute character<sup>41</sup>. In this way his writing is very like that of Perls<sup>42</sup> in which all the modifications or interruptions of the contact process are spelled out with physical and physiological detail. The dissimilarity comes, once again, over the matter of the primacy of sex in the human economy. For Perls, the prime movers are hunger and aggression. That said, there are strong similarities in the way the two men understand aggression<sup>43</sup>, the principal difference being in their understanding of the place of sex and sexual expression<sup>44</sup>. So far as aggression is concerned, both Perls<sup>45</sup> and Reich make it clear that they do not intend the word in a way which necessarily denotes hostility or sadism, although it may entail destruction (which term they are also careful to define and limit). So far as sex is concerned, Reich offers a third alternative, a move away from Freud's *libido*-based theories but not in the direction taken by Perls. Reich instead bases his therapeutic approach upon biological sexuality. In his chapter "Breakthrough into the biological", he concludes:

*"Sexuality" could be nothing other than the biological function of expansion "out of the self" from the center toward the periphery. In turn, anxiety could be nothing but the reversed direction, i.e., from the periphery to the center, "back into the self."*<sup>46</sup>

In short, Reich reworked his understanding of psychoanalytic theory on the basis of his biological understanding of human sexuality, and in particular on his understanding of the centrality of orgasm in human sexuality. He viewed Freud's life and death instincts (ideas current in the

1920s) as misinterpretations of aspects of sexual energies, stating that "*neuroses can be cured by eliminating their energy source, the sexual stasis*"<sup>47</sup>. He concluded that "*the alleged death instinct.... is the unconscious longing for the orgasmic resolution of tension*"<sup>48</sup>.

The second comment to be made here is that Reich's assertion that "a person's character is the functional sum total of all past experience" is very close to Perls' later definition of personality. The definition of character also resonates with Perls' definition of the self as the system of present contacts<sup>49</sup>, but that similarity is to be treated with caution. Perls is talking of the whole organism in its environment, whilst Reich oscillates between viewing character as personality and character as equivalent to the self<sup>50</sup>.

The third comment concerns "functional unity" referred to above. For Reich this is an almost Newtonian rule of thumb. It is striking how action and reaction abound in Perls' thinking too, and in a way whereby the existence of one (e.g. impulse or desire) seems to suggest or require the existence of its opposite (e.g. an inhibition)<sup>51</sup>. The examples that Reich uses and to which reference is made above are those of "instinct" (action) and "inhibition" (reaction). Reich developed his notions from his critique of Freudian self-structure. Perls may well have developed his ideas as much from Reich as from Freud, although his understanding of polarities (e.g. love and hate, which do seem each to presuppose the other) draws more obvious support from Friedlaender<sup>52</sup>.

### 3.4 Smuts and holism

In *Ego, hunger and aggression* Perls acknowledges the importance to him of a number of his contemporaries and teachers outside the ranks of formal psychology<sup>53</sup>. One of the most important of these, from a philosophical and theoretical perspective, is his reliance on the work of Field-Marshal Jan Smuts, President of the Union of South Africa during Perls' time in that country. It was from Smuts that he gained his understanding of holism<sup>54</sup>, a term putatively coined by Smuts<sup>55</sup>. His *Holism and evolution* was a work

.... neither of Science nor of Philosophy, but of some points of contact between the two..... Some border problems between the two are here considered in the light of recent advances in physical and biological science. And a re-examination of fundamental concepts in the light of these advances reveals the existence of a hitherto neglected factor or principle of a very important character. This factor, called Holism in the sequel, underlies the synthetic tendency in the universe, and is the principle which makes for the origin and progress of wholes in the universe. An attempt is made to show that this whole-making or holistic tendency is fundamental in nature, that it has a well-marked ascertainable character, and that Evolution is nothing but the gradual development and stratification of progressive series of wholes, stretching from the inorganic beginnings to the highest levels of spiritual creation.<sup>56</sup>

Later, Smuts indicates how the notion of holism offers a conceptual framework for the understanding of much - though not all - of the world we experience. In his summary of chapter VII he offers this paradigm:

The discussion..... has disclosed a grading-up of such structures as can in any way be called holistic; beginning with the physico-chemical structures, into which physical and chemical relations enter; passing on to bio-chemical structures or organisms, into which those relations plus something new, usually called life, enter; and culminating in psychophysical structures, in which all three relations enter, together with the new elements of mind and personality. In this grading-up the earlier structures are not destroyed but become the basis of later, more evolved synthetic holistic structures; the character of wholeness increases with the series and the elements of newness, variation and creativeness become more marked.<sup>57</sup>

He does not suggest, however, that holism is the sole organising principle or structure of the universe. The section above continues with a definition of a complementary principle that he called Mechanism<sup>58</sup>.

Smuts argues that mind and personality are vitally connected to bodily life by holism. Later, he argues, in a chapter entitled "Mind as an organ of wholes", that Mind, the atom and the cell, together constitute the three fundamental structures of Holism. However, he does not regard Mind as itself a whole, but rather as an "holistic organ" which may be seen to have several aspects or parts, one of which is what he calls Personality. He views Mind firstly as an extension on a higher plane of the system of organic regulation which characterises holism in organisms, and which has its base in the brain and central nervous system. The second aspect of Mind he identifies is that which makes of an organism an individual - that which, in our species, is "the Self of the Personality"<sup>59</sup>. His understanding of Mind is that it is the vital link that supports the holistic understanding of the human being as a psychosomatic entity. Neither Smuts nor Perls was especially remarkable in seeing people as wholes. However, there can be little doubt that the relentless use of the word "mind" as the proper subject of psychological study in, for example, the Standard Edition of Freud both reflected a dualistic tendency and also fostered it. It was this dualism which Perls confronted, and it was in Smuts' work that he found support for that confrontation. So strong is the connection between the writings of Perls and Smuts that each might have written a passage in the other's work<sup>60</sup>. As an example of this affinity, here is a passage from Smuts:

An organism, like a plant or animal, is a natural whole. It is self-acting and self-moving. Its principle of movement or action is not external to itself but internal. It is not actuated or moved by some external principle or force, like a machine or an artificial construction.

The source of its activity is internal and of a piece with itself, is indeed itself. It consists of parts, but its parts are not merely put together. Their togetherness is not mechanical, but rests on a different basis. The organism consists of parts, but it is more than the sum of its parts, and if these parts are taken to pieces the organism is destroyed and cannot be reconstituted by again putting together the severed parts. These parts are in active relations to each other, which vary with the parts and the organisms; but in no case is there anything inactive or inert about the relations of these parts to each other or to the whole organism. The organism further has the power of maintaining itself by taking in other parts, such as food, but again..... it does so not by mere mechanical addition, but by a complete transformation, assimilation and appropriation into its own peculiar system of the material so taken in. Moreover, the organism is creative in that it is capable, under certain conditions, of reproducing itself in closely similar wholes.<sup>61</sup>

This could be Perls stating that "The greatest value in the Gestalt approach perhaps lies in the insight that the *whole determines the parts*, which contrasts with the previous assumption that the whole is merely the total sum of its elements"<sup>62</sup>, or else the following passage:

Envisaging an animal freely roaming in a spacious and various environment, we see that the number and range of contact-functions must be vast, for fundamentally an organism lives in its environment by maintaining its difference and, more importantly, by assimilating the environment to its difference; and it is at the boundary that dangers are rejected, obstacles are overcome, and the assimilable is selected and appropriated. Now what is selected and assimilated is always novel; the organism persists by assimilating the novel by change and growth.<sup>63</sup>

### **3.5 Salomo Friedlaender**

Perls owed a philosophical debt to Smuts for his development of the concept of holism. In the theory and practice of gestalt therapy, holism on its own is insufficient to account for the observable behaviour and deducible structures of persons. For this further dimension of holism, Perls looked to a contemporary Berliner, the philosopher Salomo Friedlaender<sup>64</sup>. In the opening chapter of *Ego, hunger and aggression*, Perls proposes three intentions in his "revision of psychoanalysis". The first was "to replace the psychological by an organismic concept; the

second "to replace association-psychology by gestalt-psychology"; and the third "to apply differential thinking, based upon S. Friedlaender's "Creative Indifference""<sup>65</sup>. Perls' approach throughout the book is driven by his three intentions, although his approach does not often involve quotations from the works of others. It is also the case that Friedlaender's book was not then and has not since been translated into English, which may account for the summary references to a writer on whom Perls relies for fundamental ideas.

There are three particularly important notions that Perls takes from Friedlaender. These are: opposites; zero-point or pre-difference; and degree of differentiation<sup>66</sup>. Friedlaender was sure that the human species, though frequently denying it, was made up not of simple, single features or attributes, but of pairs of opposites. Further he was sure that the very universe was constructed in the same way.

The world is a pair, causality a pair, direction, dimension; each series - of numbers, sounds, colours, smells, tastes, faces - all are in pairs, polar, round, tending to be spherical. Only humanity has tunnel vision.<sup>67</sup>

He spells out his arguments on this point in chapter 1, giving numerous examples and, at one point, sees in these opposites or polarities a type of equilibrium in the world that we experience.

Whatever can be in balance is measured. That overweeningly clever "Devil", who is balanced by God and who in every limb expresses this balanced relationship, is measured and centred. The God who falsely leaves out of account his own negation, and who claims to be immeasurably good, who claims to be loving to the exclusion of hatred, has put all measuredness out of joint. He has thereby, before he has become fully aware of it, inevitably become the Devil's servant - whom he cannot get rid of, but only compensate for. To claim the opposite of a position is never crazy. To think that reality is one-dimensional is crazy: truth can only be recognised in polarity.<sup>68</sup>

This point is later developed to suggest a "zero point", a point of equilibrium which Friedlaender also thinks of as a state of pre-differentiation. This is the nub of his notion of creative

indifference. It is at this point of balance, the place between all the polarities of life, that one can be most creative. At such a zero point, one is most in touch with all the possibilities of the field, hiding from nothing, denying nothing, open to everything and yet poised and without *a priori* commitments as to value or outcome. The *Indifferenz* that Friedlaender defines is not the indifference of modern English usage. Instead it connotes impartiality. It corresponds to (but is not equivalent to nor coterminous with) the concept of "the middle mode" put forward by Paul Goodman<sup>69</sup>. It has similarities to the attitude of scientific detachment enjoined in Freud, but again is not altogether equivalent. Friedlaender specifies something more thoroughgoing and more charged with possibility. He does not caution, for example, against over-attachment, but rather shows how any attachment may signify a rejection of a polar opposite with consequent loss and concomitant delusion.

The assumption that polar opposites are a fact of life has many implications. It provides, for example, a context for the proverbial wisdom that love and hate co-exist in human relationships, and it has implications for the splitting which marks political as much as interpersonal process. It is somewhat akin to the holism inherent in Eastern thought, especially in the Taoist understanding of the inseparability and mutual co-existence of *yin* and *yang*<sup>70</sup>. It undermines at a stroke the splitting of body / mind, either / or, or good / bad. Philosophically, it is a radical rejection of and alternative to the dualism of Western thought and anticipates the binary oppositions of Derrida.

It is arguable that, for all his radicalism and departure from accepted norms of thought and morality, Freud did not make the philosophical shift that Perls made with his reliance on

Friedlaender, Smuts and others. To be sure, Freud's introduction of the notion of the unconscious has proved to be one of those ideas which has altered intellectual, artistic and spiritual life for a large percentage of the western world's population. And yet the ideas of Friedlaender represent an arguably more profound challenge to Western intellectual infrastructure. In his reliance on Friedlaender, Perls believed he had found a "mental precision tool which is neither extremely difficult to grasp nor to handle". The precision lay in the means of indicating or measuring degrees of differentiation<sup>71</sup>. Whilst the claims of precision are Perls' rather than Friedlaender's, the latter was clear in his belief that there are gradations of differentiation and that these gradations are important. He states, for instance, that

The distinction between plus and minus is not simply a matter of quantity and of gradation - that is, if one takes gradation and quantity as polar in nature. In fact it must be said that the most minute difference already indicates a polar division, by which I mean to say the eternally inseparable, the (out of enthusiasm) self-dividing total reality of the subject. Plus and minus are therefore homogeneous opposites, mirror images. Gradation is differentiation.<sup>72</sup>

Friedlaender, although a prolific writer, is not currently considered a major figure in European philosophy. Perls and his associates might have reached their novel view of the essential connectedness of apparent opposites by another route than the one that they actually took<sup>73</sup>. However, Friedlaender had done the philosophical groundwork and Perls came across his writing in Germany and indeed met him<sup>74</sup>. What he found was an original, sometimes whimsical, mind of great inventiveness. *Schöpferische Indifferenz* was thoroughly subsumed into the basic structures of gestalt therapy theory and its central notions are to be found in schools of therapy and elsewhere eighty years after Friedlaender published them.

### 3.6 Kurt Goldstein

Perls was generous in his acknowledgement that gestalt therapy owes much to the neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein<sup>75</sup>. He was equally frank in acknowledging his initial reluctance to go along with Goldstein's approach, not because he was not drawn to it or was more persuaded of Freud's, but rather because psychoanalysis had become his spiritual home. If he went the Goldstein route, he put at risk his "spiritual support". He knew that the gestalt psychologists did not count him as one of their own so that he could not look to them for support<sup>76</sup>.

Goldstein was working in Frankfurt at what Shepard identifies as "his Institute for Brain Damaged Soldiers"<sup>77</sup>. The authors of *Gestalt therapy* assert that "the magnificent work of Goldstein in neuropsychiatry still has not found the place in modern science that it deserves". They knew, despite Shepard's minimising of the connection, that Goldstein had developed clinical approaches derived from gestalt experimental psychology<sup>78</sup>. The work was therapeutic, although not primarily psychotherapeutic. Lore Posner worked directly under Goldstein and can hardly have failed to be influenced by his approach. When the Perls began to formulate their own approach, the use of the fundamental concepts of gestalt psychology were more than illustrative. As they began to describe the conceptual basis for their "concentration" process (later modified and redefined as contact process) they spoke of a sequence of figure/ground differentiations - the very heart of gestalt psychology. Shepard's dismissal of the connection can only make sense if it is understood as a remark biased toward the massive influence of Freud and of psychoanalysis. It is, of course, conceivable that, without the influence of Goldstein and others, the Perls might have arrived at a new therapeutic approach deriving from psychoanalysis and from Reich's

psychosomatic understandings. But that approach would not look much like the gestalt therapy they founded.

Goldstein's influence included a strong emphasis on the perceptual aspects of gestalt psychology which form an explicit part of Perls' approach to contact theory<sup>79</sup>. Shepard ignores Goldstein's own gestalt orientation that identifies him as one of the strongest theoretical and practical links between gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy. Two examples from Goldstein's writing serve to illustrate those links. The first demonstrates his rebuttal of the atomistic tendency of analytic scientific approaches, aligning him with von Ehrenfels and his successors:

When a student of human nature bases his studies on the results of one special science, he has nothing but a starting point; he will never derive a correct answer to his questions from the material of a single realm alone....

If the organism were a sum of parts which we could study separately, there would be no difficulty in combining our knowledge about the parts to form a science of the whole.... If the organism is a whole and each section of it functions normally within that whole, then in the analytic experiment, which isolates the sections as it studies them, the properties and functions of any part must be modified by their isolation from the whole of the organism. Thus they cannot reveal the function of these parts in normal life.<sup>80</sup>

The second example illustrates how close Goldstein's therapeutic work, reported in 1934, comes to Perls' work published in 1951<sup>81</sup>. The illustration concerns a man given to sexual exhibitionism, triggered when he accidentally saw a naked part of a woman's body. He was otherwise leading an ordinary life that included "a normal sex life". In conversation with Goldstein, the man remembered a childhood game involving boys and girls who used to strip naked and then play "milking cows" in which the girls pulled the boys' penises. The point of Goldstein's account is that the man had not repressed his memories: he did not resist their return to memory, nor resist disclosure. Goldstein asserts that the memories had merely become irrelevant when the games

stopped and the children had moved on to other interests<sup>82</sup>. The man's exhibitionist behaviour represented an "invasion" of anachronistic and unwanted impulses. He comments on the Freudian approach to such an issue and then adds:

If the required performance [i.e. carrying out of an everyday task] is a conscious act, it will seem as if unconscious processes were invading consciousness. Actually, only disfigurements of the required total excitation Gestalt take place, and these disfigurements naturally find expression in the conscious aspect of that process. What appears just as remembrance, in a situation to which it belongs as an adequate after effect, will, in a situation in which it does not belong, be regarded as the invasion of an inadequate and therefore an "alien" event that disturbs the present activity.<sup>83</sup>

It may be inferred - correctly - from the above that Goldstein did not accept the Freudian notion of the unconscious. He had no need of it within his theoretical framework. Furthermore, he was critical of Freud's use of a notion which, he considered, seriously distorted understanding of conscious process<sup>84</sup>. The understanding of neurotic behaviour and the corresponding psychotherapeutic approach in the example above are so close to those of Perls that one must assume either that Perls learned them from Goldstein directly or from another student of Goldstein's - or that they shared a common "ancestor". Given the prevailing hegemony of psychoanalysis at the time and given Perls' stay in Frankfurt with Goldstein, the simpler explanation is the first. However, the precise nature of the connection between Goldstein's thought and that of Perls matters less than the fact of their compatibility and frequent unanimity. It is safe to conclude that Goldstein was a gestaltist so far as his psychological understandings are concerned<sup>85</sup>, and that Perls and other gestalt therapists have drawn on his understandings in the formulation of their work. Moreover, Goldstein was no mere receiver of gestalt thinking. He differed from other gestalt psychologists in important respects and so broadened the gestalt approach.

My guiding principle has been a different one [from those of gestalt psychologists], inasmuch as the "whole," the "Gestalt," has always meant to me the whole organism and not the phenomena in one field, or merely the "introspective experiences," which in Gestalt psychology play quite an important part.<sup>86</sup>

He devoted his chapter 8 to defining some of his differences from other gestalt psychologists. These include a biologically based critique of Wertheimer's ideas about what constitutes a *Gestalt*. His critique does not, however, undermine the gestaltists' position, but broadens its base and paves the way for a biologically based view somewhat different to Perls'. However, Perls *et al* use the term "the organism" frequently. Although no attribution is given, it seems probable that they preferred this to other possible terms (the individual, one, a person) because of the connotations derived from Goldstein's holistic gestalt approach.

### **3.7 The gestaltists**

The influence of Wertheimer and Lewin, and of Wertheimer's students, Köhler and Koffka, on the development of gestalt psychology was discussed in chapter 2. What follows is a more detailed description of how the gestaltists influenced gestalt therapy and, in particular, Perls' articulation of a theory of the self. For these purposes, it is sufficient to take two of these psychologists as examples. The first is Köhler who here represents gestalt psychology<sup>87</sup> (as well as his teacher Wertheimer and Koffka), and the second is Lewin (section 3.8), chosen for his articulation of field theory.

In his seminal *Gestalt psychology*<sup>88</sup>, Köhler argues that much preceding psychology offered a view of nature, including human nature, that stemmed from a mechanistic view of the cosmos<sup>89</sup>.

He argued that such a view is not only at variance with the naïve and uncritical experience of most people, but that it does not stand up to scientific scrutiny. It is an inherited view that reflects the bias of atomistic thinking and neglects to take into account even the physiological (let alone psychological or emotional) sophistication of human beings. He advances a physical argument about the movement of a drop of water within a vessel and within a larger volume, gradually increasing the complexity of the scenario. He suggests that the non-physicist onlooker may conclude that the movement becomes random and unpredictable, but reminds his readers that this is merely a reflection of the observer's confusion. He argued that, within the apparent randomness is an overarching process that makes sense of the microscopic processes<sup>90</sup>.

This is precisely the theory of dynamic equilibrium or organismic homeostasis that became central to Perls' understanding of ego function. Perls saw all behaviour, neurotic or functional, as purposive and, more than that, purposive within a context usually much wider than the individual whose behaviour is under consideration. Each person may indeed be compared to a drop in a large ocean: the sheer complexity of that situation challenges human ingenuity, but it is characterised by processes that may be discerned within the overall field. Köhler further asserted in this connection, contrary to the view held by William James, that the kinds of categories and distinctions which psychologists and others attribute to the field of (particularly sensory) experience are not necessarily arbitrary or pragmatic. Rather,

"...notwithstanding the general dynamic interdependence throughout the field, there are boundaries in it at which dynamic factors operate toward a measure of segregation rather than uniform continuity. For this there are good examples in physics. Everything favors the assumption that the same happens in the nervous system."<sup>91</sup>

Köhler states that it is this apparent tendency toward spontaneous grouping in sensory fields that

Wertheimer noticed and which formed the basis for much of his research<sup>92</sup>.

Another important intellectual step which Köhler and the others took was their conclusion that the phenomenology they encountered was the phenomenology of the brain. This is a statement of fundamental importance. Psychology had been from the beginning a sub-discipline of philosophy, so that it is reasonable to speak of Aristotle's or Kant's psychologies. What Aristotle's and Kant's psychologies have in common is that they are psychologies of mind. That indeed was where Brentano had started. But, as the process of phenomenological investigation gathered pace, and under the firm guidance of Stumpf regarding scientific method, personal observation and phenomenological exactitude, the new experimental psychology became focused on the activity of the brain. It was this that underlay Köhler's assertion that "it seems to be the natural fate of Gestalt Psychology to become Gestalt Biology"<sup>93</sup>. He was anticipating by forty years current trends in psychology as a cognitive science, and a discipline linked to molecular biology, genetic research and even the memetic debate<sup>94</sup>. In other words, Köhler gave empirically researched psychological undergirding to Smuts' poetic grasp of the holism and isomorphism of biology and psychology. That was something that Freud had believed but had not been able to show in any organised fashion<sup>95</sup>.

Perls' background in neuropsychiatry predisposed him to see persons as biological and psychical entities in whom the two modes were so woven together that their separation in professional discourse would seem artificial. In Köhler and his colleagues, he found the same holism. But he found more which was to contribute to his understanding of the self and its structures. One of his chief criticisms of psychoanalysis was that its psychology was associational<sup>96</sup> (he was referring principally to notions of cause and effect in psychic functioning

as well as to free association as an analytic technique). He wanted to put in its place a functional psychology, based upon and descriptive of the functions of the ego and other aspects of the self<sup>97</sup>.

Shepard's assessment of Köhler's *Gestalt psychology* was that it had little to offer a therapist such as Perls<sup>98</sup>. For example, much of Köhler's work was to do with phi-phenomena such as phenomenal or stroboscopic movement, and with behavioural observations of primates. But he was more than a laboratory psychologist. His early chapters show a philosophical sophistication regarding the epistemological problems of the work that demonstrates clearly his understanding of the gestalt philosophers<sup>99</sup>. But his most practical gift to gestalt therapy is in the carefully articulated understanding of gestalt formation and its status as a process. It is this that lies at the heart of Perls understanding of the self. In his work on isomorphism<sup>100</sup>, Köhler sets out to establish the relationship between interior or subjective experience and biology<sup>101</sup>, "i.e...the similarity between sensory experience and accompanying physiological processes"<sup>102</sup>. He quoted Goethe in a chapter heading in his paper on physical *Gestalten*. The quotation was: "*Denn was innen, der ist aussen*"<sup>103</sup>. He was aware that his attempt to resolve a long-standing dilemma in experimental psychology might lead to misunderstanding. The dilemma may be understood as the tension between associationism or atomism on the one hand and our perception of organised configurations on the other<sup>104</sup>. The important question in this tension, he argued, was not what we see but how we see it: we know that what we see is an organised whole, but how do we perceive it? Is that organisation out there, given in the experience, or is it in here, the activity of the perceiver?<sup>105</sup>. Now Perls took Köhler to be on the side of the perceiver as organiser or maker of *Gestalten*. Wertheimer, on the other hand, and to an extent Köhler also, had held that these *Gestalten* exist in nature and, through the media of our senses, impress themselves upon us. This

uncertainty about and preoccupation with the mechanics of pure perception was, according to Wheeler<sup>106</sup>, a good example of how the presuppositions of the scientific enquirers may limit the experiment and skew the observations. Wheeler goes on to resolve that old tension in a way which, by appealing to Lewin's field theory, represents a mainstream position in gestalt thinking today and which echoes Köhler's own attempts at resolution<sup>107</sup>.

The resultant view might be summarised as a both / and resolution. A personal illustration may explicate this. In a Cornish field I observed an organised entity, a flock of sheep, in the environment. That commonplace and unsurprising percept was not the product of, say, my desire to eat mutton nor of any other subjective impulse. Then a new event took place. A more careful gaze indicated that two of the sheep had unusually long necks. They were, it transpired, not sheep but llamas put there to guard the sheep from predators. There was a moment's doubt about the sensory evidence, but the external data were irrefutable. What this illustrates is the activity of at least two processes. One is the perception of a complex *Gestalt*, i.e. a flock of sheep. It was the organised entity "flock-of-sheep" which was the sensory stimulus. There was also an atomistic or associationist process whereby the discrepant data, long necks, became figure in the ground (i.e. the perceptual field was reorganised around this stimulus) and the data checked in a scanning and matching process. Scanning built up the evidence (long necks, long ears, four legs etc), and matching entailed comparing the emergent picture with remembered images from another occasion. The example shows how both out-there and in-here can be important in what appears to be a single act of perception.

Perls was aware both of the ongoing scientific and philosophical conflict on this score and of the

importance of both these processes indicated in the example of the sheep and llamas. It was not his primary concern to address these issues in any detail although they are evident in his work on the self. For Perls, the self, as will be seen below, is not a fixed entity but a fluid process constituted out of all its experiences of contact, finished and unfinished. To put it in a more functional way, "the chief work of the self [is] gestalt-formation"<sup>108</sup>. That is what the self does and that, from Perls' point of view, is a more important statement than a less functional one answering the question, what is the self (for)? Thus when Perls came to articulate his fundamental theoretical and technical notion for gestalt therapy, that of contact, he defined that process in terms of gestalt formation<sup>109</sup>. In that definition, one can see the self both as recipient and perceiver of the external reality and as the organiser and constructor of reality. That is a direct debt to Köhler and his associates<sup>110</sup>. The outworking of Köhler's gestalt psychology in terms of the structures of the self is considered in greater detail in chapter 4.

### **3.8 Lewin**

Wheeler suggests that Perls may have been unaware of Lewin when he was working on his new approach to therapy and drawing on gestalt psychology<sup>111</sup>. This is a surprising suggestion, especially in the light of Perls' references to the notion of "field"<sup>112</sup> and a specific reference to Lewin's work on testing memory<sup>113</sup>. Although these references do not add up to overwhelming proof that Perls was conversant with Lewin's work on field theory, it does constitute textual evidence. And, even if that conclusion were unreliable, it is still possible and, in the present context, important to assert that Lewin's ideas about field theory have exercised a significant influence on the theory and practice of gestalt therapy, and that they continue to influence its

development<sup>114</sup>. It is not overstating the case to say that field theory is fundamental to gestalt therapy<sup>115</sup>.

Field theory began life as a concept in theoretical physics and can be understood as a move away from Newtonian mechanics in the understanding of forces. Subtle and sophisticated though Newton's work is<sup>116</sup>, it became necessary to elaborate ever further the interplay of forces as physical events of increasing complexity were analysed. An example of this may be found in the work of James Clerk Maxwell in the mid-nineteenth century. It was Maxwell who is credited with unifying (and thereby developing) existing theories of electricity and magnetism<sup>117</sup>. He did this by positing electromagnetic fields in which various forces might be detected as disturbances of the field (phenomena which gestaltists would recognise as figures in the ground). Early in the twentieth century, Einstein was working on what became known as his special theory of relativity and later on his general theory. This latter marked a breakthrough in the concept of field whereby all events thereafter would be regarded as occurring within four-dimensional space-time. Hawking's glossary of terms offers a thumbnail definition of field as "something which exists throughout space and time, as opposed to a particle that exists at only one point at a time"<sup>118</sup>. Now, as was pointed in section 3.1, all language is metaphorical, even the language of physics, although the degree of abstraction entailed is different to that which pertains when field theory is applied to psychology<sup>119</sup>. This is a point not easily expressed in a single formula. Thus Lewin can state

I am persuaded that it is possible to undertake experiments in sociology which have as much right to be called scientific experiments as those in physics and chemistry. I am persuaded that there exists a social space which has all the essential properties of a real empirical space and deserves as much attention by students of geometry and mathematics as the physical space, although it is *not* a physical one. The perception of social space and

the experimental and conceptual investigation of the dynamics and laws of the processes in social space are of fundamental theoretical and practical importance.<sup>120</sup> The elegance and comprehensive scope of physical field theories exercise a compelling influence over people who seek to understand (and perhaps predict) group and individual attitudes and behaviour. Once field thinking had entered educated discourse, it would have been absurd not to attempt to apply it to important matters in other areas of life<sup>121</sup>. Although the task is beyond the aim of this thesis, it can be argued that field theory had permeated other schools of psychology: however, nowhere is this more transparently so than in gestalt. Lewin's widow pointed out that her husband's lifelong preoccupation had been to relate theory to practical issues, to build bridges<sup>122</sup>. He was impatient with psychological observations that stopped in the laboratory: the experiments he wanted to conduct were in the real world, as in his "War Landscape"<sup>123</sup>. Wheeler points out that it was in the harsh conditions of the Western Front that Lewin formulated his notions of mental topology. He concluded that people make for themselves mental maps that indicate not so much the geographical definitions of a piece of ground as its features related to their current needs. The lines of the map are drawn by concerns such as safety, danger, resources or food<sup>124</sup>. He summarised this observation with his tag that "the need organises the field".

The notion of need was not new to psychology, of course. Freud had spelled out in his theories of instincts and drives the outworking of libidinal needs. Perls had started at another point: hunger. It is hunger and the need to satisfy it that configures the infant's field. Lewin's ideas offered to an emerging gestalt therapy a phenomenological and empirical foundation. On such a basis, gestalt therapy could claim philosophical connections with "hard" science, as well as finding liberation from the chains of S(timulus) / R(esponse) causality. Such a scientific and philosophical footing served to strengthen Perls' conviction that the data of the psychotherapeutic encounter were

indicators of a complex field of events and processes. In the present thesis, field theory is important as a major plank in the theoretical structures of a discipline whose scope is at least as wide as is Lewin's vision.

### **3.9 The influence of the existentialists**

Gestalt therapy is frequently referred to in books and articles as "existential" in its philosophical orientation. Such remarks are usually followed by one or two examples of what such a statement may mean. The term is used as a marker, a means of describing how gestalt therapists pay close attention to the phenomenology of their experience and to that of their patients. It is not the concern of most therapists to justify such statements through philosophical argument, nor to ask in what ways existentialism has influenced the development of gestalt therapy. But there are a few writers who spell out how such a question may be answered in terms of philosophical parentage and psychotherapeutic practice<sup>125</sup>.

Van De Riet *et al* cite Kierkegaard's *Either / or* (1944) in support of Perls' general approach.

They describe the former as having

...shunned abstract approaches and rejected formulating a general theory of "being." Instead, he concerned himself with what a person does in a real situation. The confrontation between the person and his environmental situation distinguishes him. Kierkegaard saw this confrontation as primal, not separable from what the person is or who he is. The gestalt approach, similarly, maintains that it is the contact between the person and his environment that defines the person's identity..... That contact is constituted by awareness, which is at the core of gestalt therapy. In existentialism, awareness would be "knowing"..<sup>126</sup>

Wilson Van Dusen speaks of his patients and their "being-in-the-world"<sup>127</sup>, clearly referring to

Heidegger and Binswanger. What is also apparent in Van Dusen's writing is his commitment both in theory and practice to the existential principle of here-and-now. This may be seen in an example he gives of encouraging his patient to say as an assertion and with more conviction something he had previously put as a question, *viz.* "Do you think therapy should go on indefinitely?" The here-and-now version of the expression brings out the emotion, the concern and the projection of the patient. Van Dusen comments, "The projection was not interpreted as a defect in the patient. The affect underlying it was recovered and the patient was restored to power"<sup>128</sup>. A similar gestalt viewpoint may be seen, from an existentialist standpoint, in the same author's paper "Wu Wei, no-mind and the fertile void in psychotherapy"<sup>129</sup>. He takes the Chinese notion of Wu Wei and invokes associations it might arouse in the Western mind. Chaos, emptiness, even desolation, are in the fundamental meaning. These are the kinds of experiences we have in our most extreme states - including psychotic illness. And yet the void is a fertile void. Viewed from another angle, as an aspect of human existence, Wu Wei can be an occasion of creativity, a fertile void<sup>130</sup>.

Yontef gives a further account of the significance of existentialism in the development and practice of gestalt therapy. He points out three principal points of explicit influence. The first may be seen in his observation that

The existential view holds that people are endlessly remaking or discovering themselves. There is no essence of human nature to be discovered "once and for all". There are always new horizons, new problems and new opportunities.<sup>131</sup>

and,

Existentialism is based on the phenomenological method. Existential phenomenologists focus on people's existence, relations with each other, joys and suffering, etc., as directly experienced.<sup>132</sup>

Another and fundamentally important influence of existentialism is found in the emphasis on dialogue in gestalt practice. Now dialogue goes back to a time before Socrates and is not peculiar to gestalt therapy. However, the features that were important to Perls owe much to Buber's notion of the I-Thou encounter and the dialogues that belong to such a relationship<sup>133</sup>. Yontef, perhaps most of all among current gestalt writers, promotes this dialogic approach to therapy and acknowledges its roots in existentialism.

The relationship between the therapist and the client is the most important aspect of psychotherapy. Existential dialogue is an essential part of Gestalt therapy's methodology and is a manifestation of the existential perspective on relationship.<sup>134</sup>

Yontef discerns a third influence of existentialism in the theory and practice of gestalt therapy. It is the notion of choice as perhaps the definitive human activity, the most significant sign of human consciousness. One of the most vivid depictions of choice in existentialist literature is in Sartre's trilogy of novels *Roads to Freedom* referred to in chapter 2. Choice, from a gestalt therapy perspective, is the foundation stone of the structures of the personality, and the *sine qua non* of responsibility. Yontef summarises these three elements in one sentence as "...acknowledgement of responsibility and choice in creating one's personal existence, the primacy of existence over essence, and the existential dialogue".<sup>135</sup>

One last point, again from Yontef, serves to show how important was existentialism for the development of gestalt therapy (including its development out of gestalt psychology). He makes the point that gestalt psychology is a "content" psychology in that it focuses on important aspects of persons such as their perception or cognition. By contrast, he maintains that gestalt therapy is both a "content" psychology and an "act" psychology. The grounds for the second half of this

claim lie in the way that gestalt therapy is an approach to the whole person as one who perceives and learns. This is, in effect, a shift from essence to existence in the Sartrean mode. It is a movement from the purely phenomenological approach associated with Husserl towards one which, whilst continuing to be phenomenological, widens its focus to encompass whole persons as they exist in their environment and in relation to others<sup>136</sup>. Such a view accorded closely with the views of the early gestalt therapists and supported their developing ideas about the nature of the self as organism-in-an-environment, as being-in-relation. Such a view would undoubtedly resonate positively with those feminist scholars who are concerned to deconstruct essentialist views of the human person, but might, by the same token, dismay those of a more liberal feminist approach who might feel undermined by such an approach to being and to relationship.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has surveyed major influences on the development of gestalt therapy and, in particular, on Perls and his co-workers as they articulated their approach to therapy and to wider matters such as cultural norms, education and individual evolution. Perls was heir to riches from a number of sources in many countries. He did not work alone, although it is his name that appears first in all the early works on gestalt therapy. There are many testimonies to his genius, as well as a reassuring number that focus on his personal foibles and his nastiness. What cannot be denied, however, is that his hunches about what to borrow and his ability to recognise a theoretical bargain when he saw one fed his integrative genius. That said, the articulation of gestalt therapy theory was not his alone and the work has accelerated rather than diminished since his death in 1970. The original integrations have stood the test of time and criticism to the point

where the conceptual structures of gestalt therapy are extending and elaborating, opening themselves to new influences and offering the prospect of new integrations. What is demonstrated in this chapter is the richness, complexity and the scope of gestalt therapy theory. This is important given the aim of this thesis aims to establish that gestalt is compatible with feminist theology. Gestalt must, at the least, demonstrate that it has a compatible range of interests, ideas and values.

The thesis continues, in the next chapter, to define the human self from a gestalt perspective and moves on to analyse the core ideas of gestalt. It is from this analysis that the practical-values of gestalt are derived and are, in their turn, compared with those of feminist theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesser influences acknowledged by Perls in, for example, his workshop asides are not dealt with here. One such is Moreno whose psychological and theatrical genius in the development of psychodrama was important in the technical development of gestalt therapy, but whose theoretical significance is not as great as that of, say, Freud or Reich. The theory and practice of psychodrama is spelled out in MORENO, J L *Psychodrama: volumes 1, 2 and 3* New York: Beacon House, 1946, 1959, 1969; also GREENBERG, I A (ed). *Psychodrama, theory and therapy*. London: Souvenir Press, Condor Books, 1975 and HOLMES, P and KARP, M (eds.). *Psychodrama, inspiration and technique*. London: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Later in his life, Perls referred less often to Smuts although holism continued to be central to his thinking, and he spoke more commonly of Taoism and other Eastern influences rather than Friedlaender's ideas about polarities and the zero point. It may be said both that fashions change and Eastern ideas enjoyed a certain cachet in the 1960s; and that the attempt to view Western ideas through Eastern lenses, whilst sometimes confusing, did offer a new context for familiar issues in Western cultures.

<sup>3</sup> The word here may be taken both in its philosophical or logical sense and in its gestalt psychological sense as the context which gives meaning to the figure, in this case that of gestalt therapy.

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4 BETTLEHEIM, Bruno. *Freud and man's soul*. London: Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press, 1983, ch. VIII.

5 The translation here is Bettelheim's own. It may usefully be compared with that of the Standard Edition (translated by James Strachey) which is reproduced in FREUD, S. *Two short accounts of psycho-analysis*. London: Pelican Books, 1962, p.104.

6 *Ibid* pp.104-5.

7 Bettelheim, *op cit* pp.78-79.

8 The complexities and ambiguities of language at the heart of Lacan's work were discussed in section 2.2.

9 For example Lacan (1989), esp.ch.3, "Function and field of speech and language", and, in that context, p.83 for a worked-through example of Lacan's concern for language.

10 Perls (1969) p.13.

11 Much of the biographical detail in this and the following paragraphs is taken from Shepard (1976).

12 PERLS, F S. *In and out the garbage pail*. Originally published Lafayette CA: Real People Press, 1969. Citations from re-issue, Highland, NY: Gestalt Journal Press, 1992, hereafter referred to as Perls (1992). The book has neither chapter divisions nor page numbers, rendering accurate references impossible. In the book Perls suggests that the analysis was a failure rather than complete, although it is hard to believe that Happel would have made her suggestion had she not taken the view that the analysis had gone as far as was necessary..

13 REICH, Wilhelm. *Character analysis*. English trans. New York: Orgone Institute, 1945.

14 For Reich and for Perls, the word "potency" has deliberate sexual connotations linked to Reich's notion of orgone energy. It can be seen as a beginning point for Perls' view that the resolution of a neurotic structure is often found in an explosive experience (Perls, 1971, p.60). But the term is broader than that. It can be understood as the forerunner of the word "potential" as it was used in the "human potential" movements of the 1970s and as the term is used in, for example, the education of children.

15 His mother and one of his sisters were murdered in Theresienstadt.

16 Perls (1969), p.81.

17 In chapter X, Perls sets out the principal lines of his critique of Freud and offers the outlines of his own ideas

18 For example, he says that "My experiences as a psychiatrist in the South African Army reveal that only about 15 per cent of the neuroses show disturbances of sexual gratification, while only in 2 to 3 per cent could hysteria symptoms be traced to actual sex-frustration." *ibid*.p.81.

19 *Ibid*.

20 *Ibid*.

21 *Ibid* pp.80 *et seq*.

22 Perls *et al* (1973), pp.439, 446. It is evident from the context that Perls did not use the word "otiose" pejoratively, i.e. as equivalent to nugatory or worthless.

23 He criticises Anna Freud for asserting, for example, that "The ego, if it assents to the impulse [arising from the id], does not enter into the picture at all". This statement minimises the creativity of the ego that, for Perls, is vital. Freud and the analysts tend to attribute creativity primarily to the id: whereas Perls asserts that: "...the perceptions

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[themselves functions of the ego] are not mere perceptions; they brighten and sharpen, and attract. Throughout the process there is discovery and invention, not looking on; for although the need of the organism is conservative, the gratification of the need can only come from the novelty in the environment: the id-function more and more becomes ego-function up to the point of final contact and release, just the opposite of what Miss Freud asserts." (Perls *et al*, 1973, p.440). Perls' promise that, in a later chapter (chapter 13), he will show that Freud treats self-function more satisfactorily than his followers do is not adequately fulfilled, in that Perls did not there make explicit references to Freud's theories. However, it is clear from a reading of chapter 13 that it does owe much to Freud's teaching. The chapter concerns the latter two phases of the contact process - final contact and post-contact. It is precisely at these stages that the ego is not much in evidence, for its work is over and the self fully engaged in the contact - or else quietly digesting after the contact is completed. In other words, any conflict with Freud's understanding of the self - a conflict which, following that with Freud's daughter, centred on differences over ego - is minimised.

24 FREUD, S. "The Unconscious" *In On metapsychology: the theory of psycho-analysis*, Vol 11 of The Pelican Freud Library. London: Penguin, 1984. See p.168.

25 *Op cit* part IV pp.183 *et seq*. Perls' critique shows his impatience with what he sees as an unnecessarily complicated view involving cathexes, anticathexes, and systems of conscious, preconscious and unconscious psychical life.

26 FREUD, S. "Lecture 32: anxiety and instinctual life". *In New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*. Vol 2 of Pelican Freud Library, London: Penguin, 1973, p.123. Freud refers to the same subject in his papers "Instincts and their vicissitudes" and "Repression", both of which appear in Freud (1984) (*op cit*, pp.113 *et seq* and pp.145 *et seq*).

27 One sees in this notion the root of Freud's use of the term "ambivalence", a term eschewed by Perls as unnecessary and inaccurate.

28 Perls *et al* (1973) p.504.

29 Much more may be said on this subject than these three points. Two are of particular interest here. First, there is the matter of human biology. For Freud, the physical was important but often vague, as in his lecture on self-structure (Freud (1973) Lecture 31). The physical existence of the person is merely implied in the discussion of space and time and in the impulses, desires and cathected objects of the body and the physical world. Some of the gestalt psychotherapists who learned their craft from Perls himself tend to describe reaction formations in markedly physical terms, offering as diagnostic indicators such factors as sudden upper thoracic breathing followed by swallowing and a tipping downward of the head. The force of this is to underline Perls' frequent emphasis on reaction-formation as a thing of the moment just as much as it can also be a fixed character trait such as Freud describes in the extracts from *On metapsychology* referred to in note 26 above. This understanding is not at odds with Freud's, though the nature of Freud's language (and the philosophy of the times) suggests a degree of fixity rather than of transient process. Second, in writing about reaction-formation, Perls also makes it clear that, whereas Freud thought in terms of "defences" of the ego - in this case against excessive anxiety - Perls talks in terms of aggression. In this usage, he is not necessarily intending to speak of hostility, although the object in his example is the destruction of a perceived threat. Rather, in line with his critique of the Freudian self as otiose, he conceives of a self which aggresses in the strict sense of

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that word (*ad-gressum*, Latin = move towards).

30 *Op cit* p.504-505.

31 Yontef (1993) especially ch.9, pp.257 *et seq*, makes the point that gestaltists are re-examining psychoanalysis as they encounter patients with severe personality disorders, something for which a more bare-bones gestalt therapy had not proved very effective (p.258).

32 Perls *et al* (1973) p.17.

33 *Ibid* p. 17.

34 REICH, Wilhelm. *The function of the orgasm*. London: Souvenir Press, reprinted 1993. This book appears in an earlier translation as *The discovery of the orgone, Vol 1: the function of the orgasm* (1942, 1948) - a translation of its German title - copyrighted in 1968. Some of the internal references in Reich's writing suggest minor unacknowledged editing between editions.

35 Reich (1993) p.138.

36 *Ibid* pp. 133 *et seq*.

37 *Ibid* pp. 139 *et seq*.

38 *Ibid* pp. 138-9.

39 *Ibid* pp. 144-5.

40 *Ibid* p. 140.

41 E.g. that of the young American woman (*ibid* pp. 159 *et seq*). This patient presented with symptoms of severe bronchial asthma that she had suffered from childhood. She had asthma attacks whenever she became sexually excited. In addition she experienced acute and distressing spasms and unusual rhythms in her bowel, throat, vagina and other parts of her body. Reich spells out the symptoms and his understanding and treatment of them. His point is that her body is not separate from her character. Rather her character is quite literally embodied, including in the distressing ways which brought her into therapy. Her symptoms have an insistent logic, the same logic which, when understood sympathetically, led to her developing into a healthy and sexually active person. The change was indeed one of character.

42 Perls *et al* (1973), chapter 15.

43 Reich's understanding is shown in Reich *op cit* p.156.

44 Perls' stance regarding sexuality is the more remarkable when one considers his personal history and experiences. He had grown up with a rigid sexual morality and a morbid sense of being an unattractive failure. His ideas - about politics, the arts and literature - were those of a cultural radical, but his demeanour told another story. He had a stooping posture, was prematurely bald, sexually inhibited and sure that his memory had been damaged by much early (and forbidden) masturbation. His personal sexual liberation began with a tempestuous and orgiastic relationship with a cousin while he was working in New York City. A few years later, with Hirschmann, he was still concerned with a sense of sexual inadequacy. (Shepard *op cit* pp.31-35).

45 Perls *et al* (1973) pp.100-101.

46 Reich *op cit* pp.266-267.

47 *Ibid* p.153.

48 *Ibid* p.155.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid* p. 426. This matter will be treated at greater length in chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> E.g. Reich *op cit* p.148 "...his character was the person himself".

<sup>51</sup> The obvious example of this is that of reaction-formations cited above, although it should be noted that Perls varies from the strictly Newtonian line in this instance. He does not see the reaction as being of the same order as the action, but rather as existing in a hierarchy of energies. Perls owes his non-dichotomous thinking to Friedlaender (section 3.5). Both men anticipate the work of Derrida in the matter of binary opposition.

<sup>52</sup> This is explored in section 3.5.

<sup>53</sup> Gestalt therapy derives its intellectual and philosophical structures from a number of sources that can themselves be investigated and criticised. The limited focus of the thesis excludes such an investigation of Smuts' work, although the widespread acceptance of holism suggests that research, largely lacking in this field, might lead to some fundamental reappraisal of this popular concept.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 28-29 et al. The book referred to is SMUTS, General The Right Hon. J C. *Holism and evolution*. London: Macmillan & Co, 1926.

<sup>55</sup> This claim is made by Smuts and supported by The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. There may, however, be some evidence to suggest that the term was in use, at least in gestalt circles, before 1926.

<sup>56</sup> Smuts, *op cit* p.5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* p. 145

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid* p.145. "Mechanism is a type of structure where the working parts maintain their identity and produce their effects individually, so that the activity of the structure is, at least theoretically, the mathematical result of the individual activities of the parts. With the two concepts of Mechanism and Holism before us we can see how the natural wholes of the universe fall under both concepts. There is a measure of Mechanism everywhere, and there is a measure of Holism everywhere; but the Holism gains on the Mechanism in the course of Evolution. It becomes more and more as Mechanism becomes less and less with the advance. Holism is the more fundamental activity, and we may therefore say that Mechanism is an earlier, cruder form of Holism; the more Holism there is in structure, the less there is of the mechanistic character, until finally in Mind and Personality the mechanistic concept ceases to be of any practical use."

<sup>59</sup> Smuts *op cit* p.224.

<sup>60</sup> It should be added that Perls was not uncritical of Smuts' concept of holism. He specifically indicates a "danger of deification in Smuts' concept, and I am not inclined to follow him in what I would call idealistic or even theological Holism". Perls (1969) p.29.

<sup>61</sup> Smuts *op cit* p.101.

<sup>62</sup> Perls *et al* (1973) p.19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid* p.276.

<sup>64</sup> Perls (1969) pp.13-15. The book Perls cites is FRIEDLAENDER, S. *Schöpferische Indifferenz*. München: Georg Müller, 1918; also München: E. Reinhardt, 1926.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* pp.13-14.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid* p.16.

<sup>67</sup> Friedlaender *op cit* p.87. "Die Welt ist ein Paar, die Kausalität ein Paar, die Richtung, die Dimension, jede Reihe, die her Zahlen, Töne, Farben, Gerüche, Geschmäcke, des Gesichts,

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- alle sind paarig, polar, rund, sphärisch veranlagt; und nur der Mensch, er hat den Star". I am grateful to the Revd. Dr. Paul Oestreicher for his assistance in this and the following translations of Friedlaender's text.
- 68 "Was balancieren kann, hat Mass. Der ausgepichte "Teufel", der von Gott balanciert wird und diese ebenmässige Beziehung in allen Gliedern verspürt, hat Mass und Mitte. Der Gott, welcher, die eigne Negation fälschlich ignorierend, masslos gütig sein will, nur Liebe ohne Hass, ist aus Mass und Mitte gerenkt und muss, ehe er sich's versieht, des Teufels werden, den er nie loswerden, nur kompensieren kann. Das Gegenteil der Position ist niemals Wahn. Dass Realität einartig sei, ist Unsinn, sobald man es nicht polar meint." *ibid* pp.19-20.
- 69 Perls *et al* (1973) pp.430-431.
- 70 This is a connection made explicit in, e.g., Perls (1969) p.18.
- 71 *Ibid* pp.16-17.
- 72 "Der Unterschied zwischen plus und minus ist nicht mehr bloss "quantitativ gradual": wenn man Gradation und Quantität polarisch nimmt. Ueberhaupt bedeutet auch der allerleiseste Unterschied bereits eine polare Entzweiung - und zwar der ewig unteilbaren, aus Ueberschwang sich selbst entzweierenden Vollqualität des Subjektes. Plus und minus sind also oppositiv (spiegelhaft) homogen. Gradation ist Differenzierung." Friedlaender *op cit* p.20.
- 73 For example, he might have followed Jung who in turn followed Nicholas of Cusa (15th cent) who, in his *De docta ignorantia* characterised God as "coincidentia oppositorum", i.e. the being in whom all opposites meet LIVINGSTONE, E A (ed). *The concise Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Also NICHOLAS OF CUSA (English trans. Hopkins, J) *Complete theological and philosophical treatises* Minneapolis: J A Banning Press, 2001.
- 74 Perls (1992).
- 75 Perls *et al* (1973) p. 13. Perls comments on Goldstein and holism in PERLS, F S. *Gestalt therapy verbatim*. Moab, Utah: Bantam Books (1971), p.6.
- 76 Perls (1992). This section occurs towards the end of the first quarter of the text.
- 77 Shepard *op cit* p.33.
- 78 Shepard is dismissive about this and asserts that "Gestalt psychology had little in common with what Fritz was later to call *Gestalt Therapy*. The Gestalt psychology that Lore studied and Fritz was marginally exposed to was of academic interest only. It described perception: how individuals saw things. It dealt with foreground / background and helped students to appreciate the concept of relativity ..... These Gestaltists had no idea of using their research in any psychotherapeutic way. Their interest was an experimental one, not one of helping people overcome emotional difficulties. Had Fritz not borrowed the term in 1951 for his therapeutic system, *Gestalt* would have faded to the dusty back bookshelves of graduate school libraries, a mere footnote in the history of academic psychology." (*ibid*. p.34).
- 79 The same point arises later in this chapter, when consideration is given to the importance of Köhler, section 3.7.
- 80 GOLDSTEIN, Kurt. *Human nature in the light of psychopathology*. New York: Schocken Books, 1963, pp.9-10.
- 81 Perls *et al* (1973).
- 82 Goldstein argues even against the notion of repression. "We find not continual repression

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but continual formation of new patterns. The factor, which actuates the so-called repressing, is formed neither through prohibitions from without, nor by a censor, nor by an ego, nor by a superego. Rather, through maturation, new patterns of the organism are formed, conforming to the human species in general and to the cultural pattern of that particular milieu in which the child grows up. Of course, one can call this development "ego formation," and of course, the prohibitions, just like other processes in the environment, are co-determining factors in this formation. Yet, the effects of former reactions have not been "forgotten" through repression. Rather, they cannot be remembered because they are no longer part of the attitudes of later life and therefore cannot become effective. We shall see that they can be revived or recalled if the individual is brought into a situation similar to that under which they originated - that is, psychosis or in the psychotherapeutic situation." *ibid.* p.250

83 Goldstein (1995), pp.252-253.

84 Goldstein (1963) pp.167 *et seq.*

85 For example, Goldstein (1995) p.275.

86 *Ibid.* p.285.

87 Perls (1969), p.27 clearly locates his understanding of gestalt psychology in the work of Wertheimer and Köhler.

88 KÖHLER, W. *Gestalt psychology: an introduction to new concepts in modern psychology*. New York: Liveright, 1970 (first published, 1947), chapter IV.

89 As was noted above, this was an argument which Goldstein also advanced and which lay behind the early work of Brentano and his students in Prague.

90 "... all local changes must be such that, when considered in their totality, they bring the system nearer the balance of forces. The factor of inertia, it is true, may cause temporary deviations from this simple rule. But, then, in many systems inert velocities are at once destroyed by friction, so that the actual development exhibits the rule in pure form, and an orderly balance is soon reached. (It is important to know that this applies to the nervous system. There are no processes in this system which are influenced by inert velocities.) The fact that the final result always constitutes an orderly distribution has been simply explained by Ernst Mach: In orderly distributions, the pattern of forces is just as regular as is the distribution of the material. But, clearly, in regular patterns forces are more thoroughly balanced than they are in irregular distributions. Hence, since undisturbed interaction operates in the direction of balance, it must operate toward orderly distribution both of forces and materials.

Dynamic self-distribution in this sense is the kind of function which Gestalt Psychology believes to be essential in neurological and psychological theory. More particularly, it is assumed that the order of facts in a visual field is to a high degree the outcome of such a self-distribution of processes. From this point of view, a stationary visual field corresponds to a balanced distribution of underlying processes. When conditions change, resulting developments will always be in the direction of balance." Köhler *op cit* pp.132-133.

91 *Ibid* pp.136-137.

92 *Ibid* p.144. It should, however, be noted that, in the field of auditory sensation, von Ehrenfels had preceded Wertheimer in his *Über Gestaltqualitäten*.

93 *Ibid* p. 359.

94 For examples, DAWKINS, R. *The selfish gene* (2nd Edition). Oxford: Oxford University

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- Press, Oxford paperback, 1989, chapter 11, especially p.199; and (same author and publisher), *The extended phenotype*, 1983, chapter 6. A meme is "the unit of cultural heredity analogous to the gene" (PLOTKIN, H. *Darwin machines and the nature of knowledge*. London : Penguin Books, 1995, p.251. Also pp.212-227 on culture and its replication by memetic means). Dawkins explains cultural replication by means of units of memory which are an efficient means of transmission from one brain to another - independently of genetic transmission. As Dawkins points out, by the time we see our second filial generation, the similarities are already fading: one's genes are halved with each generation soon to disappear into the gene pool. But memetic transmission is not subject to such vicissitudes and can be transmitted laterally as well as vertically: as such it is a profoundly important mechanism for human society and evolution. A view of memetic transmission contrasted with genetic transmission is set out in BONNER, J.T. *The evolution of culture in animals*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, Princeton Science Library edition, 1989, chapter 2.
- <sup>95</sup> This connection is not only one to the brain. Freud observed that musculature is intimately involved in psychological processes, e.g. his interest in the musculature of the anal sphincter which he linked to psychic development. Reich's work on character armour is probably the most complete psychoanalytic working out of the connections between psychology and muscles.
- <sup>96</sup> The point is made in Perls (1969) p.27, Perls *et al* (1973) pp.379-383 and other references under "association". There are references in the latter to Freud: the critique of Freud is extensive and on a number of fronts, all of which add up to a criticism of the type of psychology employed and developed by him, which is contrasted with a gestalt approach.
- <sup>97</sup> This is axiomatic to the approach in Perls (1969) and in Perls *et al* (1973). For example the closing words of his Introduction to Perls (1969, p.8) echo directly the approaches of Stumpf and Wertheimer.
- <sup>98</sup> This point was raised earlier in connection with Goldstein in section 3.6.
- <sup>99</sup> He cites von Ehrenfels in chapter 6 and elsewhere, and refers to other early figures. References to Ash (1982) in chapter 2 of his dissertation demonstrate the fundamental conviction of the experimental psychologists (mainly gestaltists) that their task was to answer philosophical questions by phenomenological means. The emergence of experimental psychology from faculties of philosophy was no historical accident, and the eventual schism between philosophy and experimental psychology arose from the growth of the newer discipline to the point where it ran into broadly political opposition (Ash (1982, pp.xxxi *et seq*)).
- <sup>100</sup> Köhler *op cit* pp.57-63. Isomorphism was not only a concern of gestaltists but a commonly held belief that, in some way, exterior events and interior experience reflected each other. Thus defined, its rather mechanical assumptions and shortcomings may be detected and Köhler's work offered a greatly modified view.
- <sup>101</sup> For a discussion of isomorphism in this connection, *ibid* pp.150 *et seq*, also p. 301 and pp. 344 *et seq*.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid* p.160 n.
- <sup>103</sup> This might be translated as: For whatever was interior is exterior.
- <sup>104</sup> KÖHLER, W. *Die physischen Gestalten in Ruhe und im stationären Zustand. Eine naturphilosophische Untersuchung*. Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1920. He records how he was

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able to take Wertheimer's psychological models (models of psychic ontology) and extend them to the point where they may be applied in physical contexts. He takes as example inanimate matter that operates not simply in an atomistic or quasi- mechanical way, but in systemic ways with defined *Gestalten* of behaviour. This development is summarised by Ash (1982, pp.xxxix-xli), and in an abstract in the Bibliography of Smith (1988), p.348.

<sup>105</sup> Goldstein asked the same question in his critique of gestalt psychology cited above.

<sup>106</sup> Wheeler (1991), chapter 1, especially pp.14-20.

<sup>107</sup> Ash (1995), especially pp.176-181; Köhler *op cit* ch.VII and Wheeler *op cit* pp.23-26 *et seq.*

<sup>108</sup> Perls *et al* (1973) p.441.

<sup>109</sup> Chapter 4 below and Perls *et al* (1973) chapters 12 & 13.

<sup>110</sup> An exposition of aspects of this relationship may be found in Yontef (1993), chapter 8: "Gestalt therapy: its inheritance from gestalt psychology". The chief value in the present context of this chapter lies in the way the author draws parallels between the thinking and practice of gestalt psychologists and gestalt therapists.

<sup>111</sup> *Op cit* p.5.

<sup>112</sup> Perls (1969), pp.18, 26, 28 *et al.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid* p.101.

<sup>114</sup> For example, Houston (1993) pp.77 *et seq.*, 99; and Yontef (1993), the subject index under Field, pp.543-544 which gives references to the many points at which field theory is central to Yontef's argument.

<sup>115</sup> Thus Yontef (1993), p.293: "Field theory is the theory upon which Gestalt therapy theory is based..."

<sup>116</sup> References to Newtonian science in gestalt literature can appear patronising, implying that his theories deal only with simple linear processes. Such comments fail to take into account the breadth of Newton's work (for example in optics with Herschel, as well as in mathematics, let alone in other spheres of activity, e.g. Parliament). They also overlook its sophistication, e.g. as when the demands of his own observations drove him towards the invention of the calculus (which he termed "the fluxions"), without which, it may be argued, it is hard to envisage the mathematical articulation of field theories.

<sup>117</sup> MAXWELL, J C. *A treatise on electricity and magnetism* (3rd edition). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 (3rd edition first published by same publisher, 1892).

<sup>118</sup> Hawking (1988) p.184.

<sup>119</sup> Yontef *op cit* p.301 has it that "this usage derives literally (in physics) and by analogy (in psychology)". The critical word here is "derives". One of the points at which Lewin diverged from the Berlin school was in his understanding of isomorphism. Ash's (1995, pp.268-275) and Yontef's understandings correspond to that of Lewin rather than Köhler.

<sup>120</sup> LEWIN, K. "Experiments in social space" (1939) In LEWIN, G W (ed). *Resolving social conflicts*. London: Souvenir Press, 1973, p. 71. There is a parallel and somewhat similar model in Christopher Zeeman's Catastrophe Theory. This theory, in its origins, concerns the mathematical consideration of plane surfaces of metal sheets under particular conditions of stress. A cusp is reached in the interplay of forces beyond which there occurs a physical catastrophe (buckling etc). Zeeman developed his work into modelling (and predicting) the catastrophic behaviour of human groups under stress, some accounts of which are described in ZEEMAN, E C. *Catastrophe theory, selected papers, 1972-1977*. Reading, Mass.:

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- Addison Wesley, 1977.
- <sup>121</sup> The same may be said of Uncertainty, Chaos and other mathematical and scientific theories.
- <sup>122</sup> *Ibid* p.xvi.
- <sup>123</sup> LEWIN, K "Krieglandschaft" *In Zeitschrift Angewandter Psychologie* **12**: 440-447 (1917), cited in Wheeler *op cit*, pp.27-29.
- <sup>124</sup> Ash (1995) p.270.
- <sup>125</sup> Examples are found in VAN DE RIET, V. *et al. Gestalt therapy: an introduction*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1980, pp.22-24; and VAN DUSEN, W. "Existential analytic psychotherapy" *In PURSGLOVE, P D (ed.). Recognitions in Gestalt Therapy*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968, pp.29-30. Van Dusen spells out what he understands by existential-analytic psychotherapy and states that it has "roots in the work of Adler, Rank, Gestalt Therapy, and the work of Freud".
- <sup>126</sup> Van De Riet *et al, op cit*, p.22.
- <sup>127</sup> Van Dusen is described by Shepard (*op cit*, p8) as "a West Coast phenomenologist who brought Fritz to California in 1959". He states that Perls lived for a while with the Van Dusens whose names occur throughout Shepard's book. Van Dusen was well published in psychotherapeutic journals during the 1950s and 1960s.
- <sup>128</sup> Van Dusen *op cit* p.37.
- <sup>129</sup> First published *In Psychologia* **11**:310-322 (1958), reprinted in STEVENS, J.O.(ed.) *Gestalt is*. Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1975, pp.87-93. Perls also uses the term "fertile void", e.g. Perls (1976) p.100.
- <sup>130</sup> This theme was developed for work with people with schizophrenic illness by R D Laing and by the Philadelphia Association with which he was associated.
- <sup>131</sup> Yontef, *op cit* p.131.
- <sup>132</sup> *Ibid* p.130.
- <sup>133</sup> Also BUBER, M. *Between man and man*. London: Collins, 1961 (first published in English London: Kegan, 1947) especially his chapter entitled "Dialogue".
- <sup>134</sup> Yontef *op cit* p.131; also pp.210 *et seq.*
- <sup>135</sup> *Ibid* p.138. Yontef's second term, the primacy of existence over essence, is a reference to a dictum of Sartre which points up both the absolute primacy of experience over, say, metaphysical considerations and affirms the act of choosing as a core experience of existence.
- <sup>136</sup> *Ibid* pp.252 *et seq.*

## THE SELF AND CORE IDEAS IN GESTALT THERAPY

### 4 Introduction

In pastoral theology, it is important to establish that the two (or more) disciplines in which one is working are suitable candidates for interdisciplinary work. Earlier chapters of the thesis, earlier chapters trace the unfolding of scientific thinking that guided the development of psychology. Chapter 2 shows how speculative thinking about the nature of mental acts led to the development of gestalt philosophy and, subsequently, gestalt psychology as a discrete discipline. Chapter 3 shows how Perls, originally trained in psychoanalysis, integrated other ideas and perspectives into a new approach to psychotherapy. This approach proved to be of far wider application and was quickly seen to offer a novel understanding of what it is to be human and to be in relationship with others. These broad concerns are also part of the province of feminist theology and they offer points of possible convergence between the two disciplines.

However, it is from an articulated notion of the self and the self in relationship that the core ideas of gestalt can be analysed, i.e. loosed from their background. It is these core ideas from which practical-values are derived and, in chapter 7, compared with those of feminist theology.

In this chapter the gestalt approach to the self is stated in terms of contact process. Contact, from a gestalt perspective, is fundamental to life itself. It is the basis for defining the human self - although this process may be seen in other life forms too. Contact is a process rather than an entity. It is intimately linked with the figure / ground differentiation (or gestalt formation),

implicitly recognised by the early gestalt philosophers and explicitly by the experimenters of the Berlin school. The publication of Perls (1973) - actually in 1951 - offered a developed articulation of contact theory and gestalt formation in the context of everyday human behaviour. Since that time, more has been written that elaborates those core understandings, but the early formulations remain fundamental to gestalt theory.

Section 4.1 opens with a description of the self (process) as Perls understood it. The thesis then moved on to an account of the contact process by which the self comes to be. This account brings together contact process and figure / ground differentiation. The theme of awareness, another important aspect of gestalt theory and practice, is discussed. Together, contact, gestalt formation and awareness provide the tools with which we may understand the gestalt theory of self.

Much of the revision and expansion of gestalt theory since the first published account of Perls *et al*<sup>1</sup> has been in the area of contact process, and these revisions are indicated in section 4.2. References to ongoing theoretical work in gestalt therapy are included to demonstrate both the confirmation of the basic ideas and to point to developments in gestalt thinking.

Section 4.3 begins to draw on material from this and earlier chapters to analyse core ideas in gestalt. In chapter 7, these core ideas serve as a source for the derivation of gestalt practical-values. The first of these core ideas concerns the primacy of experience in gestalt theory and practice. This is followed by section 4.4 which focuses on ideas of body / mind / spirit (gestalt holism). Another type of holism is considered in section 4.5, *viz.* that of the personal / interpersonal / political and social.

In section 4.6, attention is paid to some implications of the gestalt notions of self-regulation, homeostasis and *Prägnanz*, the German term used to convey what gestalt theorists see as an optimising tendency in the organism-in-an-environment. This is illustrated in terms of dealing with affronts to the organism and, in the following section (section 4.7) more broadly as a framework for understanding, from a gestalt perspective, individual and social evolution. In section 4.8, attention is focused on the core idea of gestalt's existentialist approach - the "Here and Now". Section 4.9 evaluates notions of response-ability as a way of viewing transcendence. Section 4.10 concludes by summarising Part One of the thesis and leads to Part Two.

#### **4.1 The self in gestalt theory**

Perls learned from Federn and other teachers a Freudian view of the structures of the self. This was not a single definition since Freud's own ideas and those of the International Psycho-Analytic Congress were in a state of continuous development, marked by occasional major changes<sup>2</sup>. Perls' critique of Freud, and in particular of the notion of the self, has already been explored<sup>3</sup>. The thesis now turns to an examination of what Perls proposed in place of those theories. The temptation in criticising received wisdom is to emphasise its negative points and so fail to do it justice. In putting forward his radical and dynamic understandings of the self, Perls tended to overlook some of the subtlety and dynamic nature of Freud's ideas<sup>4</sup>. It follows that, while Perls' ideas differ from those of psychoanalytic orthodoxy, they also concur at times.

The contrast with Freud is starkest when Perls sounds most simple, for example, in one of his definitions of the self: "we consider the self as the function of contacting the actual transient

present..."<sup>5</sup>. There are a number of points to notice here. First is the word "function" which, like the phrase "transient present" points to the self as activity and engagement, rather than as an entity proper to the enquiry of philosophers<sup>6</sup>. The word "as" in this quotation is also important, for the author<sup>7</sup> intends the meaning "may be understood as" or "is equivalent to". There is an avoidance of the verbal form "is" and of a substantive predicate to that verb. There is also a hint of parabolic speech. These are, quite probably, intentional forms designed to undermine any tendency in the reader to reify fluid processes. Reification tends to mystification and to the creation of approximations to reality that we mistake for the real experience. Like all substitutes, these objective approximate terms cannot be the reality.

Perls did not content himself with one definition of the self. Two further quotations amplify that above. First, "*...the self is not the figure it creates but the creating of the figure: that is, self is the dynamic relation of ground and figure*"<sup>8</sup>. And, in describing the interaction of organism and environment in the contact process, "*..the self (which is nothing but contact) comes to feel itself*"<sup>9</sup>. Whilst these quotations serve to support the earlier one, their terminology raises questions.

First is the reference to figure and ground, and to the creation of figures<sup>10</sup>. The concept, now commonplace, has its origins in gestalt psychology. For Perls, as for Wertheimer, it was evident that (perception of) meaning stems from the relationship of figure to ground<sup>11</sup>. In the process of differentiation, part of the field becomes in some sense prominent or more focused with a corresponding decrease in the same qualities in the remainder of the field<sup>12</sup>. Some of the philosophical discussions of the early gestaltists concerned the nature of figure / ground

differentiation. The process reaches a point (typically a series of succeeding points) where a clear *Gestalt* is formed. The *Gestalt* or form is precisely that which is constructed or given as figure in the ground of all the possibilities that preceded the construction of the *Gestalt*. Once it has been formed and has been duly processed, it then dissolves into the ground and another figure may take its place in the view or interest of the subject. A simple example of this process is evident when one looks at a painting. One expects to see something (forms, shapes, patterns) and indeed does so, sometimes sooner, sometimes later. As one does so and then proceeds to examine that form (figure in the ground of the possibilities of the picture), it often gives way to other forms or possible figures in the same picture. In other words, and from another viewpoint, one's interest shifts to another aspect. The debates between the Berlin school and the "production" schools concerned the nature and origin of the *Gestalten* formed. Were they the products of the viewer's interest or were they given in the experience? Why were some figure / ground differentiations apparently stronger or more insistent than others? Why is it that the figure which one makes and its relation to the ground (and indeed the perceptible contents of the ground itself) vary with circumstance and from one person to another? These questions are of such strong philosophical and scientific interest and value that there is ongoing debate between the two main viewpoints<sup>13</sup>.

Perls followed Wertheimer (and thus von Ehrenfels) in his theory and assumed with him that perception is organised "*von oben nach unten*" (from the top downward). It was von Ehrenfels's view that the *Gestaltqualität* is given in experience over and above sensory *fundamenta* ("bits" of experience). It is this quality that determines which *fundamenta* are taken into account, how they are processed, and which are put into the background. The *Gestaltqualität* works in the process of figure / ground differentiation and is fundamental in the activity of humans and other primates<sup>14</sup>.

Second, it is important in considering Perls' definitions of the self, to return to the term "organism". In the context of gestalt theory, the word denotes part of a totality which is the organism / environment, i.e. a distinguishable entity (or, better, a moment) in a given field. The "organism" referred to could, for example, be the reader or writer of this paragraph. The word "self" is secondary to "organism" and refers to an aspect of the organism which, through its process of contacting, nourishes the organism by identifying and meeting its needs, primarily in relation to its environment.

The other words that are important in understanding Perls' view of the self refer to three "partial systems" of the self. These are termed id, ego and personality. Since psychologists, as well as people with no formal psychological education, use these words with a range of meanings, some definitions are offered here from a gestalt viewpoint. These definitions were constructed from two directions. One direction came from the observation of patients as therapist and patient thought new thoughts and developed new methods of working. This approach took as its primary criterion the (avowedly subjective) experience of the patient as opposed to the (equally subjective) experience of the therapist. The other direction was a critique of the methods taught in Freudian circles and the (related or corresponding) theories propounded<sup>15</sup>.

The most striking thing about the terms used of the partial systems is that all three, though employing pronouns and nouns, refer to activity or process. In this way, the authors seek to avoid the trap of ontological statements, and do not suggest entities or reifications. Taking the example of a simple spontaneous act, they state:

As aspects of the self....Id, Ego, and Personality are the major stages of creative

adjustment [between organism and environment<sup>16</sup>]; the Id is the given background dissolving into its possibilities, including organic excitations and past unfinished situations becoming aware, and the environment vaguely perceived, and the inchoate feelings connecting organism and environment. The Ego is the progressive identification with and alienation of the possibilities, the limiting and heightening of the on-going contact, including motor behaviour, aggressing, orientation, and manipulation. The Personality is the created figure that the self becomes and assimilates to the organism, uniting it with the results of previous growth. Obviously all this is just the figure/background process itself, and in such a simple case there is no need to dignify the stages with special names<sup>17</sup>.

## 4.2 Contact process and the self

The quotation above shows how Perls' partial self-systems link with his understanding of figure / ground differentiation. This, in turn leads to his definition of the contact process. The terminology of self, partial systems, figure / ground differentiation and contact process together constitute the theoretical core of gestalt therapy. The quotation refers to a simple situation and to more complex ones in which a more elaborate definition is required. This more elaborate understanding is usually presented in terms of the stages of the contact process<sup>18</sup>. Contact process is defined in the fundamental language of gestalt psychology as a succession of figure / ground formations<sup>19</sup> in which four stages are distinguished<sup>20</sup>:

1. Fore contact: the body is the ground, the appetite or environmental stimulus is the figure. This is what is aware as the "given" or Id of the situation, dissolving into its possibilities.

2. Contacting: (a) the excitement of appetite becomes the ground and some "object" or set of possibilities is the figure. The body diminishes. (Or contrariwise, in pain, the body becomes figure.) There is an emotion.

- (b) there is choosing and rejecting of possibilities, aggression in approaching and in overcoming obstacles, and deliberate orientation and manipulation. These are the identifications and alienations of the Ego.

3. Final Contact: against a background of unconcernful environment and body, the lively goal is the figure and is in touch. All deliberateness is relaxed and there is a spontaneous unitary action of perception, motion, and feeling. The awareness is at its brightest, in the

figure of the You.

4. Post-contact: There is a flowing organism/environment interaction that is not a figure/background: the self diminishes.<sup>21</sup>

The sequence is simply illustrated in a meeting of two people. In fore-contact, an I-organism anticipates or approaches a meeting. My body is full of excitements - a little hungry, on the edge of some sexual excitement and a little nervous about meeting this person. What do I want from the meeting? from him? He enters the room, sees me, greets me (as I do him). I feel my excitement more clearly: he is as attractive as I remembered and hoped. My hunger disappears into the (back)ground of my body, as the stimulus from my environment triggers excitements from other, unfinished situations from my past.

The contact stage flows immediately from fore-contact. My excitement is now the ground from which a new figure emerges. Our greeting was not enough. I want more - what more I do not at first know. I feel my emotion. I feel a desire to touch and be touched. How can I do that? I do not want to launch myself at him or have him do that to me: that would be too much. I would feel embarrassed and ashamed. I could take his hand.

I reach out my hand, a conventional gesture, but not one I expected to use in this context. In response, he reaches for mine. Our hands hold, our eyes meet and we smile in recognition of our success in handling this new and exciting opportunity. I am no longer nervous - let alone hungry - but content in this moment with this person (final contact).

Perhaps we stayed like that longer than either of us had expected. I was not counting the seconds:

it was what I had wanted and felt good. After a while, our meeting moved on. That first gestalt was complete, the contact finished, its fruits absorbed (post contact).

There are a few points to note in this illustration. One is that the initial contact is one *Gestalt* within the wider *Gestalt* of the whole meeting which is itself one *Gestalt* within the wider *Gestalt* of the life of the I-organism, which is ... *ad infinitum*. Using words like fore-contact and contact over something so ordinary and fleeting is to risk seeming ridiculous. The terms come into their own when applied to more complex *Gestalten*. However, even in this simple example, one further elaboration is required to complete the picture of this encounter. We have seen how the id may be understood as the I-organism's desire and / or the impact of the other person, or both. And we have seen how the ego is active after the excitement coalesces around a set of possible goals. What is not spelled out in this example (as it is not in the excerpt from Perls *et al* above<sup>22</sup>) is that the achievement of the ego function in the illustration represents an increment in the personality. In the gestalt understanding, personality is the term used for the sum of all one's ego achievements. It contains one's learned ways of dealing with life situations. These include, for example, one's personal, public and social roles and attitudes. The increment of personality in this illustration may be slight; and yet it is an achievement. The I-organism has found a way to deal with a situation that appears to have worked satisfactorily. It is henceforward available in similar situations, obviating the anxiety associated with first-time quick thinking. In summary, we may say that personality is the repertoire of our predictable behaviours by which the world knows us and by which we know ourselves. By contrast, we cannot know what we shall be or become in moments of creative spontaneity.

In a gestalt understanding of the self, the structures of the self are moments in a temporal process<sup>23</sup>. Self-experience tells us, however, that there is continuity. Our bodies continue, although if our bodies were not also constantly changing, they would be dead. Our personalities continue. One cannot say that, were personality unchanging, the organism would be dead – except in a metaphorical sense. It is intrinsic to personality that it grows and develops from infancy through many stages into adulthood. Moreover, it does not stop at an arbitrary point of maturity. People continue to grow and develop, sometimes prompted from within themselves and sometimes in response to external circumstances<sup>24</sup>. Some people grow unevenly and may appear to have areas of no growth. Consider, for example, the fifty-year old person whose religious ideas are almost identical to those of a five-year old. Such a person has not grown in that respect and, to that extent, must be considered undeveloped or immature in relation to his religious ideas. Or consider the person whose personality has what Perls called a "hole". Examples of people with holes in their personalities include those who are incapable of listening to others; or those who are socially disabled when encountering persons of the opposite sex. They have not achieved the necessary pieces of personality, and the corresponding holes are obvious to observers. To have a hole in one's personality is inconvenient or painful and the pain must be soothed or compensated. People who cannot listen usually ensure that they do not have to do so, and they often achieve this by themselves talking whenever they are with others. People who cannot bear to meet the opposite sex usually contrive to avoid them or else develop techniques such as bluster or withdrawal.

This model of the self points to the fundamental "moment" (rather than unit or entity) identifiable in therapy, management and education, as well as in broader processes of family and social life,

political and economic activity. This is what gestaltists and other psychologists increasingly recognise as "spiritual" engagement.

Having arrived at a gestalt understanding of the self, it becomes possible to analyse, from material in this and earlier chapters, core ideas in gestalt. These core ideas serve as a source for the derivation of practical-values in gestalt and are discussed in chapter 7.

### **4.3 Core ideas in gestalt: the primacy of experience**

The first of these core ideas concerns the primacy of experience in gestalt theory and practice. The fundamental importance of this notion reaches back to the seminars of Brentano who urged his students to consider, by observing and reflecting upon their own experience, what is the nature of a mental act. The early papers of von Ehrenfels, no less than the laboratory observations of Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka, took as their starting point the validity of experience. One of the differences between the first of these and his successors was simply that of a generation, during which time thinking about the meaning of *Gestalten* had moved on. Another was the shift from what we would recognise as a philosophical enquiry to what is recognisably a psychological one. One of the factors in the elaboration of empirical psychological research was the recognition that experience is not an absolute. Even sensory perception is problematic and the move into experimental psychology represents a logical necessity encountered by gestaltists as they moved from hypothesis to empirical experiment, observation and scientific theorising. In philosophical terms, the gestaltists rested upon foundations laid by Descartes (the emphasis upon the cogitation of the subject) and upon the subject-centred approach of Schleiermacher. They were supported in

this by the phenomenological approach of Husserl and by the work, originally in Prague and then in various centres in post-war (post 1918) Europe which derived from the simultaneously introspective and empirical work of Brentano's students and associates. For all the struggles to obtain objectivity, the gestaltists realised that we are limited in what we can know of the world "out there". Their focus was precisely upon the world "out there" plus the world "in here" and in the relations between these two spheres. We can know nothing of out there except via the perceiving subject in here: it was the "how" of that enquiry which fired their research and which inevitably put the experience of the experiencing subject at the core of the enquiry.

#### **4.4 Core ideas in gestalt: holism**

The emphasis on holism in gestalt therapy is usually attributed to Fritz Perls and his reading of Smuts' work. It is also true that the idea was one which reflected (one aspect of) the spirit of the time, in the sense that Smuts' work was widely accepted as an articulation of what others were thinking and feeling about their experience. What is arguably less evident, but nevertheless important, is that holism is a notion which expresses something of the spirit of gestalt philosophy and psychology. The studies of perception to which reference was made in earlier chapters do not always assume that the experiencing subject is a cognitive entity unconnected with a feeling organism. Rather, it was frequently evident to the experimenters that the ways in which people construed their physical environment was sometimes connected with the rest of their lives! It was the work of Lewin on field theory which finally made explicit what was only implicit in earlier gestalt psychology, namely his understanding of how need configures perception. With this established, the links of mind and body moved from intuitive perception and introspection into

empirical study.

That gestalt holism should also encompass the human spirit is, at first sight, less obvious. Much intellectual discourse of the twentieth century sought to relegate notions of spirit and spirituality to, at worst, the retreat of intellectual scoundrels or, at best, the realms of poetic discourse and rhetoric. The rediscovery by academic psychologists of the human spirit (still not a conclusive victory) points to a growing discomfort with that scientific reductionism which denies whatever cannot be studied empirically (= reductively). Gestaltists use the term "spirit" imprecisely and it seems unlikely that they will define it precisely. What is important about their usage - and its meaning - is its location in the body / mind / spirit trinity. It is a term that recognises the unnecessarily limiting aspects of empirical reductionism without feeling obliged to offer atomised definitions. Body / mind / spirit holism, where it is encountered in gestalt literature, is a term that seeks to include the whole of what it is to be human. It points to the whole person with her hopes and fears, her bodily existence and physical senses, her perception and cognition - in short, the whole experience.

In promoting a holistic approach in gestalt therapy, the Perls were confronting what they saw as the over-cerebration of psychoanalysis (Fritz Perls' notorious "mind-fucking") and the corresponding reification of mental "parts" (ego, id etc). In positive terms, they put the whole person in place of a fragmented "subject" back at the centre of discourse about people and society.

#### 4.5 Core ideas in gestalt: personal / interpersonal / political

It is ironic that one of the early criticisms in Britain of gestalt was that its focus on the experience of people was unhealthy. The suggestion was that in using the word "I" a good deal, patients in therapy were being encouraged to be selfish in a negative and ultimately immoral way. Undoubtedly, the Gestalt Prayer<sup>25</sup> and, indeed, some of Perls' own advocacy did much to fuel this perception: it is also likely that some British suspicion of American cultural imports added to it. It should be remembered that the 1970s in Britain, when gestalt became established as one of the humanistic psychologies, were years in which it became fashionable to use the language of "I" if one were a participant in the new counter-culture.

It was only as British and other European practitioners of gestalt developed their understanding of the approach that its multi-dimensionality became clear. The publication in Britain of *Gestalt therapy now*<sup>26</sup> showed that the approach had important implications for education, childcare, the penal system and everyday discourse between people. Only then did practitioners themselves begin to appreciate the scope of what they were developing. Moreover, experienced practitioners in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s were discovering that there was little point in helping their clients to change their individual lives if the relationships and networks around them remained unchanged. They had been taught that the individual is a (sometimes) convenient abstraction from a much larger process. Their work, if it was to be useful, had to focus with the client on the wider process and to resist the tendency of a hurt person to demand attention to themselves alone.

The personal and the interpersonal cannot be separated. By the same token, the interpersonal and

the political, social and economic are inter-related: these distinctions are for the sake of convenience and focus only. Gestalt holism is a viewpoint ultimately linking us all to each other and to the rest of the cosmos. It is a vision as poetic as that of Genesis or of the cosmologists who remind us we are made of stardust, and it is one grounded in empirical research and daily experience.

#### **4.6 Core ideas in gestalt: self-regulation and *Prägnanz*.**

One of the implications of this dynamic view of the self is that it can only be understood in its context. Perls viewed the self as an organism-in-an-environment, and paid particular attention to the regulation of self and environment. His fundamental understanding was that, in normal circumstances (i.e. principally ones not disturbed by neurotic formations) the organism tended to establish homeostasis. In practice, this means that healthy people will tend to make an optimal adjustment to their circumstances. From the point of view of human relationships, homeostasis suggests that we do not have a fixed identity in all circumstances, but vary how we are and even who we are to fit the situations in which we are - at home, at work, at ease or under threat. Moreover, following the theories of the gestalt psychologists, he was clear that each organism had its own *Prägnanz*, by which he meant that the organism has its own optimising tendency within its own boundaries. Between them, homeostasis and *Prägnanz* describe the How of self-regulation and the primary means of growth and development.

We take what we need from our human, social and physical environment, experiencing and accepting that this is a mutual process in which others will take from us. Furthermore, we identify

whatever factors in our environment are not acceptable to us. These may be affronts (e.g. physical, psychological or political factors) and make the best adjustment we can to those. Sometimes, we avoid - at some cost - the conflict. At other times, we may take up the challenge - again, at some cost - and confront the people, circumstances or parties that threaten our (or human) wellbeing. All these are examples of organism-environment homeostasis. It is our *Prägnanz* that prompts us to, say, join a gym for the sake of our personal fitness, and it is our *Prägnanz* that may also prompt us to take political action to promote more widespread human flourishing.

Perls was not afraid to call this, however controversially, "selfishness". Even what seems like being "taken from", e.g. in child-rearing, may contain large elements of mutuality which make the experience rewarding in both directions. This was an important argument in the initial reception of gestalt in some quarters as the use of the term "selfishness" reinforced cultural unease about gestalt. It is now clearer that there is a proper attention to and care for the self which does not conflict with, for example, Christian morality about self-giving and taking up the cross. This argument is often captured in the pithy observation that to love one's neighbour as oneself is not much good to the neighbour if the Christian does not care at all for herself! In sum, self-fulfilment is unlikely to follow from a selfish approach to life, i.e. one that does not take proper account of the social and physical environment.

#### **4.7 Core ideas in gestalt: evolution.**

*Prägnanz* and homeostasis are the mechanisms whereby the organism regulates itself (and is regulated) in the environment. There is another perspective on these complex mechanisms, namely that of individual and social evolution. This expands the gestalt perspective offered so far. For Perls, as for many of his successors, the key metaphors here were nourishment (the whole process from the onset of hunger to absorption into the body) and learning (from first stimulus - within or without the organism - to integration of what is learned into the personality). Again, in an ideal healthy situation, we are regularly taking in nourishment whether in the form of food and drink or, metaphorically, in terms of emotional building-up or useful and interesting learning about ourselves and our environment - including, of course, other people. We have a hunger to learn, practise and know (for future reference) just as much as we have physical needs. In this sense, we are evolving creatures. Perls did not use the word evolution to describe this, although it is useful to see how much his ideas tied with in those who did use the term in something other than its modern biological sense. One such person was Ouspensky<sup>27</sup>. The parallels between Perls and Ouspensky illustrate the spirit of the time (the late 1930s in this instance) and illustrate the interest in intellectual circles in what became known in the 1960s and 1970s as Personal Growth. Perls' writing and his practical work at Cowichan Creek and at Esalen demonstrate vividly his commitment to what Ouspensky called "personal evolution", i.e. change and growth in people. Again, it is necessary to suspend judgement about the narcissistic possibilities inherent in these phrases and to view them in the context of their users' broader concerns for the environment, for world peace and for more widespread fulfilment for humanity.

#### **4.8 Core ideas in gestalt: Here and Now.**

We have already seen how important was the contribution of existential thinking to the evolving gestalt project. This was evident in the early articulations of Concentration Therapy in the Perls' period in South Africa as they began to focus on the minutiae of their patients' behaviour in the therapeutic encounter and to pay less attention to analysis of past events. Their hunch and subsequent experience was that whatever was important from that past would in some manner present itself in the encounter. This was a crucially important development in therapeutic endeavour and no mere adoption of contemporary philosophical ideas for their own sake. One could speculate that such a move would not have been possible without their immersion in European existentialism in Berlin and Frankfurt. Whatever the truth of that, the gestalt focus on here and now in the therapeutic encounter remains central even though it can be argued that existentialism as a philosophical approach is no longer in vogue in the twenty-first century.

The present and specific focus of gestalt theory and practice is not confined to the consulting-room. Wherever a gestalt approach is being employed, for example in management training or in education, that focus is evident. Its impact is found in its immediacy, in its vibrant sense that, whatever the past, we can only act - or decline to act - now. Moreover, we can only do that in the world as we experience it: there is no ideal or better world in which we might do differently.

Christian critics might see this as immanence taken to its extreme and enquire about the perspectives of eternity. Here and now do not, however, contradict notions of eternity in the sense of a transcendent dimension to our lives. From a gestalt perspective, the emphasis is different.

The gestalt question is, how does this eternal dimension affect the present situation? Paradoxically, in this way the gestaltist confronts at every turn what T. S. Eliot characterised as "the intersection of the timeless moment"<sup>28</sup>. To live in the here and now is, from a Christian perspective, to live in crisis or under judgement in its non-condemnatory sense. Every choice has its consequences and each counts now and in the longer term.

#### **4.9 Core ideas in gestalt: implications of response-ability.**

The notion of personal response-ability is crucial to a gestalt approach. Perls offered this spelling of the word to underline his positive view of human responsibility. He was concerned both to avoid laying burdens of guilt on people who sought his help as a psychiatrist and also to demonstrate the liberating possibilities inherent in assuming responsibility. Responsibility in this sense was a major part of what he saw as every individual's journey from high dependence in infancy to mature adulthood. We become, in a healthy situation, increasingly responsible for ourselves. We learn not to take responsibility for the actions of others for two reasons: one is that it is inaccurate and induces guilt in us, and the other is that it robs the other of her proper response-ability.

There are, however, other possibilities inherent in the notion of response-ability. Experience teaches us that we cannot be responsible for more than our share of life. We can only do what is possible for us and we have to leave the rest to others. Sometimes, there are no others to take responsibility, and sometimes there seems to be nothing that anyone can do. Let us consider a common, if tragic, example. The death of a child or other loved person through incurable illness

is a terrible loss. When we have done all that can be done, we are faced simply with that loss. Our response-ability leads us to grieve our loss: we rail against the loss and long for a world that does not exist in which these things do not happen. Eventually we respond by adjusting to our loss. For some, this is not enough. If response-ability is, as many gestaltists hold, part of the way the universe - or at least our humanity - is, then perhaps it does not stop with our grief, mourning and adjustment to loss. Perhaps there is some response-ability beyond our own immediate sense but which is simply unknowable. Not the world as it might be (impossible) but a world we do not fully understand and can only intuit as possible.

Such a viewpoint does not constitute a gestalt understanding of transcendence. It does not prove anything about the cosmos we inhabit. However, it does suggest that transcendence and gestalt are far from incompatible. There is nothing in a gestalt perspective that, of itself, refutes the possibility of a dimension to the cosmos beyond what is ordinarily open to our apprehension. More than that, transcendence of a type is implicit in the very notion of the growth of a person from dependence to mature interdependence. After all, that move from primary narcissism and dependence relies on the real identification of that which transcends us, i.e. parents, siblings and society. There is, in the embeddedness of response-ability in our human nature, something that feeds an intuition that the universe may respond to our need and our suffering beyond our comprehension. Gestalt, as scientific discourse, does not accommodate notions of divine revelation in ways comparable to those supported by some theologians. However, the open agnosticism of the gestalt position outlined here is akin to that of some theological writers such as Cupitt (referred to in chapter 1). And it opens the possibility that response-ability is a context in which Christian gestaltists might contemplate a reflexive God.

#### **4.10 Summary**

This section concludes Part One of the thesis where work of Brentano and his students at the German University in Prague in the late nineteenth century is examined. This work led to a novel approach in philosophy. In turn, this gave rise to the discipline of gestalt psychology, directly influencing the establishment of modern psychology which emphasised empirical verification and scientific methodology. The experimental and theoretical work of the gestalt psychologists anticipated the findings of later neuroscientists, and demonstrated the processes of perception and learning executed in the brain. Of particular interest for this thesis was the crucial involvement of the perceiving subject in what is perceived. The gestaltists challenged the relationship of subject and object as then conceived, and undermined the notion of an objective perceiver / subject. Relations between subject and object came to be understood in a dialectical or reflexive manner, and the hitherto autonomous subject was re-configured as an organism in an environment, seeking its own optimal self-regulation through its interactions.

The emergence of gestalt therapy was due not only to the work of the gestalt philosophers and psychologists, but also to many other contributors whose ideas were current at a time when the originators of gestalt were engaged in their critique of psychoanalysis. The novel integration of all these ideas and practices by Perls and his colleagues led to the launching of gestalt therapy with its own theories about the self and how the self evolves in its world. This self has been described in the present chapter and the various threads of its construction have been interwoven, e.g. linking contact process with gestalt formation.

Such a novel approach has many implications as well as applications. Central notions such as organismic homeostasis, *Prägnanz* and field theory show that these are theories of wide applicability. The Perls saw that gestalt was more than a new approach to psychotherapy. Its ideas and practices have reached far beyond the consulting-room and the training seminar. Its philosophical roots, drawing on the gestalt philosophers, on Friedlaender, on Smuts and on the existentialists contribute to its breadth as a discipline. It engages with other disciplines and in the discourses of philosophy, science and psychotherapy. It owes as much to its critique of psychoanalysis as to its roots in gestalt psychology and has the same possibility of wider application as does psychoanalysis, opening up possibilities in the arts as well as sciences. It is holistic and refuses the common dichotomies of body, mind and spirit, or the personal, interpersonal and political.

Out of this complexity, it is nonetheless possible to analyse ideas that go to the heart of the gestalt approach. There is a distinctive perspective, even though some voices in the gestalt community would choose a different emphasis or express reservations at certain points.

In this present chapter, core ideas of gestalt have been analysed through an in-depth examination of the academic literature. These core ideas are compared (in chapter 7) with core ideas from feminist theology. It is to feminism and feminist theology that the thesis now moves in Part Two.

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- <sup>1</sup> Perls *et al* (1973[1951]).
- <sup>2</sup> The most obvious example is that of *Das Ich und das Es* (1923), translated into English as *The ego and the id* in 1927. The Standard Edition was much revised and produced in 1961. With slight editorial changes, the latter is published in the Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 11, pp.341 *et seq.* Although much of the material is prefigured elsewhere in Freud's writing, these papers represent a gathering together and novel presentation of his ideas at a particular Congress (1922) on the subject of the structure of the self. All Freud's later work on the subject is predicated upon this collection. These are therefore the ideas that the young Perls would have learned through his analysts and in seminars from 1928 onwards.
- <sup>3</sup> In the first half of section 3.2.
- <sup>4</sup> Freud *op cit*, Paper II, posits a dynamic relationship between Id and Ego and the whole has an overall dynamic tone. Psychic material is described as "latent", "transitory" and processes are described in verbal terms such as "change", "discharge" or "lowering energetic cathexis". To be sure, Freud's concepts are avowedly speculative, whereas Perls claimed that his are descriptive or derived from observation of what is (in fact, Freud makes the same claim for his ideas also) and are thus, presumably, empirically verifiable. Perls' succumbing to the temptation to caricature Freud's work may be seen at its most extreme when, in the context of workshops, he refers to the experience of psychoanalysis (and therefore, by association, its conceptual structures) as "mind-fucking" (see also Perls, 1969a). Perls' sense of personal hurt is reflected in *Garbage Pail*, but his more considered writing (e.g. Perls *et al*, 1973) often shows admiration and respect for a healer and thinker of stature.
- <sup>5</sup> Perls *et al* (1973) p 425.
- <sup>6</sup> This is a distinction that Tillich, Laura Perls' one-time academic supervisor, might have defined as "ontic" rather than "ontological". (Tillich, 1962, p.50).
- <sup>7</sup> Almost certainly Goodman if style, intellectual density and precision are to be taken as indicators of authorship.
- <sup>8</sup> Perls *op cit* p. 470.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid* p 475.
- <sup>10</sup> This matter has been touched on in section 3.6 regarding Goldstein's work.
- <sup>11</sup> This distinction had become fundamental in the work of the Berlin school and has since passed into common language. It denotes the perceived *Gestalt* (figure) as differentiated (a central feature of the activity of perception) from all other *fundamenta* available to perception.
- <sup>12</sup> There is a correspondence here with the psychoanalytic idea of cathexis, whereby one or more objects or aspects of internal or external experience take on, as it were, a psychic charge. This cathecting process implies a differentiation from other objects or aspects.
- <sup>13</sup> Some of this discussion is continued in consciousness studies, for example, VARELA F J *et al. The embodied mind: cognitive science and human experience*. London: MIT Press, 1991. Chapter 1 relies heavily on MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1962 and *The structure of experience*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963. Varela *et al* (chapter 2) make clear the direct line they, as cognitive scientists,

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- trace from themselves through Merleau-Ponty to Husserl and thus back to Brentano at the German University in Prague. They cite particularly Brentano's work on intentionality which formed part of the matrix in which von Ehrenfels did his creative work on *Gestaltqualitäten*.
- 14 The other view (*von unten nach oben*) (Wertheimer (1922) p.57) is currently found in the neo-gestalt school of cognitive psychology. Henle (1989) has a detailed discussion of this point. KEANE, M. "Modelling problem solving in gestalt 'insight' problems" *In Irish Journal of psychology*, **10**(2): 201-215, 1989 gives an example of how the distinction of Berlin and Graz theories may be blurred in some practical research, although the avowed theory is a production one. Production theories failed to satisfy von Ehrenfels and, later, Goldstein (1995, esp. ch II) who specifically refutes their implicit atomism as a scientific approach suitable for the study of humans.
- 15 An illustration of these two directions is given in Perls *et al* (1973), pp. 432-438
- 16 Present author's note in square brackets.
- 17 *Op cit* p.433.
- 18 The stages are, unlike the contact process itself, somewhat arbitrary. They are contrived notions that enable us to consider aspects of a unity.
- 19 For example, Köhler (1970) pp. 202 *et seq.* A gestalt therapy understanding of the terms Id and Ego is found in Perls *et al* (1973) ch.10.
- 20 It is also possible to discern a stage of pre-contact in the process, making five stages in all. See HINKSMAN, B. "Gestalt group therapy" *In* AVELINE, M and DRYDEN, W. *Group therapy in Britain*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988. O'Leary (1992), pp.30-36 gives examples of contact.
- 21 Perls *et al*, *op cit* p.460. Other formulations of this pattern are summarised in Clarkson (1989b), pp. 27-40. These formulations differ in their shape and their emphases, but each retains something of the naturalness and the rhythmicity of the original, marking out particular stages or points of interest.
- 22 This point is, however, made in the excerpt from Perls *et al* (1973) at the end of section 4.1.
- 23 For example, the comment in Perls *et al* (1973) on the Id: "The self [in aware relaxation] seems scattered, and it is indeed disintegrating and vanishing into mere potentiality, for it exists, is actualized, by contacting" (p.436).
- 24 Perls' notions of creative adjustment and movement towards homeostasis (in e.g. Perls, 1969 and Perls *et al*, 1973), may be understood as similar in their underlying thinking as well as in their practical application to the self-actualization theories of Carl Rogers and of Will Schutz and the encounter theorists in ROGERS, C. "Learning to be free" *In* ROGERS, C & STEVENS, B. *Person to person: the problem of being human*. London: Souvenir Press, 1973, pp.47-66; and SCHUTZ, W. *Profound simplicity*. London: Joy Press, 1979, pp.98-110.
- 25 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, 1971, p.4).
- 26 FAGAN, J.& SHEPHERD, I.L (eds). *Gestalt therapy now: theory, techniques, applications*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- 27 OUSPENSKY, P.D. *The psychology of Man's possible evolution* London: Arkana,

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## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

### 5 Introduction

Part Two of this thesis examines feminism and feminist theology. The aim is first to identify the diverse voices within second-wave feminism and proceeding to examine feminist theological contributions. Defining a canon of writing as "feminist theology" is suggestive of a discrete discipline with its own contents, methodologies and values. There are advantages to this distinctive status in that it draws attention to what is feminist about its methods and its contents. There are also disadvantages to any such separation, principally that it might encourage its critics to sideline rather than respond to its critiques of theological methodology and content. The position adopted in this thesis is that, by identifying feminist theology as a discrete discipline, there is an acknowledgement of identifiable feminist perspectives in theology, as in much else. Whatever one's point of view, there is no single feminist viewpoint, since feminist theology speaks with many voices, sometimes united and sometimes conflicting.

Any examination of feminist theology, no matter how tightly focused, has to make choices, to take a standpoint. The activity of analysing core ideas from a large *corpus* of work representing feminist theology and interrogating them for practical-values is one involving choices. These choices cannot be objective or absolute. Most feminist - and other - critics today acknowledge that they inhabit a world influenced by deconstructionism and postmodernism. From such a perspective, the notion of an objective standpoint or "a view from nowhere"<sup>1</sup> is problematic. Critical decisions are involved in each stage of what follows.

The first such decision is to focus primarily on feminist (Christian) theology in the West, that is to say, the Catholic, Reformed and Protestant traditions of Europe and North America. Where occasional references to other contexts are necessary, these are highlighted.

Throughout this chapter, attention is paid to both the methodology and the content of feminist theology: they are, for most writers, inextricably linked, demonstrating a more general principle that hermeneutics and content are necessarily related, even if the links are not acknowledged.

Feminist theology is a term that embraces a wide range of views and ideas. Whatever differences of personality, experience or religious belief feminist theologians may have, their differences can be understood as differences in philosophical assumptions. In this they have much in common with feminists in other discourses. The next section of this chapter therefore engages in an analysis of feminist perspectives using a philosophical typology (section 5.1). In a critical discussion of Judith Evans' review<sup>2</sup>, feminism is described in terms of "schools" along an axis whose poles are *equality* and *difference*. The purpose of this typology is to demonstrate the broad spectrum of critiques that pass under the banner of feminist perspective. It might be possible, from this typology, to map a range of feminist theological stances. However, for the purposes of this thesis, i.e. the derivation of practical-values from an analysis of core ideas in feminist theology, this is unnecessary and outside the scope of the present work. Nevertheless, references are made, in the sections that follow, to Evan's typology since it is useful in identifying the philosophical provenance or context of a writer and aspects, at least, of their practical-values.

Section 5.2 introduces feminist perspectives in the church and in theology. This leads on to

sections examining in more depth the work of feminist scholars in the fields of Old and New Testament studies (with particular reference to methodology) (5.3), pastoral theology (5.4), christology (5.5) and spirituality (5.6). This last shows how feminist spiritual writers tend to integrate what have traditionally be seen - in the West, though not in the Orthodox East - as discrete discourses, namely spirituality, theology and politics.

## **5.1 Feminism and philosophy**

Philosophy is in urgent need of a feminist perspective. For centuries the practice of philosophy has been overwhelmingly the prerogative of men but it is only recently that feminist analysis has made it possible to see the distorting effect of this historical fact.<sup>3</sup>

This opening statement by Griffiths and Whitford draws attention to two phenomena that operate together. The first is that feminism is intrinsically philosophical. There are feminist ideas that frequently lead to engagement and action, and there are also feminist ideas arising out of action and experience: experience and thinking are necessarily interrelated. The second, and in many ways distinctive, thing about feminist ideas is that they are closely linked to women's historical experience and to emotions<sup>4</sup>. The purpose of this section is to indicate how feminist ideas "are interrelated with philosophical ideas"<sup>5</sup> and thus have changed the infrastructure of discourse in many disciplines.

However, "[f]eminism is not monolithic and feminists do not speak with one voice"<sup>6</sup>. Attempts to categorise feminist ideas run the risk of arbitrariness, but there is some consensus about their history, direction and compatibility.

[F]eminism means that we seek for women the same opportunities and privileges the

society gives to men, or ... that we assert the distinctive value of womanhood against patriarchal denigration. While these positions need not be mutually exclusive, there is a strong tendency ... to make them so.<sup>7</sup>

In drawing a distinction between a demand for equality ("the same opportunities") and a requirement that difference be acknowledged ("the distinctive value"), Evans posits an "axis" along which is ranged several "schools" of feminism. Her typology is chosen here because it offers a more extended list of types than the three more frequently encountered, i.e. liberal, socialist and radical. Evans' axis is not itself a classification of types of feminism, although the terms "equality" and "difference" have been used by others to suggest differences between, for example, North American and French feminism. The schools Evans identifies are "liberal, 'early radical', 'strong cultural' (or 'cultural radical'), 'weak cultural', socialist, and postmodernist". Even these categories are not, as will become evident, hard and fast distinctions. They are elaborations of the three categories (liberal, socialist and radical) referred to above and, as such, offer a more nuanced picture of the range of voices in feminist criticism<sup>8</sup>: her elaboration of these schools demonstrates the links and gradations between them.

As illustration of how Evans' axis works, we may consider the way it functions in the case of liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is directly linked to first-wave feminism epitomised by the speech of Julia Anna Cooper<sup>9</sup>. Cooper believed that all oppressions are oppressions of the human spirit. One species of oppression is not overthrown until all oppressions are overthrown and replaced by a new consciousness and new social order. Her agenda for radical thought and action represent a vision for an ever-extending future, since oppression in some form is endemic to human existence.

Liberal feminism of the second-wave was and is concerned primarily with the quest for equality, e.g. equal employment opportunities and pay for women and men, and may thus be thought to fit into a category of equality-feminism. However, some of its protagonists recognised that equality was, on a number of counts, a goal of dubious worth and, in some senses, incapable of achievement. Evans locates Betty Friedan's *The feminine mystique*<sup>10</sup> in this liberal feminist category because Friedan criticises the secondary status accorded to women relative to men and argues that women are equal to men and should be accorded equality. At the same time, Friedan traces how such a state of affairs has come about and points to the development and imposition of an ideology. This ideology creates in women a false consciousness centred on their being "special and different"<sup>11</sup> - but special and different in the direction of sexual passivity, subordination to men and a life of home making and child rearing. In this way, Evans' first and leading exponent of liberal feminism defies categorisation as an equality-feminist and shows how both equality and difference are factors to be taken into account. Equality and difference are both entailed in a feminist quest and are therefore best regarded as poles of an axis along which the various schools are ranged and move relative to each other.

Friedan's *The feminine mystique*, serves to undermine confidence about the feasibility of equality. Evans points out that the kind of equality demanded by her was, in essence, equality with men on the part of white, middle-class, educated women. Such equality denies another equality, that with women who do not conform to those criteria. An example of this awareness of difference comes from Susan Thistlethwaite, a white feminist writer:

The white feminists' emphasis on the ontological identity of women and men did not allow them to explore either their own differences or those that existed between the situation of white and black women. Difference is assumed to be the result of rational

choice. White feminist liberals, therefore, do not include analyses of existential difference *a priori* in their analyses.<sup>12</sup>

Early radical feminism may also be regarded as an equality-feminism but one more overtly addressing difference. Evans refers to Shulamith Firestone's *The dialectic of sex*<sup>13</sup> to demonstrate a radical development in ideas about equality:

.... the end goal of feminist revolution must be ... not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally .... The tyranny of the biological family would be broken. And with it the psychology of power.<sup>14</sup>

Firestone offers a critique arising from her experience in the American New Left and shows that the oppression of women was integral to the structure of society and more fundamental than other oppressive distinctions e.g. of class and race. To work for women's liberation is to strive for the freedom and equality of all humankind - women, children and men.

Although Evans' account draws mainly on feminist writers in the USA, she refers at length to the British Marxist Juliet Mitchell<sup>15</sup>. Mitchell's analysis of women's place in society starts from her observation that, for many socialists, the liberation of women would be an outcome of the revolution: revolutionary theory was not founded on a view of women's oppression *per se*. In other words, for many on the Left, women and women's liberation were not fundamental. Mitchell's own analysis began with the ways in which "woman" is constructed, for "woman" is something determined by the structures of society. In particular, the determinants are "production, reproduction, sex and the socialization of children"<sup>16</sup>. The force of these structures is such that women are marginalised in the sphere of paid work (production), while reproduction and the rearing of children are held to be part of an unexamined entity called "family" in whose name

women's interests are submerged.

The term "cultural feminism" applies to those writers who take a positive view of the characteristics of women and who hold a different view of the characteristics of men. Inherent in such a position is feminist separatism, which may take the form of physical and environmental separation or may be a matter of function, for example, participation in political activity only with women. Such separatism arises in part from negative experience of not being separate from men. It is based also upon a view that there is no point in participating with men (culturally or politically) since men do not have the characteristics that make such participation possible. Among those who have written from a cultural feminist position are Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich.

For Daly, writing as a theologian,

The becoming of women may be not only the doorway to deliverance which secular humanism has passionately fought for - but also a doorway *to* something, that is, a new phase in the human spirit's quest for God.

Using Tillich's ontological language, (even though he "does not betray any awareness of the relevance of this to women's confrontation with the structured evil of patriarchy") she suggests that "at this point in history women are in a unique sense called to be the bearers of existential courage in society"<sup>17</sup>.

The core of Daly's critique of male culture is contained in a chapter subtitled "The end of phallic morality". Although she begins by writing of "radical feminism" it is evident that her goal is a critique of male culture, and that she is indeed a cultural feminist. She criticises explicitly

equality-feminism as "neither possible nor desirable" because such a project would be conducted in "patriarchal space". For the women's movement to make any real progress it is patriarchy which must be exposed and confronted.

Intrinsic to the re-creative potential of the women's movement, then, is a new naming of values as these have been incarnated in society's laws, customs, and arrangements. This means that there will be a renaming of morality which has been false because phallogocentric, denying half the species the possibility not only of naming but even of *hearing* our own experience with our own ears.<sup>18</sup>

One of Daly's methods in her cultural critique and in indicating woman-culture is a novel use of language. Most characteristic is her reclaiming of terms of abuse (employed by men against women) to use them as terms of pride. She writes of Crones and their wisdom, of Witches and their Craft, and of Hags. Such uses are playful and they are serious political acts in their simultaneous confrontation of male oppression and their proclamation of woman-culture.

Rich's work is in many ways congruent with Daly's, although her approach has a quite different feel. It is more poetic and discursive, and also transparently earthed in her personal experience. Thus in her work on motherhood<sup>19</sup> she arrives at a definition of woman-culture out of her bipolar (but never in practice separable) sense of motherhood as both an experience which is hers and also as an institution - set up and maintained by a patriarchal system. Her critique of patriarchy leads to one of marriage and of heterosexuality. It follows naturally from that critique as well as from her study of the mother-daughter relationship that she confronts the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. In designating a different woman-culture, she hesitates to use the term "lesbian" in an unqualified way but is at a loss to offer a more useful term.

Evans' scheme for understanding the various schools of second-wave feminism continues with a "weaker" version of cultural-feminism. In a critique of Carol Gilligan's *In a different voice*<sup>20</sup> she finds this "weaker" form in her distinction between the meanings of "woman" and "womanhood" compared with the meaning of "womanly". A focus on "woman and womanhood" signals a thoroughgoing critique of patriarchy whereby women create a separate culture based upon their understanding of what it is to be "woman". The concept "womanly" on the other hand simply requires the recovery or creation of "womanly" characteristics that oppose patriarchal values. Gilligan is ultimately writing about difference rather than equality, although there is evidence in her work of both poles of the equality-difference axis.

The same mixture may also be seen in socialist-feminism. In the early days of socialist-feminism, as references above to Mitchell show, the struggle was for women's rights to be recognised as having any place except as a struggle for the rights of members of an oppressed class that should look to the revolutionary movement for its liberation. Specific hopes or claims of women would have to wait until that liberating goal was achieved. As is noted above, more radical socialist-feminists subverted this proposed order of things by positing that the fundamental oppression was that of women (and children) and that all other oppressions were secondary to it. By placing patriarchy above capitalism in the list of oppressive forces, socialist-feminists such as Firestone moved the socialist project from being one of a radical egalitarianism to a politics of difference.

In her analysis of socialist-feminism, Evans cites the work of Iris Young. In particular, she shows how Young moved from socialism with feminist overtones to radical gynocentrism. This is a species of cultural-feminism at once politically radical and also consciousness-raising and

empowering of women. Empowerment takes the form of concrete social action based upon analysis of the political situation of various groups within society including racial groups and sexual minorities. The analysis does not, however, construe women as a group, for Young distinguishes between groups of women with different interests. The women who belong to these groups belong also to other groups, not all of whose members are women. Women may also belong to groups opposed to each other within a political process. The socialist struggles for justice and for access to the democratic process are still there but the means of those struggles are some way from Marxist class-based theories. Young's gynocentrism nevertheless does not posit women's oppression as primary. Her political concern is for the empowerment and advantaging of all oppressed or disadvantaged groups<sup>21</sup>.

Evans' last school of feminism is postmodernist. She examines how the subversion of all grand narratives has, from this perspective, exploded whatever validity might have attached to liberal, cultural or socialist feminisms. She examines the implications of the postmodernist assumption that the "subject" is dead and finds in it both good news and bad news for the cause of feminism. None of the grand narratives, even those of liberal-feminism and socialist-feminism, has privileged women. Since these narratives are undermined by postmodernist critiques, the continued disadvantaging of women (whether it was incidental or central to them) can no longer be supported. However, and by the same token, claims made by women cannot be based upon, for example, an appeal to justice or truth if these notions are implicated in one of the grand narratives, notably those of socialism and liberalism.

So far as the death of the subject is concerned, Evans argues that feminists may be relieved at the

abdication of the white male subject that had posed as the "neutral" observer of history, politics and social policy. From a feminist perspective, it is better to engage from a standpoint of the interaction of women and men rather than from a viewpoint that does not exist. However, from a postmodernist perspective, the interaction of women and men is itself problematic since it is a case of *différance*<sup>22</sup>. Women-men is a "binary opposition" and the implication of "women" with "men" suggests an interdependence that is nevertheless intrinsically hierarchical. Such a view comes close to psychological notions of co-dependence with a dominant partner. The deployment of Derrida's term *différance* suggests difference in the ordinary sense of the word, but also opens up the possibility that both terms of the binary opposition may be no more than terms. From a Derridean perspective they do not refer to a subject or essence called "women" or "woman", nor to "men" or "man". In this way, the philosophical underpinning of the women-men binary notion may be subverted and reduced to word-play.

Such a subversion may expose and undermine the claims of patriarchal structures, but it simultaneously removes from feminists any ground upon which to base their own claims or statements. This is a problem faced by the British feminist Kate Soper. She argues that postmodernism is in danger of becoming self-stultifying in its relativising attacks on value statements and truth claims. Deconstructive critiques end in the assertion that value statements or truth claims made in a discourse can have no extra-discursive weight.

Soper, as a feminist, finds deconstructive methodology useful in exposing and confronting the claims of patriarchal systems, but sees that her opponents could claim that her denial of extra-discursive force should apply equally to her own values as a feminist. Does this mean that

feminists are obliged to fall back upon liberal metaphysics to support their values? Soper's answer is negative. She retains her intellectual coherence by pointing out that the very relativising approach of post-modernism contains its own "latent metaphysical tendencies", its own values that, whilst they may belong to a meta-discourse, are nonetheless a species of transcendent value<sup>23</sup>. One obvious example of this is the appeal to justice. However problematic in specific applications, the notion of justice is integral to feminism. Few people would want to claim that an appeal to justice in some form had no force outside the limits of a particular discourse called justice or law or morality, but rather has a more universal and trans-discursive validity.

## **5.2 Feminist perspectives in theology: some fundamental problems**

There are a number of fundamental problems that arise when feminists consider theology<sup>24</sup>. The first is that theology has often supplied the wherewithal for the sacralisation of patriarchy. "Much of Christian culture has been and is deeply sexist. There is no doubt about that"<sup>25</sup>. Feminists have seen and experienced in the life and language of the church the signs of patriarchy. The leadership was ordained and, until recently, only men were ordained (as is still the case in some churches), whilst the majority of members were - and are - women. The written languages of liturgy and scripture were cast in the male-as-norm mould. The organisational structures and management practices were not only masculine in style but also often anti-feminine. These factors have constituted the norms of the church as an organisation, and they shape the thinking and feeling lives of members. Feminists can therefore point to the church not only as one more feature of a patriarchal society, but, more seriously for the church, as an organisation offering transcendent sanctions to the sexist structures of other organisations<sup>26</sup>.

The second fundamental problem is that these criticisms apply to the structures and customs of the church as an organisation, and to its theologies. They are linked. Theological discourse has a reciprocal relationship with the church in that it both shapes that organisation and is shaped by it. There would probably be no Christian theology were it not for the church, and such an organisation necessarily generates assumptions and ideologies that become formalised. It is in the nature of such formalisations (a comparison with a relatively simple text such as a company's mission statement illustrates this point) that they take on a quasi-independent position in relation to the organisation. From that position a critique of the organisation may be made and resources offered for its direction, self-representation, motivation and encouragement. It follows that, if the organisation is one shaped by and in turn promoting sexism, then its assumptions and ideologies - formalised into theological discourse - are inevitably sexist and tend to reinforce sexism.

Such, certainly, is the position of Daphne Hampson. She sees Christian theology as disadvantageous to women from a number of points of view. She examines the ways in which Christians are tied to the past, for example in the ways that they seek support for their views in biblical texts. This constitutes our third fundamental problem. It is most evident when Christians try to make changes (such as taking on board feminist critiques).

Christians seem to believe themselves to be under a pressure to find texts in the bible which directly support their case. Those arguing for the ordination of women clutch at verses, or at historical evidence from the past, which seem to support 'their' side. The fact that this is so indicates well that scripture is considered to be sacred literature. (Something that arises out of the fact that Christianity is a historical religion in which there is a belief in revelation, so that the literature, which tells of this revelation, is a literature apart.) Christians must have difficulty in using the bible to speak to contemporary issues so long as this belief persists.<sup>27</sup>

Hampson's second main theme (and the fourth fundamental problem) is that Christianity is tied irrevocably to a male saviour and to a male God, which makes both figures and Christianity irremediably unacceptable to her and to women who share her view. Now, it may be argued that Hampson's view of theology is invalid. It could be argued, for instance, that theology flows principally from divine self-revelation. Thus, although one would have to admit the possibility of human distortions, these would probably be corrigible errors that the divine self-revelation could in some way override. Hampson calls this the "golden thread" approach. It asserts that, despite the distortions, there is a thread of good news in the traditions for women and other oppressed people. That is how she views, in part at least, the approach of Ruether<sup>28</sup> when the latter gives preferential status to some passages over other obviously patriarchal or misogynist ones. Ruether, on this view, resists the possibility that the self-revelation of God could be sexist.

Here lies one aspect at least of the fifth and perhaps the greatest fundamental problem. It is an ultimate question about Christianity and women. Is what feminists consider discriminatory and oppressive behaviour rooted in the nature of God and accurately reflected in God's self-revelation in scripture? Or is what feminists consider discriminatory and oppressive behaviour within a patriarchal structure simply what they think it is, i.e. a system of injustice and oppression that cannot arise from a God of justice and righteousness? There is a third possibility, adopted by a number of post-Christian writers, namely that God is just and righteous: however, the claimed revelations enshrined in the structures and theology of the churches are so contrary to God, that God is obscured rather than revealed in them. There is therefore a need to focus on new revelation or else to let go one's hope of such revelation and to abandon Christianity or the church or both.



Hampson puts the matter thus:

Many a woman - in a way in which this has not on the whole been true of men - has had to turn her back upon the religion within which she grew up. It simply became impossible. For any woman apprised of what the history of women has been, the question of theodicy raised by the previous conception of God has made that conception of God unthinkable. That God, moreover, was most clearly not made in her image, and became superfluous as she came to herself and acquired a feminist consciousness. In this situation there is, among those women who wish to find a way to be in some sense religious, a desire to find a way forward. What would seem to be crucial is the question as to whether we can learn to perceive, and to find new ways to conceive the presence of God in our world.<sup>29</sup>

Hampson is arguing for a theology based upon experience and looks to Schleiermacher for philosophical support, but she is not persuaded by what she sees of feminist theology.

What strikes me about much modern theology - and this not least true of feminist theology - is how profoundly secular it is. It is as though theology has lost its moorings. In the case of feminist theology, what seems to have replaced talk of God is largely talk of women's experience. It is not even women's experience of God: it is simply women's experience.<sup>30</sup>

These five fundamental problems are intended as an introduction to a more detailed consideration of feminist perspectives in theology. The list is compiled for the purposes of this thesis: other writers might demonstrate other priorities in their assessment of the problems. However, what does emerge from this approach is that the problems, from a feminist perspective, go to the root of Christian faith (in the sense both of belief and of trust) and practice. Unless they are addressed satisfactorily, it is hard to see how Christianity and theology have much to offer women that does not tend to reduce and conform them to patriarchal norms, with, of course, corresponding damage also to men in whose apparent interest those norms have existed.

### **5.3 Feminist perspectives in OT and NT studies: methodological considerations**

It would not be reasonable to quiz the Bible on its views about second wave feminism, and yet, as Hampson points out, Christians continue to look to the Bible (and other traditional sources) for guidelines in regulating their personal, social, economic and political lives. Such people soon discover that, the NT epistles and the Torah apart, much of the Bible is in the form of stories, with the consequence that a large part of what can be understood about, for example, the relations of women and men is implicit. The underlying views and social assumptions of the Old Testament writers were largely those shared with their initial hearers or readers so that it was not necessary to spell them out. Even where there is some specific teaching offered in order to correct or regulate behaviour or attitudes, as in some prophetic writing, we have to remember that our interests and concerns (including feminist perspectives) are not necessarily those of the original readers. Ancient cultural forms and ideas are inferred from texts and may be supported by evidence from archaeological reconstruction, histories, contemporary parallels, and anthropological and religious studies. Even so, we cannot be certain what these matters meant to those people in their societies in their time.

It may be argued that our information is probably more reliable if it is more recent. When compared with Old Testament cultures, we can see that those of the New Testament are rich in parallel written material. But that richness presents its own problems. There is a considerable difference, for example, between the peasant Christians of the Syriac tradition and the sophisticated city dwellers of Ephesus or Carthage - and between the residents of those two cities - despite the common hegemony of Rome<sup>31</sup>. We should therefore expect to find, even in the

gospels, a variety of emphases reflecting different world-views according to their provenance. If, despite all this variety, we then arrive at a degree of certainty about teaching, context and meaning, what emerges may take the form of a custom, command or prohibition that jars with our own culture and could even be morally or ethically repugnant.

This uncertainty is compounded when we recall that we cannot expect our enquiry to lead to a neutral “view from nowhere”. The approaches of feminist theology lead us to interrogate, from a perspective unknown to early Christians, their traditions regarding their use of biblical material. For example, when the creation accounts are cited, we have to ask if the NT writers privilege aspects of Genesis that could be taken as divine authentication of male dominance, whilst ignoring texts or perspectives with more egalitarian possibilities.

This approach implies two stages of extrapolation. Let us take, as an example, the material about divorce. First, the texts themselves are to be taken seriously. This entails locating them, so far as is possible, within the cultural setting that gave them meaning at the time. Second, although we must acknowledge that feminist interests were not central to biblical writers' interests, we might suggest that some kind of gender politics forms the occluded or unconscious sub-text or an unspoken binary opposition buried in the text<sup>32</sup>. What is more certain is that we can find by our interpretation only the writers' interpretations. There can be no value-free interpretative standpoint, nor way of knowing what they thought and felt which is untrammelled by the motives and presuppositions of our enquiry. This is not, however, a new situation brought about by feminist criticism. The Bible has always spoken with more than one voice and has represented many traditions and points of view<sup>33</sup>.

Feminist critiques of Christian theology vary in their scope. Following Evans' scheme, we could define the limited goals of a liberal feminism, e.g. the admission of women to all areas of church life on equal terms with men, and the governance of the church in inclusive ways<sup>34</sup>. Cultural feminists, by contrast, would probably challenge the very notion of priesthood as an order that is intrinsically patriarchal<sup>35</sup>.

The ongoing arguments about women's ordination to priesthood in the Church of England offer practical demonstrations of the gendered nature of biblical hermeneutics. Broadly speaking there are three approaches to biblical texts that have been employed by feminists and that have enabled previously occluded evidence to emerge from the text. One such derives from the approach of the French historian Michel Foucault. It is often referred to as "postmodern" even though Foucault himself showed how that label was inaccurate. McNay states that, whilst Foucault

...goes along with the postmodern rejection of metanarratives, ..... his work cannot be categorized as postmodern. Against the postmodern dissolution of the subject, Foucault retains a notion of the self and affirms autonomy as a worthwhile goal of emancipatory politics.<sup>36</sup>

Foucault himself, whilst recognising the difficulty inherent in recovering events from history, believes that history is more than (mere) discourse. Discussing the Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, he describes his own critical approach:

[C]riticism is no longer to be practised in the search for formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological - and not transcendental - in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structure of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate

out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wise as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.<sup>37</sup>

Critics who share this more politically and historically conscious standpoint are concerned to locate texts in their cultural and historical settings as part of a Derridean "double reading"<sup>38</sup>. In doing this, they are able to identify the values overtly or covertly at play within the text and to identify whose ends are thereby served. An extended example of this approach is Fiorenza (1983). The early chapters show her construction of a critical apparatus that rejects the "view from nowhere" and creates a feminist vantage point.

The inconsistencies in our New Testament sources indicate that the early Christian traditioning and redactional processes followed certain androcentric interests and perspectives. Therefore, the androcentric selection and transmission of early Christian traditions have manufactured the historical marginality of women, but they are not a reflection of the historical reality of women's leadership and participation in the early Christian movement. It is important to note that the redaction of the Gospels and of Acts happened at a time when the patriarchalization process of the early Church was well underway.<sup>39</sup>

And, as the argument proceeds:

The dominant sociological model for the reconstruction of early Christian beginnings explains the process of gradual ecclesial patriarchalization which entails the historically necessary development from charism to office, from Paulinism to early Catholicism, from a millenarist radical ethos to a privileged Christian establishment, from the radical Jesus movement within Judaism to an integrative love patriarchalism within the Hellenistic urban communities, from the egalitarian charismatic structures of the beginning to the hierarchical order of the Constantinian church. Unlike the orthodoxy-heresy model, this interpretative framework does not justify the patriarchalization process of the early church on theological grounds but argues for it in terms of sociological and political factors.<sup>40</sup>

Phyllis Trible develops a second possible feminist approach to texts. She was a pupil of the rhetorical critic James Muilenburg whose method is explained in Walter Bruggemann's Foreword

to Tribble (1984). He points out that she aims to "get the interpreter/expositor out of the way so that the unhindered text and the listening community can directly face each other"<sup>41</sup>. Tribble's use of rhetorical-critical method does not give much attention to anything except what lies within the text. This sounds dangerously like an "objective" viewpoint and Bruggemann seems conscious of that danger when he asserts that

.....the regnant methods [of criticism], for all their claims of "objectivity", have indeed served the theological ends of "the ruling class". What now surfaces is the history, consciousness, and cry of the victim, who in each case is shown to be a character of worth and dignity in the narrative. Heretofore, each has been regarded as simply an incidental prop for a drama about other matters. So Tribble's "close reading" helps us notice. The presumed prop turns out to be a character of genuine interest, warranting our attention. And we are left to ask why our methods have reduced such characters, so that they have been lost to the story.<sup>42</sup>

There is, then, a perspective. It is that of the person usually and traditionally overlooked, and that person is usually a woman.

A third line of criticism employed by a number of feminist writers is that of the psychoanalytic school. Part One of this thesis has already identified that psychoanalytic theory can be problematic for feminists, although Mitchell counters by stating that "psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for* a patriarchal society, but an analysis *of* one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it."<sup>43</sup> The outcome of her and other scholars' reworking is a psychoanalytic theory different to that articulated in the 1920s and 1930s. It has become a method - both of therapy and of hermeneutics - appropriate for women (and men) in a culture shaped or challenged by feminism. Psychoanalytic perspectives are important in much feminist theological writing, and psychoanalytic theory has contributed to theological reflection<sup>44</sup>. Psychoanalytic insights are,

however, more likely to be found in works on religion (as distinct from Christian hermeneutics)<sup>45</sup> as well as in commentary about texts used in preaching. Of the three types of criticism identified in this section, the psychoanalytic appears to be least used in both OT and NT studies.

In concluding this section what can be said is that there are characteristically feminist approaches in OT and NT studies. These approaches address some of the fundamental problems defined in section 5.2 in that they offer ways of using the Bible that do not tie us to a putatively definitive past. They undermine the normalising structures of patriarchy. Feminist scholars also create a vantage point from which to encounter their texts. This methodological work is intrinsic to a feminist approach and contrasts with those biblical scholars who are apparently content with what they presumably regard as an objective analysis of revelatory narrative.

#### **5.4 Feminist perspectives in pastoral theology**

A theological discipline much influenced by feminist critiques is pastoral theology. In theological education, it has been regarded as that most practical of subjects, dealing with the mediation of God's love through the church and directed towards church members and the wider community. Pastoral theology leads to pastoral care, and in turn it feeds on the experience of pastoral carers in a cycle of reflection and fresh inspiration. This reflexive relationship does, however, raise at least as many questions as it resolves. The most obvious of these is the very nature of pastoral theology<sup>46</sup>.

Although there have been prophetic exceptions, the early models of pastoral theology and

pastoral care were what one can now identify as paternalistic. By current standards, they were frequently marginal in their impact, marginalising in their effects, misdirected and even political in a suspect cause. The advent of a Christian socialist movement represented a crack in that mould. Changes in theory and practice were further promoted by the liberation theologians of Central and South America and the Black Consciousness movements in the USA and South Africa, and by post-missionary theologians in Asia and Africa. In this context, feminist thinking could be seen as another aspect of liberation theology, taking as its reference point God's option for women, in parallel to the discourse about God's option for the poor of the earth. Indeed that is one way of understanding the separatist, cultural feminist line associated with Mary Daly. However, just as some South African liberation theologians have always held that liberation in South Africa must be liberation for black, mixed race and white people, so many feminist theologians insist that their hope is for the liberation of whole societies from the curse of patriarchy and its attendant sexism.

Arguments for the renewal of pastoral theology and practice have come from a number of sources. Kenneth Leech<sup>47</sup> has demanded that the church address the political dimensions of people's lives. Leech does not equate pastoral care with political activity<sup>48</sup>, nor does he deny the need for individual attention that may be crucial to a person's development. Pattison makes the point as follows:

Healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling and nurturing, the core elements of pastoral care, have been directed mainly at individuals and small groups. For many people, pastoral care is synonymous with personal counselling and a therapeutic role.

I will argue here that, while giving care and respect to individuals is certainly an important part of the pastoral task, this is too limited. Pastoral care has fallen into the trap of thinking too narrowly about how people's welfare might be sought and their potential

developed. In so doing, it may actually inadvertently work against its intentions to promote well-being; it may also collude with some of the social and political forces which create and maintain human suffering.<sup>49</sup>

Pattison takes feminist critiques seriously when he addresses the issue of "pastoral care with women" and he examines "how the principles of socio-politically aware and informed pastoral care can point ways forward for this activity"<sup>50</sup>. Peter Selby addresses another angle of the same issue:

Feminism has offered a huge pastoral challenge. It has not so much raised doubts about men's pastoral gifts or their monopoly of them; more importantly, feminism challenges us to look again at what it is to be a pastor.<sup>51</sup>

Pastoral care from a feminist perspective is explored by Graham and Halsey who look at women as carers and as receivers.

Attention to the novelty of women as agents and recipients of pastoral care is a matter which goes far beyond the mere process of "adding in" a new constituency of pastoral ministers and clients to conventional models. Instead, it requires the Church to consider the nature of the core values at the heart of pastoral practice, and the implicit truth-claims of the Christian community as enacted and embodied in diverse patterns of pastoral ministry.<sup>52</sup>

Common to all these writers is an examination of what Graham refers to as "the implicit truth-claims of the Christian community". She goes on to say that:

Embodied in the apparently straightforward and uncontroversially benign acts of healing, guiding, reconciling, and sustaining - are assumptions concerning the nature of Christian faith and human destiny, patterns of authority in the Church, and the very character of God at work in the world.

Attention to the *politics* of pastoral care, therefore, begins with the realization that pastoral relationships cannot be isolated from their broader social and cultural setting....<sup>53</sup>

The main argument of Graham's chapter concerns issues of power and empowerment. She sees

that power relations inevitably inform any helping relationship and that power gradients play an important part in relations between women and men individually and socio-politically. Even in the most apparently apolitical encounter, there are inevitable communications from each side as to what constitutes the healthy, the normal, or the good. It is an important task of pastoral theology to reflect critically on the implications for pastoral practice of this fact<sup>54</sup>.

Sexual politics must therefore be high among the agenda of pastoral carers and pastoral theologians, and they inform both content and process in pastoral praxis: here, as elsewhere, the medium is the message<sup>55</sup>. It follows that a thoroughgoing feminist critique in the area of pastoral theology will focus on both the methodology (of pastoral theology) and on praxis. Pastoral theologians can point a way forward for theologians, pastoral practitioners and Christian communities. New models of pastoral care put "the client" first whether the client is an individual, a group or half the population. Older models of pastoral care have obscured or denied this broad understanding of the client, just as they have obscured the pastoral work done daily in unrecognised ways by millions of people, most of whom are women. These publicly praised (but actually undervalued or ignored) caring functions of women are not usually dignified as pastoral care because they are occluded in patriarchal cultures as unexceptional features of women's biological destiny. It is for this reason that the concerns of many women - for themselves, their sisters and the children for whom they are usually the primary carers - have not been given their due weight in pastoral theological circles. The same must be said about the methodology of pastoral theological reflection in the church. An example of this was the debate about abortion conducted through the synods of the Church of England during the 1980s. The issues touched on themes central to women's lives, yet the tone of the debate was masculine, its language was that

of a patriarchal institution, and the process was arguably masculine.

Whatever the nature of pastoral practice and pastoral theology, it reflects, explicitly or otherwise, an understanding of God. This is as true of older models of pastoral care as it is of models advocated by feminist theologians. Certainly, Graham points out that pastoral care enacts a pastoral theology that is in turn "a reflection of the nature of God"<sup>56</sup>. Implicit in her position is a belief that the nature of God is in some way reflexive, that is, in this context, client-centred and empowering. It contains within it the striking possibility that, in our need, we come to know something of the nature of God<sup>57</sup>. Monika Hellwig develops the notion of reflexivity in which the nature of God and the key themes of a pastoral theology are intimately connected. She writes of the theologian as mythmaker, and offers a myth of her own:

God creates human persons in the divine image by awakening them into freedom, self-determination, and creativity, in which they discover that they are essentially relational and that their humanity is realized in the ways they shape the earth, themselves, one another, and their societies; in this they are fulfilling and realizing the creativity of God; when they shape communities which offer liberation, happiness and fulfilling relationships to all, they fulfil the purpose of creation; then all creation is drawn into a great harmony and returns to the Creator in peace, and God is glorified.<sup>58</sup>

Hellwig's myth is striking as a piece of Christian theology in that it does not feature, for example, God as father, lawgiver or judge. As a feminist pastoral theologian she is concerned with justice, but justice in terms of relationships within families, and relationships in communities and wider social groups.

One of McFague's models of God supports this point. Speaking of the commandment to love others as ourselves, she notes the impossibility of its fulfilment, but affirms the direction it gives to human lives.

The direction suggested by the present interpretation is toward bedrock justice: the establishment of the conditions of a just order in which the necessities of existence are shared. God as mother-judge condemns those who selfishly refuse to share. When judgment is connected to the mother-creator, it is different from when it is connected to the king-redeemer. In the picture of the king-redeemer, individuals are condemned who rebel against the power and the glory of the monarch, assigning to themselves the status that only the king deserves.... In the picture of the mother-creator, however, the goal is neither the condemnation nor the rescue of the guilty but the just ordering of the cosmic household in a fashion beneficial to all.<sup>59</sup>

Pastoral practice can address most sharply one of the fundamental problems referred to in section 5.2, for it is in the life of Christian communities that patriarchal practice is reiterated and reflexively reinforces theological assumptions. But pastoral theology is more than daily *praxis*: as much as OT and NT studies, it is a site of deconstruction and reconstruction of Christian theology.

### **5.5 Feminist perspectives in christology**

The changes in theology in the past thirty years are reflected strongly in christology. To illustrate this fact and to analyse those changes, we will consider three books published during that period. These very different but important examples are Oscar Cullmann's *The christology of the New Testament* (1959), Jon Sobrino's *Christology at the crossroads* (1978) and Rita Nakashima Brock's *Journeys by heart: a christology of erotic power* (1991). Cullmann's book is and remains, despite his wish expressed in the Preface, a book of reference. It is a book of exegesis. Taking the christological titles of Jesus for his structure, Cullmann examines the historical and textual evidence about how early Christians viewed Jesus, what claims they believed Jesus made and what claims they themselves made for him as Christ. Cullmann tries to confine himself to a

thoroughgoing, historical and would-be objective examination and exposition. He asks of his critics that they marshal their evidence as he has marshalled his if they wish to take issue with his exposition and conclusions<sup>60</sup>.

Sobrino writes as a Jesuit theologian working in San Salvador. He is aware of the tensions in his political and ecclesial situation. He cannot ignore the conciliar and papal *magisterium* that enshrines and enjoins dogmatic christology. He believes that the framework of his christology must be ecclesial, historical and trinitarian. By ecclesial he refers to the living experience of Christians in South America: only secondarily does he mean the *magisterium*, although he has also to bear in mind the significance that church members and church authorities give to it. He is clear that "historical" in this context is not meant simply in the Marxist sense, i.e. that christology should be "worked out on the basis of present-day history"<sup>61</sup>. He takes seriously present-day history, but is also dedicated to discovering a christology that proclaims the historical Jesus. He reminds his readers that Jesus did not come to proclaim himself or an idea, but the rule of God's justice. His book shows that the proclamation of Jesus is good news to those who hunger and thirst for justice and right dealing. In his view, christology tells poor and oppressed people something about their worth, and about the world as God would have it be<sup>62</sup>. Nonetheless it is a work of what he calls *theo-logy* because it debates who Jesus was and is only in relation to God the Father and God's kingdom, in relation to the Christ as God's anointed and in relation to the Spirit of God<sup>63</sup>, i.e. a trinitarian *theo-logy*.

Rita Nakashima Brock's christology, on the other hand, whilst taking seriously the historicity of Jesus and the history of christological thinking, takes a different stance with regard to history.

She writes from her perspective as an Asian American feminist theologian whose personal history is marked by oppression on the dual grounds of race and of gender. The starting point of her christology is a theology "grounded in a feminist view of love as the basis of all power in human life"<sup>64</sup>. As a feminist she discerns two major problems in christology. One is the fact that Jesus was male.

In fact it is Jesus' maleness, and no other of his particular human characteristics, like race, age, class, or ethnicity, that has kept women, an entire category of persons, out of full participation in the Christian community.<sup>65</sup>

The second problem lies in the traditional doctrines of the Christ's atonement that emphasise the death of the son of God and themes of separation, disconnection and punishment (including punishment in the absence of wrongdoing). She finds these unacceptable and incompatible with the intimate love that she takes to be the nature of God (God/dess in her usage). Of such traditional Christian teachings she writes:

The past and its traditions must liberate and make whole the present. All use of the past to hurt and to oppress is illegitimate, and those who are hurt by traditions have the right to decide what makes us whole. I seek to reveal here what, in christology, can lead us toward a whole-making life.<sup>66</sup>

Brock's feminist christology rests primarily on her experience and that of other women and men who have wrestled with the forces of patriarchy. She distinguishes her views of patriarchy from those of some more radical feminists by asserting that, at the core of patriarchy, there is what she terms "broken-heartedness". In short, she sees it as a pathological condition, socially prevalent, and resulting from pain and damage inflicted, experienced and internalised in the family. She does not seek to fight men and wrest from them their illegitimate power, but rather to bring healing to people who are, in the first instance, themselves damaged and, in consequence,

destructive of themselves, their families and, by extension, society and the world.

It is unsurprising then to find that Brock's central christological metaphor is not that of an individual but of a community that she calls Christa/Community<sup>67</sup>. This community is characterised by its manifestations of "erotic power", that is, the power of intimate love in the context of relatedness. Jesus neither confers this on the community nor controls it, but himself participates in it as a given of God. Because erotic power can only exist in relatedness, it could not reside in an individual, not even Jesus.

Brock is relying here on an understanding of Eros that has evolved in feminist thinking, particularly in the work of Haunani-Kay Trask. She quotes part of Trask's definition of Eros.

The feminist Eros encompasses the "life force", the unique energy which springs from the desire for existence with meaning, for a consciousness informed by feeling, for experience that integrates the sensual and the rational, the spiritual and the political. In the feminist vision, Eros is both love *and* power.<sup>68</sup>

Brock contrasts the use of Logos in contradistinction to Eros, and draws out the way in which Eros feeds and sustains the hearts of human beings in their relationships. The notion of "heart" is central to her work both in relation to people and to God/dess, and it is in our hearts that we are variously hurt or healed, deprived or nourished. Eros is the stream that brings us this nourishment and is the medium in which we are created and through which we relate. Eros has characteristics both of the spirit of God in the Old Testament and of the divine Logos<sup>69</sup>.

In expanding the feminist concept of erotic power to include its sacred dimensions, I am developing its theological implications as the incarnation of divine love. The presence and revelation of erotic power is the divine dimension of human existence.....

In the beginning is the divine Eros, embodied in all being. As the incarnate, life-giving power of the universe, divine erotic power is the Heart of the Universe.<sup>70</sup>

All three of the books reviewed above were conscientious in their attempts to be true to past wisdom on one hand and, on the other, true to the needs of the world in which the writers found themselves. The world changed radically between 1956 when Cullmann surrendered his manuscript to his German publishers, and the time in 1991 when Brock ended a decade of struggle to write hers. Brock's work arose in a context of new christological and theological thinking. Chopp and Taylor identify five "discursive shifts" which influenced North American theology in that period<sup>71</sup> and it is arguable that these same shifts are true for Western theology generally. They are: the deconstruction of older theologies with their WASP-male-as-norm; the identification of social and political crisis as the *locus* for doing theology; postmodernist ambiguity; a new sensibility of post-colonialism; and the perspective of world religions. In such a context, it became important to review Christian symbolic systems (doctrines), including that of the Christ, and to develop an appropriate communal praxis. For both Sobrino (his "ecclesial" criterion) and Brock, the communal focus is particularly significant. Imagery based upon the Suffering Servant may have implied a communal dimension for christology, but it was first liberation theology and then feminist theology which brought to the fore a dimension largely missing from earlier thinking.

Francine Cardman<sup>72</sup> traces the development of feminist christologies from Daly's critique of "christolatry" and Ruether's challenging women's alleged need of a male saviour to the reconstructive work of Fiorenza envisaging a community marked by a discipleship of equals and a praxis of inclusive wholeness. It was Grant<sup>73</sup> who saw that these feminist christologies required further critique in that they were based upon white racist assumptions: to embrace them would be to perpetuate that oppression. Grant's project of a womanist christology confronts the triple

oppression of black women<sup>74</sup> (race, sex and class) and identifies the Christ in the community of black women<sup>75</sup>. What feminist christologies have achieved is to dethrone the white, male hero and, in his place, to point to an inclusive community whose praxis is to seek justice and wholeness.

At the conclusion of this section, it is evident that there is no one feminist christology. As we saw earlier in this chapter (fundamental problems), some feminist difficulties with Christianity are precisely with the Christ. Feminist scholars have found a number of ways to address this problem (e.g. the Christa/community, Eros) and we should not - need not - look to find a single answer to those problems. These writers have articulated understandings of christological function that are independent of maleness and inclusive in their effects. In addressing these problems, they confront Hampson's complaint that much feminist theology is (from her perspective) apparently secular and they challenge previously accepted understandings as, at the least, compromised by patriarchal values.

## **5.6 Feminist spirituality and sexual politics**

Cullmann's book was not intended as a work of spirituality whereas Brock's is one both of spirituality and of theology and is political in its implications. Since the rise of academic theology as a discrete discipline, the task of theological reflection has often been divorced from the workaday concerns and struggles of people and of communities of belief. The masculine habit of classification and division has, undoubtedly, its uses, but it has supported a split between theology and spirituality that is a feature of patriarchal religion. Leech points out that patriarchy,

as a dominant cultural norm, rules by splitting or dividing<sup>76</sup>. For Leech, the spirit of the Christian person is to be nourished by and to be active in society. In *The eye of the storm*, he quotes the maxim (which he claims antedates modern feminism) that "the personal is political"<sup>77</sup>. Clearly, small groups with exclusively personal agenda are likely to stay fragmented and be easily marginalised. However, Leech contends that

. .... in the recovery of the personal dimension in politics, there has come to the surface a feature of liberation struggle which is vital and yet is all too easily forgotten in much fashionable militancy: the value and dignity of every human being, however degraded and broken. Feminist politics arises from very basic and painful experiences of oppression, and it is this rootedness, this solidarity in pain, and the organised response to it, which makes the commitment to the least powerful so passionate and so persistent.<sup>78</sup>

Feminist voices have challenged people to confront the splits, ignorances and gaps in their spirituality. A spirituality that is properly theological and political is one that finds its place and fulfilment in God's desire for the world.

... liberation does not occur at the level of ideas and feelings, but at the level of actual people, and of concrete institutions and structures. At the core of contemporary feminism is a profound commitment to people combined with a critique of existing institutions which oppress and damage people.<sup>79</sup>

Feminist spirituality takes seriously human experience and, in particular, the experience of oppressed people, including women. Lavinia Byrne does not identify herself as a feminist but writes nonetheless

....as a Christian, as a woman, as a person who is grateful to the feminists for opening my eyes to certain issues and problems. More significantly, I write as a Roman Catholic and as an apostolic religious sister; as a member of a Church and religious Order that have a particular heritage and style.<sup>80</sup>

In her chapter "On being a praying woman" she describes her spiritual journey from being a small child to the time of writing. Much of the detail of her childhood prayer seems like that of many

young girls - and boys too. Growing up, she realised that prayer is not primarily a matter of words and rituals or of formulae offered by the church. She saw that emotions and thoughts, e.g. about injustice and suffering, are natural, given, and thus a part of prayer, but that they might not be evenly distributed as between women and men.

Traditional Christian spirituality has not always been particularly helpful to women because all too often it has proposed that most sophisticated of virtues, humility, to those who are not yet ready to deal with it. Women approach all power, all strength, all authority from a position of weakness. Not because we are weak and feeble people but because we have been treated as such for centuries. The first Christian task is to come to full, adult stature as people whom God has made and whom God finds good. In this way we come to glory.<sup>81</sup>

In a study of the raising of Jairus' daughter and of the woman with the haemorrhage, Byrne begins to sketch a new imaging of God and a new imaging of women in the messianic community. The new image of God is of father, mother and life-giver.

Women have too easily in the past been asked to sacrifice themselves upon the altar of a God misread, a God imaged as tyrant rather than a God imaged as life-giver and nurturer, as parent and as friend. Behind the sacrifices asked of us in the name of religion lay too much social convention and conditioning; woman the queen of shining floors has man the king of the universe walk all over her far too easily. When any of us makes the Christian gesture of offering ourselves in love to diminishment and weakness, we can do so only at the request of God. For God alone can give the treasures of darkness, God alone can call us beyond these into eternal life. Other calls to diminishment are the work of that Satan who asked Jesus to throw himself off the side of the Temple, to make a heroic gesture in the name of religion, isolate himself and, thereby, to test God.<sup>82</sup>

Much of what is so refreshing in Byrne's writing is in fact very old. It is as though there were a stream of feminist consciousness that has run underground in the life of the Christian theology-making community. At various points in the life of the church that stream has surfaced. Each surfacing is different in detail, but the similarities are more striking. Nowhere was this more evident than in the medieval flowering of female religious life. Caroline Walker Bynum has shown how this coincided with a concentration of feminine imaging of God and especially of the

person of Jesus<sup>83</sup>. Working from primary sources, she criticises those who have written off feminine imagery of Jesus as the "puerile"<sup>84</sup> imaginings of sexually frustrated women - if only because much of it comes from men!<sup>85</sup> Bynum examines (1) the rise in popularity of the religious life for women in northern Europe; (2) the feminisation of religious imagery (among women and men) during the period; and (3) the unprecedented production of documents of religious experience by women compared with men in the same period. She challenges earlier conclusions that these were due to a sudden demographic change or special deprivation on the part of women<sup>86</sup>, and identifies one principal reason for this mass movement. It was a reaction to the increasing clericalisation of the church evidenced in the great production of canon law in the period. A further consequence was the elevation of the priesthood to the point where God became effectively inaccessible to the laity<sup>87</sup>. In an essay on the nuns of Helfta, Bynum describes the kinds of women who joined that and similar communities. They were educated, literate and, in our terms, in search of "a positive sense of self".

Such women were more likely to see themselves as functioning with a full range of male and female, governing and comforting roles, paralleling the full range of the operations of God.<sup>88</sup>

Caught up in the religious fervour of the time, they could not become priests, although some of their devotional imagery suggests they saw themselves in that light. Nor could they become friars. But they could become nuns, and take on the role of vicarious worship that had been the lot of (lay) monks. They could be and were religious and social counsellors and community resource people. They could, with the direct authority of Christ mediated through their imaging of Jesus, become mediators of the divine<sup>89</sup>. And they had access to the "apostolate of the pen"<sup>90</sup>: The thought forms of those times do not always speak to our own religious sensibilities. What

emerges, however, is the authority of women who knew God, spoke to God and spoke of God to others. That authority is at least as powerful, though different from, the writings of their male contemporaries and of the ordained priesthood<sup>91</sup>.

In returning to current feminist spirituality, the focus here is on its theology, and on the recent work of feminist scholars in that field. There has been an increase in the number of overtly feminist books of prayers and liturgies, but more important for the purposes of this thesis, an increase in work showing a forging of spirituality with theology or theological spirituality. This has been represented by the work of Byrne, who does not call herself a feminist, but whose work resonates strongly with the theological / spiritual re-imaging of McFague in section 5.4. It is also represented in the work of Brock and of Fiorenza, referred to in section 5.5 on christology, offering further evidence of what one may regard as feminist theological spirituality.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

There is no single set of ideas and practices that constitutes feminism. Evans' scheme of an equality-difference axis provides a basis for a typology of schools of feminism that also shows how they relate to each other, principally at the level of their philosophical assumptions. Feminist critiques have influenced profoundly many areas of discourse including philosophy and theology to the extent that it is usual to use the term "feminist theology" as shorthand for a large body of work. Section 5.2 shows that feminists encountered in Christian theology a number of fundamental problems and these are discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter. Feminist critiques in the fields of Old and New Testament studies are notable for their hermeneutic

approaches. Methodological considerations are central to a feminist approach to these ancient texts, exposing patriarchal assumptions and editing that otherwise occlude important aspects of ancient and more recent tradition. There are debates within feminist circles, as is seen in the section 6.1 about the propriety - or even effectiveness - of some of this critical work.

The present chapter also examines the impact on pastoral theology of feminist critiques. Pastoral theology is particularly important in the sense that it is in pastoral practice that people are most obviously supported or impeded by theology in their lives. Feminist analyses of models of pastoral care and of the imaging of God in practice have begun to change what is taught and practised. More significant for present purposes, however, is the centrality of pastoral theology as sign and agent of Christian belief and behaviour and an indicator of practical-values.

Feminist perspectives on christology are also important in this regard. So far as Christian theology is concerned, christology is a central component of its structures. It is argued that earlier christologies were, from a feminist viewpoint, more or less deficient and sometimes downright oppressive. The work of discerning what is properly christological, as distinct from a study of Jesus, may be said to date back to the gospels. Feminist critics such as Brock have brought new elements into christology as well as deconstructing old patriarchal elements brought to the subject many centuries previously. In doing this, they have begun a process that has the capacity radically to re-model Christianity.

The same may be said of feminist spirituality. The argument advanced is that, in all the undoubted diversity of feminist writing, feminist theologians have broadened a strand in western

Christian spirituality that was in danger of being lost, namely its connection with theology. The perspective of that theology is, of course, feminist and thus not to be subsumed into similar endeavours from other quarters, e.g. Orthodox spirituality. It is shown in later chapters that this constitutes an important aspect of holism.

The next chapter moves the argument forward by analysing the core ideas found in feminist theology with a view to identifying the practical-values inherent in them.

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- <sup>1</sup> JANTZEN, G.M. *Becoming divine: towards a feminist philosophy of religion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998 uses Thomas Nagel's phrase "a view from nowhere" in her assertion that ultimate objectivity is not possible – or even desirable. She shows that this is not an "anything goes" standpoint where any view is as good as another, but rather prompts us to examine a range of standpoints, some of which we privilege over others (pp.205 *et seq*).
- <sup>2</sup> EVANS, J. *Feminist theory today: an introduction to second-wave feminism*. London: SAGE, 1995. Other classifications or typologies exist, for example in WARHOL, R R & HERNDL, D P (eds). *Feminisms: an anthology of literary theory and criticism* (revised edition). Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, pp. ix-xii.
- <sup>3</sup> GRIFFITHS, M & WHITFORD, M (eds). *Feminist perspectives in philosophy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, p.1.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid* pp.138-143. Griffiths specifically criticises those (masculine) views of "mind" which explicitly relegate emotion to a position of inferiority relative to thinking or even, in the case of Scruton (cited), seek to empty it of any intrinsic significance relative to thinking. Elsewhere Griffiths comments: "Feminism is not monolithic and feminists do not speak with one voice. It is all the more striking then that the different concerns expressed in feminist writing and the variety of different voices which make themselves heard, all point, time and again, in a similar direction with regard to emotion and reason." (p.134).
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p.1.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.134.
- <sup>7</sup> YOUNG, I. "Humanism, gynocentrism and feminist politics" *In* *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory*. Cited in Evans *op cit*, p.2. A number of writers, like Evans, concur in the usage of "second wave" to describe feminists of the

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1960s onwards: this term distinguishes them from early feminist writers and activists, most notably in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>8</sup> Evans *op cit* p.8. Writers who distinguish the three main groupings already referred to (liberal, socialist and radical) include LOADES, A (ed). *Feminist theology: a reader*. London: SPCK, 1990, p.1; Graham (1995), p.26; RUETHER, R.R. *Sexism and god-talk: towards a feminist theology*. London: SCM, 1983, pp.216 *et seq*.

<sup>9</sup> “We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition.... The colored woman feels that women's cause is one and universal; and not till the image of God, whether in parian or ebony, is sacred and inviolable; not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as the accidents and not as the substance of life, not until the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won - not the white woman's nor the black woman's, nor the red woman's....The acquirements of her rights will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason, and justice, and love in the government of the nations of the earth.” Extract from the speech of Anna Julia Cooper to the 1893 Congress of Representative Women, quoted in FIORENZA, E.S. *Searching the scriptures. Volume one: a feminist introduction*. London: SCM, 1994, flyleaf.

<sup>10</sup> FRIEDAN, Betty. *The feminine mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963. The survey of the history of feminism [DOYLE, J.A. & PALUDI, M.A. *Sex and gender: the human experience*. Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark, 1991, pp. 303-322 puts Friedan's book in its list of three events which gave rise to the (re-)emergence of the "women's movement". The other two were the U.S. Women's Bureau commission which looked into women's status and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This is an American viewpoint which overlooks, for example, the impact of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), published in English only four years later.

<sup>11</sup> Friedan *op cit* in Evans (1995) p.33.

<sup>12</sup> THISTLETHWAITE, S B. *Sex, race and God: Christian feminism in black and white*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> FIRESTONE, S. *The dialectic of sex*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1971. Cited in Evans *op cit* p.63 and pp. 67 *et seq*.

<sup>14</sup> Evans *op cit* p.67. See, for a view contrary to Firestone's, MIDGLEY, M. "Natural sex differences" *In* Griffiths & Whitmont (1988), pp.36-37. Midgley takes what might be termed a strong view of difference when she writes "Different does not mean worse or better, it means different". Her paper specifically contests what she sees as the current orthodoxy that minimises sexual difference.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that Evans places both writers under the same heading does not mean that Firestone and Mitchell speak with one voice. Mitchell makes some important criticisms of Firestone, most evident in Mitchell (1975) pp.347-349, where the author portrays Firestone as confident that "social reality [is] *all*" and that mental life is not a reality. Such a criticism challenges the reliability of Firestone's analysis and approach.

<sup>16</sup> Evans *op cit* p.73.

<sup>17</sup> DALY, M. *Beyond God the Father: towards a philosophy of women's liberation*. London: The Women's Press, 1986, p.23 and a reference to Tillich (1962).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* p.100.

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- 19 RICH, A. *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution*. London: Virago, 1977.
- 20 GILLIGAN, C. *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- 21 Evans *op cit* p.120.
- 22 The term was invented by Derrida and combines elements of both "difference" and "deferral". It refers to our semiology and epistemology evidenced in our sense of meaning. Meaning involves identity (what or who something or someone is) and that entails automatically what that something or someone is not (i.e. difference). We never get finally to resolve this matter, i.e. we defer the matter of meaning. Hence Derrida's neologism. (APPIGNANESI, R & GARRATT, M C. *Introducing Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999, p.80).
- 23 SOPER, Kate. "Postmodernism, subjectivity and the question of value", *In New Left Review*, 1991, **186**: 120-128.
- 24 The term theology, as was pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, is used to refer to Christian theology in the West. This limitation is simply one of scope and should not be taken to infer that feminists may not have strong criticisms of, for example, Eastern or African Christian theology, or Jewish or Islamic theology.
- 25 TORRANCE, I. "Is Christianity irredeemably sexist? A response to Daphne Hampson" *In* HOLLOWAY, R (ed). *Who needs feminism? Men respond to sexism in the Church*. London: SPCK, 1991. p. 75.
- 26 "In her celebrated *Scum Manifesto* Valerie Solonas declared: "The male ... has made of the world a shitpile." It might be said that in the particular corner of Christendom in which the women of this book find themselves, patriarchy (with more than a little help from lots of men and quite a few women) has made a similar job of Christianity". WEBSTER, A. *Found wanting*. London: Cassell, 1995, p.163.
- 27 Hampson (1990) p.27.
- 28 *Ibid* p.28.
- 29 *Ibid* p.173.
- 30 *Ibid* p.170.
- 31 For example, BROWN, P. *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*. London: Faber & Faber, 1990. Brown makes this point explicitly on p.88, although it is implicit throughout the book. He frequently contrasts Syriac, Iraqi and Eastern Mediterranean Christian traditions with those of the cities of Alexandria, Carthage, Rome and the Roman colonies, e.g. Corinth.
- 32 Jantzen (*ibid* pp.61 *et seq*) develops a methodology of "double reading" based upon the work of Derrida and Irigaray. This hermeneutical tool discloses both what the authors of the text wished to communicate as well as what they were either unaware of or did not wish to disclose.
- 33 SANDYS-WUNSCH, J "A few kind words about the Enlightenment" *In Theology* **CI**, **801**:196-202 ( May/June, 1998) summarises some of the 18th century wrestling with the issues of revelation and inspiration in understanding the Bible, demonstrating how our concerns are by no means new.
- 34 For example, RUSSELL, L M. "Good housekeeping." *In* Loades (1990) pp.225-238. Russell's contribution is, like much liberal feminism, also imbued with other types of

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feminist thinking. These distinctions are not hard and fast, but indicate the writers' emphases.

35 For example, Webster *op cit* pp.95-96 cites Marie Fortune on the power differential between clergy and congregants and the complexities of power-sharing (in this instance in the context of abuse of power). Daly (*op cit* pp.172, 196) describes in stark language the self-regarding parasitism on (women) congregants of (a male) priesthood. There can be little doubt that implicit in this view is one that priesthood is inevitably patriarchal.

36 McNAY, L. *Foucault and feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, p.197.

37 FOUCAULT, M. *Ethics: subjectivity and truth* (ed. Rainbow, P). Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press.1997, pp.315-316.

38 The first stage of the double reading is the rigorous location of the text as suggested here. That opens up the second stage which entails the disclosure of what is not stated, what has been occluded or suppressed and what is unconscious. Jantzen *op cit* pp.59 *et seq* uses strategies derived from Derrida and Irigaray to give an account of this process in a theological context.

39 Fiorenza (1983), p.52.

40 *Ibid*, p.52.

41 TRIBLE, P. *Texts of terror: literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*. London: SCM Press, 1984, p.ix.

42 *Ibid*, p.x.

43 Mitchell (1975) p.xv.

44 E.g. Graham (1995) and COOEY, P M. *Religious imagination and the body: a feminist analysis*. Oxford: OUP, 1994. Both writers refer to the work of Freud and his critics and to later writers in the field, e.g. Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Mitchell and Chodorow.

45 Among the exceptions to this general statement are WHITE, E. "Religion and the hermeneutics of gender: an examination of the work of Paul Ricoeur" and GOLDENBERG, N. "The return of the Goddess: psychoanalytic reflections on the shift from theology to theology", both in KING, U (ed). *Religion and gender*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, pp.77-100, 145-163. Both essays entail a critical use of psychoanalytic theory as a means of engaging with religious experience and text.

46 "The practice of pastoral care has been central to the disciplinary identity of pastoral / practical theology; but a central concern in much of the contemporary literature is a search for an adequate *definition*." Graham (1996), p.52.

47 LEECH, K. *The social God*. London: Sheldon Press, 1981. Also by same author *Politics and the faith today*, a monograph for Affirming Catholicism, London: DLT & Affirming Catholicism, 1994.

48 This point is discussed in Pattison (1994) esp pp 232-233.

49 Pattison, *ibid* p 208.

50 *Ibid*, p.240 *et seq*.

51 SELBY, P. "They make such good pastors." In Holloway (1991) p.125.

52 GRAHAM, E. "The sexual politics of pastoral care" In GRAHAM, E & HALSEY, M (eds). *Life cycles: women and pastoral care*. London: SPCK, 1993, p.210.

53 *Ibid*, p.211.

54 "Norms and ideals inform pastoral strategy by influencing certain choices regarding three main areas of care: questions of agency, priority, and aims and ends. When it comes to

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- examining the norms which inform patterns of who cares for whom and by what means, decisions concerning the needs which merit pastoral attention and judgements on the appropriate virtues to be fostered and wrongs to be righted, it is important to recognize that such choices are not neutral, but have been influenced by already existing value systems.”  
*Ibid*, p.216.
- <sup>55</sup> McLUHAN, M. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. London: Ark, 1987, pt.1, chapter 1 (originally published London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).
- <sup>56</sup> *In* Graham and Halsey (1993), p.218.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.221.
- <sup>58</sup> HELLOWIG, M K. *The role of the theologian*. Kansas: Sheed & Ward, 1987, p.13. Quoted in Loades *op cit* p.8.
- <sup>59</sup> McFAGUE, S. *Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, p.117. McFague's book is written specifically to challenge and undermine patriarchal structures of thought and action (Preface, p.ix).
- <sup>60</sup> CULLMANN, O. *The christology of the New Testament*. London: SCM, 1959, pp.xiii-xiv. He describes himself as: “Dispensing with all profound methodological observations (and thus proving myself quite "out of date"), I emphasize only that I know no other "method" than the proven philological-historical one. I know of no other "attitude" toward the text than obedient willingness to listen to it even when what I hear is sometimes completely foreign, contradictory to my own favourite ideas, whatever they may be; the willingness at least to take the trouble to understand and present it, regardless of my own philosophical and theological "opinions"; and above all the willingness to guard against designating a biblical statement a dispensable "form" because it is unacceptable to me on the basis of my opinions.”
- <sup>61</sup> Sobrino (1978), p.xxi.
- <sup>62</sup> For example the first section of his chapter "The death of Jesus and liberation in history". He makes a telling point about Good Friday being a more popular "festival" than Easter amongst South American peasants (p.180).
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, Introduction, pp xxiii-xxiv.
- <sup>64</sup> BROCK, R.N. *Journeys by heart: a christology of erotic power*. New York: Crossroad, 1991, p. xii.
- <sup>65</sup> This argument is substantiated in her Introduction and spelled out in her first chapter, "The character of being human" as well as in chapter 3 "The feminist redemption of Christ".
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid* p.xvii.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid* pp.52-53 and elsewhere for elaboration of this idea.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p.25 quoting TRASK, H-K. *Eros and power: the promise of feminist theory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, pp. 92-93.
- <sup>69</sup> Despite this reliance on John's gospel, Brock turns to Mark for much of the biblically related content of her book, devoting two chapters to studies of that gospel.
- <sup>70</sup> Brock, *op cit* pp.45-46.
- <sup>71</sup> CHOPP, R.S & LEWIS, M.L.(eds). *Reconstructing Christian theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994. The reference here is to the editors' Introduction, especially pp.1-17.
- <sup>72</sup> CARDMAN, F. "Christology" *In* RUSSELL, L M. & CLARKSON, J S (eds). *Dictionary of feminist theologies* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, pp.40-43.

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- <sup>73</sup> GRANT, J. *White women's Christ and black women's Jesus: feminist christology and womanist response*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, 1989. WELCH, S D. "Human beings, white supremacy and racial justice" *In* Chopp & Taylor *op cit* pp.170 *et seq* demonstrates how white theologians have been limited by their racism.
- <sup>74</sup> Grant, *op cit* p.209.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid* Précis.
- <sup>76</sup> LEECH, K. *The eye of the storm: spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice*. London: DLT, 1992, especially pp.92 *et seq*.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid* p.82.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid* p.83.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid* p.83.
- <sup>80</sup> BYRNE, L. *Women before God*. London: SPCK, 1988, p.xi. The book was written before Dr. Byrne felt obliged to leave her order (though not the church) after a series of attempts to silence her.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid* p.79.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid* pp.82-83.
- <sup>83</sup> BYNUM, C W. *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley, LA & London: University of California Press, 1982.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid* p.171.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid* pp.113 *et seq*.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid* p.183.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid* pp.9 *et seq*.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid* p.185.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid* p.251.
- <sup>90</sup> Bynum attributes this remark to Mechtild of Magdeburg.
- <sup>91</sup> Nearly a third of the book is taken up with a chapter entitled "Women mystics of the thirteenth century" which contains quotations and references to the primary source material. One of the differences which is of significance for this study concerns the ways in which Jesus as mother was linked to Abbot as mother in the mind of some male writers. Mother in this context was a symbol of (pastoral) authority, one in which governance was tempered by nurture. Women's writing on Jesus as mother was more ecstatic, although the feminine imagery of both women and men was at some points strikingly similar.

## CORE IDEAS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

### 6. Introduction

In the previous chapter, feminism is discussed in terms of a number of schools. Each school has its own philosophical basis or emphasis along an axis whose poles are equality and difference. This is a prelude to examining in depth the underlying concepts that inform feminist theology. It is evident that feminist theology contains a range of theological (sub)-disciplines with a variety of voices and emphases. Chapter 5 demonstrates that in theology, as in other feminist disciplines, content and methodology are intimately linked. The need to pay attention to both content and methodology is a feature of much feminist scholarship. In this chapter, the focus moves to an analysis of core ideas in feminist theology as a means of deriving its practical-values. Such values arise from both the content and the methodology of that theology. These values are then compared in chapter 7 with the practical-values derived from a gestalt perspective and their compatibility discussed and assessed.

This chapter analyses core ideas in feminist theology. Analysis is a process whereby concepts and ideas are loosed from their original context. The word "analysis" derives from Greek roots meaning to loose from... The root meanings carry with them the possibility that, in such loosing, ideas could be taken out of context and their meaning altered. Since there are no agreed objective means to guard against this possibility, the writer must adopt rigorous academic standards of intellectual awareness and integrity.

The overall aim remains to establish that gestalt is compatible with feminist theology. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the core ideas of feminist theology from which practical-values may safely be deduced.

The first core idea is that of experience as an epistemological basis in feminist theology. This is a position with a long philosophical ancestry. Consideration is given to other possible bases in the present philosophical and religious climate and to the question of whose experience is accorded that position. Some voices in feminist theory point to negative aspects of this epistemological stance, and these are discussed. Section 6.2 focuses on the place of the body in feminist theology and its role as the site of our experience. Over the past thirty years, feminist theorists have taken a number of conflicting views of the status of the body. Their ideas, though not mapped precisely onto schools of feminist theologians, inevitably problematise attempts to take a single view of the body in feminist theology. A further core idea is examined, in section 6.3, by focusing on gender issues in feminist thinking. The precise relationship of sex and gender continues to be debated in feminist circles, and no single voice commands universal assent. What is incontrovertible is that the phenomenon of gender permeates our experience of religious practice and theology.

In section 6.4, the focus moves to the relationship of the personal, the political and the theological. It is argued in this section that this is a species of holism that is important to many feminist writers and to feminists in the church, though not commanding universal support. Section 6.5 analyses ideas about patriarchy and the importance of confronting it.

That leads into a related section (6.6) on commitment to change as a core idea in feminist theology.

In section 6.7, the focus moves again to an examination of the place of Jesus and the messianic community in feminist theology. It is argued that, although some writers are able to redeem Jesus and his immediate followers from the distortions of patriarchy, others have gone further by developing the notion of the salvific or saved community. The next section (6.8) follows in which ideas of God / Goddess are examined and found to occupy a key position in most feminist theological thinking and writing. Section 6.9 concludes this chapter by summing up the work on core ideas. It also looks forward to Part Three of the thesis in which practical-values are proposed for gestalt and for feminist theology on the basis of their core ideas. These practical-values are then compared and discussed as a basis for the compatibility of the two disciplines.

### **6.1 Core ideas: the place of experience**

One of the main ideas evident in the origins of feminist theology is that human experience provides an important basis for epistemology. This idea can be traced back through the philosophy of Schleiermacher to Descartes. It can be thought of as a logical or even necessary extension of a project much older than present-day feminism. However, it is not an idea that had noticeably transformed theological discourse until the respective advents of liberation theology and feminist theology. In placing such emphasis upon experience, feminist writers (like those of the *comunidades de base* - base

communities - of the liberation theology movement) do not claim that experience is all that there is. That would constitute an excessive relativising of theology. In according epistemological status to experience, feminist theologians recognise and assert that, whether or not we acknowledge it, we all start from "somewhere" in doing theology. Given that we cannot start from "nowhere", we will inevitably accord to something or someone status as a point of reference. Even so, there are some feminist voices that sound a cautionary note. Perhaps the starkest of these is that of Hampson, cited in the previous chapter<sup>1</sup>. She is concerned that the "experience" which plays such an important role in theology is not women's experience of God, but simply women's experience, so that talk of God is, in her view, replaced by talk of women's experience. There may be situations where this is the case, although such idolatry is something for all theologians to be wary of rather than a possibility unique to feminist theologians.

If we do not follow those writers who accord epistemological status to human experience, then we will surely adopt some other epistemological scheme, for example that of the proof texts offered by some biblical literalists. However, this approach is arguably more dangerously subjective for its being (putatively) objective and allegedly free from the influence of personal and communal experience. A further and major implication of this epistemological stance is discussed later in this chapter when we consider the notion of the reflexivity of God.

Although most feminist theologians would have little difficulty with the epistemological position outlined above, problems arise when we focus on the question of whose

experience counts. As chapter 5 showed, it is not enough for feminist theologians to answer "women's experience" because the question immediately arises as to who are the women whose experience is to have such a defining status. Sometimes it is the experience of women as reported, or even as occluded, in biblical traditions. Theologians attempt to reconstruct these suppressed or largely vanished traditions<sup>2</sup>, and in this frequently difficult task, they can claim some successes. They have confronted the theological positions, statements and stories that represent the dominant cultural norms of societies whose religious views were and are inimical to a feminist reading. By doing this they have established the outlines of other positions, statements and stories, and thus have gone some way to recovering the experience of the occluded others, usually women<sup>3</sup>.

Another aspect of experience opened up by feminist hermeneutics involves the highlighting of texts that look to women as models. Examples include the accounts of Ruth, Esther and Judith<sup>4</sup>. It may be argued that the experience of such women offers questionable role models to women today. A patriarchal (but superficial) view of Ruth, for example, might suggest that her claim to fame was to become David's great-grandmother, and that was only achieved by following her mother-in-law's advice to seduce a rich male relative. But such a view misses the inclusivist and principal point of the story, namely that Ruth was a foreign woman tellingly imbued with important values. A Moabitess, she could shame the most virtuous Israelite with her strong sense of family, of loyalty and of industry. Hers is also the story of a relationship between an older and a younger woman, marked by solidarity, mutual support and commitment. It is a story of

survival. These are the factors that emerge as primary in a feminist reading and which provide powerful role models.

Ruether sees the difficulties inherent in criticising biblical texts from outside and seeks to establish a means whereby texts can be criticised from within. She explains this in relation to what she calls the "prophetic principles" in the Bible that she takes as normative both for the Bible and for feminist critics. She says that:

Feminist readings of the Bible can discern a norm within Biblical faith by which the Biblical texts themselves can be criticized. To the extent to which Biblical texts reflect this normative principle, they are regarded as authoritative. On this basis many aspects of the Bible are to be frankly set aside and rejected.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of criticism challenges previously unexamined and familiar meanings and appears to overturn what was previously "agreed". Ruether wants us to accept that many of the prophetic utterances can be understood as speaking for oppressed groups in general and consequently for women in their oppression. This is because, despite the (oppressed) writers being male Hebrews living in an ancient rural culture, they knew what it was to feel threatened and disparaged - in their case by the sophisticated town dwellers of surrounding civilisations<sup>6</sup>. In this example, the city dwellers may be seen as standing for women's principal oppressors, i.e. men. Such a view, taken by their wives and daughters, would have been unthinkable for the original writers, but the force of their utterances in the modern context is potent. Ruether refers to this phenomenon of changed meaning thus:

This expansion of the Biblical message to include the unincluded rests on the assumption that the point of reference for Biblical faith is not past texts, with their sociological limitations, but rather the liberated future. ....In applying the prophetic principle to the critique of sexism and the liberation of women, we

deepen our understanding of social sin and its religious justifications and expand the vision of messianic expectation.<sup>7</sup>

Such a stance does not command universal accord among feminist theologians. Fiorenza points out that Ruether "is forced to concede that this critical prophetic tradition did not explicitly apply itself to the women's question either in the history of Israel or in Christianity. Nevertheless, she argues that women today can apply it to the feminist quest". Fiorenza's criticism is that Ruether overlooks "the oppressive androcentric elements" of the biblical traditions<sup>8</sup>. Fiorenza's specific point appears to be based firmly in history. The prophets did not promote a feminist cause: indeed the articulation of the concept announces its impossibility since feminism is itself a social construction of recent times rather than one of biblical societies and their times. However, Fiorenza's criticism need not be taken as invalidating Ruether's approach. Whether or not Ruether overlooks "oppressive androcentric elements" within the Bible, there seems to be no logically compelling cause precluding her from using prophetic insights and utterances in a situation for which they were not originally committed to writing.

Specific words spoken or written in specific situations, whenever they are cited in succeeding generations, are inevitably being used in contexts for which they were not originally intended. What matters is the adequacy or otherwise of the match between the original situation, insofar as it is knowable, and the current one. This is the case with the proof texts of first-generation Christians. They did not hesitate to use Ps.110, originally a royal psalm concerned with David and the sanctuary at Jerusalem, to refer to the risen and ascended Jesus. And whilst such a use of biblical text is not in vogue in most current

critical circles, it has always formed a part of Christian liturgy. What matters is not what the psalmist had in mind at the time of writing, but the usefulness of the text to the early Christians and their successors. The test question we might ask ourselves is: can we meaningfully<sup>9</sup> use such a text about Jesus? By the same token, Ruether can take the prophets' demand that one nation should not subdue and exploit another and apply it to the socio-political interaction of men and women. The test question is: can we meaningfully use such a text about sexual politics? An affirmative answer does not mean that one believes that this usage was in the mind of the prophets and their followers, because the tradition which is being exposed is not so much about women as about minorities, the dispossessed, the disadvantaged and the poor of the earth.

Whereas much of the evidence of a more or less hidden tradition may be deduced from canonical texts, other evidence of marginalised traditions regarding women and the feminine comes from the study of contemporary extra-canonical texts. While the conclusions of such enquiries may be tentative, this may be simply because they do not have as much written material behind them as the successfully dominant texts. It is, however, also the case that such a heuristic approach may seem offbeat, unlikely or even presumptuous - depending on the cultural assumptions of the hearer or reader. Discussion of the relationship between Paul and Thecla<sup>10</sup>, for example, or between Jesus and Mary of Magdala<sup>11</sup> contradicts most "received" understandings about the celibacy or otherwise of the two men concerned. These may then be rejected automatically simply because they are unfamiliar, rather than on evidential grounds.

The criticisms of Fiorenza are by no means the most radical that are offered to this feminist reading of the Bible. There are others who gave up the attempt to reconstruct or recover women's voices that had been occluded by centuries of patriarchal definition, re-writing and editing of traditions. They came to the conclusion that the Bible is irretrievably patriarchal and inimical to any feminist reading<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, it is important to recognise that experience itself can be two sided. Of course, there is the as-it-were-natural recognition that what we have lived through must be the basis for what we know to be true. But some feminist scholarship, e.g. the work of Joan W. Scott, points out that an uncritical reliance on experience and history can reproduce suppressions of difference (the examples she gives are of sexual and gender difference) akin to those that prompted this feminist epistemology in the first instance<sup>13</sup>. While this criticism need not undermine the importance of the main point here, it is a powerful reminder that it is unsafe to accept ostensibly liberating ideas uncritically.

## **6.2 Core ideas: the body in feminist theology**

Christianity has a mixed history with regard to human embodiment and the physical world generally. Whilst affirming that the physical world is God's creation and that God called it "good", theologians and preachers have a long tradition of focusing on the fallen nature of the cosmos. Prominent in that fallen nature is the human body. So much is this the case, that popular belief still affirms that the "sin" of Adam and Eve was to do with their "discovery" of sex as well as of their nakedness. It is evident from the work of

Brown and others (e.g. Nelson) that Christian dualism with regard to our spiritual and bodily selves was widespread in the cultural environment of early Christianity. Voices can be heard both affirming and warning against our bodily nature. The early Christian history of sexual renunciation (a phenomenon also found outside Christian circles) suggests a widespread attitude of negativity towards the body as it is distinguished from the rest of the self. Nelson begins his account of this phenomenon in the present day but links it firmly to the earliest strata of Christian thinking and feeling.

Suppose on Sunday, the minister were to announce as the day's text Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you therefore .... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God ..." Would "bodies" be interpreted by most hearers as the entire self (as Paul intended)? Probably not. Would the mood conveyed by that text be the prospect of wholeness, joy, ecstasy? No, more likely it would be heard as the injunction addressed to the mind or the spirit to engage in the dreary duty of disciplining and controlling one's body, imposing upon it from outside an alien willpower.<sup>14</sup>

Nelson sees this alienation of the body as evidence not of dualism but of a "triadic" separation. That is because such alienation does not confine itself to the self and her / his body, but extends to our neighbours and ultimately to God. Further "what we reject in ourselves becomes projected outwards"<sup>15</sup> and Nelson sees these projections of the unwanted body and its supposed evils as the root of medieval demonology. The thesis of his work is that Christian theology is nonetheless and necessarily body theology and that the body language of Paul and others is no mere coincidence, for all Paul's ambivalence about sexuality.

Nelson traces Christian mistrust of the body, relying on the exegeses of Bultmann and Robinson, to the hellenistic dualism evident in Paul's discussion of *soma*<sup>16</sup>. He also traces

some negative attitudes toward sexuality - particularly that of women - to post-exilic sources<sup>17</sup>, although the bulk of the written evidence is found in the Church Fathers. Nelson refers briefly to Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine in their mistrust of human sexuality. A concern with sex is only one aspect, however important, of body theology<sup>18</sup>, and Nelson points to other equally important factors. Chief amongst these was the continuing influence of Plato. Plato elevated the mental and spiritual above the physical, and that thinking influenced the more or less explicit Stoic philosophy found in the major centres of Roman civilisation. Stoicism places high value on an ethical state characterised by an absence of passion, desire and excitation. It takes a negative view of physical (i.e. bodily) excitements, passions and desires. Nelson sees parallels between Stoic philosophy and Plato's distinction between spiritual and bodily love on the one hand, and the equally dichotomous thinking of Christian writers who separate *agape* from *eros* on the other. In particular, he makes a link with Augustine<sup>19</sup>. He traces a line from Augustine to Aquinas and the development of a comprehensive theology that elaborated and promoted Christian attitudes to the body for future generations.

Even in the gospels, this tradition is found embedded. Luke, for example, betrays this same dualism in his pre-birth narrative. Luke's concern becomes clear when one considers other texts he is presumed to have known, i.e. Mark, Matthew and Q. Mark begins his gospel account with a baptism narrative, and Matthew with a genealogy followed by an account of a presumably miraculous conception and a visit to Bethlehem by clairvoyants or astrologers. Luke, on the other hand, begins with two unusual conceptions, the second of which is usually taken to be a virgin conception. This

understanding about Mary conceiving whilst remaining a virgin was circulating early in Christian history, although there are hints that it was not an understanding shared by all early believers. The argument against the "virgin" reading relies on a knowledge of the Hebrew text of the prophecy (Is. 7:14) which refers to "a young woman" bearing a child, whereas the Septuagint translators used *parthenos*, "a virgin". Such a usage in the Greek speaking world would promote the notion of miraculous conception and could fuel a legend. This conflicting understanding about Mary's status could explain the Lucan reference at 3:23 "[Jesus] being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph" as a parenthesis by a Greek-tradition editor, i.e. one who believed in the virgin conception of Jesus.

Caird argues that, to a Jewish believer, even the Lucan material relating to the "overshadowing" of Mary by the Holy Spirit would not suggest an alternative to the usual pattern of human begetting<sup>20</sup>. A question therefore arises regarding Luke's choice of words and phrases. Why did he cite the Septuagint version of the Isaianic prophecy? What is at issue here is not the first century use of proof-texts in Jewish circles. Since Luke is writing in Greek, one may conclude either that he did not know the Hebrew behind the text, or that he did know but chose to let the text stand without comment<sup>21</sup>. Either way, he presumably attached some significance to *parthenos*. And, even if the "as was supposed" of 3:23 is a later gloss, thus reducing the support for an argument that Luke is a virgin-conception advocate, the text still suggests something in the original which attaches significance to virginity. What is undeniable is that the two texts together form an insistence that was significant to early readers. This is not, of course, proof of a doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary (see, for example, Lk 8:19 regarding Jesus'

brothers), in Luke's gospel. But it is suggestive of a *pericope* (or established unit) of tradition, with an embedded message to a community that placed store by the virginity of Mary. It attaches importance to Jesus coming to birth by means other than that involving the physical coupling of a woman and a man.

If Luke's gospel carries some implicit teaching about the significance attached by the recipient communities to virginity<sup>22</sup>, it follows that it is important to look for a context in which such an emphasis finds its place. That context may be found in the significance for a great many early Christians of sexual abstinence. In referring to this matter, Brown follows a widely accepted tradition that the third synoptic gospel was the work of the author of Luke-Acts, a native of Antioch and a companion of Paul on some of his travels around the Mediterranean. The gospel, in this view, dates from around 80 CE<sup>23</sup>. It was, importantly for present purposes, the same gospel which Marcion so drastically edited but which, one may presume, most closely matched Marcion's theological priorities<sup>24</sup>. Brown makes two points about the Lucan emphasis on virginity. First he links it with prophecy in the Church, and second he examines Marcion's assumption that to be baptised is, by the same token, to enter into a life of celibacy.

Of the first point, Brown's citation of Lk. 1:34-35 seems not to support any connection with prophecy. But this point soon melts into insignificance when, a few verses later, Luke offers the Song of Mary which is a prophetic call for justice and the rule of God. As to Brown's second point, he demonstrates how, by the end of the first century and onwards, it seems that there were communities of Christians for whom baptism into their

faith entailed a ministry linked automatically to celibacy<sup>25</sup>. He also demonstrates that, within many churches and wandering between churches, there were organised groups of celibates, particularly in eastern Mediterranean countries. These celibate groups were not a suspect fringe but part of the mainstream of Christian *praxis*. Such persons regarded Mary as virgin and presumed Jesus to be celibate. The virgin and the celibate were the role models offered to the Body of Christ in the church's preaching and written teaching. The body is therefore in this view ideally virgin and celibate for life.

Sexual renunciation is a strand in Christian history about the body that contrasts with contemporary Christian and pagan views of the Roman *familia* (family and also household, including its slaves). Its outlines may be glimpsed in some Pauline writings<sup>26</sup> and in the pseudo-Pauline epistles<sup>27</sup>. More written evidence becomes available in later decades when renunciation was debated in the case of the Manichees<sup>28</sup> and other Encratites<sup>29</sup>. What was signified by renunciation varied according to time, culture and religious emphasis. Many Christian teachers enjoined sexual constraint on (their) disciples, while others, e.g. the Encratites and Augustine, urged sexual abstinence (continence) on married people, and this despite Paul's specific advice to married Corinthian Christians. A more radical renunciation of sexuality was to be found in Christian circles all round the Empire. Young women who had not married declared themselves to be virgin members of their churches and assumed a peculiar status both in the church and in the wider community<sup>30</sup>. The popularity of this movement can be readily understood in the light of expectations regarding marriage and childbirth. Another reason was the occasional difficulty of finding suitable Christian marriage partners. Paul had

advised that to marry a non-Christian might well be the salvation of the non-adherent partner, but, in the sexual politics of the day, that was more likely to be true of a Christian man marrying outside his church than of a Christian woman doing so. Parents therefore were often supportive of their daughters achieving some eminence as part of a special group within the church and less willing for them to make unsuitable alliances outside it. A further reason for the popularity of these groups of virgins is seen in the consequence of Christian prohibitions against exposing infant girls (i.e. seeking their deaths by neglect or exposure to danger). Their survival had consequences in costly dowries given in order to secure husbands. If, however, the family consecrated a daughter as a bride of Christ at an early age, they could keep their options open. She would probably not be formally admitted to the "order" of virginity until her childbearing days were past, and her family could change their minds about her eventual destiny if a promising partner were found in the mean time. And, even though many daughters had been treated as a commodity, they could become people to be reckoned with as part of a powerful caucus within their church.

There were other groups of women in the early church communities. The author of 1 Timothy writes of widows<sup>31</sup> as though they were what later generations would term a church "order". A widow in this sense was a woman who, having married once, opted not to do so again after the death of her husband: instead she joined a defined group. Many of these women were old and doubtless some were destitute, and grateful to rely on the church for physical and emotional support. Others, however, were younger women with time, energy and money to spare, who became a force within the Christian community.

They could exercise a significant degree of leadership, challenging as well as supporting the role of the male clergy<sup>32</sup>. In the second and third centuries, some churches had many hundreds, some more than a thousand, women enrolled as widows<sup>33</sup>.

As well as virgins and widows, there were yet other groups who had renounced bodily sexual expression including the disciples of gnostic or *quasi* gnostic teachers. The details of their teaching varied from one part of the Empire to another, but the basic design was common and their regime rather like some present-day religious study or disciple groups. They were the Christian equivalents of the *didaskaleia* (discipleship group) that gathered around pagan philosophers. The gnostic study circle, led by its teacher, was a group of women and men committed to deepening their relationship with God<sup>34</sup>. They received instruction in biblical exegesis, Christian behaviour, prayer, and anything that might edify the Body of Christ. They were a part of the local church, but also a discrete entity within it and one less open to control by clergy. Because they were independent in their thinking, they were more likely to take up unorthodox stands on such matters as sexual behaviour<sup>35</sup>.

Part of their discipline was a distinctive sexual ethic. Gnostic teaching emphasised the redemption of the world by the transformation of earthly and physical existence to a more spiritual and mystical one. Women and men joined together for the purpose of thinking and studying and of transcending their bodily existence. They were effectively small mixed-sex religious orders. Here, as well as in groups of virgins or widows, we can see

how some Christian groups came to a different understanding of the sexes and their relationships<sup>36</sup>.

Brock offers a critique of this kind of spirituality. In her work on erotic power, she shows how masculine spirituality and theology tend to dualism, splitting body and spirit. That dualism can lead men in the direction of dominance and control (even if only of themselves) rather than intimacy, whereas the healing of the gospel narratives is a healing of embodied persons. When people meet heart to heart - the example is one of healing - "erotic power" emerges<sup>37</sup>. This is not to say that sexual union generates erotic power - that might or might not be the case. What Brock shows is that, where sexual renunciation entails disembodiment, the dualism is life-denying.

Luce Irigaray is a feminist writer who holds together virginity and a non-dualist view of woman. This is exemplified in her "sexuate rights" of women<sup>38</sup> where she is careful to define virginity in terms that emphasise its spiritual connotations rather than its purely bodily ones, thus acknowledging a seemingly inevitable tussle with a dualism inherent in language. Irigaray's work indicates a point in the thirty-year history of feminist theorising about the body. Recent work by feminist scholars has examined a range of topics including sex and gender differences and their status, racism, the normative pressures of heterosexuality as well as the tools or symptoms of a patriarchal order observable in politics, education, legislation, the abortions debates and pornography.

Radical feminists have usually focused some of their analysis of patriarchy on the ways in which it has oppressed women's bodies. Much of the rejection of Freud and of psychoanalytic theory has been on the grounds that Freud's theories (and still more those of Lacan) are phallogentric, and that they marginalise women and their bodies. This critique extends into other areas such as the medical profession where male consultants dominate in areas devoted to women's health and women's bodies, even - especially - in gynaecology and obstetrics. Radical feminists similarly identify and confront male violence (especially, though not exclusively) towards women. They have campaigned vigorously against the pornography industry. They are not content merely to see pornography confined to some hidden sphere away from public media and the gaze of women and children. Their grounds are that it makes women into sexual objects whose bodies are there for men to use as men see fit. In short, they have brought to light the ways in which male oppression is enacted in the bodies of women.

Such feminist critics have reclaimed their bodies / women's bodies, and have made progress in the public consciousness and public service provision in the direction of remedying these ills. However, they have not met with universal support from other feminists because they have come close to creating - or have actually brought about - a new and potentially oppressive situation. The risk they have run in confronting patriarchal oppression of women's bodies is that of reification into a new essentialism. That is to say, they have made a new entity called women's bodies which is a relatively fixed, discrete something grounded in a biological sphere. In the view of their critics, they have created (or supported the creation of) a further essence that is biological

science. What they did not do was to expose biology itself as a cultural product, the outcome of forces that are also formed by a patriarchal culture. The rescue of women's bodies left them still in the domain of patriarchal essentialism where all is controlled by a process of division, classification and control on the basis of a specious doctrine of objectivity and "the natural order".

Liberal feminists are, by definition, less open to the impact of these problems. With their focus on equal rights and justice for all, they would naturally argue for the right of a woman to deal with doctors (or other professionals) of her own sex. They take issue with the dualistic abjection of women and of the feminine, but do not go on to integrate women's bodily experience into a notion of the experiencing subject. Nor do they focus on the framework of patriarchal culture and the colonisation or subjugation of discourse which, it can be argued, makes it impossible for women to have a place of their own on which to stand.

Irigaray has sought to identify a point at which women can stand that is outside the frame of reference of patriarchal systems. Specifically, as a part of the *Ecole freudienne* in Paris, she offers a critique of Lacan's "phallogocentrism". Lacan's re-working of Freudian psychoanalytic theory perpetuated rather than replaced notions of the primacy of the phallus. In her view, Lacan did not intend to indicate a physical phallus whose rule dominates the unconscious life of children, but a principle defining infant development including the development of language. Irigaray saw both that the effect of Lacan's approach was much the same as Freud's and that, as with early Freudian theory, girls and

women are defined as "lack" (of phallus) and thus as secondary. She set out to develop a theory of femininity distinct from, and as robust as, existing theories about masculinity. Her feminist critics pointed out, however, that she ran the risk (run by cultural feminists) of creating another essentialism whose effects would be to subvert her own aim. Graham, however, points out that "such feminist renderings of the body ... deliberately draw upon the psychoanalytic fusion of psyche and soma" and that the effect of Irigaray's work is to give a voice to self-knowledge stored in the unconscious. Such theories subvert the tendency of older psychoanalytic theories to polarise self and society, accepting that our bodies are both constrained and determined by social pressures and also free to transcend our cultures, thus undermining the argument about a new (deterministic) essentialism.

Kathy Davis suggests that, where the body is concerned, there are three major "problematics" in such scholarship: difference, domination and subversion<sup>39</sup>. Drawing on the work of Butler, Cixous, Grosz and others, she offers a critical examination of the different positions taken by feminist scholars on these points. On the matter of difference, for example, she contrasts Butler's radical refusal of gender difference and her views about how women appropriate "the cultural prescriptions on sex"<sup>40</sup> with Nicholson's view of the body as a substrate upon which gender is expressed. In a similar way, the problematic of domination entails the familiar ideas of women's bodies as the site of male domination and oppression as well as a more recent phenomenon of the appropriation of "male" styles of power by which women may "master" themselves (especially their own bodies) and others. In her examination of subversion, Davis argues that women's struggles with cultural gender norms and prescriptive heterosexuality have led some to

active subversion of the norms by embracing queer theory or treating the body as a "statement, text or performance of gender"<sup>41</sup>.

These differing feminist views of the body cannot be mapped precisely onto schools of feminist theology. As critiques of older, patriarchal traditions about the body in Christian theology, they present powerful challenges to those assumptions. They have great potential for doing new theology about the body. It is not important or necessary for the purposes of this thesis that there be one unified voice among feminist theologians on the importance or meaning of the body. What matters here is that the body is itself a core idea and one that generates ongoing debate.

### **6.3 Core ideas in feminist theology: the place of gender**

In the consideration of feminist theology, it is evident that, however central are human experience, women's experience and bodily experience, there is no single unproblematic statement from a feminist viewpoint that can be made on any of these matters. Perhaps the only consensual point to be made is that all of the above matter. All of them figure in feminist theology. From the consideration of experience and particularly of bodily experience, a further core idea is evident. Given the pervasiveness of patriarchy in the historic cultures of the Bible and of Christian traditions down to the present day, it is hard to imagine any view of experience or of the body that is blind to gender. In other words, the bible and the Christian traditions studied by feminist theologians and critics are shown to be a collection of texts constructed and edited by people who made or held

assumptions about the ways things were in their societies and how things should be. For those people, as for us, there could not be a "view from nowhere". No matter how unconscious or how implicit in their texts and other cultural artefacts (painting, songs, statuary, organisation, legal codes etc), they held views and perspectives that shaped the ways they constructed the world around them. This means that their views of God's nature, God's will and God's activity reflect their cultural norms. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, those cultures are predominantly, although not exclusively, ones that take the male as the norm of humanity, and that privilege male over female and masculine over feminine.

It is irrelevant to argue against this that notions of patriarchy and male sexism derive largely from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and should not be applied retrospectively to traditions that reach back more than two thousand years. It may be irrelevant to those writers, editors and other creators: but we who live in the twenty-first century have to take account of what we know here and now, and then make sense of our inheritance. It would be as futile to disregard feminist criticism of earlier Jewish and Christian cultures as it would be to "forget" modern physics and cosmology when approaching the creation myths. Modern science does not, from a Christian standpoint, cancel out Genesis, but it does forbid us to flee from thinking when we come to our religious apprehension.

Feminist critics demonstrate that all human experience is gendered and feminist theologians show how this affects religious belief and behaviour. King, focusing on religion (as distinct from theology), writes about religious experience:

Progress in the study of religion is slow, but there is no doubt that the perspective of gender is of increasing importance in theoretical and empirical studies, not only for the growing number of women scholars, but also for many men.....Until very recently the study of religion has been undertaken in general terms, without specific attention to gender. Now many new questions arise, and new knowledge is discovered in relation to the gendered dimension of religious phenomena.<sup>42</sup>

Later she turns to the methodologies of studies of religion and religious experience and finds that these too are gendered. There are two problems. One is that the subject matter of research is set in an androcentric framework, shaping the task as the researcher attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct the material. The other problem lies with the attitude of the researcher. Scholars, who have been mainly men with androcentric views, have developed methods of study which focus quasi-objectively on texts or the phenomena of experience. Approaches adopted or pioneered by feminist scholars begin with the subjectivity and reflexivity of the scholar herself<sup>43</sup>. Both these problems are addressed by Graham's "feminist pastoral practice".

All forms of *praxis*..... seek in various ways to reappropriate and recast traditional forms of Christian pastoral activity in the name of affirming the full humanity of women and correcting androcentric distortions.<sup>44</sup>

As with the related question of the body, feminist theologians are aware of the debates in feminist circles about what is meant by gender. Some theorists make relatively simple distinctions between gender as a social construction that is mapped on to the body whilst others see sex itself as a cultural phenomenon. These concerns point again to ongoing work in feminist theory that prompts and supports theological reflection in, for example,

the journal *Theology and sexuality*. For the purposes of this thesis, it is concluded that gender is a core idea in feminist theology.

#### **6.4 Core ideas: the personal and the political**

As we saw in the previous chapter, feminism is by definition political. This is true almost regardless of the particular school of feminism or its location on Evans' axis of equality / difference. Even the most liberal (equality) feminist engaged in a campaign for equal pay regardless of sex is committed to a political stance and, presumably, a corresponding activity. By the same token, a liberal feminist focusing on her personal relationships with men is taking a political stand and one whose effects are likely to be felt beyond the boundaries of her personal relationships. That feminism is intrinsically political is yet more evident in the case of, say, cultural feminists where some separation between women and men is likely. The separation of women and men in, for example, political activity is itself political as well as being a defining feature of the personal lives of the women involved. In both instances the matter of the politics is personal in two senses.

First, feminist critics attribute importance to personal and social relationships as political fact and an arena of political commitment and activity that should not be split off into a private zone distinct from the external world. There is a perceptible holism in feminist writing which, with varying emphasis, challenges a once broadly accepted / imposed (and patriarchal) tenet to the effect that there are two spheres of life - the public and the private. Each sphere had its own priorities and each its own morality.

Second, feminist critiques interrogate the agenda of patriarchal politics and propose different agenda. This is likely to be most evident where those critiques arise from socialist or cultural feminism or, indeed, from postmodernist feminism. From any of these viewpoints, it would be important to confront, for example, a politics that purports to be based upon the objective criteria of market forces and global economic factors. Such critics would challenge the reification and essentialism that place "forces" and "factors" above argument and would seek to identify the persons and groups behind the labels. In so doing, they should not be taken as denying the existence of market forces. They would vary as to what course of political action might be taken to deal with them, but would probably agree that it is important to lay them open to scrutiny and to democratic intervention.

## **6.5 Core ideas: confronting patriarchy**

Feminists vary as to the attention they give to the concept - and experience - of patriarchy. The term refers to social constructions of some antiquity that are still pervasive in many areas of life. Liberal feminists are typically more concerned with dealing with the practical consequences of these structures (e .g. denial of access to hitherto male preserves in the field of employment) than they are with the philosophical and psychological existence of a system called patriarchy. More radical feminists are, however, concerned with confronting and, in their different ways, combating it. There are a number of areas where feminist theologians struggle against patriarchy.

One important example of this struggle is their identification of male-as-norm thinking. As the references to King's work in chapter 5 showed, patriarchal forces have dictated both the content and the process of religious studies. One characteristic of patriarchal definition of a discourse is that it takes on a male-as-norm approach. In theology and in religious studies, male-as-norm thinking defines how people (male and female) are believed to have experienced God and are expected to continue to experience God. Judaeo-Christian history has also, in its male-as-norm approach, marginalised and occluded women and their ways of experiencing. In place of a balanced understanding of God and God's creation is a one-sided view in which maleness and a species of alienation are normative.

This alienation can be seen in a number of strands running through biblical stories and acting normatively in Christian culture. One such strand is evident in the Genesis stories of Adam and Eve. Adam blames Eve for his downfall in God's eyes, and the punishment for both Adam and Eve is a species of alienation. Both are dismissed from the garden. Adam is promised a life of hard toil in which he is alienated from a natural order that works against him, and Eve is punished with hard labour of a different kind, one that sets her body against herself. This is the starting point for the human race: at that start, man is already seeing himself as superior to woman and holding her responsible for his experience of alienation.

Some of the atonement theologising of the New Testament builds upon alienation as a given of the human condition. It is argued that, far from being a distortion due to

patriarchal forces, alienation is actually central to human experience. Against such a view, one can argue that Jesus' own spirituality, as demonstrated in the gospels, is the antithesis of alienation. The relationship of this man to *Abba* speaks of relatedness and of intimate connection, not alienation. Even in the desert temptations, Jesus is portrayed as having a sense of connection to *Abba*. Only in the desolation on the cross is there a sense of separation which could properly be called alienation. That one exception, potent and pivotal as it is, must, however, be seen in the context of a lifetime of intimate connection with *Abba* and with others. If, in some sense, Jesus took the weight of human sinfulness on his dying shoulders, then alienation would indeed be the proper name for his consequent experience. Christians who take such a view also tend to believe that it was that alienation which died on the cross and, as a consequence, relatedness, connection and integration came through death and destruction, offering those possibilities to believers now.

Accounts of substitutionary atonement and of "Christ dying for my sins" stand in contrast to a view of Christ as the expression of God's erotic power. Brock, like many feminist theologians, de-emphasises notions of a fallen human nature and corollary doctrines of atonement. She characterises God's activity in human lives as one of reducing alienation, including that of women, children and men<sup>45</sup>.

Another area in which patriarchal and feminist theological ideas differ widely is in reference to notions of God's justice. Both viewpoints see justice as something central to the nature of God and to God's concern for human relating. But the word "justice", its

nature, how it is conceived and how it is expressed, clearly signifies quite different thinking and values. What is noticeably absent in the work of, for example, McFague<sup>46</sup> is a notion of condemnation and resultant alienation as part of God's just judgement. It may be argued that this is unrealistic, and that any act of judgement must carry the threat of alienation, if only as a last resort. Even the wisest mother might end by saying to her child, "if you persist in this destructive activity, you will alienate yourself from me - or me from you". It may therefore be impractical and ultimately false to polarise these two views of justice. One is admittedly masculine and carries patriarchal notions of justice involving punishment and alienation. The other displays the more feminine and conciliatory attitudes of such writers as McFague and Sharon Welch<sup>47</sup>. Perhaps one of the outcomes of confronting patriarchal male-as-norm attitudes is to rescue and, in a new context, rehabilitate elements that are important and, actually, true to life. Alienation may be the end of the line, but in an imperfect world it may have to be the last resort of the processes of justice after attempts at mediation, reparation and reconciliation have failed. This may be the self-selected "hell" inherited by, for example, war criminals who refuse the claims of international justice. It would not be useful to shut one's eyes to such harsh realities and dismiss them as just another example of patriarchal evils, even if the war crimes were shown to be the extreme consequences of patriarchal attitudes and activities.

A further example of feminist theology confronting patriarchy is seen in its approach to theology itself. It is common to find in feminist approaches a holistic vision in which spirituality, politics, daily life and the concerns of the academy are integrated in ways uncommon in the Christian West before the critiques of the liberation theologians and

feminists. Leech comments on this<sup>48</sup> and examples abound, for example in Brock<sup>49</sup> and, in the context of women's discipleship, in Byrne<sup>50</sup>.

However, caution should be observed here. This has been more of a problem in Western theology than in the theology of the Orthodox, although it might be hard to argue that orthodox theology is noticeably less patriarchal than that of the West. It is evident that the integration of daily concerns, of political and economic life, are the bread and butter of pastoral theology. Much as pastoral / practical theology has taken seriously feminist critiques, this has not always been the case, nor is it true that all pastoral theology is feminist theology. What we are left with, therefore, is a recognition that the confrontation of patriarchy is central to feminist theology and that this is one factor in a growing integration of aspects of theology which have been historically divorced in the West.

## **6.6 Core ideas: commitment to change**

Commitment to change is the next core idea to be discussed. Again, caution must be exercised in examining this concept. Feminist theologians do not have a monopoly on change, since a call to change is a starting point for many people coming to Christianity for the first time and is evident in the gospels. Change in the way we view and treat other people is a major theme in Christian thinking. One has only to consider the example of the Clapham sect of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to see that radical change in political and economic activity is part of a lively Christian belief and not only a

feminist concern. Nevertheless, it must be allowed that a commitment to change is also built into feminist theology.

Feminist critiques start with dissatisfaction at the state of society and the world and they offer alternative visions. The degree to which individual feminists are committed to personal engagement must surely vary from person to person, and the kind of changes to which they are committed will vary in accordance with their political and social goals. The essence here is that few feminist critics are likely to be satisfied simply with making (i.e. writing) the point: they themselves or their supporters and followers would expect to enact their visions. It is this idea of practical difference which accounts for the frequent appearance in books of personal narrative (the author's or someone else's experience) of such novel features as exemplary liturgies (as means of expressing perceived spiritual realities), and of references to work with students or in women's groups. Although by no means a universal feature of feminist theological writing, it has become so common that it is easy to forget that, twenty years ago, it would have seemed unusual. It is linked directly to the primacy of experience as epistemology, and it also represents the embodied expectation that doing theology is about making change.

Another example of change oriented theologising is found in a client-first or client-centred pastoral practice<sup>51</sup>. It should not be assumed, however, that all feminists think in this way or that all who think like it are necessarily feminists. Nevertheless, part of the commitment to change in feminist theological thinking is seen in such an approach to pastoral practice.

There are solid reasons why feminist theologians are likely to take such an attitude. First, it is evident from the development of counselling theory and of educational theory that people are able to become self-directed and increasingly autonomous when they learn in ways that respect their experience and personal authority. Second, people develop more strongly and surely when they are encouraged, provoked or otherwise facilitated to unlearn and learn for themselves new ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting.

These two related reasons were axiomatic for the liberation theologians working with oppressed people in Latin America and elsewhere. Many feminist theologians operate along the same lines for the same reasons. Writers who espouse and promote these principles are themselves engaged in learning. Those white feminist writers who came to see that their vision drew on too narrow a sample of the female population of the world, and that there are many constituencies of women with many oppressions illustrate clearly how teachers are also learners. Their commitment to change for white, middle class women became a wider commitment to change for all women, and especially for those who were most oppressed. Such commitment is, in the nature of things, without end: that is to say, its only end can be in the realised rule of God and not in any set of human achievements.

## **6.7 Core ideas: Jesus and the messianic community**

Countryman and Brown both show how the early Christian communities were different from those around them. Brown in particular also shows how those early communities

were similar to the cultures in which they were set. In the tension between similarity and difference, we may find much that is central to early Christian identity. A close reading of Paul and the pseudo-Pauline writings gives insights into this tension. What might otherwise be characterised as Pauline self-contradiction and confusion can be understood as evolving thought over a quarter of a century, and as an attempt to live both in the world as we find it and as God's will might have it be.

Early Christians lived with neighbours and family they had grown up with, and also had to accept that "new birth" might lead to radically transformed social relationships. Examples of these tensions are seen in Pauline arguments over the place of "the flesh" in Christian life. New Testament scholars examine the two "flesh" adjectives Paul uses and suggest that one may be a negative reference to (sinful) flesh while the other may simply suggest "bodily" existence. However, the root problem never was a semantic one. There is a tension in living two lives. It was inevitable, given a philosophical background of neo-platonism and stoicism, that the early Christians struggled with their identity and their discipleship. The same tensions exist today for a number of Christians (and people of other faiths). The attempted resolutions must be thought through, although they are not purely intellectual. The apparent simplicity of a (possibly idealised) messianic community offers guidelines in this complex situation. For a number of feminist theologians, a community which apparently saw itself as a continuing expression of the life, values and will of Jesus after his death is an attractive source of norms and ideals.

The "early church" has traditionally enjoyed high status in Christian circles as a putative source of authenticity. Hampson, as we have seen earlier, regards this as part of the disqualification of the church to speak with authority to women. On the other side, Fiorenza (1983) represents a number of writers who seek to reconstruct the outlines of early communities and to recover their ideas and values. She sees the tension referred to above played out between the messianic community and the settled city / colony churches with their *paterfamilias* leader / presbyter.

Hampson sees the church as a lost cause for women (which makes it, logically speaking, a lost cause for men who are not satisfied with the hegemony of patriarchy). Fiorenza sees it as an institution containing within it an ongoing struggle between the forces of institutionalisation and those of the radical dynamics of the messianic community. Fiorenza, Ruether, and Heyward<sup>52</sup> not only believe in the ideas and ideals they attribute to Jesus and the early Christian communities: they seek to enact those ideas, and to create alternatives to what they have inherited. However, their inspiration remains an abstraction - from the gospels, the prophetic writings, parts of the Pauline *corpus* and what can be deduced from contemporary literature.

This reservation about the messianic community and about what can be known about Jesus is, however, a reservation that must also be acknowledged in relation to pre-feminist or non-feminist traditions. "Received" ideas about, for example, the church, its leadership and the place of women have no greater intrinsic authority than feminist ones. Their proponents may claim that their ideas are somehow more obvious, but this

argument is quickly countered by considering that what we have "received" is text and every text has its author and editors. Each author and editor has his (in this case, most usually and tellingly, "his") context and these contexts cannot be neutral. In the end, what matters most is not whether feminist critics are telling us exactly what Jesus and his early followers were like, but whether their intellectual and moral coherence is as great as, or greater than, that of their opponents as both parties wrestle with the traditions.

In this light we may understand Brock's feminist christology with its grounding in a distinctively feminist notion of *eros* (discussed in chapter 5). As we have seen, she is not unique in this: Heyward's work offers radical ideas for the transformation of pastoral practice, especially as she relates it to interpersonal relations in the context of therapy and healing<sup>53</sup>. Brock develops the feminine idea of playful *eros* in contradistinction to the more masculine idea of *logos* (word) with its overtones of reason and logic. Again, we see a theologian wrestling not with diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive entities. Her Christ is not one opposed to *logos*, but one who incorporates the warning of the poet Auden: "the Word was made flesh and we have made him Word again". This christological idea links clearly to that of embodiment discussed above.

It is also important to notice that messianic ideas in feminist theology are frequently corporate ones, i.e. they are founded in communities and groups. This is most obvious perhaps in the work of writers such as Hellwig (referred to in chapter 5) who offers the image of a Christa community. But it is also clear from the work of more mainstream feminist theologians such as Ruether that it is the community founded by or arising from

the ministry of Jesus which offers models that are potent for Christians today. These models are potent in two senses which reflect the content / methodology interconnection: what the community believes, lives and teaches is important for the disciple today; and the fact of these dynamics arising in and extending from a community suggests strongly that disciples today are / should be in communities. There is also a strong inference that what was transmitted by those early communities arose from their experience which has today a self-authenticating quality. Just as the *comunidades de base* (base communities) found the courage to speak the prophetic texts for themselves (in their Latin American context), so women in community may find a similar courage to regulate themselves by what they understand of the messianic community and to become themselves self-authenticating.

In summary, we may conclude that the person of Jesus remains problematic for some feminist theologians. The fact of his maleness constitutes a difficulty for some, while for others the difficulty lies in what Christians have done about or to his maleness. Whatever the difficulties, the messianic community as a sign of God's will and God's rule may be important, in part because it offers models for community now and in part because it opens up the messianic function from the individual to the group.

## **6.8 Core ideas: God/dess**

As discussed in chapter 5, a few feminist theological critics have abandoned notions of God on the grounds that God-talk, like Jesus-talk, has been irretrievably compromised by

the forces of patriarchal hegemony and male oppression. Others, perhaps the majority of those who write theologically, have uncovered or recovered understandings of the divine characterised by the freshness that can accompany a religious revival. McFague, Hellwig Brock, Heyward, Jantzen, are among those who have engaged in re-imagining or re-imagining what has been referred to as God.

These are images that arise out of both positive and negative feminist criticism. Positive criticism includes the identification, for example by Old and New Testament scholars, of aspects of the divine that offer to women and / or to all people a message of hope and affirmation. We have seen, for example in section 6.5, how the prophetic notion of justice is important for any community that has experienced expropriation and oppression. It is one that offers to people the dignity of humanity as made in the image of God. Negative criticism indicates the process whereby "traditional" imagery that is oppressive of women and other people is rejected. Fiorenza was candid in her view that whatever affronts human worth and dignity, no matter how revered it has been, should be discarded.

Jantzen shows how many of the oppressive and dehumanising aspects of belief in the divine rest upon a fundamental philosophical basis<sup>54</sup>. Her views, though not necessarily shared in detail by all feminist theologians, represent a negative criticism of "mainstream" western philosophy of religion, and her positive construction of an alternative basis for such philosophy is representative of a radical feminist approach to the subject. In some ways her approach is similar to that of Mary Daly in the USA. The nub of her argument is that we have all inherited a philosophy based upon our mortality,

i.e. it is focused on the certainty that we shall all die. Whilst this assertion is obviously true, it has profound implications. Suppose, says Jantzen, our understanding of God arose from the equally obvious assertion that we are all born, what then? On this simple but profound premise, she constructs a life-affirming theology of relatedness. In this she parallels the work of Brock, Heyward, Hellwig and McFague. Moreover, not only in her title - *Becoming divine* - but also in the direction of her argument, she resonates with some aspects of (eastern) orthodox theology regarding the divinisation of our humanity in what the west refers to as the life of grace.

Overall, Jantzen's God is a God of life, love and relatedness. Gone are notions of fallen humanity (though necessary understandings of human sin and alienation remain). The price paid for the construction of such a theo-logy is that much theological work of previous centuries (including Augustinian and Thomist ideas thought by many to be essential to Christian theology) are sidelined or rejected. Hampson, in discussing the place of the Bible in Christian sensibility and praxis, noted how Christians so often refer to the Bible as though finding support for their life choices there would make it alright and not finding that support would seriously undermine one's position.

The same principle must be extended to some of the work of the Church Fathers and to later generations of theologians. There are choices to be made. If we stand by our trust in the God whom Jantzen indicates, then we cannot (and presumably would not wish to) have the God whom we inherited from the Church of, say, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nor should we imagine that such choices are new: the Reformation

process, whatever else it entailed, put people in similar positions of choice. It seems that what Jantzen confronts us with is one further example of a process, often unacknowledged, which has always been present, though not always so starkly put.

Another important feature of feminist theology includes a sense of God as one whose incarnate or immanent presence is such that this God may be described as "reflexive" - at least in relation to the cosmos and to people and other beings within that cosmos. What is referred to may not, by its very nature, be reduced to a list of categories or attributes. The term signifies something richly nuanced which includes dimensions of transcendence and of immanence, of spirit and embodiment, of justice and of mercy, of co-inherence and, in the strictest sense of the words, sympathy and empathy. The suffering of the cosmos is God's suffering and the evolution of the cosmos may also be the evolution of the divine<sup>55</sup>. The inclusiveness of divine reflexivity is the counterpart of a more analytic approach to theology that distinguishes, divides and classifies.

Important for the thesis, as one further feature of the divine in feminist theology, is the transcendence of gender categories. Most theologians of any description would probably agree that, in God, notions of male and female have very little meaning since they relate to plants and animals. They might further agree that masculine and feminine qualities may equally be attributed to God. However, it is evident that such agreements have not been such as to subvert historic patriarchal attitudes and policies. Saying that masculine and feminine are likewise subsumed into the divine has in reality meant that the masculine has subsumed and even suppressed the feminine. A number of feminist

theologians have worked at this aspect of re-imagining the divine, hence the reference in the title of this section to God/dess. These (in Christian circles) neologisms are part of an attempt to redress a balance brought about by a patriarchal hegemony. They arise out of a lived experience in which women have been unable to see themselves as made in the image of a God who is presented by the church and by its theologies as something ineffably male.

Feminist images are projected out of women's consciousness and self-consciousness. Attacks such as Oddie's<sup>56</sup> on these images are not to be taken at face value. Oddie wishes to know what will become of God, by which he means the God about whom he has learned through theologies steeped in patriarchal assumptions. Where he has a stronger case is in his recognition that a God who has no connection with the male half of the human population of this planet is also not sufficiently rounded to meet (the needs of) God's people. This has, of course, been the experience of women for centuries. Oddie is also incorrect in his sense that this is a new development. The history of women in the church contains a number of examples of such re-imagining<sup>57</sup>, and he is mistaken if he believes that the "traditional" images arose by any other means, except that the image makers were men.

One further point needs to be made with specific reference to God as imaged by feminist theologians, and it concerns Evans' axis of equality and difference. If God does in some sense transcend our humanity and the kinds of distinctions that are fundamentally important to us, then presumably God contains or subsumes both difference and equality.

One way of expressing this is to imagine that God is different to God, i.e. contains difference. Of course, one can only write this from a human perspective. But one can imagine that God "is" both father and mother. The word "is" is in inverted commas as a warning about reification into some essentialist view of the divine<sup>58</sup>. By the same token, one can imagine a God who subsumes equality into the divine in the sense that without the justice and right dealing entailed in notions of equality, there would not be God.

This interest in what might be called the nature of God is not of universal concern among feminist theologians. It is naturally particularly important with philosophers of religion such as King, Daly and Jantzen. The ground of their work is in the relationship between what women and other people experience, need and hope for, as well as in what may or may not be revealed or otherwise presented in experience. The issue may therefore be seen as one of realism *vs.* non-realism, or of psychology and metaphysics. In what sense is the God in whom Oddie believes real? Is this the sense in which the God imagined by McFague is real? All theologians ultimately base their understanding of the divine on the resolution of the question about the nature of what we experience. It is noticeable that those theologians whose awareness is formed by postmodern perspectives (e.g. Cupitt<sup>59</sup>) or (post-)liberationist perspectives (e.g. Matthew Fox<sup>60</sup>) share much with more radical feminist writers, whereas those who wish to re-assert "traditional" metaphysical views (e.g. Millbank<sup>61</sup>) seem least sympathetic to feminist perspectives.

## 6.9 Conclusion

This chapter examines core ideas found in feminist theology. The purpose of this task is to provide an academic basis on which to establish the practical-values of feminist theology. The discussion centres around the place of experience; the body as a specific of feminist epistemology; the place of gender; the personal and the political; confronting patriarchy; commitment to change; Jesus and the messianic community; and God / dess. The sections analysing these ideas illustrate the diversity and conflict inherent both in feminist theories underlying the theology and also between feminist theologians. This diversity and conflict can be understood both in terms of the schools of feminism discussed in the preceding chapter and as theological conflicts.

In the following chapter, the practical-values of feminist theology and of gestalt are drawn out from these core ideas. This is done in such a way that the practical-values may be compared and their compatibility assessed.

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<sup>1</sup> Hampson (1990) p.170.

<sup>2</sup> Tribble (1984); Fiorenza (1983) and HEYWARD, C. *The redemption of God: a theology of mutual relation* New York: University Press of America, 1982 are examples here.

<sup>3</sup> Loades (1990, pp.21-22) describes Tribble's methods and her belief that the intentionality of the Bible is neither to create nor perpetuate patriarchy, but to point to salvation for women and men. Elsewhere, Loades (p.193) quotes Mary Daly regarding Tribble's attempts to discover a bible free of patriarchal teaching: "It might be interesting to speculate upon the probable length of a 'depatriarchalized Bible'. Perhaps there would be enough salvageable material to comprise an interesting pamphlet."

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- 4 CRAVEN, T. "Tradition and convention in the book of Judith" *In* Loades (1990), pp.29-40. PLASKOW, J. "Bringing a daughter into the covenant" *In* CHRIST, C. & PLASKOW, J (eds.) *Womanspirit rising: a feminist reader in religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979, pp.179-184 cites Hannah, Sarah, Deborah and others in a girl's *brit milah*.
- 5 Reuther (1983), p.23.
- 6 *Ibid* p.32. The current arguments between OT scholars regarding the historicity and dating of the relevant books do not detract from this point which is expressed as it is for the sake of simplicity.
- 7 *Ibid* pp.32-33.
- 8 Fiorenza (1983), p.17.
- 9 To ask this question raises another about what type of meaning is intended. The meaningful ascriptions of liturgy are perhaps comparable to those of poetry, but systematic or philosophical theologians might regard such usages as having little meaning.
- 10 ARMSTRONG, K. "The acts of Paul and Thecla" *In* Loades (1990), pp.83-88 writes about this relationship.
- 11 HEINE, S. *Women and early Christianity: are the feminist scholars right?* London: SCM, 1987, p.129 refers to the apocryphal Gospel of Philip.
- 12 Two examples of this position may be seen in MILNE, P J. "The patriarchal stamp of scripture: the implications of structuralist analyses for feminist hermeneutics" *In The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5:17-34 (1989) especially the last page; and Hampson (1990), especially p.5 :". Christianity is a religion of revelation with a necessary foot in history. It cannot lose that reference so long as it remains Christianity. And that reference is to a patriarchal history".
- 13 SCOTT, J.W. "Experience" *In* BUTLER, J & SCOTT, J.W. (eds). *Feminists theorize the political*. London: Routledge, 1992, p.25.
- 14 NELSON, J.B. *Embodiment: an approach to sexuality and Christian theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, p.41.
- 15 *Ibid*.
- 16 BULTMANN, R (trans. Grobel, K). *Theology of the New Testament, Vol.1*. London: SCM Press, 1952, pp.192-203 & 239-243. ROBINSON, J A T. *The body: a study in Pauline theology*. London: SCM Press, 1952.
- 17 Nelson, *op cit*, pp.47-48.
- 18 *Ibid* pp.52-53.
- 19 *Ibid*, p.111, also pp.53 *et seq*.
- 20 CAIRD, G B. *The gospel of Saint Luke*. Pelican New Testament Commentaries, London: Penguin Books, 1963, p.30.
- 21 The same argument applies *a fortiori* to Matthew's choice of language.
- 22 Kristeva understands the linguistic "error" and comments that it allows for the projection of material connected with matriarchy and mother-goddess from the Indo-European civilisations (Moi, 1986, pp.163-166).
- 23 The precise dating is not of direct relevance for present purposes. What does matter is that the gospel with its particular emphases on matters such as virginity emanates

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from a Christian community or communities in the eastern Mediterranean in the late first century CE. Brown discusses Luke's gospel and Marcion, *op cit* pp.87 *et seq.*

24 Caird *op cit*, p.33, offers a note on Marcion and his use of Luke.

25 Brown discusses Marcion (*op cit* pp.88 *et seq.*) and Tatian (pp.92 *et seq.*). He also makes frequent links between prophetic ministry in the early church and sexual abstinence (e.g. chapter 2).

26 For example 1 Cor. 7 1-16; 22-39 regarding sexual abstinence and continence.

27 For example 1 Tim. 5: 9-16 regarding widows and "gadding" women.

28 Brown *op cit* pp.197-202.

29 The name Enkratite is derived from the Greek *encrateia* (continence). COUNTRYMAN, L.W. *Dirt, greed and sex: sexual ethics in the New Testament and their implications for today.* London: SCM, 1989, pp.138 *et seq.*; Nelson (1978) pp.50 *et seq.* and Brown *op cit* pp.92-102 discuss this phenomenon.

30 There were also young men who made the same renunciation. The evidence Brown offers suggests that there were, however, more women than men involved in this movement and that, for women, it represented a liberating contradiction of a cultural norm in a way it could not for men.

31 1 Tim 5:9.

32 Brown, *op cit* p.146 *et seq.*

33 *Ibid* p 148.

34 Brown *op cit* pp.103-121, cites Valentinus during the Alexandrian phase of his career 138-166 CE.

35 *Ibid* pp.105-106. It was important then as now to church leaders (of what was referred to as the Great Church) and to small group leaders that they should maintain a close relationship. These relationships consisted in maintaining a marked degree of orthodoxy of belief and practice.

36 STUART, E. "Sexuality: the view from the font (the body and the ecclesial self)" *In Theology and Sexuality* 11 Sept 1999, pp.9-20, spells out in modern catholic theological terms the basis of such a radical view, though without commending sexual renunciation. The example of the gnostic groups highlights the difficulty of such studies. Thus it would be a mistake to regard these groups as merely anti-sexual because that is to ignore the historical context that gave them their meaning. Origen's self-castration was viewed by his contemporaries as the act of an awesome Christian teacher: the same act by a man in an English cathedral in the 1960s was regarded as psychotic.

37 Brock *op cit* p.82.

38 IRIGARAY, L. (edited by Whitford, M). *The Irigaray Reader.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p.208.

39 DAVIS, K (ed). *Embodied practices: feminist perspectives on the body.* London: SAGE, 2001, pp.7 *et seq.*

40 *Ibid* p.9.

41 *Ibid* p.13.

42 King (1995) p.5.

43 *Ibid* pp.21-22.

44 Graham (1996) p.172.

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45 Brock (1991), pp.55 *et seq.*  
46 This was discussed in section 5.4 and footnote 5.59  
47 WELCH, S.D. *A feminist ethic of risk*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990: especially  
48 "the erotics of domination", and "the valorization of absolute power" pp.111-122.  
49 Reference was made in the section 5.6 and note 5.76.  
50 *op cit* ch.1 and especially p.5.  
51 Byrne (1988) ch.1.  
52 E.g. Graham & Halsey (1993), pp.220 *et seq.*  
53 Heyward (1982), pp.9 *et seq.*  
54 HEYWARD, C. *Touching our strength: the erotic as power and the love of God*.  
55 New York: HarperCollins / HarperSanFrancisco, 1989, especially ch.6.  
56 Jantzen (1998).  
57 Such are ideas are not entirely novel and can be found, for example, in ROBINSON,  
58 J.A.T. *Exploration into God*, London: SCM, 1967.  
59 ODDIE, W., *What will happen to God? Feminism and the reconstruction of*  
60 *Christian belief*. London: SPCK, 1984.  
61 This point was argued in chapter 5 by reference to the work of Bynum who includes  
instances of men using feminine divine imagery. Mechthild, Hildegard of Bingen and  
Julian of Norwich all use feminine imagery of Jesus and thus, by implication, of  
God.  
62 McFague (1987), p.121 *et seq.*  
63 E.g. Cupitt (1980) and Cupitt (1998) referred to in ch.1, note 14.  
64 Fox shows clearly how he has absorbed the teachings of earlier writers, e.g. his  
fellow Dominican Herbert McCabe or the Jesuit Jon Sobrino and has integrated their  
work in, for example, *Original blessing*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co, 1983 and  
*Hildegard of Bingen book of divine works (with letters and songs)*. (same publisher),  
1987.  
65 Millbank, J. *The word made strange: theology, language, culture*. Oxford: Blackwell,  
1997, takes a wider view of philosophical theology and, in particular, of theories  
about language and epistemology. In so doing, he seeks to deal with the critiques that  
have led the likes of Hick and Jantzen to their (very different) conclusions, and, in  
the process, re-creates a new orthodoxy. This can be described as a new realism  
(often referred to as "new orthodoxy") in the sense that it posits, behind theological  
language and prior to it, a reality which precedes everything. This position is  
summarised in Millbank, J. "Postmodern critical Augustinianism: a short *Summa* in  
forty-two responses to unasked questions" *In* Ward, G (ed). *The postmodern God: a*  
*theological reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p.265, answer 2.

## COMPARING PRACTICAL-VALUES

### 7 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to establish that a particular school of psychotherapeutic psychology - gestalt - is compatible with the theological discipline of feminist theology. It seeks to establish this compatibility on the basis of practical-values. Part One of the thesis concerns the theory and practice of gestalt therapy and the analysis of its core ideas. Part Two examines feminist Christian theology with a view to analysing its core ideas. In each case, the examination shows that neither gestalt nor feminist theology is a simple or single discipline with a single set of ideas. Each discipline has complex origins and each speaks with many voices. Yet in each case, it is possible to analyse core ideas that represent the range of theory and practice. These core ideas are more than mere ideas: the rhetorical mode of their proponents and a careful reading of their content suggest that they are value-laden ideas. Each discipline has practical-values, which is to say that these are the values that inform the ways in which people live and practise within those spheres. Practical-values are closely related to the core ideas that are analysed in chapters 4 and 6.

In the present chapter (the first half of Part Three), practical-values are deduced or drawn out from the core ideas so that they may be compared, and an assessment made of their compatibility. This leads on to a statement of the conclusions of the thesis in chapter 8. It is shown that, on the basis of their practical-values, gestalt and feminist theology are compatible disciplines and therefore appropriate partners in interdisciplinary work.

In order to pursue the question of compatibility it is necessary to ask whether or not comparing gestalt with theology is comparing like with like. To accomplish that, we have first to ask whether or not gestalt and theology are systems of the same order. It is evident from earlier chapters regarding their philosophical backgrounds that each offers not just a world-view but a complex range of such views. These take in the minutiae of everyday life as well as the great questions about what it is to be human, to live in relationship and to be part of the cosmos. The point about the scope of disciplines involved in interdisciplinary work is a fundamental consideration. Had it been demonstrated, for example, that gestalt is simply a set of techniques useful in counselling practice, it would be of only limited use to enquire whether or not it is compatible with feminist theology. Such a question would, in those circumstances, be no more than a question of practical ethical standards. The comparison of gestalt and theology contained in this thesis is less straightforward, but much more promising in its outcomes.

With the assurance that these are two disciplines of a similar order or scope, the next question is to define an approach to the matter of their compatibility. This is done with Pattison's warning in mind regarding the selection of suitable partners for interdisciplinary work<sup>1</sup>. It might be possible to begin the task with, for example, some definitions, or with some indication of their histories. Whilst it becomes clear in this chapter that historical coincidence plays an important part in assessing compatibility, there are more obviously functional indicators for this project. In examining the core ideas analysed from the two disciplines, it is evident that each relies so much on, and refers so much to, human experience, that it is both more obvious and more useful to consider how each functions in the communities that most often use it.

We see in chapter 4 that, although there is no gestalt *credo*, there are core ideas that are central to gestalt. Each of those ideas contains within it, often implicitly, assumptions about values. These too are not spelled out in a credal statement. They are found in the theory and practice of gestalt. They can be deduced in practice, but are more than operant assumptions of simply technical interest. These values are not proclaimed in therapeutic, educational or managerial dialogue. They are usually implicit in any such dialogue. It is useful to think of them as values that are of practical significance - of significance in practice. They are therefore referred to as "practical-values". It will be necessary to consider only those practical-values that are explicit, i.e. are readily supported both in practice and text<sup>2</sup>.

In the following sections of this chapter the question of compatibility is explored by deducing or drawing out, comparing and discussing the practical-values entailed in each discipline. In section 7.1, the practical-values derived from the place of experience in both disciplines are identified and compared. Here it is possible to see a direct correspondence between core idea and practical-value, a one on one correlation. In some of the practical-values that follow, the correlation becomes more complex as practical-values are deduced from a number of core ideas. In the following section (7.2), there is a discussion of the practical-values associated with body / mind / spirit holism and with feminist understandings of embodiment. Section 7.3 examines the value aspects of feminist understandings about gender and seek correspondence and support in gestalt theory and practice. Links between the personal and the political form the focus of section 7.4 where practical-values are derived from both disciplines as they relate to these issues. Practical-values are defined that relate to the personal / political / theological on the one hand and personal

/ interpersonal / political on the other hand. The practical-values associated with a commitment to change are compared in the next section (section 7.5). These differ as between gestalt and feminist theology, but it is evident that the different perspectives do not undermine their intrinsic compatibility. Section 7.6 opens with the juxtaposition of feminist theologians' interest in the messianic community and the gestalt commitment to here and now. There is no suggestion that these core ideas are one and the same, but the practical-values derived from these disparate sources are compared and shown to be compatible. In section 7.7, the place of God/ess and the gestalt understanding of response-ability are taken as starting points. The associated practical-values are drawn out and compared: from this comparison emerges their compatibility.

In the conclusion to this chapter (section 7.8) there is a summary indicating both the coincidences of practical-values between the two disciplines and also some of the divergences between them. This summary leads into the final chapter of the thesis with its review of the thesis, statement of conclusions, and indications of areas for further research.

### **7.1 Practical values: the place of experience**

Chapters 4 and 6 respectively show that each of the two disciplines takes the notion of human experience as a foundation for its epistemology. Although it must be acknowledged that such reliance is to a degree problematic, it remains the case that the truth claims of gestalt and of feminist theology rest upon human experience. In both cases, that may include experience of whatever transcends our humanity, and that too may be problematic. In this section, the focus

shifts away from experience itself and turns to the values that arise from or are contained in such a core idea. The emphasis here and in subsequent sections is on the importance of such values for the people who live them in practice. It is this practical rather than purely theoretical approach which gives rise to the term practical-value. The term also echoes the frequent use by a number of feminist writers of the words practice and *praxis* - again with a focus on lived ideas (conscious or otherwise) rather than purely intellectual constructs of belief and value. For Graham, "practice" refers to what we do and what we experience whether as participants in human cultures generally or in Christian circles in particular. In paying attention to practice we may discover that "symbolic and material reality is both mediated and reconstituted"<sup>3</sup>. Experience, from this perspective, is active as well as passive and is reflexive. In developing a theology of practice, Graham focuses on human experience in order to identify both "sources" ("various authoritative and definitive resources which inform theological discourse and practice") and "norms" ("...the principles upon which sources are designated authoritative and binding")<sup>4</sup>. Her sources and norms are derived from a number of liberation, feminist and narrative theologies: what is significant for the present argument is that all of these arise directly from human experience.

The prime importance of experience as the basis of knowledge in gestalt, i.e. as having epistemological status, is evidenced in frequent statements concerning its phenomenological nature<sup>5</sup>, and in the original practice (practical) demonstrations of gestalt therapy by Perls<sup>6</sup>.

The German philosophers who began the earliest discussions about gestalt (and who are discussed in Part One of the thesis) were familiar with Schleiermacher's emphasis upon the

experiencing subject in the face of the experienced object. Schleiermacher's interest arose from his concern with how Christian people could connect directly with what was in the biblical texts. For him, the business of understanding the bible became a matter of interpreting and appropriating scripture. He moved the burden of the text from words and ideas "out there" to a concern for how a Christian lives her life in practice. This combination of simultaneous modification of the subject / object relationship and practical appropriation informed gestalt philosophy and was ultimately appropriated by the founders of gestalt therapy.

Although one could say that most therapists - not just gestaltists - are dealing with little except human experience, gestalt has a particular history in the way it has placed the subject at the centre of her experiential universe. In the films of early gestalt workshops and in the literature from Perls (1976) onwards, the patient is asked time and again, "What do you feel / see / hear / imagine?" Each person is discouraged from interpreting these experiences. They are encouraged to let them be what they are - statements announcing raw experience. They may then, perhaps, want to respond to them or to express some emotion connected with them. Each person is also encouraged to trust that experience. Therein lies one of the problems about experience as epistemology that is common both to gestalt and to feminist theology.

Because of the fundamental importance of the practical-value concerning experience as epistemology, the problem is discussed here in some detail. It is epitomised by the crisis that occurred in psychotherapeutic and counselling circles in the 1990s when a growing number of allegations were made by people who claimed to have "recovered memories" of childhood sexual

abuse. There were critics who insisted that these allegations were, in some instances, not based on memories. Such critics maintained that some (perhaps most) of the allegations were the fantasies of neurotic people, or were the products of therapeutic conversations in which ideas about abuse were either implanted or confirmed by therapists. However, much public sympathy, as well as professional opinion, tended to favour the account of the person with the memories. The issue was plainly a sensitive and painful matter for many people. Underlying it were two non-therapeutic issues that were frequently confused in the minds of commentators and in the public media. These were the status of memory as a part of human experience, and, in consequence, the veridical status of memory generally.

The status of memory is the more readily resolved issue. Memory, in the usage of clinical psychology, is shorthand for a series of neurological systems (usually thought to number four) that performs a complex range of functions. One aspect (or, perhaps, construction) of this complex function is a sense of personal history, i.e. of being a person who has a history. That leads on to the second, and more controversial, issue. The psychological disciplines had barely recovered in the 1990s from the arguments over Freud's treatment of reports of childhood sexual abuse, when the arguments raged again. At the heart of them was the concern, referred to above, not to ignore memories of great suffering (hitherto suppressed), whilst also exercising caution in ascribing evidential weight to what might be imaginative retrospective creations based upon a sense that all was not well. The balance of psychological opinion on the issue (rather than on specific cases) was that people can and do create memories that are important to them - but which are factually inaccurate. The extent of such inaccuracy is usually minor and commonplace. Most

people have had the experience of recounting clear memories of childhood only to have them either radically modified or even flatly contradicted by others who were involved and who have no interest in the accuracy or otherwise of the memory. For example, "No, it was Auntie Ellen who gave you the teddy, not your Aunt Kathy". It is reasonable to suppose that similar mistakes of identity can occur where the psychological investment is greater: and it is also reasonable to suppose that the event itself can be mistaken. For example, "No, it wasn't a teddy, it was a monkey", or even "No, your aunts never gave you any presents". By extension, objects and events of greater import can be confused in memory.

Some of these problems about memory have significant judicial implications, for example regarding the appearance and thus the identity of offenders. We can believe sincerely that we remember the face and demeanour of a person even if it is later proven that we are mistaken. Some of the most poignant examples of this debate were in trials of alleged World War Two war criminals in the late twentieth century: a few trials resulted in great hurt from stirred up memories which the courts decided were either unreliable or simply inaccurate. What is at stake in such trials, beside the guilt or otherwise of the accused, is the status of the "experience" of people who suffered terribly and, with it, their self-image as persons whose sense of being persons is tied to their belief in their memories.

Although memory is only one aspect of experience, i.e. it relates to experience in the recent or distant past, it is crucial to our understanding of the status of experience generally. Some people are able to live comfortably with the belief that their memories have some basis in fact ("shared

reality", might be a more useful concept) but with the understanding that those memories may differ from the memories of others who claim to have lived through the same experiences. Such people are unlikely to become emphatic in their claims to factuality or objectivity. For most, our memories - except when they feel hazy - feel like an accurate and reliable source of data about the real world. They are the basis upon which we operate. And yet our memories are, in large part, stories we have told ourselves, and, moreover, which we re-write with surprising frequency and with large revisions.

So far as feminist theology is concerned, these considerations bear directly upon the status accorded to the experience of women in or at the hands of the church. The literature on this subject includes critical views of the ways in which the church has dealt with women throughout its history and continues in some measure to behave today, e.g. the Church of England's reception and treatment of its women priests. Feminist theology has played its part in modifying belief and practice in the church. However, because of the oppressive nature of their experience, many women have no interest in a theological viewpoint: it is at best an irrelevance and even an offence<sup>7</sup>. However, Hampson's challenge about what or whose experience forms the basis of feminist theology, reminds us that it is insufficient to speak in an unqualified way about experience.

Some feminists have used their (and other women's) experience of the church and of theology to construct feminist theologies. They come at this project from one of two directions. These can be seen as positive and negative in their method. The first takes the form of pooling and then

extending ideas that crystallise out of narrative, especially out of stories about the lives of women and their reflections on their lives. Loades (1990) give a number of such accounts. Ruth Page's account of Elizabeth Cady Stanton<sup>8</sup> epitomises this approach, and there are other examples by Phyllis Tribble<sup>9</sup>, Toni Craven<sup>10</sup> and Nicola Slee<sup>11</sup>.

The negative approach involves deconstructing the dominant traditions. From these ruins arise other versions of events and ideas, frequently attenuated, and often the subject of imaginative reconstruction in the face of earlier attempts to suppress a tradition. This process of recreating an occluded tradition is seen in feminist approaches to biblical hermeneutics, and it allows women's experience once more to be read in the pages of the Bible. Fiorenza's (1983) book is an extended example of this recreation, and the work continues in Fiorenza's (1994) work of biblical hermeneutics<sup>12</sup>. Other examples include Ruether (1983)<sup>13</sup>, Karen Armstrong<sup>14</sup>, Sallie McFague<sup>15</sup> and Beverly Wildung Harrison<sup>16</sup>. It should be noted that some of these writers adopt both positive and negative approaches at different times.

It is evident from these references that feminist theology, like gestalt, rests upon philosophical presuppositions or axioms about the primacy of experience. However, this reliance requires some qualification. Each discipline is open to the charge that what is held is (merely) the subjective experience of a group of people. Such criticisms, exemplified by Oddie (1984), are founded on the notion that the experience of a group of people is to be contrasted (unfavourably and unreliably) with "truth" or even "revealed truth", i.e. truth owing its origin in some direct way to God. However, from the perspective of many feminist theologians and from that of gestaltists

(and others in scientific disciplines), truths can never be more than provisional<sup>17</sup>. All that is required for a re-think is the assertion by another community or group that they have a different experience and understanding. For the gestaltist, this process of bringing together conflicting experiences and integrating them into a new synthesis is simply a continuation of the process whereby a *Gestalt* undergoes deconstruction and dissolves into the field, out of which new *Gestalten* will eventually emerge taking new data into account. This has been demonstrated in the feminist field also. For example, the womanist<sup>18</sup> critique showed that received feminist ideas had been limited by the experiences of too narrow a community. The old, however temporary, certainties collapsed and the view taken subsequently (the new *Gestalt*) has begun to take its place. The reliance on human experience as basis for our epistemology favours or even requires, a dialectical and provisional stance regarding truth and certainty, whether in the field of gestalt or of feminist theology.

This practical-value may be summarised by reference to how people (from whatever discipline) live. It is in our daily lives that we have to base our epistemology upon experience. Living on this basis means that we live with a recognition that our "truths" are of necessity conditional or provisional. They are, however, the most reliable basis we can establish.

## **7.2 Practical values: holism and embodiment**

This second practical-value concerns the integrity of human nature and our embodiment. As we saw in sections 3.3 and 4.4, Perls was influenced by the notion of holism expounded by Smuts

and also by the teaching of Reich (section 3.4). From a gestalt perspective, it is axiomatic that we are embodied.

Health is an appropriate balance of the coordination of all of what we *are*. You notice that I emphasized a few times the word *are*, because the very moment we say we *have* an organism or we *have* the body, we introduce a split - as if there's an *I* that is in possession of the body or the organism. We *are* a body, we *are* somebody...<sup>19</sup>

Yontef's articulations of gestalt therapy are more developed and extend Perls' view of human embodiment. He states at one point that "In Gestalt therapy, metabolism is used as a metaphor for psychological functioning"<sup>20</sup>. In practice, this is more than metaphor. The distinction between signifier and signified diminishes because the psychological processes which Yontef describes are also physical ones, integrated in the body. Yontef shares Perls' sense of our embodied humanity, and that sense is encompassed in the gestalt notion of holism<sup>21</sup>.

By holism ... Perls referred to the whole being greater than a sum of the parts, to the unity of the human organism, and to the unity of the entire organism / environment field. He regarded Gestalt therapy as correcting psychoanalysis' error in treating psychological events as isolated facts apart from the organism....<sup>22</sup>

Section 4.4 demonstrates that the "spirit" element of the mind / body / spirit unity is a feature that later gestaltists recognise. That recognition has its problems, notably those of reification and the risk of alienation from the process orientation that Perls propounded. What is important at this point in the argument is to note that the assumption of holism in human nature is as much a value statement as an ontological one. The alienation of one of these "elements" of our nature constitutes ill-health for the individual and thus for her community. There are undoubtedly situations where an ability to split off our emotions from our thinking (e.g. when a doctor is

engaged in surgery) is useful, but this is an example of a functional "detachment" rather than a neurotic one.

Similar concerns for an integration of thinking and feeling are linked to the importance of embodiment in feminist theology. Theology too has traditionally been comfortable with body imagery. The image of Body is a major strand in Paul's understanding of the Church. At the same time the framework of body theology has been androcentric. Much pastoral teaching and practice has been about controlling the body / our bodies. Even the governance of the church has, in practice, been about the control of the body by its head(s)<sup>23</sup>. An alternative and arguably less androcentric approach might have been to trust the body to be a self-regulating organism operating in an environment in a homeostatic fashion. Yet neither in church governance nor in pastoral practice have such views figured large. Graham notes how social theorists increasingly refer to the human body but nevertheless fall into the trap of abstraction to the point where the body itself becomes another abstraction. Section 6.2 illustrates how feminist theorists have adopted a range of positions regarding the body: it is evident that they raise important issues for our culture and for our politics. In the context of pastoral theology, Graham urges that we "remain concrete" regarding not "the" body but "my / our bodies". These "crucial actors" influence profoundly our activities and relationships, and this holds true for all our historical and cultural contexts including religion and theology<sup>24</sup>.

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel articulates a specific theology of embodiment and offers this definition of her subject:

A theology of embodiment does not seek to outline a new theology, but it does seek to open up a forgotten place which is important today, from which there can be theological thought and action: the human body. It seeks to draw attention to our origin, to the fact that we are born from mothers, a fact which is constantly forgotten in a culture of fathers but which shapes us all our lives, whether we are women or men.<sup>25</sup>

She asserts that "the human body is repressed and misused in the Western Christian tradition".

This misuse is not uniform as between the sexes, since "woman's full personhood has been denied her on the basis of her body" whereas "man's body has been glorified, made a norm, instrumentalized and also misused". She links the ways in which bodies are represented in our culture to body ideals and to our understanding of achievement. She sees a contradiction between these observable experiences and the Christian conviction that, no matter how absurd or scandalous it may seem, God became incarnate. This leads her to offer a negative criticism of much that is basic to earlier theology<sup>26</sup>.

Brock and Heyward also focus on the experience of embodiment. Brock is not using the terms "heart" and "erotic power" simply as analogies. Her understanding of these terms is that they refer as much to the activity and experience of the body as they do to the emotions or the mind, and that, in any case, these are intimately linked. Heyward's language is also the language of the body<sup>27</sup>. The references to heart and to *eros* and the grounding in bodily experience suggest that human experience - unless irreparably distorted by the splitting effects of patriarchy - cannot be other than bodily experience<sup>28</sup>.

From this examination of the practical-values of feminist theology with regard to holism and embodiment, there are five points that emerge for comparison with the practical-values of gestalt.

First is a conviction that, for good and ill, the body is the *locus* of human experience. Second, it is unrealistic to attempt to split body, mind and spirit. Third, it is evident that, when a culture becomes disembodied or alienated from the physical, bad consequences ensue. Fourth, women and men often have different awareness in these matters. Fifth, most societies have traditionally devalued women's bodies, even when they purport to honour them, and have overvalued men's bodily attributes.

For gestalt practitioners and others versed in Perls' writings, there can be no doubt that, in theory and practice, the body is indeed the *locus* of human experience. The analogies, the therapeutic observations and practices are focused in and on the body. As was seen in earlier chapters, gestaltists do not think of us as having bodies. We *are* bodies - and more. Attempts to split the person in two or three parts are seen as neurotic disturbances and as recipes for ill-health. On these points, gestalt is in accord with feminist theology. However, it has little to say on the fourth and fifth points above, namely the differences between women and men regarding bodies, and the ways in which patriarchal cultures have devalued women's bodies and overvalued men's bodily attributes. These points are not well illustrated in gestalt literature, for reasons discussed earlier in this thesis, namely that, for cultural and historical reasons, they were not issues at the top of the gestalt agenda. They doubtless were and are for individuals and groups of practitioners in their training and work, as well as in their professional practice.

It would be unrealistic to pretend that gestaltists are more at ease with human embodiment than are feminist theologians, even though, at the level of theory, both disciplines have similar or

compatible positive views. In practice, there are theologically educated Christians and gestaltists (including Christian gestaltists) who live out a mixture of ease and suspicion with regard to their bodies and those of other people. Such people demonstrate both the positive practical-values affirming human holism and embodiment and the difficulties and negative valorisations of our embodiment.

Despite the fact that one cannot match the practical-values of feminist theology point for point with those derived from gestalt, it is evident that, on the main points, they are entirely compatible and that, in other areas, there is no conflict. In both disciplines, the body is the focus of important practical-values.

### **7.3 Practical values: gender**

The third practical-value follows from some of the difficulties about embodiment, namely the assumption that all human experience is gendered. This is a fundamental tenet for feminist writers, and a view shared by most feminist theologians. Thus King, focusing on the study of religion (rather than Christian theology alone), writes:

Progress in the study of religion is slow, but there is no doubt that the perspective of gender is of increasing importance in theoretical and empirical studies, not only for the growing number of women scholars, but also for many men.....Until very recently the study of religion has been undertaken in general terms, without specific attention to gender. Now many new questions arise, and new knowledge is discovered in relation to the gendered dimension of religious phenomena.<sup>29</sup>

Later she turns to the methodologies of studies of religion and religious experience and finds that these too are gendered. These present two challenges. One is that the subject matter of research is set in an androcentric framework, shaping the task as the researcher attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct the material. The second challenge is contained within the attitude of the researcher. Scholars, who have been mainly men with androcentric views, have developed methods of study which focus quasi-objectively on texts or the phenomena of experience. Approaches adopted or pioneered by feminist scholars begin with the subjectivity and reflexivity of the scholar herself<sup>30</sup>.

Feminist understandings vary as to how gender relates to sex and to the body. As we have seen in earlier sections, there is a range of theoretical positions in this matter. Some writers see difficulties in biological assumptions about male and female sex. They point out that biology itself is not a neutral discipline, free of values. Indeed, the very language of biology (like that of the study of religious experience cited above) has been criticised because of the patriarchal assumptions that have shaped its expression<sup>31</sup>. However, for many feminist writers, the existence of male and female persons with gonads appropriate to their sex provides a baseline for the discussion of gender<sup>32</sup>.

That baseline has, however, been used for centuries to support what can now be seen to be spurious notions of gender. The stereotypes of patriarchal culture are linked to sex as though sex of itself gives rise to gender attributes. Notions of the stronger and the weaker sex, the cultivation of stoical (male) rather than emotional (female) personalities, inequitable property laws and legal rights are just three examples of arrangements arising from the values of patriarchal religion and

patriarchal science. It is conceivable that these values once derived from a (now irretrievable) part of our animal inheritance that had survival value for our species, but, for the time being, this is speculative and its discussion inconclusive<sup>33</sup>.

Whatever their origins, these old cultural values have been subject to rigorous criticism for several decades. That criticism demonstrates that these values are not God-given nor are they scientifically or rationally derived. They arose historically and in the demonstrable interests of a dominant social group, i.e. men, and must be regarded as discredited social constructions.

Despite this long period of criticism, it is evident that gender does not figure greatly in gestalt discourse. The reasons for this are largely historical. As was stated earlier, the Perls developed their work during the 1940s and 1950s, but it was in the 1960s that it came to public prominence. This was the period when, in the United States in particular, second wave feminism also came to public attention. In other words, the development of second-wave feminism and gestalt overlap geographically and chronologically. The question which must be answered is, do they overlap in their understandings and solidarity regarding gender issues?

Accounts of the behaviour of gestalt practitioners in the 1960s suggest that, for the most part, they were unaware of gender issues. Tapes, films and written records of gestalt demonstrations suggests that those early practitioners were able people and even dazzling models of perceptiveness and skill, but they also demonstrate masculine characteristics of dominance and control that jar with present-day sensibilities. Such behaviour undoubtedly contributed to the

occlusion of women's skills and potential and to the suppression of femininity. Unsurprisingly, there is little in gestalt literature that refers to these matters<sup>34</sup>.

However, this does not mean that gestalt practice continues untouched by current gender awareness. The historical overlap of gestalt and second-wave feminism, referred to above, means that gestalt was influenced from the outset by feminist critiques. The impact of feminism in gestalt training and practice has brought about many changes, as has, for example, an increasing awareness of post-colonialism and multi-ethnicity. Gestalt theory is not about gender - or ethnicity. It is simply applied to these issues as constituents of the landscape in which people live. Awareness of second wave feminism has grown and its claims for justice and new awareness have been heard. Gestalt practice, like other professional practices, has embraced and integrated its thinking and practice. It is unthinkable that a gestalt therapist in the twenty-first century fails to integrate feminist critiques into her / his thinking and practice<sup>35</sup>.

The present situation is illustrated in Yontef's approach. Writing in the 1990s, he looks back at the "turn-on" culture of the 1960s and is critical of those unaware biases. He posits a model of practice that is egalitarian and dialectical. It is one in which power gradients between therapists and patients and between women and men are open for inspection, and in which gender issues form part of the therapeutic agenda. This change has come about as part of the evolution of a community rather than as the end product of scholarship: intellectual support has come from feminist writing generally rather than from some specifically gestalt feminism.

The gestalt approach to gender can be summarised by saying that gender is a *Gestalt*. Chapter 3 demonstrates how, from a gestalt perspective, human perception is not a simple matter of images falling on the constant surface of a *camera obscura*. It is instead a complex process whereby physical interactions with the environment at the sensory surfaces (contact boundary) of the perceiver are linked with psychological processes. The net result of these interactions, themselves influenced by other contemporary and past interactions, is a perception which is often communicable in some form to other perceivers. Physical examples of this process, though complex enough, are relatively easy to describe. Far more difficult are the more complex perceptions of, for example, the qualities of humans relating to each other.

It is in this realm that the perception of gender lies. From a gestalt perspective, the perception of gender is the outcome of a process of construction<sup>36</sup>. This does not mean that the constructive activity is conscious: more often than not it is automated and the perceiver or constructor is not conscious of doing anything. For many people, it may seem that what is masculine and what is feminine is obvious and requires no explanation. In the language of gestalt therapy, these “obvious” recognitions requiring no explanation are termed “confluences”: they are part of what defines a culture, a generation or a sub-group. We recognise that we are such-and-such a group because we have the same beliefs and ideas, including assumptions about what constitutes masculinity and femininity. We are unlikely to be aware that we hold such norms unless something occurs to disturb our confluence<sup>37</sup>. Only then does that norm become figure in the ground of our community. At such a point, it can be seen that gender is a *Gestalt* which we made, one figure created in the ground of potentially infinite possibility.

It is when differences in perception occur that people are most likely to notice how different individuals make *Gestalten* sometimes more, sometimes less similar to those of their neighbours. Gestalt theory is well placed to tolerate and anticipate variety and difference. Whilst the created *Gestalten* "masculine" and "feminine" differ from one person or group to another and can even be contradictory, the categories "masculine" and "feminine" are not arbitrary. These exist because there are enough consistencies in the patterns to give a sense of convergence, at least within a given group or culture, so that one can assert that gender is socially constructed and, from a gestalt perspective, could be nothing else.

In the matter of the gendered nature of human experience, there is compatibility between gestalt and feminist theology. The historical engagement of each in this matter differs considerably, although concerns about gender issues, their centrality in western cultures and their effects of people's lives, concern people in both disciplines. Their compatibility is evident - despite the paucity of writing on the subject from the gestalt side.

#### **7.4 Practical-values: personal, interpersonal, political and theological**

This practical-value concerns the interconnectedness of people. Perls, his colleagues and successors were working in an environment dominated by a highly individualistic view of persons. This view was associated with psychoanalysis (although it would be inaccurate to portray to-day's psychoanalytic writers as holding such a view). Gestalt's particular contribution was to emphasise the dialogical nature of persons, i.e. that we are who we are, not just as the

product of a series of interpersonal encounters (at heart an essentialist view), but that we are (in) a continuous process of interaction with others. That process is who we are and who others are also<sup>38</sup>.

From the outset, the early practitioners of gestalt were interested in a *praxis* that both maximises personal autonomy and also extends the possibilities of democracy. Fritz Perls' experience of a repressive childhood and his experience as a Jewish citizen of Germany undoubtedly contributed profoundly to these concerns. As was discussed earlier in the thesis, the first flowering of gestalt took place in New York City and in the state of California (as well as other American and Canadian centres) during the 1960s and early 1970s where, from a different perspective, there were concerns about autonomy and democracy.

Perls was consistent throughout his career in asserting that, fundamental to the business of therapy, is the movement from inappropriate dependence towards self-support. Inevitably, there were distortions of his theme, some of them unjustifiably visited upon him. However, he did open himself to criticisms of individualism and of supporting narcissistic self-concern, for example with his so-called Gestalt Prayer<sup>39</sup>. Such criticisms should nonetheless be placed in context and with some allowance for the culture of the time as well as Perls' promotional intentions. The movement to autonomy has little to do with pathological individualism: instead, it confronts the basis of neurosis, i.e. the difficulty we experience at times in dealing head on with the real issues at hand. In those circumstances, we learn to manipulate, avoid, pass the buck or play stupid. At the time of their invention, these devices are triumphs of creativity: only later can

others see that we are not in all respects self-supporting, responsible and autonomous beings. The gestalt approach assumes that most people have their neurotic areas in which they play such games<sup>40</sup>.

There is an intrinsic link between this gestalt understanding of autonomy on the one hand and a commitment to democracy on the other. The link is found in the model of a mature interdependence in which we relate directly to others, with maximal awareness and minimal neurotic manipulation. The focus on the realisation of a personal autonomy that is not narcissistic selfishness makes precisely for democratic responsibility and ultimately a world-view based on contact and dialogue. Democratic politics is not merely the macro analogue of such an understanding: it is hard to imagine a well constructed democracy unless it is built on such a foundation.

The belief that the personal is political - and the values that statement implies - form, as chapter 6 discusses, an important plank of any feminist platform. It is therefore a short step for Christian feminists to assert that the personal is also theological. Such a form of words may be accepted widely in the sense that all theology can be said to be - in some sense - personal, i.e. about the person or *personae* of the Triune God, and about the person of Jesus, and about us as persons. On the face of it, this may seem to offer a point of unanimity for feminist and non-feminist theologians, until, that is, one bears in mind King's two problems referred to above. The meanings attributed by the term "personal" point to both content and methodology and they point

also to what King called "one's own subjectivity and reflexivity"<sup>41</sup>. We shall consider these points in two examples of this practical-value.

The personal and the political are linked in feminist theological discourse at the level of content. Some examples illustrate the range of these links and point to the values they uphold and promote in practice. First, there are a number of formal and informal liturgies designed to celebrate events that are distinctly personal. One such is the coming to puberty of girls published by the St Hilda Community<sup>42</sup>: such a liturgy is arguably of great importance to the girls in question and to their friends and families. The publication of such a liturgy brings into a public arena something that has, in our culture, been confined to private obscurity and even abjection<sup>43</sup>. This is a political act that challenges profound and often unconscious prejudices in the minds of men and women about women's sexuality, fertility and place in society. That such liturgies are infrequently held suggests either - or both - that women and girls are reluctant to celebrate such a rite of passage because they believe these things are private and not to be shared publicly, or that men (and women) are keen to continue a species of abjection of women. The fact that there have been some such celebrations demonstrates that linking the personal and the political can be a powerful intervention in the public arena.

A less contentious and personally exposing link between the personal and the political is evidenced in the debates surrounding women's ordination of women. Theological emphasis varies as to whether it is the individual who is called to ordination or whether the individual responds to a need within the church for people to be ordained - a call from God perhaps, but one mediated through the church and with a corporate feeling about it. When women began to say

that they felt called to seek ordination to priesthood in the Church of England, they were sometimes told that they must be mistaken since this was not the historic practice of that church. It was stressed that they were individuals and had an individual sense of vocation for which they must find other outlets. A number of such women, and some sympathetic men, realised that this individuation was a political tactic to keep women out of the priesthood.

The sense of vocation was indeed personal, but it was more than that, and it was the political dimension of these personal stories that prompted the founding of the Movement for the Ordination of Women in the late 1970s. It was clear at the foundation of MOW that the movement was of enormous political import for the Church of England. When the movement's aims were largely met in 1992, the BBC clearly felt that this personal issue was one of political significance, and gave the Synod debate live coverage on Radio 4 throughout that November afternoon as well as extensive news coverage before and after the debate and the vote. There was a sense in which the Church of England was either acting on behalf of English society, or else was marking a transition already underway in that society and which continues still. The process in question is about the place of women in society, about women's leadership and about women taking power. These personal issues are clearly political.

Gestalt and feminist theology are clearly compatible and convergent on links between the personal, the interpersonal and the political. However, gestalt cannot follow feminist theology in assertions about the personal and political being also theological. On this third point, an

appropriate gestalt response to theological dimensions is that of open-minded dialogue and a willingness to listen.

## **7.5 Practical values: commitment to change**

The discourse of gestalt is paradoxical about change (section 4.6). Gestalt therapists are often asked by patients how they may change. A typically gestalt response is to urge that patient to stay the same and avoid change as much as possible. This is a deliberately paradoxical injunction that may lead to the patient's enhanced awareness not only of how they are (in ways they do not like) but also how they maintain those positions. Despite the paradox, gestalt is founded on a belief that change is the norm of the human condition. That is what lies behind notions of homeostatic self-regulation and *Prägnanz*.

Perls' view of the human condition is a growth model, not in itself uncommon in his day<sup>44</sup>. An unusual feature was Perls' insistence that growth is a normal and commonplace function, the means by which each person evolves from moment to moment and throughout a lifetime. The means of growth he describes as contact which, as we see in section 4.2, is central to gestalt theory<sup>45</sup>. Perls found support for his ideas in his work at the Esalen Institute with colleagues in what was called the Human Potential movement<sup>46</sup>. He found links with, for example, Maslow's notion of "peak experience" which he likened to "aha moments" or "*satori*"<sup>47</sup>. He accepted that human beings have extraordinary experiences as well as ordinary ones that contribute to or mark the passage of their development as persons. His particular contribution lay in stressing the

ordinary, incremental processes of individual evolution. Change is the given of our lives but, he insisted, "...we cannot deliberately bring about changes in ourselves or in others"<sup>48</sup>.

Feminist theology is also committed to change (section 6.5). This commitment is evidenced in deconstructive and constructive modes. The deconstructive is epitomised in the broad feminist analysis of history and tradition that identifies the formative influence of patriarchy<sup>49</sup>. Even though feminist theologians differ as to their hopes or means in this connection, they share a commitment to redeeming human communities from such distortions<sup>50</sup>. An example of the constructive mode is the creation of a theological space in which new models of humanity and divinity are made available to women and men. Both modes are addressed by Graham's "feminist pastoral practice", a notion that encapsulates much of what is meant by practical-value. "All forms of *praxis*..... seek in various ways to reappropriate and recast traditional forms of Christian pastoral activity in the name of affirming the full humanity of women and correcting androcentric distortions" <sup>51</sup>.

The core ideas of feminist theology and gestalt differ - though without contradicting - regarding change, but it is clear that, at the level of practical-values, both disciplines move beyond analysis of the human situation (individual and corporate) and see change as essential to human flourishing.

## **7.6 Practical-values: the messianic community, here and now**

One of the important features of some feminist theological writing is the prominence it attaches to the messianic community. It is evident in the discussion in chapter 6 that, whilst this is largely irrelevant for those theologians who find Christianity irretrievably patriarchal, for others it forms the focus of their deconstruction of Christian theology and of the creation of a feminist theological space. Criticism of such theology often challenges the notion of a messianic community on textual and historical grounds.

As is stated in chapter 6, there can be no such entity as the messianic community - unless one thinks only of Jesus and his immediate followers. There were undoubtedly many communities that saw themselves as living out the ideals of the Christian messiah and these are discussed in earlier chapters. The phrase "messianic community" in the present context points to the efforts of a number of feminist scholars who attempt to isolate it from its patriarchal context. They discern outlines of early Christian groups including the (technically pre-Christian) group around Jesus himself. They seek to define the *mores* of such groups and, in particular, their attitudes to key issues such as gender relations and their priorities for social and communal life. The dangers of such undertakings are discussed in section 6.7.

So far as practical-values are concerned, reference to the messianic community suggests that there are values associated with that community that inform current feminist theology. These values include those of gender relations and more broadly of communal and social life. There is a suggestion that the messianic community reveals values for human community now. This is well illustrated by Fiorenza<sup>52</sup> who sees the "Jesus movement" as a renewal movement within Judaism.

She also shows how the new Christian community, with its transformed and transforming relationships between women and men, engaged as a missionary movement<sup>53</sup>. These new and distinctive relationships were intrinsic to the impact that Christianity made in the social and political climate of Hellenistic Judaism and the wider Roman Empire.

Gestalt has neither a messiah nor a messianic community. However, there are two points that, at the least, complement the reliance by some feminist theologians on such a notion. The first is that gestalt therapy was initially promoted as a group experience in two senses. It was convenient to demonstrate the new ideas and practices in the setting of a smaller or larger group. Further, by working in a group and using that group's resources, patients were able more expeditiously to identify and work through the various projections and other modifications of contact that impeded them.

The second point to be made about gestalt and messianic community is that Perls famously attempted to found a community at Cowichan Creek in British Columbia that would live out the practical-values of gestalt<sup>54</sup>. There is an implicit suggestion here that some of Perls' students and patients might have seen him as a messiah figure. Perls was possibly less alert than Jesus to the dangers of such projections. Less implicit is the sense that Perls, nearing the end of his life, wanted to see how such a community would work out away from the pressures and media sensationalism of Esalen and California.

Gestalt communities of different types and of different duration have formed since that time. Every group of student therapists forms a type of community, as does each therapy group. Groups

of managers or social workers committed to a gestalt model of working constitute a more or less conscious gestalt community. However, they do not look back to the earliest gestalt groups as a paradigm for their life and work. They deliberately focus instead on Now and Here (typically the current gestalt group or community) rather than focus on their own history or that of gestalt predecessors.

This practical-value derives from the early work of Fritz and Lore Perls on Concentration Therapy in their South African period. It rests philosophically upon their understanding of existential philosophy with its focus on the present. The shift from past concerns to present experience is of great clinical significance. The Perls did not deny that the past had significance for sick (and well) people, but they confronted what they saw as a pitfall in psychotherapy that was capable of supporting people to live emotionally as though the past were the present. The quest here is not for logical exactitude, but for the most powerful place to stand in order to face reality. If I feel past anger now (because I could not finish it then), what can I do with it? Where does it go and where does it belong? Those are the important questions for the sufferer now. By extension, it can be argued that corresponding questions are the important ones for managers or social workers or teachers.

Closely linked with now is “here”. The topical or geographical may be extended to include, for example, us (here) or this institution or group. If, to continue the example above, I am angry now (though my anger comes from some past time and place), how may I finish this anger here?<sup>55</sup> It has to be “here” very often (typically in this group or community) because it is not possible to re-

visit the original *locus*. That is because the original *locus* was not just a place but a particular set of circumstances involving relationships which might not be capable of reconstruction. Sometimes, of course, it is important and possible to re-visit a particular place in order to finish or let go some experience associated with it and to which we still feel tied.

Plainly the ways in which feminist theologians view the messianic community are not equivalent to a gestalt view of Now and Here. They are not the same thing, but they are nonetheless compatible so far as their practical-values are concerned. Broadly speaking, the gestalt approach seeks to unhook people from entrapment in the past (or future) in order to locate themselves at the only point where they are able to act effectively, i.e. the present. The feminist view of the (past) messianic community is that it is a resource that can lend support to present critiques and engagements, i.e. that it can sanction opposition to present behaviour that does not accord with "messianic" principles. However, the messianic community is not a refuge from the present: feminist critics can only act now and in the here of their context. The same strictures apply to gestalt practitioners: they may have access through text or film or personal memory to some past events and people, but these are only useful insofar as they tend to support or critique present engagements. And that is, in fact, how the growing *corpus* of gestalt knowledge functions for them. In the matter therefore of the feminist appeal to the messianic community, there is no incompatibility in gestalt's focus on Now and Here: in fact, that present focus can enhance and support feminist positions. The practical-values of the two disciplines are compatible in their appeal to historical precedent and in their focus on the present.

## **7.7 Practical-values: transcendence and responsibility**

Theology is, broadly speaking, a discipline that seeks to address all the important aspects of human experience. These include personal relationships; community and social life; political and economic life; life and death, sickness and health; corporate wholeness and fulfilment; justice and right behaviour; concern with what transcends human experience and comprehension; an impulse to worship and a sense of creatureliness.

Most feminist theologians look to a God (God/ess), although beliefs range from what Cupitt terms "realism"<sup>56</sup> to atheism<sup>57</sup>. Wherever there is even an implicit transcendent dimension, there is also a belief that transformation of the present situation is possible or even predicated in the order of things. Such possibilities are seen as those of the God/ess as well as representing the hopes and desires of the theologian. They are intrinsic to Christian theology rather than only to feminist theology: where feminist theologians may differ from others is in the shape of that hope. It would include hope for a community free, for example, of distortions based upon patriarchy and male domination. In feminist and in other liberationist circles, such beliefs may arise from action critiques as much as from purely intellectual struggle

From the point of view of practical-values, however, it is important principally to ask what flows from such beliefs. It has already been noted that change in certain valorised directions (e.g. for peace and justice and against oppression and injustice) is predicated, i.e. held to be in the very

"nature" of such a being / process. Such predicates also subsume to some extent an earlier practical-value, that of commitment to change.

So far as gestalt is concerned, there may or may not be a God, and gestaltists are found in both camps. If these notions correspond to a reality in the cosmos, then it is understood in process terms (and thus finds echoes in some theological circles, e.g. Tillich, Cupitt). From a gestalt perspective, the possibility of a God, however beneficent such a being is held to be, is fraught with difficulties.

First, if a God were omnipotent, (s)he could threaten the (already limited) predictability of the universe. Moreover, a being that could create the universe would be likely to invite fearful dependence on the part of people and thus undermine their autonomy and responsibility as responsible actors in the universe in the fields of scientific research or medicine, psychology or the arts, personal relationships or communications technology. However, no sooner does one construct such a list of fields where religious belief can be positively harmful to a person, than one realises that this is true whether from the perspective of a gestalt practitioner or from that of a feminist theologian. These are the difficulties that certain images of God raise for many people, and they are not confined to a gestalt perspective.

Perhaps then it would be more profitable to consider what there is in the gestalt framework that could positively support the notion of a transcendent process or entity. There are two promising

points of contact: one is the gestalt notion of responsibility and the other lies in the notion of *Gestalt* itself.

The gestalt notion of personal responsibility is sometimes distorted to suggest that we are all responsible for ourselves in the sense that there is nobody else to blame (so whatever is painful or unsatisfactory must be our own fault). Such misunderstandings were rife when gestalt workshops were part of the new psychology scene with their message of instant turn-on and easy cure. These facile views did not do justice to Perls' position even during his promotional workshops. He liked to spell the word as response-ability<sup>58</sup>. He was interested to discover what a person could do by way of responding effectively to life situations. He encouraged people to pay attention to their responses where they did not achieve the result they desired. They could then explore how such undesirable consequences arose and what would have to be different to arrive at desirable outcomes. The role of the gestalt practitioner is to assist by drawing attention to questionable assumptions and self-defeating ploys<sup>59</sup> - and certainly not to add to existing burdens of guilt about not being more effective.

The experience of response-ability extends to any situation where people have to deal with each other at home, at work or in political life. And here we can link response-ability to the second point of contact, that of the concept *Gestalt*. Section 4.2 (on contact process) and parts of chapters 2 and 3 showed that each *Gestalt* of experience is part of a wider *Gestalt* in an infinite succession that is as large as the universe itself. Wertheimer's view is that we experience as though we have within us a pre-existing *Gestalt* that is triggered by certain inputs. This view

leaves open the possibility of something transcending human perception. At the least, no thoroughgoing gestalt approach can *a priori* rule out the possibility of a realm beyond ordinary sensory awareness. More positively, it allows for the possibility of religious experience and religious viewpoints as normal apprehensions or as pointing to a process irreducible to mere subjectivity.

Whatever view they take of Wertheimer's idea, gestaltists agree that, ultimately, we are all connected to everyone else and to everything and every event. This sense of co-inherence and connection is remarkably close to the mystical visions of people as culturally distant from gestalt as, say, Hildegard of Bingen and Teilhard de Chardin<sup>60</sup>. The gestalt vision is remarkably close to one espoused by, for example, Hellwig, whose myth is examined earlier in the thesis<sup>61</sup>. The gestalt view has other features in addition to its possible appeal to people outside any religious framework. It is not gender specific; it is not hierarchical and therefore requires a different approach, for example to justice; and it undermines the kind of dependence that is the pitfall of many other images, replacing it with images of relationship and connectedness.

In the matter of God, therefore, it is evident that gestalt and feminist theology are compatible regarding their practical-values, sharing many priorities and remaining open to dialogue on points where there is not - and need not be - agreement.

## 7.8 Conclusion

This chapter draws out from the key ideas of feminist theology and gestalt their practical-values. There are strong similarities in the first two practical-values concerning the epistemological status of human experience and the body. It is evident that both these practical-values are problematic, and yet the importance of both to gestalt and to feminist theology provides firm foundations for their compatibility. The process of analysing their core ideas and deducing from them their practical-values demonstrates how wide-ranging their conceptual grasp is.

Their concerns and emphases differ in a number of ways so that they cannot be thought of as coterminous. Later practical-values, e.g. those arising from the gendered nature of our experience, are less straightforward: in this instance the gestalt perspective has to be arrived at with little textual support. In the matter of links between the personal, the political and the theological, there are other problems, most notably that gestalt as a discipline does not take a view on the theological. Where a commitment to change is concerned, the gestalt perspective is paradoxical but nonetheless clearly compatible with that of feminist theology. The differences between gestalt and feminist theology are most challenging when practical-values connected with the messianic community and with God are considered. The links made between the messianic community and a gestalt view of the group are not of the same order, although it is argued that there is nonetheless a practical equivalence. Much the same may be said of the section on God/ess and gestalt notions of transcendence.

However, the aim of this chapter is not to seek or force into existence some unanimity between gestalt and feminist theology. What this chapter demonstrates is that their practitioners can claim that they respond to and deal with a wide range of existential concerns in ways that are compatible. Their compatibility lies in their scope, their heuristic approach and their treatment of human experience. They are disciplines of a similar order and, as such, proper candidates for a test of compatibility. This compatibility lies demonstrably in their practical-values<sup>62</sup>.

The final stage of this thesis lies in the next chapter. In chapter 8, there is a brief summary of the whole. The main conclusions of the thesis are set out and further research, outside the scope of the present work, is identified.

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<sup>1</sup> First section of chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> There are also what may be referred to as implicit practical-values. These could be deduced by a study of gestalt practice and would include, for example, a regard for personal boundaries, a respect for the religious or aesthetic sensibilities of others, and an appreciation of paradox as a given of social life. These and others may be thought of as subsumed under the headings of the broader explicit practical-values.

<sup>3</sup> Graham (1996) p.111.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p.112.

<sup>5</sup> For examples, Yontef (1993) pp.130-131, pp.186 *et seq*, pp.196 *et seq*; Perls (1971) pp.54-55. In this last Perls discusses awareness as the gestalt mode of apprehending experience: the "talks" in this book are, in fact, all examples of the fundamental importance of human experience and his view of its epistemological status.

<sup>6</sup> Perls (1971). The dreamwork transcripts which make up the bulk of this book illustrate the point.

<sup>7</sup> If Christianity is only an irrelevance, it is unlikely that a woman would bother to write a book about it. Hampson (1990) speaks for herself, of course, but also gives voice to many people who find that Christianity is not so much irrelevant as irredeemably patriarchal and thus unfitted to be a religion for people who have rejected androcentric and patriarchal

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ways.

8 Loades (1990) pp.16 *et seq.*

9 *Ibid* pp.23-29.

10 *Ibid* pp.29-40.

11 *Ibid* pp.41-47.

12 Part III, Scrutinizing the Master's Tools: Re-thinking Critical Methods is apposite here, although all the essays support this point.

13 The "feminist midrash" that opens the book is a more imaginative piece of reconstruction, less constrained by textual details.

14 In Loades *op cit* pp.83-88.

15 *Ibid* pp.255-274.

16 *Ibid* pp.194-213.

17 HACKING, I. "The self-vindication of the laboratory sciences", In PICKERING, A (ed). *Science as practice and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, esp. pp.57-58.

18 The critique by black feminist circles in the USA, Africa and elsewhere, e.g. COLLINS, P H. *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1990 and Jacquelyn Grant's christology in Grant (1989).

19 *Op cit* p.6.

20 Yontef *op cit* p.141.

21 This matter is explored at greater depth in section 3.4.

22 Yontef *op cit* pp.86-87.

23 A notable exception to this type of teaching is Nelson (1978) cited earlier.

24 Graham (1995) p.145.

25 MOLTSMANN-WENDEL, E. *I am my body*. London: SCM, 1994, p.103. Also, Cooley (1994) p.31.

26 Moltmann-Wendel, *op cit*, p.104. Reflection on embodiment as a central Christian topic prompts mistrust of Western Augustinian theology that begins with the fall instead of creation and the pleasure God takes in this creation. A creation-based embodied theology does not see sin as a general fate which is suffered as a matter of principle, rooted in sinful human flesh and in the structure of its drives. Such a theology recognises the potential for destruction in human beings, but sees this as a problem arising from a lack of relationship, beginning in an earlier phase of life. It acknowledges a lack of relationship between human beings, between humans and other animals, and between humans and their environment. Fox (1983) echoes these ideas: the spirituality and theology he develops is likewise contrasted with Augustinian theology.

27 Brock (1991). Heyward (1989). This latter so entirely assumes this point that it is simply there as a substrate of her text, appearing at times like an outcrop, e.g. pp.10, 17, 25.

28 Some men have taken seriously the criticism voiced by feminist writers about the alienated nature of male-dominated theology. One example in this context is Nelson (1978). In his Preface, Nelson, an ethicist, explains his need to go beyond the traditional limits of sexual ethics to what he terms "sexual theology". This "too-narrow focus" (p.9) is another feature of the splitting of experience concomitant with an over-masculine or patriarchal theology.

29 King (1995) p.5.

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30 *Ibid* pp.21-22.

31 BIRKE, L. *Women, feminism and biology: the feminist challenge*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1986. Birke argues that both the subject matter and the methodologies of biological science have been androcentric. The tools of androcentrism have been determinism, reductionism and essentialism. She is concerned to establish a scientific methodology that subverts these "received" approaches.

32 This cautious phrasing refers to back to Davis (1997) cited in chapter 6. Much of the argument may be seen as a form of the nature / nurture debate or the "essentialist" debate. HARRISON, B. W. "The power of anger in the work of love: Christian ethics for women and other strangers" *In* Loades *op cit* pp.194-213 states "...I do not share Mary Daly's reverse Thomism - that is, ..I believe that the major differences between men's and women's behaviour are rooted in culture and history rather than in a relatively fixed 'nature' ....." (p.213).

33 REITER, R R (ed). *Toward an anthropology of women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975. This book takes, as its title suggests, an anthropological approach toward women: but, more interestingly, looks at a hidden tradition of women as anthropologists, many of whom were either ignored or, in some cases, plagiarised by men. Among its themes is a serious challenge to received notions of human history which turn on man / male as hunter-gatherer.

34 POLSTER, M F. *Eve's daughters: the forbidden heroism of women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.

35 ZINKER, J C. "Fritz Perls in 1993" *In* *British Gestalt Journal* 2:2 (1993) writes a dialogue with Perls (who died in 1970) which touches on this. In response to Zinker's challenging Perls' non-inclusive language, Perls retorts that it is a preoccupation of the 1990s - and anyway he "was never very much concerned with being socially correct" (p.133).

36 The language of gestalt predates some current distinctions. Its language in the matter of *Gestalt* formation moves between that of constructivism and social constructionism. This tension was evident in some early debates, but it was cast in terms of the relationship of the inner and the outer. There were arguments over how reality is represented within the perceiver, and about what type of correspondence exists between those representations and what may or may not be absolute realities "out there". In terms of current debate, there is little doubt that the process of *Gestalt* formation corresponds closely to constructivism as defined in COLMAN, A M. *A dictionary of psychology*. Oxford: OUP, 2001. It is, however, also illustrated in BERGER, P & LUCKMANN. *The Social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Allen Lane, 1967. At the social level of gestalt thinking, however, discussion of social phenomena frequently suggests social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1967). KVALE, S (ed). *Psychology and postmodernism*. London: SAGE, 1992, pp.46,150-151 illustrates these distinctions in current psychological thinking. GERGEN, K J. *Social construction in context*. London: SAGE, 2001 defines, in a series of essays, how social constructionism operates at three levels in current discourse as a metatheory, as social theory and as societal practice: so far as gestalt is concerned, it is the second of these where there is correspondence. Elsewhere, Gergen confirms this by stating that the "terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of situated interchanges between people" as a result of which

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"psychological processes differ markedly from one culture to another". (Cited in FOX, D & PRILLELTENSKY, I. *Critical psychology: an introduction*. London: SAGE, 1997, p.277.

37 An example of breaking confluence for a number of church congregations is the presence and status of gay and lesbian people. Many congregations had never consciously considered such sexuality and gender issues, but are now taking them seriously. What had been background (and thus in confluence) has become figural (i.e. a focus created by attention).

38 This position is stated strongly here for the sake of emphasis. It should not be read as denying, for example, the obvious continuity we have as persons from one engagement to the next: it is, however, stated in opposition to the reification of an essence or core. From a gestalt perspective, process is the key to understanding personhood. Examples of such a view regarding process and dialogue include: Yontef *op cit* pp.35-36; p.131; pp.221 *et seq*, p.331 ("human structures are process"); Perls (1971) p.17 refers to the self-actualising organism (in a context which clearly implies interaction with others).

39 Referred to in chapter 4, note 25.

40 Perls *et al* (1973) p.296 *et seq* points out that the patient comes for help because he cannot help himself. The approach of the therapist is immediately to enlist him as an active experimental partner, thus reversing one of the main planks of the neurotic structure that entails helplessness. This helplessness is not feigned or in any way insincere. The therapist, at the outset, envisages and seeks to create situations in which it is, however, impossible. This rather stark confrontation is perhaps typical of illustrations offered in the early days of gestalt writing: it may suffice in the case of mild neurotic disturbance. It would not be an appropriate approach, however, with a person experiencing a more profound disturbance. Yontef *op cit* pp.419-488, esp. pp. 484-487 discusses working with people with character (personality) disorders where such robust confrontation could be very destructive.

41 King *op cit* p.20.

42 St Hilda Community. *Women included: a book of services and prayers*. London: SPCK, 1991.

43 CONDREN, M. *Julia Kristeva on abjection*. Paper at the annual pastoral studies conference of The British and Irish Association for Practical Theology, Dublin, 1999. The reference is to KRISTEVA, J. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

44 P.D. OUSPENSKY, for example, had an understanding based on growth which he develops in his *The psychology of Man's possible evolution*. London: Arkana, 1991. However, Ouspensky did not think such (individual) evolution possible for many people. It was only for those who would make efforts, who would seek help and who had the unusual capacity for recognising what in their experience is new (rather than understanding it in terms of what was old, already known) pp.7-12. Perls was familiar with Ouspensky's teaching but clearly departs from it with his own theories about the ordinariness of evolutionary growth - as well as his recognition of the universality of neurotic developments in place of healthy growth.

45 Perls *et al* (1973) p.275.

46 Shephard (1976) pp.113 & 115 *et seq*.

47 Perls (1971) p.43, (1976) pp.68 & 100. Perls *et al* (1973) pp. 429-430 also has a section entitled "Self as Actualization of the Potential" where it is stated that "the self can be felt

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48 only as a potentiality; anything more definite must emerge in actual behaviour."  
Perls (1971) p.20.  
49 Fiorenza *op cit* pp.288 *et seq.*  
50 For instance Ruether (1983) p.37; Hampson (1990) pp.9-11.  
51 Graham (1996) p.172.  
52 Fiorenza (1983), pp.105-159.  
53 *Ibid* pp.160-204.  
54 STEVENS, B. *Don't push the river*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1970, and  
BAUMGARDNER, P & PERLS. F.S. *Legacy from Fritz & gifts from Lake Cowichan*.  
Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behaviour Books, 1975 both describe from their authors'  
viewpoints the work that was done there.  
55 Examples in O'Leary (1992) pp.66 *et seq* & 74. Also LEDERMAN, J. "Anger and the  
rocking chair" *In* Fagan & Shepherd (1972) pp.328-338.  
56 Cupitt (1998), pp.152-154.  
57 The same range of beliefs may, of course, be found among gestalt practitioners.  
58 Perls (1971) p.56.  
59 Examples in *ibid.* pp.1-76, but particularly pp.18 *et seq.*  
60 HILDEGARD. *Scivias: the English translation from the critical Latin edition*. Tr.  
Hozeski, B. Santa Fe, NW: Bear & Co, 1986; de CHARDIN, T. *The phenomenon of*  
*Man*. London: Collins, 1959 and *Le milieu divin*. London: Collins, 1960.  
61 Section 5.4  
62 This claim is made here for gestalt, but should not be taken as applicable only to gestalt.  
Much work has been done on religion (and specifically Christian theology) and  
psychotherapeutic psychology. In chapter 1, reference was made to Halmos(1965) and Lake  
(1966). A survey of this field may be found in LYALL, D. *Counselling in the pastoral and*  
*spiritual context*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995, especially ch.1. More  
recently, some critical issues in this relationship were explored in LYNCH, G (ed). *Clinical*  
*counselling in pastoral settings*. London: Routledge, 1999. Some of the theoretical  
problems are indicated earlier in the thesis in reference to Pattison's (1986) warnings in  
section 1.3.

## CONCLUSIONS

### 8. Introduction

This chapter reviews the thesis as a whole, tracing the outlines of the arguments and then sets out the principal conclusions. After this introduction, section 8.1 summarises the arguments of Part One, and in particular chapters 2 to 4 following the development of gestalt philosophy, psychology and therapy. The work on the development from gestalt philosophy to gestalt therapy is important for the thesis as a whole. This is because no other single work was found that brings together these three gestalt elements in sufficient detail to establish a secure foundation for the subsequent discussion of compatibility with feminist theology. It is necessary to establish the credentials of gestalt as a world-view able to stand comparison with so developed and broad a discipline as feminist theology. Part One concludes by articulating a gestalt view of the self, and then analysing the core ideas of gestalt.

Section 8.2 follows the discussion through Part Two (chapters 5 and 6) on second-wave feminism and feminist theology. It recapitulates the discussion of the variety of feminist schools or viewpoints. These schools represent, in effect, philosophical positions ranging from a liberal, reformist stance through socialist and cultural feminisms to postmodern critiques. What is important for the argument of the thesis is the effect such critiques have on the development of distinctive feminist theological voices. It is argued that a one on one mapping of feminist perspectives on to feminist theology is unnecessary. It is more important for the purposes of the thesis to demonstrate the breadth of feminist perspectives before examining the range of feminist

theological voices. Out of this variety, it is nevertheless possible to analyse some core ideas in feminist theology and to indicate where these are widely supported and where they are subject to ongoing criticism.

Section 8.3 moves to Part Three of the thesis (chapter 7 and the present chapter). At least two earlier works bring gestalt and theology into proximity<sup>1</sup>. But the concerns of their writers are different to those of the thesis and they do not deal with issues of compatibility nor provide means of assessing compatibility such as those in chapter 7. They are more concerned to celebrate the apparent fit between Christian pastoral concerns and gestalt than to identify and deal with whatever problems arise in such a conjunction of disciplines. Section 8.3 therefore recapitulates the process of deducing practical-values from the core ideas of each discipline. It makes distinctions between an assessment of compatibility on the one hand, and, on the other hand, confluent movement between the disciplines or easy assumptions about their unanimity.

At a number of points throughout the thesis, there is discussion on the problems inherent in the specific task at that stage or in the overall task of the thesis. Often, it is not possible to assume consensus even on a fundamental matter (e.g. belief in a God (/ess), and it is unrealistic to anticipate unproblematic outcomes to the thesis as a whole. Section 8.4 discusses some of the problems and notes the weaknesses and strengths of the approach adopted throughout the thesis. It also discusses some of the challenges inherent in interdisciplinary study. Then follows a section containing the main findings of the thesis (section 8.5). These findings are stated with references to the discussion in the thesis. The final section of the work (section 8.6) identifies themes and topics in the thesis that merit further research.

## 8.1 Gestalt: origins, development and core ideas

Part One traces the origins of gestalt in an empirical philosophical enquiry among Brentano's students in Prague. Questions are asked about the nature of mental acts as personal experiences that could be quantified and qualitatively assessed. Von Ehrenfels uses the common German noun, *Gestalt*, to support a view opposed to contemporary scientific atomism or reductionism. He suggests that perception was a more active and complex matter than had previously been supposed. He does not deny that external events and objects (the *fundamenta* of sensory data) may be built up to produce more complex images or impressions. However, he focuses on an evident quality of wholeness in perceptions - even when some *fundamenta* are absent. He argues that we perceive wholes, and that these are given in the experience of perception<sup>2</sup>.

After 1918 the Prague faculty broke up and the universities at Graz and Berlin became home to the two poles of development in gestalt psychology. The former was associated with "production" theories of *Gestalten*, originally associated with Meinong and Benussi. The Berlin school became part of the first school of experimental psychology in the modern sense of that term. Wertheimer and two of his research students, Koffka and Köhler, were primarily responsible for the development and promotion of gestalt psychology. Like von Ehrenfels, they took an overall view that the whole perception is given in the sensory experience. It was Wertheimer who, anticipating recent neuroscientific research, spoke of perception being organised *von oben nach unten* (from the top downwards)<sup>3</sup>.

Gestalt psychologists demonstrated how perception is the work of the perceiver. Seeing, hearing

and understanding were shown, on the basis of empirical research, to be active constructions. This construction often proceeds without any need of awareness or conscious effort on the part of the agent. Goldstein was among the first people to develop therapeutic applications of the new psychology. The effects of combat and acquired brain injury among military personnel in the Great War<sup>4</sup> drove Goldstein's neurological work. Goldstein approached his patients as people whose behaviour was based on perceptions with their own psychoneurological basis and logic.

Fritz Perls worked, briefly, at Goldstein's clinic in Frankfurt where he met Lore Posner, his future wife. She had been Goldstein's associate and was familiar with gestalt psychology in a clinical setting. Perls brought to the partnership his psychoanalytic training and his experience as a patient of, *inter alia*, Reich. With this experience of body-centred therapy, he brought also his passion for theatre and performance and his excitement with the philosophy of Friedlaender as well as that of the existentialists centred in Frankfurt.

Following their enforced flight from National Socialism, the Perls set up practice in South Africa and defined their own way of working as analysts. They departed increasingly from European norms of psychoanalysis. They were influenced by Smuts' holism. It supported their view that psychoanalysis, though speaking of the body, concentrated on mental and emotional processes as though these could be separated from the body. The scene was set for a synthesis that developed as they moved, after the war, to New York City. There they established the New York Gestalt Institute, and Perls wrote, with Hefferline and Goodman, his second book<sup>5</sup>.

Chapter 3 of the thesis examined the other main influences in the formation of gestalt therapy,

e.g. Lewin's field theory and Reich's psychosomatic approach. These influences are very important but do not diminish the unbroken line from the ideas in Brentano's seminars to those promulgated in the 1960s and 1970s on the West coast of the USA when gestalt therapy emerged as one of the new, humanistic approaches. The diverse background of gestalt meant that its founders could claim they had established ("rediscovered") more than a school of therapy. Perls and his colleagues proclaimed it as a serious and well-founded discipline, a fact sometimes belied by the furore of publicity they deliberately attracted. It was important to demonstrate the depth and breadth of gestalt as a discipline with the scope to stand comparison with feminist theology.

One of the strengths of gestalt is its understanding of the self - the small s denoting Perls' resistance to any reification of ideas. The self is process, the sum of all the contacts between organism and environment. The notion of contact is central to gestalt thinking, as are the modifications of contact to a gestalt understanding of neurosis and other dysfunctions<sup>6</sup>. We are the sum of our contacts: we are constituted in and by them and are engaged in the constitution of other selves. The grounds for this assertion run deep in gestalt theory, and support for it is found in the writings of Perls *et al* (1973) as well as in the modern theorists, notably Yontef (1993).

The remainder of chapter 4 contains an analysis, on the basis of previous sections and chapters of core ideas in gestalt. This analysis forms a basis for the derivation of practical-values in chapter 7. The core ideas begin with the primacy and epistemological status of experience in gestalt theory and practice; and the holism of body / mind / spirit. A further holism - of personal / interpersonal / social and political - is established. The concept of self-regulation towards homeostasis and the notion of an optimising *Prägnanz* are examined in their turn. Other core

ideas are those of individual and social evolution, the importance of Now and Here, and the notion of response-ability and its transcendent possibilities. This analysis opens the way for a similar - though not identical - approach to feminist theology.

## **8.2 Feminist theology: origins, development and core ideas**

Part Two of the thesis begins in chapter 5 with a discussion of the wide range of ideas encapsulated in the phrase "second wave feminism". Following Evans' taxonomy along an equality-difference axis, these viewpoints or schools are viewed in relation to one another and to corresponding political and philosophical standpoints. It is demonstrated that the range of voices in feminist theology reflects the variety of feminist thought and commitment outside the field of theology. The chapter then explores feminist perspectives in the church and in theology and amplifies this with a review of feminist critiques and contributions in the specific fields of New and Old Testament studies, pastoral theology and christology as well as in the field of spirituality. Throughout this discussion, it is shown that, in feminist theology at least, content and methodology are intimately - and often overtly - linked.

The following chapter, chapter 6, moves forward to analyse the core ideas of feminist theology. These are identified as central to most feminist theological writing, although it would be unrealistic to hold up any as commanding universal assent. These core ideas are examined with a view to using them as sources of practical-values in the following chapter. The core ideas begin with the epistemological status of experience in feminist theology, the place of embodiment and the body's epistemological possibilities. This leads on to the importance of gender issues

affecting both the content of feminist theology and its methodologies. The next core idea concerns the integral links between the personal, the political and the theological in much feminist theological writing. The core idea of the embeddedness of patriarchy in structures of thought, governance and behaviour, and the necessity of confronting them is linked to another core idea, namely the intrinsic commitment to change. This core idea is in turn linked to the place of Jesus and the messianic community in feminist theological writing, and to ideas of God (/ess). Several of these ideas are shown to be problematic and to generate a good deal of critical discussion. Some major problems are examined in the chapter, notably concerning the first two core ideas of experience as epistemology and feminist debate about the body. Part Two ends with a conclusion that looks forward to the deduction of practical-values in Part Three.

### **8.3 Practical-values and the compatibility of gestalt and feminist theology**

The core ideas of feminist theology and those of gestalt are brought together in Part Three of the thesis. Chapter 7 opens with a discussion of values and the definition of practical-values as identified and developed in this thesis. The chapter continues by drawing out from the core ideas of each discipline a number of practical-values found in those ideas. Each practical-value is examined in turn and as it applies to both disciplines, in such a manner that, as the chapter moves forward, the degree of compatibility between the two becomes clearer. There is no suggestion in this that feminist theology and gestalt are identical, e.g. consisting of the same ideas and practices but simply using different words. Their histories and priorities are different, but they are shown at most points of comparison to be far more similar than dissimilar in the values they espouse and embody.

As well as the similarities, there are also some marked differences. Perhaps the clearest example is that of gender. A cursory visit to any university bookshop or academic library demonstrates that gender studies is a major subject area and that the matter of gender is fundamental to feminism, including, where it can be found to have a separate section, feminist theology. The same cannot be said of gestalt, although gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy are usually classified under psychology. This is an example of how a flexible practical-values approach can be useful in interdisciplinary work. The extent to which the literature can be lined up to correspond across disciplines is not the sole consideration in the method. What is of more importance is how, despite differences in history and applications, the two disciplines are analysed to show a practical correspondence in what they demonstrate to be important and valuable. Even in the matter of gender, it is shown that gestalt and feminist theology are compatible despite a lack of equivalence in the weight of literature available on the two sides.

#### **8.4 Problems, weaknesses and strengths**

This thesis relies heavily on literary sources. Another possible approach would be to carry out a literature review and, on the basis of emergent themes, to pilot and then set up a quantitative and qualitative study aimed at two communities of people - gestalt practitioners of various types and feminist theologians. Doubtless such an empirical approach would produce a great deal of interest to gestaltists and to feminist theologians. One of the drawbacks of such an approach, however, is that it would be beyond the resources of a single researcher because of the numbers of people in each community necessary for outcomes that could command confidence. Even a

representative sample of each would necessitate several hundred participants in each arm of the enquiry in order to evoke response numbers sufficiently high for qualitatively reliable results.

The chosen literature-based methodology is both informative about the situation under review (namely the compatibility of gestalt and feminist theology), is direct in its approach and, is applicable to other areas of interdisciplinary work. Given the ongoing interest among ministry students and practitioners in counselling and therapeutic psychology, tools are needed that can be used to assess the fit between chosen schools of counselling and therapy and (equally chosen) theological perspectives.

However, no approach is without its weaknesses, and that is true of the present method. These weaknesses lie in two main areas. First, there is the possibility that the writer has overlooked or inappropriately ruled out work of potential significance for the study. This is always a challenge for the researcher. Whilst care was taken to review the available anglophone literature, it is not possible completely to rule out bias or oversight or the possibility that another researcher is about to publish in the same area.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, there is the possibility that the literature does not represent what people actually do in their lives: perhaps the words and the *praxis* do not match. This is a limitation endemic to a literature approach. The thesis counters this possibility by its approach to compatibility expressed in terms of practical-values. The writer practised and taught gestalt theory and therapy for three decades in addition to studying theology and returning to academic work to resume that study in the light of feminist critiques. Nevertheless, it remains

possible that an empirical study of the same subject area might challenge some of the present findings.

One of the challenges of a thesis arising from research in such a broad field is that there are inevitably problems at every stage. To return to an earlier analogy of a brick built structure, it is important that the foundations are sound and that the bricks themselves are of sufficient strength for their role in forming the structure. Foundations must vary according to what they have to carry. In this case, the foundation represents the chosen methodology. The chosen approach is not suitable for every kind of study, but has proved equal to the weight it has to bear in this study. However, it has become clear that each of the bricks has its strengths and its weaknesses. Let us consider, for example, the importance accorded in feminist theological circles to embodiment and the place of the / my body in feminist discourse. It is evident that, whilst many feminists are clear that the body is central to their thinking and living, there are other feminists for whom the matter is of less importance<sup>7</sup>. It is hard to see how a theological perspective that does not accord importance to the body could be compatible with gestalt. And yet, on the gestalt side, there are a number of senior practitioners and teachers who, while proclaiming the importance of psychosomatic holism, distance themselves from the ideas and practices of body-oriented colleagues. Their practice, seen in seminars and demonstrations, seems like psychotherapy in that the focus is entirely on words and on psychological processes. If there are sufficient of these bricks in the structure, it will not stand the test of time.

At each point in the argument of the thesis, there are conflicting voices. The writer has to choose how much weight to give them and whether their ideas offer serious challenge to the views

adopted. Where these voices are thought to be important, and to be heard alongside the main point, they have been indicated.

With all these reservations, there remain considerable strengths in the approach of this thesis. First, it tackles a problem that has either been overlooked or else avoided in the past. The thesis makes visible what has often been invisible. Feminist theology and psychology (by which is meant therapeutic, interpersonal, organisational and social psychology) are two key disciplines in the development of pastoral / practical theology. Pastoral theologians move in and out of a number of disciplines in which they may or not be formally trained. There is evidence that they are unaware of crossing boundaries when they do this, and that words, phrases and ideas may have different meanings in different contexts. Crossing these boundaries is of the essence of pastoral theology - an interdisciplinary discipline or else nothing. But the boundaries represent realms of meaning and it is essential when venturing into another realm to ensure that this can be done without prejudice to the integrity of either discipline. It is necessary therefore to test for compatibility. That is the case where feminist theology and gestalt are concerned and would doubtless also be the case with, say, political theology and monetary economics or the study of governance.

## **8.5 The main findings of the thesis**

**8.5.1** What is established in Part One is the existence and strength of a direct line from von Ehrenfels to Perls<sup>8</sup>. Three chapters of the thesis (chapters 2-4) examine in detail the roots of gestalt therapy. The development of gestalt began in the late nineteenth century,

although gestalt therapy did not appear under that name until the late 1940s. The first published work establishing the title was in 1951. One of the most influential of its sources was the gestalt psychology of the Berlin school and, before that, the gestalt philosophy that emerged from the German University in Prague. This is important for gestalt therapists who need to know where their philosophical and psychological roots lie as gestalt theory continues to develop. It is also an important conclusion of the thesis that gestalt has been demonstrated to be not simply a therapeutic approach, still less a collection of dramatic counselling techniques. It has been shown to be a world-view arising from fundamental notions about the homeostatic nature of the cosmos and of human beings. That view is of persons as organisms-in-an-environment which at once links and differentiates people, other creatures and the so-called inorganic environment. These perspectives suggest also other possible connections for interdisciplinary work, e.g. in the environmental movement. Finally, this conclusion is in contradiction of previously received views regarding these connections, and is a contribution to existing knowledge.

**8.5.2** Of the other major influences in the shaping of gestalt therapy, psychoanalysis represents the greatest contribution to a gestalt perspective on intrapersonal dynamics<sup>9</sup>. This is not to deny that there are strong links between Perls' views of the self and those of other psychologists, especially the originators of other humanistic therapies. However, Perls' radical criticisms of Freud's theories - most vehemently expressed in the 1960s and 1970s – should not occlude what is more obviously the case, that the two schools approximate to each other more than they differ. Examples of this approximation are the psychic mechanisms of projection, introjection, retroflection and sublimation. Significant

differences exist regarding, say, repetition compulsion or understandings of consciousness on the one hand and awareness on the other. It would be difficult, however, to imagine where gestalt understandings in such matters could have come from except as criticisms and refinements of the earlier work. The position arrived at in the thesis represents a contribution to an ongoing debate in gestalt circles regarding gestalt and psychoanalysis.

**8.5.3** Gestalt therapy was novel in embracing existentialism, field theory and holism<sup>10</sup>, and in its reliance on the previously neglected work of Friedlaender<sup>11</sup>. For its psychology, it is also indebted to Reich, in particular for his emphasis on psychosomatic unity<sup>12</sup>. Gestalt therapy promotes a notion of the human self as a responsible and responsive agent existing (only) in an environment, a concept that includes relationships with other selves<sup>13</sup>. This is, so far as can be ascertained, the broadest discussion yet available on these philosophical connections and draws together a number of strands referred to in Part One. The reading of Friedlaender (still apparently unavailable in English) fills out Perls' statements on that score. The author has found no other such undertaking in English.

**8.5.4** In turning in Part Two to Christian traditions, the thesis recapitulates much existing work that demonstrates how Christian scriptures and traditions have been deeply imbued with patriarchal assumptions. If these assumptions are not challenged they support the perpetuation of sexism and other forms of oppression in church and society<sup>14</sup>. Some feminists find it impossible to stay within the church. Others remain and continue to offer

a critique of Christian behaviour (including institutional and corporate behaviour), attitudes and thinking. Feminist scholars have recovered traditions that were not inimical to women and have exposed examples of cruelty and oppression<sup>15</sup>. This part of the thesis forms the basis for understanding why feminist theology has come into existence and continues to be an important part of academic and ecclesial projects dedicated to human flourishing.

**8.5.5** Feminist critiques bring about a re-valuing of women and, by the same token, the re-valuing of femininity (in both sexes). There are several areas of discourse where such change is found: they include philosophy, theology and psychology. Patriarchy, by contrast, entails devaluing (often by both women and men) the feminine, and a polarising of masculine and feminine so that they become indistinguishable from male and female. The discussions about the status of sex as an aspect of body are touched on, although they are not of direct relevance to the thesis. However, the nature of gender is important to the argument. From both feminist and gestalt perspectives, it is seen that gender is not an absolute, something immutable given at birth. It is always relative.

From a gestalt point of view, it is based on a differentiation of figure from ground. It is the outcome of a process located within persons and agreed between them. This comes close to constructivism. However, there is another strand of gestalt thinking that sees gender operating as a cultural introject at the level of human societies and their politics. As such, it comes close to social constructionism. Gestalt, qua gestalt, does not make these distinctions, any more than it takes issue with neo-Darwinian or evolutionary

psychological views of gender. From a feminist perspective, it is evident that gender definitions are a social, economic and political matter. From a feminist theological perspective, gender is all these things and, in a sense, less, since God, in whose image people are made, is presumably beyond gender, subsuming and transcending all human attributes. The contribution of the thesis at this point is in bringing together two disciplines with diverging investments in philosophical discourse and, notwithstanding those differences, identifying their compatibility.

**8.5.6** In bringing together gestalt and theology, it is found, by comparing their practical-values, that the two disciplines are compatible. However, there is a corollary. They do not have a complete identity of purpose. It may be that gestalt can speak of matters which it is more difficult for theology to encompass and *vice versa*. It is shown that gestalt is not inimical to ideas of God and indeed that it presupposes an ever-widening *Gestalt* whose boundaries are the mysterious ones of the cosmos itself. Moreover, gestalt theory and practice recognise our need of transcendence as well as its facticity (the organism is not an end in itself, but exists only as organism-in-an-environment). This basic premise and its related concept of response-ability open the way to compatibility with theological disciplines at levels once thought either impossible or irrelevant. It is likely that models of God developed by some feminist writers are more likely to engage gestaltists in dialogue than those imbued with patriarchal associations and history.

**8.5.7** The most fundamental points of meeting between gestalt and feminist theology are the places accorded to human experience as an epistemological foundation, and to the human

body as site of that experience and truth. Whilst neither of these fundamental points is unproblematic, the weight of argument favours them and supports the accord between the two disciplines both concerning their interests (bodies and experience) and their methodologies (starting where we are and working outwards rather than the opposite).

**8.5.8** Both disciplines tend to an holistic view not only of the person (mind / body / spirit) but also to her context in society, the world and, ultimately, the cosmos. This holism is perhaps more apparent in feminist politics than in the gestalt consulting room, but is nonetheless potent in both contexts. If a gestalt therapist narrows her vision to the point where the patient is the problem, then any changes she makes are unlikely to be efficacious: she lives in an environment full of other people, and it is there that she must make the changes she needs. Jesus' view of the identity of the neighbour motivates many Christians into political activity, including feminist politics: for the gestaltist too, we are all connected and can be response-able in all situations.

**8.5.9** What is sure, from a gestalt perspective, is that our tendency is towards self-regulation in any context. We do not necessarily have to work at this since, in health, our *Prägnanz* operates automatically to ensure optimal adjustment in each context. Our flexibility and adaptability is, of course, finite and we may find ourselves in intolerable circumstances. However, for most of us, the common problems are those we bring to a situation, i.e. our modifications of contact such that we do not deal with the real situation but one formed in part by our fears and other self-related difficulties. This view of life is not reflected in the *corpus* of feminist theology, although we can find a clear commitment to the radical re-

structuring of the world as we have inherited it. We do not have to take what is given as though we had no choice. So many apparently objective and immutable customs, ideas and practices have been subjected to rigorous criticism that has exposed their arbitrary and oppressive nature. Through solidarity with other women, and sometimes with the support of men, women have deconstructed much that is oppressive of humanity in the churches and in theology, as well as in the wider world - although there is further work to be done.

**8.5.10** Finally, in this summary of the main findings, it is shown that there is an approach to the difficulties inherent in interdisciplinary work which, given sufficient understanding and familiarity with the disciplines entailed, can be effectively deployed. This is the approach that identifies the practical-values of each discipline and tests them for compatibility. From one perspective it can be seen as an ethical approach, and from another it is an expression of a (British) pragmatic tradition. It arises from practice and is intended to speak to practice by getting theory into practice. Practice, without due consideration of its intellectual infrastructure, is inevitably compromised. The practical-values approach is capable of extension and of application to a range of interdisciplinary situations.

## **8.6 Areas for further research**

A major piece of research suggested by the present thesis is a follow-up study using both quantitative and / or qualitative approaches into the fundamental thesis question studied here, namely the compatibility of gestalt and feminist theology. It may be argued that the question has

been addressed sufficiently thoroughly in this thesis and that the commitment of the necessary resources requires justification beyond the value of an empirical check on the present findings. However, there would be a second perceivable gain, and that is the possibility of pursuing the question of compatibility further. Put briefly, the hypothesis states that anything that can be said in theological language can be said equally in psychological language. This hypothesis would take researchers into the philosophy of religion and into questions of realism and non-realism, but in a strictly empirical fashion. This qualification is important because of the gaps between what people believe and think and how they live their lives. This last is not a matter of insincerity but of cognitive dissonance. It concerns the accuracy of our awareness and self-perception.

Part One of the thesis brought together a range of sources and ideas from the history and practice of gestalt. The research underlying this part of the thesis has produced solid evidence, for example linking Perls back to von Ehrenfels. This link is not supported by some writers in the field of gestalt therapy, nor by one of the principal researchers in the fields of gestalt psychology and philosophy<sup>16</sup>. However, Ash's comments on gestalt therapy amount to little more than an aside since they were not central to his work at the time. This question merits further research and such work would encourage debate in the gestalt practitioner community on the philosophical underpinnings of practice.

There is an unresolved conflict as between the Graz and Berlin poles of the argument about gestalt. It is possible that the view taken in this thesis may ultimately prevail. That is to say, it is probably not necessary to take a view as to whether *Gestalten* are "produced" from the *fundamenta*, or whether they are given in the experience "von oben nach unten". What is evident

is that modern gestalt theorists, typified by Yontef, are following the Wertheimer line (though not with polemical intent), whereas cognitive psychologists are more interested on a day to day basis in what gestaltists recognise as production studies (building up percepts from sensory bits). This argument has practical implications in, for example, National Health Service provision of clinical psychology to persons suffering phobic symptoms. They may be treated as persons who produce erroneous percepts from innocent *fundamenta* or they may be regarded as persons who project *von oben nach unten* some terrifying *Gestalt* on to innocuous elements in their environment. There are at least two quite different therapeutic responses here, and the choice has implications for outcome - and cost. The unfinished task is to discover if a synthesis of the two schools may be achieved that does not undermine the theoretical integrity of constructs founded upon one or other of them. The necessary neurological techniques and knowledge are now available to make relatively simple what had to be done by painstaking experiment and surmise in the student days of Koffka and Köhler.

The advent of sophisticated mechanisms and techniques for neuroimaging have opened up avenues of research with potential for generating new techniques of management and new treatments for schizophrenic conditions, dyspraxias, dysphorias and other neurological states. Gestalt approaches to perception and mental construction might well furnish useful and important conceptual frameworks for understanding the outcomes of physical and empirical enquiry.

In the sections bearing on feminist theology, it is apparent that there are a number of significant writers for whom Christianity is so founded upon and constructed by patriarchal assumptions that it is no longer possible - or worthwhile - to consider its reform. Some have moved to other types

of religious practice whilst others have remained as critics on the edge of the church. The witness of such people is important, both to those who choose to remain identified as church and to yet others who are more interested to discover more about an apparent need for transcendence. The thesis identifies common ground between gestalt and feminist theology regarding the possibilities of transcendence. In so doing, it suggests further questions to be pursued.

The next piece of possible further research is linked to the question of transcendence. Some of the most important elements of feminist theological critique are at the level of the philosophy of religion. By this is meant two things: first, the philosophical import of feminist critiques even if they are not expressed primarily in philosophical terms (e.g. the epistemological implications of theologies founded upon the experience of women) and, second, explicit philosophical criticism such as that of Jantzen. There is more work to be done in both of these areas, and it is likely that the outcomes of such research would have formative influence on religious *praxis* in the future.

Linked to this last paragraph is the issue concerning the place of the body in feminist theology and, in particular, the body as a sexual body. It is arguable that the integrity (in both usual senses of the word) of the Anglican Communion has been threatened by a series of issues that are, in part at least, sexual. In the 1920s and 1930s, contraception and divorce were two issues that threatened to divide the communion. The issue of contraception was not settled until the Lambeth Conference of 1958. The issue of divorce has also been divisive and remains to be resolved: in this connection, each new accommodation in a province of the communion seems to raise further debate suggesting that it is work in progress. Currently, the most divisive single issue is that of the status of homosexuality and the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people in the

church. Loosely referred to as "the gay issue", it is more probably a wide range of issues that connects to the most profound levels of human identity and of theology. The gay issue raises questions about the use and status of the Bible that are examined for a different purpose in this thesis. It puts theological traditions into significant confrontation with psychological theory and practice. It interrogates assumptions about the place of the body as an epistemological touchstone and challenges old (if sometimes inaccurate) notions about original sin. The gay issue not only has potential for schism between the churches of Africa and Asia on the one hand and the USA and Europe on the other, but also between parts of the same church (e.g. the Church of England) potentially divided along traditionalist and liberal lines. The work of Brock and of Heyward in particular represents part of a liberal position in a necessary and ultimately important dialogue. These feminist writers may undercut what has become an argument about sex and sexuality and offer instead a more nuanced discourse about what it is to be a sentient being in a divine dispensation.

There is a great deal of research to be done in this complex area. Some of this research could lead to clearer understandings about the place of the Bible and of other content of Christian traditions, and it would probably lead to greater discrimination by evangelical parts of the church and, perhaps, intellectual debate. It would highlight weaknesses in the new conservative theologies and promote dialogue between open evangelical positions and those of liberal and liberal catholic theologies. Such dialogues would cut across the denominational lines of Christianity and would also have implications for engagements between religions. Finally, such work would inevitably and quite properly have wider importance in the United Kingdom where, it is arguable, what appear to be internal dialogues of a minority body (the church) have vicarious significance for

people who never associate with the church.

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1 Walker (1971); Davidson (1991).

2 von Ehrenfels (1890).

3 Chapter 2.11

4 It had also prompted important developments in the work of Freud (1922), particularly in the  
5 area of repetition compulsion as was evidenced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

6 Perls *et al* (1973).

7 This was discussed in chapter 4.

8 Section 6.2.

9 Section 2.14.

10 Section 3.2.

11 Sections 3.4, 3.8, 3.9.

12 Section 3.5.

13 Section 3.3.

14 Section 4.1.

15 Sections 5.2, 5.3.

16 Sections 5.3, 5.5, 5.10, 5.11.

Ash, 1995, p.xi.

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