
Paul Goodman's Gestalt Therapy

An Advertisement and Introduction

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New Foreword and Appendix, March 2007

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Foreword (2007)

I wrote this paper 40 years ago for a University of Michigan seminar called “Theories of Personality”. I am reissuing it now, for the same reason I wrote it then: to recommend to you the deepest and truest book of psychology that I have known – the theoretical volume of *Gestalt Therapy*, by Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, first published in 1951.

“Gestalt Therapy” vs *Gestalt Therapy*

The only significant change to this new edition is the addition of this new Foreword and a new Appendix. These additions are motivated by something that happened soon after the first edition came out: “Gestalt Therapy” became a household word!

In 1967, the term “Gestalt Therapy” was almost unknown, even though the book *Gestalt Therapy* had already been in print for 16 years. So in the 1967 version of this paper, my task was simply to win my readers’ attention for a brand-new approach. I didn’t have to overcome anybody’s preconceptions about it.

But in the years between 1967 and his death in 1970, Frederick (Fritz) Perls became a celebrity of the “counter-culture”, and “Gestalt Therapy” became synonymous with the teachings and techniques of Perls and his followers. Alas, as he stepped into the spotlight, Perls did not bring the *Gestalt Therapy* book with him. The ascendancy of “Gestalt Therapy” left *Gestalt Therapy* even deeper in the shadows.

So as I promote this book in 2007, I have to make this additional plea: Whatever you have read or heard, loved or hated, about “Gestalt Therapy”, please don’t let it stop you from reading *Gestalt Therapy*. It’s not the same thing! Please take a fresh look at *this* book, and love it or hate it for itself.¹

Gestalt Therapy consists of two volumes, published together as a single book. Both volumes were initially inspired by the ideas, the practices, and the presence of Fritz Perls.

- The volume that reports the results of applying Perls’ experiential exercises, titled “Mobilizing the Self”, was written by Ralph Hefferline. It’s pretty good; but 40 years later, I feel no burning urge to resurrect it.
- The theoretical volume, titled “Novelty, Excitement, and Growth”, was written by Paul Goodman. *This* volume is the nearly lost treasure that the world needs to rediscover. It is the essence of the *Gestalt Therapy* that this paper advertises and introduces.

To make the focus explicit, this paper is called *Paul Goodman’s Gestalt Therapy*.

¹ In case you want to put a little more space between the “Gestalt Therapy” you probably know and the *Gestalt Therapy* you probably don’t yet know, the new Appendix to this paper (“Appendix (2007): Perls and Goodman”, page 39) offers some additional history and commentary.

Available Editions of *Gestalt Therapy*

In the happy event that this paper inspires you to read *Gestalt Therapy*, here is some bibliographic assistance.

The book's full title is *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. It has been published in three editions:

1. The first edition came out in hardback from Julian Press in 1951 and in paperback from Delta Books (Dell Publishing) in 1965. Just before the first edition went to press, the publisher decided to reverse the authors' intended order of the two volumes. He put the volume of exercises ahead of the theoretical volume, hoping to sell more books in the "self-help" market.
2. Bantam Books published a second paperback version in 1977. The content of the book was unchanged from the first edition, but it included a new preface by Perls, dated 1969.
3. The Gestalt Journal Press issued the third and "definitive" edition in 1994. It restores the authors' original ordering of the volumes and adds a new introduction by Isadore From and Michael Vincent Miller.

Only the Gestalt Journal Press edition is still in print (for ordering information see <http://www.gestalt.org/book.htm>). I recommend this edition – it really *does* read better when the theoretical volume comes first. However, the earlier editions are readily available through online booksellers and used bookstores. You can read Perls' preface to the second edition and the From & Miller introduction to the third edition online at <http://www.gestalt.org/phgintro.htm>.

The three editions have different paginations. Citations of the book in this paper refer to the book as "*GT*" and give the pages of both the latest (Gestalt Journal Press) and the earliest (Julian/Delta) editions. The citation format is this: the citation "*GT*, pp. 20-21 / 243-44" means that the passage is on pages 20-21 of the Gestalt Journal Press edition and pages 243-244 of the Julian/Delta edition. If you happen to have the Bantam edition, I'm afraid you're on your own.

Preface

I want to advertise and introduce Paul Goodman's *Gestalt Therapy* because it has done more for my psychological thinking than anything else I have read – more, perhaps, than everything else put together. I find that:

- Its broad scope provides context and orientation, and often surprising and useful answers, when I am considering limited and specialized questions;
- In its framework various seemingly unrelated views of humanity (e.g. laboratory psychology and psychoanalytic theory) fall into place;
- It accounts for both what people are and what they might be under better circumstances; and
- In my experience, its theory is true.

But also, the book *needs* an advertisement and introduction, especially for the reader who wants to extract from it a comprehensive psychological theory (as opposed to just random insights, which it provides abundantly and quite easily). As an exposition of a theory, it is a poorly written book: Key terms are haphazardly defined or receive seemingly contradictory definitions in different passages. Process descriptions are prematurely interrupted by commentaries on society or other theories and never quite resumed. Goodman tends to say what he has to say without first taking the time to give you orientation and context.

Moreover, it is difficult because it is basically a theory about how people experience, and so much of its verification must come from the reader's own experiencing. Goodman goes to some pains to show the reader why, given his situation, he experiences as he does. Nevertheless, it falls to the reader to make the connection between his own living and the propositions of the book. This requires much more self-knowledge, sensitivity, and perseverance than evaluation of a theory only with explicit "data" and semi-formalized criteria. As this "contextual method of argument" (*GT*, pp. 20-21 / 243-44) is acquired, it proves a much more powerful, method, in my opinion, than those based on a priori formalisms, for its appeal and its responsibility are to all of experience, not just to those parts that have already been considered and codified.

So my aims here are:

- to motivate you to tackle this book,
- to provide a "map" that may make the task easier
- for myself, to get a better grip on the whole theory by trying to expound it.

First I try to orient your attention and understanding to the actual, ongoing "here and now" functioning of the human being, as it is represented both in the direct experience of the person in question and in the more detached experience of an outside observer.

Then, staying always as close as possible to concrete present functioning, I elaborate *GT*'s most general propositions about what happens in

- healthy functioning,
- the transition to neurotic functioning,
- neurotic functioning, and
- the transition from neurosis to health.

Finally, attempting to develop the theory further, I translate some of its basics from words into a “flow diagram” to provide a different representation of the process.²

But of course the advertisement is not a substitute for the product itself. If this paper succeeds in articulating sharply the general framework of the theory, even so it does so at the loss of the vivid concreteness that makes the book itself meaningful and appealing. As we say on Madison Avenue, you owe it to yourself to try it.

² Note added in 2007: Because I expect that most readers' eyes will glaze over at the sight of a flow diagram, I have omitted it from the version of the paper you are now reading. If, however, you are one of the happy few who find such presentations enlightening, you can find a version at <http://kenatsun.home.comcast.net/pggt-fd.htm> that includes the flow diagram.

Processes vs Things

In this paper, I want to describe *GT* as a general psychological theory, taking this facet of the book as the basic one, from which the others (its do-it-yourself therapeutic exercises, its social criticisms, its discussions of the therapist's role, etc.) more or less deductively follow.

First, an important orienting remark: In almost all psychological theorizing, indeed in almost all of our systematic thinking, "objects" or "things" are taken as more basic and real than actions or processes. It is usual to begin naming objects as the foundations or "units" of your theory, and then secondarily to have these things "interact." I think it was the psychologist E. G. Boring who noted that hypothetical constructs, even those better described as functions than as objects, tend to acquire "thinghood" as they mature. (Consider the Ego or the S-R bond.)

But a fundamentally different approach is available. It begins with ongoing motions, actions, and processes as basics, awarding "thinghood" only to the relatively static and discrete (and therefore, for many purposes, least interesting) aspects of the processes. To put it shortly and crudely:

- The "objects" approach asks "What is it?" before it asks "What's happening?"
- The "process" approach asks "What's happening?" before it asks "What is it?"

Though Goodman doesn't explicitly make this distinction, I would put him on the extreme "process" side of it. In another context, Goodman (1966) says that "truth is not the description of a state of things but the orientation of an ongoing activity," and later claims that the Euclidian "space" in which we put "objects" is not prior to, but rather only a formalized derivative of, our awareness that motion is possible for us. "Space is given... simply and essentially as the organism's possibility of motion in its environment." And in *GT*, almost every key term refers to a process, to something that is happening rather than something that is there. In fact, virtually the only concepts that are static enough to attain "thinghood" are mostly disparaged as impediments to ongoing processes: the neurotic fixations, splits, and repression-habits.

Unfortunately, current English seems to be a thing-language. (I was taught in elementary school that nouns are "names of things".) So any exposition that describes almost exclusively processes is bound to have an odd ring, and to become senseless as we habitually try to convert its concepts into hard objects. *GT*'s readers are advised, when in doubt about what something means, to view that something as a process.³

³ Andras Angyal gives a pretty clear presentation of the "processes are basic" position in his *Neurosis & Treatment: a Holistic Theory* (Wiley, 1965), pp. 3-8. He calls "things" – in particular, the "organism" and "environment" as things – the "structural precipitates" of the life-process. Incidentally, there is an astonishing correspondence between Angyal's theory and the one discussed here – astonishing especially since they seem to have been formulated independently. Angyal's is easier to understand, but I find it rather airy and abstract (like most holistic writing).

The Process of Experience

GT theory begins with experience, and one of its strengths is that its concepts never stray far from direct experience. What is experienced is **contact**⁴ between organism and environment. But already, beware of premature “thinghood” – the “organism” and “environment” in the preceding sentence are not fixed things!

We speak of the organism contacting the environment, but it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality. ... Psychologically, everything [but contact], including the very notions of an organism or an environment, is an abstraction or a possible construction or a potentiality occurring in this experience as a hint of some other experience. – *GT*, p. 3 / 227

You are invited, then, to suspend your notion of yourself as a set of organs, inside a skin, surrounded by a three-dimensional environment, and instead to attend closely to your actual experiencing. In each experience there is experienced the “hint” of an “organism”: a safe, conservative, automatic and absolutely essential functioning, the moment’s manifestation of what William James (1890, Ch. 10) called the “me”. Also in each experience is the “hint” of an environment: a novel, somewhat risky, but necessary milieu, not yet harmonious with the “me” but currently being dealt with. It is this “dealing-with” that is the experience: “it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality.”

It may initially seem pointless to insist that the “organism” and “environment” hinted at in contacting be distinguished from the “organism” and “environment” of our usual abstracted conceptions, because in fact in many instances the locus of the contacting process – the **contact boundary** – is “the skin surface and other organs of sensory and motor response” (*GT*, p. 3 / 227), precisely where the usual conception would place such a boundary. But in many instances, the correspondence doesn’t hold, and either the experience or the usual conception must yield. For example:

- If you are trying to reason your way to the solution of a problem (without external aids), the experience is you (organism) and the material of the problem (environment) and the process of thinking (the contact process) – with emphasis on the process, for it implies all that is necessary of the other two. But in the usual conception, all of this is wholly inside the “organism” (i.e., the skin). If one had to find “contact” at the skin or receptors in such a moment, one would have to settle for the touching and pressure of your body and the chair you’re sitting in. But this is at most a dimly aware and fairly irrelevant contact during a moment of intense thought. The real contacting, both functionally and experientially, is the thinking.

The Gestaltists' more difficult theory is superior because it throws clear light on concrete events as well as improving one's abstract theories of human nature. (Angyal has some lovely concrete insights, but they don't seem to bear much relation to his theory.)

⁴ The terms that I find most central in Goodman's theory are introduced in **boldface**.

- Or consider the phenomena of “internalization” and, on the other hand, the “extensions of man” through tools, etc., with which psychology frequently grapples. Such matters seem less anomalous if we consider organism and environment to be newly defined by each moment of contact rather than as fixed things that define the contact.
- As with “organism” and “environment”, so with other aspects of any given situation, and in general with **reality**: It too is defined by the contacting process and its imperatives (and difficulties); “the core of the real is the action in any case.” (*GT*, p. 79 / 302)

This view Goodman deliberately and extensively contrasts with the usual view of “reality” as an objective, constant, immutable, and impersonal property of the environment, to whose laws any contacting process would be subject.

What is contact for?

- First and importantly, the moments of contact are ends in themselves (“pleasure [is] the feeling of contact” – *GT*, p. 202 / 422).
- But also, contact is a means, and this requires some explanation of what is on either side of the contact boundary.
 - On one side there is the “conservative” **organism** (often called simply the **physiology**), a system that functions automatically (this is called **organismic self-regulation**) – with one important exception: its functioning occasionally needs something from the environment. This is true for the digestive system, the genital system, the brain, and less obviously for functions like excreting, where there is need for an environment that will accept the cast-offs. “A physiological function completes itself internally, but ultimately no function can continue to do so (the organism cannot ‘preserve itself’) without assimilating something from the environment.” (*GT*, p. 180 / 401) When a particular organismic function needs something from the environment in order to continue, there exists an **unfinished situation**. The most pressing unfinished situation at a given time assumes **dominance**, meaning that it alone is represented in awareness, lesser needs being held in abeyance by the self-regulation of the organism, as long as satisfactory progress toward fulfilling this need is underway (*GT*, pp. 51-56 / 274-279). (But, as we’ll see later, if in the past some dominant unfinished situation was kept from awareness and remains unfinished in the present, the needs present themselves in a more confused and precarious way.)
 - On the other side, there is the **environment**, and the important point here is that it presents almost infinite **novelty**. In the present context, novelty means whatever is not (or is not yet) appropriate to the organism’s **needs** – that is, as given it does not provide what is necessary to the completion

and perpetuation of the organismic functions. The novelty includes both dangers (threats of further disruption of organismic processes) and material that must be changed before it will meet the needs. Novelty is what is still problematic for the present contacting.

Contact is the process that mediates between the needs of the organismic functions and the novelty of the environment processes. It is the means by which a **creative adjustment** is made between the organismic needs and the environmental novelty.

- The term “adjustment” indicates that in contact, both organism and environment are subject to being changed, so as to fit together (in the symbiotic sense already described above).
- The term “creative” indicates that something new must be created in the contacting process, a new adjustment reached, because novelty is involved.

To the extent that the environmental situation, hence the problem, hence the solution, are new, there is a need for contact, and the function proceeds with awareness.

It is at the [contact] boundary that dangers are rejected, obstacles are overcome, and the assimilable is selected and appropriated. Primarily, contact is the awareness of, and behavior toward, the assimilable novelty, and the rejection of the unassimilable novelty. What is pervasive, always the same, or indifferent is not an object of contact. (*GT*, p. 6 / 230)

The contact process changes the processes of the organism and the environment so that the organism can **assimilate** what was originally the novelty involved or so that some novelty (a danger) is eliminated from the environment (the *experienced* environment, remember!).

In turn, the result of assimilation is **growth**.

Depending on the kind of novelty that has been addressed and transformed, the growth has various names: increase in size, restoration, procreation, rejuvenation, recreation, assimilation, learning, memory, habit, imitation, identification. – *GT*, p. 200 / 421

The transformed novelty is, so to speak, handed over to the self-regulating organism, which makes use of the new material without further need for awareness. The organism now has an added capability, new skill or knowledge, a stronger body, or perhaps the solution to a persistent problem that allows the other functions to proceed without being distracted by that problem.

Finally, let us note the basic sub-processes that must occur in contacting. First, there must be a *selection* of what is to be included: Neither all of the organismic functions nor all of the environmental novelty are included in any such process. The acts of accepting and rejecting “material” for the contact-process are called, respectively, **identifying** and **alienating**. Since every contact implies changing of what is given, contact necessarily implies **aggression** of some sort. Goodman distinguishes two basic aggressive functions (See *GT*, esp. pp. 9, 120-122 / 232-3, 340-342):

- **Annihilating** is the aggressive attempt to remove completely from experience something that is disruptive of and useless to the current process of contacting a danger or distraction. It is the function exercised against what has been alienated yet obtrudes itself into the situation anyway; its function is simply to bring about the absence of the alienated object or event.
- **Destroying**, by contrast, is aggression toward an object or process that has been identified with, not alienated, but that is not assimilable in its present form, and hence must be “de-structured” to be reformed by the imperatives of the present contact. This applies to what might begin as a property of the experienced organism and/or a property of the experienced environment. Identified with, they become part of the contacting, and amid the contacting, their original forms are subject to destruction in the interests of the contacting as a whole.

A Digression Concerning “Perspectives”

Before we go on with the theory, another problem of orientation must be set straight. In order to understand what a theoretical concept is about, you must know where and how to “look” in order to experience what the concept is referring to. Or – to put it in a way that is only superficially different – you must know where to “look” *from*: what vantage-point or perspective will afford you a “view” of the concept’s referent. This is, in a broad and loose form, the requirement that the concept be “operationally defined”. Since Goodman is none too clear about what perspectives are appropriate to each of his concepts, let me distinguish the three perspectives that most importantly figure in their theory.

1. As noted above (page 7), the approach taken so far in this paper has been to ask you to consider the entirety of your experiencing as the subject-matter. Some concepts have already been suggested to help in describing this. Let me label this the *experiential perspective*.
2. But instead of all experience, you can select only what you contact in some specific kind of experience and develop concepts based on that. The specific kind that concerns me here is essentially that of the empirical scientist at work. The unfinished situation is an important question or a doubted belief that you, the empirical scientist, have. The environment contacted is whatever you take as the subject-matter relevant to this concern. The contacting process is these “prior beliefs” and these “new data” interacting and re-structuring one another until they are mutually consistent. And as a scientist you try to alienate whatever you feel would “bias” the outcome of this process (e.g., a feeling that your career would be advanced by a certain outcome and set back by another). Now if you are a life scientist, note that in this mode of experience your subject-matter is not your own present experiencing, not yourself, but rather *some other organism* that is part of the environment you are presently contacting. I’ll tag this second way of studying life-processes as the *observer’s perspective*.

3. Let me also distinguish here a third perspective. It proceeds from the notion that you yourself are an organism quite similar to those you experience from the observer's perspective. In this perspective, you attempt to view yourself "from the outside," as an object in an environment. This attitude, of trying to take the observer's perspective towards yourself, I will call the *self-observer's perspective*. I emphasize that this is not at all the same as the experiential perspective, for in the self-observer's perspective the subject-matter, what is contacted, is not your present experiencing but a conception of yourself assembled from your general views about human beings, from other people's reactions to you, from looking in mirrors, and many other sources.

The Organism/Environment Field

The arena in which the events that concern the gestalt therapists occur is the **organism/environment field** (see *GT*, esp. p. 228ff). This is a tricky notion – tricky, largely because it is considered from each of the first two perspectives, experiential and observer's, and Goodman seldom bothers to tell you which perspective is relevant at a given time.

We must first take the observer's perspective to understand this concept. From this viewpoint, Goodman says, there is the field of experience. As life-scientists, we are likely to differentiate this field into organism(s) and environment – this is the organism/environment field. It is best viewed as a process: "the interacting of organism and environment." (*GT*, p. 4 / 228) The general point made with this concept is that life-scientists must understand the functioning of the field, not just of an isolated organism. In fact, the self-contained organism is illusory:

Where the organism is mobile in a great field and has a complicated internal structure, like an animal, it seems plausible to speak of it by itself – as, for instance, the skin and what is contained in it – but this is simply an illusion due to the fact that the motion through space and the internal detail call attention to themselves against the relative stability and simplicity of the background. (*GT*, p. 4 / 228)

Though they all work in the same field, different specialties within the life-sciences focus on different processes within the field. Physiology, for example, attends to processes occurring mostly within the organism, settling for only sketchy knowledge of environmental events. Sociology, by contrast, concentrates on processes largely in the environment, especially those among many organisms; it knows little of intra-organismic processes. Psychology's focus, according to Goodman, is properly on those processes that mediate between organism and environment. These are the processes that the organism in question experiences: the contact-processes. "Psychology studies the operation of the contact-boundary in the organism/environment field." (*GT*, p. 5 / 229)

Choosing the contact-boundary (which, remember, may be "inside" or "outside" of the organism-in-its-skin that we usually define) as focus means remaining relatively ignorant of the details of the more routine physiological functions and the more remote sociological processes. But it must be emphasized that, in choosing any of these

specialties, one risks ignoring some of the processes that are crucial in understanding the processes covered by one's own specialty. The trouble is not that the specialist doesn't understand everything; it is that he doesn't understand even his specialty – for it, too, functions as part of the field.

The human organism/environment is, of course, not only physical but social. So, in any humane study, we must speak of a field in which at least social cultural, animal, and physical factors interact. Our approach in this book is 'unitary' in the sense that we try in a detailed way to consider every problem as occurring in a social-animal-physical field. From this point of view, for instance, historical and cultural factors cannot be considered as complicating or modifying conditions of a simpler biophysical situation, but are intrinsic in the way any problem is presented to us. (*GT*, pp. 4-5 / 228)

Now let us take the psychologist's central subject-matter, the contact processes, as our central subject-matter, and consider how it appears from each of the three perspectives described above. This is useful because, in my opinion, the idea of contact processes offers a good resolution of the problem of "knowing other men's minds" that always plagues psychology. Then, at last, we can go on to consider the structure of this contacting.

First, consider the contact processes of the "other organism" (see page 10) that the psychologist is observing, from the experiential perspective *of that other organism*. The other organism experiences all of his contact processes and only them, because those processes *are* his experience.

Now shift to the viewpoint of the observing psychologist: the observer's perspective. Among the many processes that he might observe in the organism/environment field before him are *the contact processes of that other organism*, i.e., what that other organism is experiencing. This is true in principle; the extent to which it is true in fact depends largely on the beliefs and concerns of the psychologist (for instance, whether he believes the organism is sentient and whether his aim is to achieve empathy with it).⁵

Note that each of these two perspectives has its advantages and disadvantages as an approach to understanding the contacting of this "other organism", that neither viewpoint is completely better than the other. The experiential perspective has the advantage that it automatically includes all of the contact processes that are occurring, for it is coextensive with them. It tells of – it *is* – the reality of the present situation as the "other organism" experiences it, and therefore includes whatever awareness of the field in general that that organism has. The disadvantage is that it *excludes* whatever that organism is *not*

⁵ The positivist probably would argue that all this empathizing is not observation but inference from observation. That distinction is not much good, however, for no observation makes sense apart from the observer's assumptions and intentions, i.e., what he infers that his present experience signifies. Seeing only a "neutral" environment where the only reality is neutral "overt behavior" follows from a certain attitude – mainly the chronic inhibition of concerned action in the environment (see *GT*, pp. 10 / 233, 31-49 / 255-73) – which is as "subjective" as any other, whatever its pragmatic advantages. For a good and hard-headed presentation of this matter in general, and in particular of the notion that empathizing is observing life just as literally and directly as recording muscle-twitches is, see Polanyi (1962).

presently experiencing; the present contact cannot be seen in the context of the processes in the field that the organism is not experiencing but that may be relevant to understanding the contacting. The observer's perspective, by contrast, has the advantage of this context; the fact that the organism is unaware of a given process in the field (e.g., an unconscious physiological function or something in the environment that the organism ignores or avoids) usually presents no added difficulty to the observer studying the relevance of that process. He can therefore make explanations of why the contact process is happening the way it is that the observed organism could not make. The disadvantage is the loss of intimate access to the contacting process. The issue of "what is being contacted right now?", which is automatically resolved from the organism's experiential perspective, is endlessly problematic for the observer. He is likely to posit functioning contact-boundaries where and when they do not exist (e.g., between the intense thinker's body and his chair – recall page 7) and to ignore important contact processes (particularly those that are not at "the skin surface and other organs of response").

We may view the third viewpoint, the self-observing perspective, as something of a compromise between the first two. Its subject matter is mainly memories of one's past experiencing and images, variously reflected from the environment, of what one might look like from an observer's perspective. It tends to have more intimacy with the contact-processes in question than the observer's perspective has, for the memories retain some fidelity to the original experience. But it has less intimacy than the experiential perspective, for they are only memories and are distorted by the other factors that go into the construction of self-images. On the other hand, in self-observation one can consider some such remembered past experience in a larger context, by drawing on other knowledge to piece together processes that probably were in the field but not noticed at the time. Yet again, though, it is unlikely that a self-observer, having only secondhand material and probably a strong bias toward certain conclusions, will be able to do this as easily and impartially as another person considering the process from the observer's perspective.

When one is earnestly trying to understand some aspect of life – whether the subject-matter is oneself or others; whether the problem at hand is therapy, love, education, or whatever – one rapidly shifts between these perspectives. Experiential, observational, and self-observational evidences interact and support or refute one another, and in many cases it is not necessary to recall meticulously which of the data came from which of the perspectives. Similarly, a general psychological theory formulated and checked from many vantage points is bound to be more interesting, accurate, and relevant than one based on a limited and peculiar kind of perspective (the laboratory or the analyst's couch being two examples among many). A basic reason, I think, for the richness and usefulness of Goodman's theory is that he has found a central subject-matter – the contact processes in the organism/environment field – and has considered it from various, radically different, perspectives. As he puts it:

They are relevant in the total field... However incompatible [the various limited theories] may seem to their several proponents, since we work in the same world there must somewhere be a creative unity. (*GT*, p. 21 / 244-245)

But a problem arises when one is presenting a multiple-perspective theory to a reader who isn't free to cross-examine. A major aim of this paper is to provide the orientation that is missing.

The Structure of Contact

Now, at last, we can again turn full attention to the theory itself. A fundamental proposition of the Gestaltist position is that experience occurs and makes sense only in "whole configurations" that are "definite unified structures." (*GT*, p. 3 / 227) From what I have said so far, you are quite justified in doubting that. I have confronted you with a process called "contact" and sub-processes such as "alienating," "identifying," and "aggression" and "hints" of a "self-regulating organism" needing a "novel environment". (But you aren't allowed to cling to even these as things in Euclidian space; they are only artifacts of the contacting.) So now, let me put some structure into the process of contacting – though we must both be careful not to force any more rigidity into our subject-matter than it in fact contains.

Having seen that our subject-matter, "the operation of the contact-boundary in the organism/environment field," can be studied from various perspectives, let us now return solely to the experiential perspective and consider the structure of contacting from that viewpoint.

Contact, the work that results in assimilation and growth, is the forming of a **figure** of interest against a **ground** or context of the organism/environment field. (*GT*, p. 7 / 231)

Awareness is a figure against a ground. (*GT*, p. 196 / 416)

You are no doubt familiar with the textbook examples of visual figure/grounds (if not, see *GT*, pp. 273-274 / 26-27). Goodman has taken this concept beyond the laboratory and beyond purely visual phenomena (see *GT*, pp. 14-16 / 237-238) and applied it to *all* situations and *all* phenomena – in short, he uses it to describe the structure of all experience – and in so doing has had to add a dimension, namely, the **dynamic relation of figure and ground**, which is the temporal structure of experiencing.

To understand this added dimension, begin by distinguishing sharply the qualities of the figure from the qualities of the ground, as they exist at a given instant in awareness.

The figure is the totality of what is being contacted at that instant, experienced in the simplest **gestalt** possible. It is the whole experience, in one sense – namely, that only the figure is experienced with clarity, explicitness, discrimination, focal attention, concern. At this instant, "the need and energy of the organism and the likely possibilities of the environment are incorporated and unified in the figure." (*GT*, p. 7 / 231) Another important characteristic of the instant's figure is that it is *bounded*: one can say that "this, and only this, is the present figure." This enables it to be a "definite structured whole that is not too inclusive yet is not a mere atom." (*GT*, p. 15 / 237) And it is to the figure that we will apply the usual Gestaltist evaluative terms: in an instant of "good contact" all the

contact processes form a “good figure,” a “good gestalt,” one that has unity, coherence, and closure.

Now let us contrast the characteristics of the ground (remembering that we are isolating a given instant in time). The ground of this instant is composed of processes that are not presently contact processes, and so in the sense mentioned above are not experienced. You can see why this must be so, for if one of these processes were experienced with “clarity, explicitness, discrimination, focal attention, concern,” it would distract from the clarity, etc., of the figure – or rather, it would be a part of the figure. For the same reason, the ground is not a “whole,” a “configuration,” a “unity” – anything with these properties would be the figure, or part of it – rather, it is “empty,” “homogeneous.” And again for the same reason (this is a peculiar-sounding but important point) the ground of an experience has no “outer” boundary: From the experiential perspective, one cannot say “this, and only this, is in the ground” – for as soon as you attend to the “this” in question you make of it a figure! – and now there is the ground of this figure for you to try to delimit – and so on in infinite regression.

We have, then, the following structure for an instant’s experience: a figure, unifying what is of interest at that instant in the simplest configuration possible, experienced against an empty, homogeneous ground whose wholly subsidiary function is to give context to the figure without giving distracting content. The ground, so to speak, extends indefinitely far in all “directions” rather than having an outer boundary.⁶

Two more points concerning an instant’s experience are as follows. First, the contents of the figure/ground are best conceived of as processes, of which “things” are only a special case. For instance, in the famous Gestalt picture that alternates between a vase and a pair of faces, it may seem adequate and simpler to describe the figures in thing-language, as a vase and faces. But (as even, or especially, any materialist will point out) it’s rather funny to say that these things alternate – the “physical reality” on the page doesn’t change; things don’t go into and out of existence like that. What alternates is the *seeing* of a vase and the *seeing* of faces, and these are processes. This point is relevant because

⁶ Let me stress this lack of a border delimiting the ground, for the textbook illustrator deceptively puts a frame around the figure *and* the ground of his illustration, implying that the ground is a discrete “part” of the experience like the figure. But note that if you attend to the frame as a boundary, the whole illustration is then the figure against an indefinite larger background; if you try to find a border for this ground at the edge of the page, then the page is the figure, etc. I dwell on this because the reader who wants to interpret his experience in figure/ground terms may mistakenly go about it by trying to enumerate what is in the figure of a given instant and what is in the ground and what is in neither, and may be disturbed when the latter two categories can’t be differentiated. (I was, anyway.) It is indeed impossible, but this shouldn’t be disturbing. It may be comforting to note that this unboundedness is true of the organism/environment field – of *any* field – viewed from *any* perspective. In the conventional scientific framework, i.e., the observer’s perspective, this comes up as the problem of the impossibility of finding a first cause or a final consequence. The scientist starts with a phenomenon of concern as his figure, and then broadens this figure to include other phenomena that he sees as causes and/or consequences. But however many steps he takes, however inclusive a figure of causes and effects he manages to form, there remain further causes and consequences still in the ground. The field is indefinitely large.

the forthcoming discussion of figure/ground dynamics often would sound rather enigmatic if you conceived of figure and ground as aggregates of things. If instead their contents are viewed as processes, even when thing-language is temptingly easier to use, the dynamics will make much more sense. Second, the contents of figure/ground are not only visual processes but are processes of all the “kinds” that are experienced – sounds, proprioceptions, emotions, thoughts, etc. – and in good contact the figure/ground process unifies these; indeed, “it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality,” and the differentiation of it into “kinds” of process is a post hoc categorization that may or may not be useful.

So far I have discussed the figure/ground of a given instant, describing a “snapshot” of experience. Now it’s time to consider figure/ground not as a snapshot but as an ongoing process, and thereby to try to counteract misimpressions stemming from “the peculiarly static and formal quality of most gestalt theory.” (*GT*, p. 15 / 238) There is a **dynamic relation** of figure and ground processes. These dynamics receive annoyingly fragmentary though often vivid descriptions in *GT*, so I’ll try to assemble a better-integrated view here.

There is one fundamental principle here. Figure/ground dynamics, which are the contact-processes from the experiential perspective, always operate according to the **tendency toward the simplest structure of the field** (*GT*, p. 36 / 260).

This means that what is given in present awareness is integrated as well as possible and that the ongoing contact, the “passage out of the past toward the future” (*GT*, p. 153 / 374), is always tending to change these “givens” so that a still simpler structure will be realized. “Simplest” means a clear, bright figure or none at all (as in dreamless sleep and certain peaceful waking situations), against an empty, undisturbed ground (which thereby becomes almost irrelevant).

Virtually all of the dynamics follow from the operation of this principle in the face of the complications presented by other organismic needs, the environmental objects-of-desire, aims, dangers, and the intricate strategies needed to deal with them. Let me describe these dynamics further through some slightly less general examples.

The Creative Adjustment Sequence

The kind of situation that Goodman discusses most fully is one where the organism is strongly motivated, i.e., where a particular unfinished situation has firm dominance (recall page 8), and the organism-environment field presents substantial dangers and difficulties, so that creative adjustment is necessary. Though the experience of coping with this situation is a continuous one, Goodman divides it for convenience into four stages. Taken together as a sequence, they comprise a single creative adjustment.

1. **Fore-contact** is the brief stage in which the motivation first assumes dominance, when the appetite, the pain, the question, the curiosity, or whatever, is first experienced, and momentarily is a figure by itself. But the

nature of this figure – for reasons that cannot be determined from the naive experiential perspective – is such that it does not form a simple figure by itself. Rather, it generates activity, exploration, and attention to certain “parts” of the field. (Also, the motivation-figure itself increases, changes, and becomes painful if it is not dealt with.) So this stage soon passes on to the next stage. The fore-contact stage is the kind of experience that led Freud to postulate the impulsive, demanding Id. Goodman uses the term, but for him the Id is not a “thing” one always has; it is one kind of structure the experiential field may take – mainly, in fore-contact – and ceases as the situation develops.

2. **Contacting** is the most interesting, varied, and difficult stage, where the motivated organism confronts its environment and seeks satisfaction there. (This, again, is the *experienced* organism and environment – what is experienced is first and foremost the “confronting” and “seeking.”) The excitement of the original appetite (or whatever) unites with some “‘object’ or set of possibilities” (*GT*, p. 182 / 403), and they become a part of the figure. The “‘object’ or set of possibilities” may be something that an outside observer would say is really there, or purely imagined, or “an object made of perception *and* imagination”: “the tendency to hallucination, to make the needed object, enlivens something that is actually perceived ... and in general, one’s technique or style, the learned possibilities of manipulation, add to and determine what is perceived as an ‘object’” (*GT*, pp. 183-4 / 404). It isn’t just adding some experienced object to the experienced desire:

Neurologically, (the contact-boundary) has receptors and proprioceptors. But *in act*, in contact, there is given a single whole of perception-initiating-movement-tinged-with-feeling. It is not that the self-feeling, for instance of being thirsty, serves as a signal that is noted, referred to the water-perception department, etc.; but that *in the same act* the water is given as bright-desirable-moved-toward, or the absence of water is absent-irksome-problematic. (*GT*, p. 36 / 260)

The effect, where the motivation selectively “enlivens” certain parts of the situation (and thereby begins to define its own nature); is what Goodman means by “the ‘given’ of the situation, dissolving into its possibilities” (*GT*, p. 182 / 403). Whether the “‘object’ or set of possibilities” is present or hallucinatory, its function is to promote achievement of the simplest structure of the field, by orienting action toward likely objects for completing the unfinished situation. This situation, which is an **emotion** in its most useful sense (*GT*, pp. 186-188 / 407-409), passes without discontinuity into action, as “there is choosing and rejecting of possibilities, aggression in approaching and overcoming obstacles, and deliberate orientation and manipulation. These are the identifications and alienations of the Ego” (*GT*, p. 182 / 403).⁷ The

⁷ Like the Id, the Ego is not a permanent thing but the structure of experienced contact when there is deliberateness, choice, maneuvering, and manipulating in the face of difficulty. For a

simplest-structure principle here promotes “the formation of a sharper and simpler object figure”, which involves such actions as “approaching it, appreciating it, overcoming obstacles, manipulating and altering the reality, until the unfinished situation is complete.” (GT, p. 182 / 403) Again, this is not just adding or subtracting immutable, pre-established “things” to and from the figure, as if it were a jigsaw puzzle. “What is important to notice is that the actuality contacted is not an unchanging ‘objective’ state of affairs that is appropriated, but a potentiality that in contact becomes actual.” (GT, p. 153 / 375) But also, it does not mean that the initial situation is irrelevant, that the unfinished situation can be completed just by dreaming up the appropriate figure, by wishing the solution into existence, that anything will do if you really want it. The “givens” of the initial situation, including both the environmental situation at the outset and the organism’s available powers of using and changing it, provide plenty of constraints. Nor, finally, does it mean that the new figure (and the new adjustment) is reached by a mere compromise between the “givens” of the difficult, constraining environment, by finding some middle-ground between the “pleasure principle” and the “reality principle” – a “neurotic dichotomy of theory” that the writers continually criticize. To the extent that the outcome of the contacting stage is just a compromise, the field has not reached a simple structure, the achieved figure is still weak and unintegrated, the “final contact” (described below) and the satisfaction are only partial, and the unfinished situation remains unfinished (and therefore will demand further attention).

In short, contacting is not passively absorbing a solution that is “there” from the outset; it is not whipping up a solution out of nothing; and it is not settling for a compromise where something is passively accepted and then hallucinated into appearing as a real solution.⁸ Rather it is in allowing all of these abilities – imagination, aggression, deliberation, prudence, knowledge, etc. – to come into play as they will that the best contact occurs and the best solution is generated. One way to explain this is to say that in this situation the contacting process includes and is governed by, and the developing figure integrates, all of the available “information” about the situation, whereas in the various halfhearted strategies described above some of the information is excluded a priori. As Goodman puts it:

more detailed exposition of Goodman’s revised usage of these Freudian terms, and the importance of the revision, see GT, pp. 156-160 / 377-381.

⁸ True, we very often do one of these things alone. But the point is that, firstly, they are only *special cases* of contacting, and secondly, they are cases in which the contact is poor. Goodman would consider them healthy strategies in certain specific situations, where in fact passive acceptance, hallucination, or compromise are the best possible approximations to satisfaction. But he views such situations as much rarer than most theories (which seem to see them as virtually universal) imply – or rather, they *would* be rare if people would use all the powers available to them in dealing with each situation they encounter. He views as neurotic a person who *chronically and habitually* settles for one of these three strategies, inhibiting his potential powers and coming to a less-than-optimal solution, or to none at all.

We believe that the free interplay of the faculties, concentrating on some present matter, comes not to chaos or mad fantasy but to a gestalt that solves a real problem. ... Where one is in contact with the need and the circumstances, it is at once evident that the reality is not something inflexible and unchanging but is ready to be re-made; and, the more spontaneously one exercises every power of orientation and manipulation, without holding back, the more viable the remaking proves to be. Let anyone think of his own *best* strokes, in work or play, love or friendship, and see if this has not been the case. (*GT*, p. 23 / 246)

Now, with all these “faculties” being activated, it follows that the figure-ground dynamics in the contacting stage will be dynamic indeed.⁹ Amid the immense diversity of possible sequences and kinds of sequences, it is possible to say a few things that are common to all figure-ground relations.

The ground, besides providing context for the figure of a given instant (recall page 14), is the source of the raw material, the “givens,” out of which the next figures will be synthesized. The perceptions, ideas, skills, etc., are in the ground as potentialities or possibilities and (in the healthy organism) are activated or actualized as the imperatives of the present situation require.¹⁰ This initiation of processes that are somehow latent in the ground is accompanied by the release of more **excitement**. As Goodman describes the experience: “The mounting excitement flows from the ground toward the more and more sharply defined figure.” (*GT*, p. 190 / 411) Thus the initiation

⁹ This is why “flexibility” of figure/ground formation is an aspect of Goodman's criterion of psychological health: It indicates that the person is allowing all of the possibilities for fulfillment to emerge and have their chance. It isn't the whole criterion, however. To take it as such leads to the “analysis neurosis” where “everything is potentially relevant and novel” but the person never goes beyond this interesting situation to fulfill his need (*GT*, pp. 244 / 464). Creative flexibility then amounts to a way of avoiding the feared need or solution. The rest of the criterion of health, then, has to do with the relevance-to-the-present-situation of the objects, faculties, etc., that the person identifies with, for which the evidence is the degree of excitement accompanying the contact-processes and the unity and brightness of the experienced figures. “When the figure is dull, confused, lacking in energy (a ‘weak gestalt’), we may be sure that there is a lack of contact, something in the environment is blocked out, some vital organic need is not being expressed; the person is not ‘all there’, that is, his whole field cannot lend its urgency and resources to the completion of the figure. ... The achievement of a strong gestalt is itself the cure, for the figure of contact is not a sign of, but is itself the creative integration of experience.” (*GT*, p. 8 / 232) By this criterion, the healthy person's life isn't necessarily idyllic – for the “givens” cited above (page 13) are still constraints – but “he is psychologically healthy, for he is exercising his best power and will to do the best he can in the difficult circumstances of the world.” (*GT*, p. 11 / 235)

¹⁰ One of the biggest gaps-in the present theory is that it essays no explanation as to *how* the appropriate processes come to be initiated at the appropriate moment. From the experiential perspective, at least, this is quite a mystifying phenomenon – certainly one does not survey the ground and consciously-deliberately pick out the appropriate skills, etc.; for if one surveyed the ground it wouldn't be the ground any more! (Also, there isn't time.) Yet somehow, when you need to walk, there you are walking; when you have something to say, there you are having the words and saying them; there you are looking where it is relevant to look. One could (and some do) get mystical about this appropriateness, yet it is so common a part of every situation that only its *absence* – e.g., when the appropriate words *don't* occur to you – is generally noticed. Goodman certainly acknowledges this phenomenon; it is the experiential manifestation of organismic self-regulation. But he doesn't say *how*.

of new processes (skills, perceptions, etc.) lends excitement and thereby enhances the brightness, clarity, and “energy” of the figure. But the “content” of any one of these activated powers is experienced, it enters into the figure, *only insofar as and as long as that process is novel or problematic, in the context of the present situation.* To the extent that it is not novel or problematic, it is experienced only as part of the ground, the context of ongoing events in which the present novelty, the figure, is being contacted.

Consider, for example, the literally thousands of fixed forms that go into the process of a reader’s gathering (we hope) meaning (we hope) from these sentences: the abstractions of childish verbalizing and attitudes of communication, of school-attendance, orthography, and homework; of typography and bookmaking of genre of style and expectation of the audience; of the architecture and posture of reading rooms; of the knowledge taken academically for granted and the assumptions taken for granted for this particular argument. One could attend to them but does not, unless there is a hitch, a bad typographical error or a purple passage or a joke out of place, or a bad light, or a crick in the neck. (*GT*, p. 43 / 267)

So in considering the role of the ground – or should I say, of the various grounds – over time, rather than just in an instant, we see that they are not parts of the field in which “nothing” is happening. In the ground of a given experience may be the fact that you are then running or driving, that it is raining, that you are reading words and sentences, that you are breathing rapidly, or that many other active functions are proceeding. Being “in the ground” is the status of those functions whose present trajectory, so to speak, is compatible with the present contact-processes – the functions that present nothing interesting, novel, or problematic in the present context.

But of course – to emphasize the dynamics once again – any of these proceeding functions is susceptible to becoming aware, either because it malfunctions (e.g., the “crick in the neck”) or because the context changes and in the new context the old function is novel or problematic (e.g., what happens to your ongoing reading habits when I make a typographical error or commence à écrire en français). When it does become problematic or novel, the function must be dealt with. Either its inappropriateness must be alienated, somehow kept out of attention, or the problem it represents must be accepted as part of the present situation (e.g., in encountering a bilingual passage you can either try to ignore the French and muddle through, or adjust your “set” so you are ready to read passages in either language, thereby getting more out of the reading).

To review: In the “contacting” stage, the initial motivation focuses attention and generates emotions toward objects or possibilities that would complete the unfinished situation, satisfying the simplest-structure criterion. As the organism goes on to identify and alienate various possibilities, to manipulate, aggress, destroy, synthesize, etc., it experiences as figures both the coming solution (including both awareness of the present developing reality and

hallucinated “fragmentary flashes of the finished product” – *GT*, p. 155 / 377) and whatever other processes pop into awareness as novel or problematic. The latter must either be alienated or accepted and integrated into the figure. And each time a sub-problem is solved, or a new possibility is glimpsed, or a new organismic or environmental resource is brought to bear on the situation, the ground “empties out and lends its energy to the forming figure...the entire process is an aware mounting excitement” (*GT*, p. 182 / 403). The excitement is evidence that the present contacting is appropriate to the present dominant need, and it is also what maintains the directedness of the developing activity: Irrelevant stimuli, thoughts, and behavioral possibilities simply do not release excitement and energy.¹¹

The contacting stage is completed successfully when a figure is achieved that embodies and unifies the solution to the problem, the fulfillment of the need generated by the dominant unfinished situation that was the original motivation, and the ground is fully emptied of any disturbances, of anything that “mobilizes” it (*GT*, p. 195 / 416) and tends to form a competing figure. (Note that, by the “rules” of figure-ground dynamics, these criteria are redundant: the presence of one implies the presence of the other, and the absence of one implies the absence of the other.) For the healthy person, it’s all downhill from here. The deliberateness, aggressiveness, circumspection, and other instruments of difficult figure-forming now can relax, as their excitement flows into the achieved figure, as the beautiful and transient stage of final contact begins.

3. **Final contact** is roughly the same as the “consummatory act”, though it is the experience of a consummation uniquely and specifically appropriate to the novel figure just achieved, not merely a stereotyped reflex.¹² In this stage the

¹¹ I have not at all tried here to spell out the various strategies an organism can employ in completing this stage. Nor have I mentioned the great variety of setbacks that require the person to “try again”. Nor have I yet noted the additional difficulties engendered when neurosis prevents the contact process from flexibly drawing on the resources of the organism and the environment. All of these are too numerous and various to spell out, though I’ll have more to say on the neurotic problem below.

¹² This does not deny that a given final contact may be quite similar to other previously achieved, final contacts – every orgasm is much like any other orgasm, especially from an observer’s perspective. The points to be made are that:

- The final contact has been quite finely adjusted, by the preceding contacting stage, to be appropriate to just this situation; and
- From the experiential perspective, the moment of final contact is so exciting, absorbing, and (momentarily) self-sufficient that there is no “room” for or interest in, experiencing it in a detached, comparative, way, e.g., as “Just another orgasm.”
- In the stage following final contact, however, the final contact may be retrospectively viewed from this more distant and relative perspective.

Note also that it is in the stage of final contact that the experience of someone in the observer’s perspective, unless he has achieved strong empathy, is likely to be the most different from the

figure virtually fills the experiential field; “momentarily, there is practically no background” (*GT*, p. 195 / 416). This is appropriate because there is no need for context or further resources from the ground; the organism feels itself to be in the “right place” and with everything it needs. To *GT*'s description of the experience of final contact, I have little to add. (See *GT*, pp. 195-200 / 416-421. Maslow's descriptions of “peak-experiences” [1961, esp. Ch. 6] are also relevant.) Final contact is “spontaneously transitory”: The achieved figure, having been fully experienced, vanishes, for it is no longer novel. If one tries to prolong the lovely moment, it sours and fails, and the satisfaction is spoiled. This is the “passage from the psychological to the physiological” (*GT*, p. 201 / 422), and it leads to the final stage.

4. **Post-contact** is the peaceful, diffuse state immediately following. “There is a flowing organism/environment interaction that is not a figure/background” (*GT*, p. 183 / 404). If any figure/ grounds occur, they are transient and rather random and do not carry the motivating excitement of the figure/grounds already discussed – and with good reason: There is no more need for purposeful contact, but there may be need to relax and let the physiology complete the assimilation of, and growing by means of, the newly transformed material. Goodman (p. 201 / 422-423) notes that this experience may be one of “deep pathos,” for the perfect world of final contact is now experienced as just a part of, a modest specific improvement of, a much larger and more imperfect world. And/or it may be an experience of warm satisfaction, for “although the increment of physiological growth is small, it is absolutely sure; we may use it reliably forever.”

And eventually – perhaps after sleep, perhaps not – the post-contact stage ends, as a new unfinished situation assumes dominance strongly enough to generate goals, organize behavior, and initiate a new creative adjustment sequence.

It is with the “passage from the psychological to the physiological” that the new adjustment, the transformed novelty, moves from the ongoing, fleeting, “here-and-now” status toward becoming one of the more stable and enduring qualities of the organism – i.e., toward the subject-matter of personality theory as conventionally conceived – for these qualities are established, modified, and disestablished through contact-processes. But before we sail off into such abstractions, we would do well to work a bit more on getting an adequate grasp of the experience of the “glancing present.”

Your Present Experience

The kind of situation I have been discussing in the preceding pages is one in which the person is “engaged with the situation,” where “there is no sense of oneself or of other things other than one's experience of the situation. The feeling is immediate, concrete,

experiential perspective of the person in question. This presumably is why description of such moments is still largely in the hands of poets, not psychologists.

and present and integrally involves perception, muscularity, and excitation.” (*GT*, p. 155 / 377)

Now, your present experience of reading this paper, I fear, is not that absorbing – both because the paper does not encourage and reward such total involvement and because you, being neurotic, are forcing yourself to attend to this and inhibiting tendencies to try to fulfill your stronger needs (which might well generate quite different behavior).¹³ If my fear is well-grounded, you may have found that the description of the quite passionate contact-process didn't much resonate through your own experiences, and hence didn't make much sense. The fact that most of your experience, including the present, is “dull, confused, graceless, lacking in energy (a ‘weak gestalt’)” means that in particular you are probably hard-pressed to recall instances where (a) you experienced the contacting sequence in the order and clarity I have described, all the way from fore- to post-contact, and where (b) you experienced final and post-contact with anything approaching the absorption, perfection, and peacefulness that I attribute to them.

So let me briefly suggest a few experiments that are appropriate to what I assume is your present situation, in hopes of tying the concepts I've been expounding to some concrete experience. (The volume of *GT* called “Mobilizing the Self”, pp. 249-468 / 3-226, suggests many more such experiments.)

Figure-ground. Attend to some fairly complex visual object, such as a painting or photo, or to something auditory, like music. Note the varied figure/grounds you experience: figures of parts, such as a specific object, color, or feeling in the picture, or of certain instruments, melodic lines, moods, overtones in the music; figures of the whole picture or musical passage as a unity; and perhaps also “irrelevant” figures such as words and thoughts generated by the perceptions or aches, pains, and environmental distractions that obtrude themselves into your awareness. Note that your activity, as well as that of the object “out there”, determines what you experience. Note that each figure, however transitory, is a unity, and its ground is empty, for as long as it is a figure.

Dynamics. In the same situation, now try to notice the transitions between the different figure/grounds. Note first that they are generally very frequent, for the figures you are forming are not of very vital concern. Note also that (for the same reason) the “direction” of the transition seems arbitrary; the sequence of figure/grounds doesn't lead anywhere. But note also that (probably) some figures do persist longer and develop in a comprehensible way. Perhaps you hit on some interesting visual object, or drift off into a sexual fantasy, or feel hungry, or worry about some problem, or feel an annoyed urge to stop these games and get done reading this paper. If something interesting has occurred, try forcing yourself back to attending to something less interesting, and note the dull unpleasantness and difficulty involved.

Aware vs unaware processes. Again, do the experiment of scanning a visual object. At some point, stop attending to the object and attend to your eye-movements – try to feel your eyes rolling in their sockets. Realize that eye-movements were going on all along,

¹³ Though now that I'm insulting you, you may be getting more engaged.

and were appropriate to your visual scanning, but that they were in the ground; you didn't experience them until these instructions gave you reason to do so. Note that it is easier to attend to them when you do something novel, like rolling your eyes around crazily or looking cross-eyed. Note that just when you're feeling your eyes roll you aren't *seeing* any more; your visual field is in the ground during such instants. Try similar experiments on your breathing and posture.

Certainly not all of these quick-and-dirty little experiments will "work" for you, and I have somewhat cheated and blunted their impact by telling you what you're "supposed to" experience, making it somewhat likely that you will obey or rebel without really attending to the structure of your experience. But hopefully a few of them will provide insights, and you of course can invent your own.

The Self

The last concept relevant to "here and now" experience is the **self**, which I have so far avoided in the interests of clarity. Goodman seems to consider it the most basic concept of the theory (in fact, he calls his theory the "theory of the self"). Yet it is both confusing (because his concept of "self" is so different from the usual use of the word) and perhaps superfluous. (I've already presented much of their theory without using the term or missing it very much.) But in this Introduction, I must introduce what is in the book, so here goes.

Let us call the 'self' the system of contacts at any moment. ... The self is the contact-boundary at work; its activity is forming figures and grounds. (*GT*, p. 11 / 235)

In short, the self is a process. Specifically, it is the integrated totality of the contact-processes that are going on at a given time. As such, it is not a "thing" that a person "has"; it is a process going on with greater or lesser intensity or not at all.¹⁴ So there can be greater or lesser "amounts" of self, or none at all. In the creative adjustment sequence described above (pages 16-22), there is most self during complicated contacting and final contacting, and the self "diminishes" during post-contact (*GT*, p. 183 / 404).

Let me point out a confusing ambiguity in Goodman's use of the word. In some contexts, he speaks as if the self were an extrinsic agent, a busy homunculus in charge of forming figure/grounds, making alienations and identifications, and generally executing the contact processes. In other contexts, the self simply *is* those processes. The ambiguity is explicit at one point: "In contact situations the self is the power that forms the gestalt in the field; or better, the self *is* the figure/background process in contact situations." – *GT*, p. 152 / 374.

It seems to me that the concept "self" serves two functions in the theory, neither of which is essential to understanding the theory.

¹⁴ Thus the Id and the Ego, as already mentioned, are "structures of the self" – forms it assumes in particular situations. See *GT*, pp. 156-157 / 377-378.

First, solves a syntactical problem by providing a subject for sentences describing contact-processes: it is easier and smoother to say “the self identifies and alienates” or “the self inhibits itself” than to write passive sentences like “alienations and identifications occur” or “some of the contact-processes are inhibited by other of the contact-processes.”

Second, the choice of the particular word “self” is perhaps intended to make a (quite valid) rhetorical point. One of the connotations of the word “self” is that one’s “self” is what one most basically, intrinsically, and inevitably is, the core of one’s being. But this word has now generally come to refer to something else, namely, some loosely defined set of sentences, propositions, or beliefs about one’s abilities, limitations, desires, attractiveness, future prospects, or whatever. Taken together, then, these two connotations imply that these rather static sentences, etc., are what a person most essentially is. This is a disastrous assumption, Goodman would say. Logically, even if the sentences, etc., are in same sense “true” they are at best only as descriptions of what the person *has been*; they are only the “givens” of his present situation (recall page 16). And practically, if the person believes the sentences, etc., to be the immutable laws of his own nature, he will overlook or avoid the possibilities in the present situation that *don’t* fit this static self-image. His potential powers will be filtered through the self-image, and he will lose contact with the present situation. Better, Goodman would say, to use the word “self” to describe the person’s present functioning, for that is what the person most essentially is. From this viewpoint, then, the traditionally defined “self”, which I’ll call the “self-image,” may prove an aid or an impediment, depending on its contribution to or detraction from the present contacting process. In this, it is like any other established habit or belief.

For understanding the theory qua theory, however, you may find the use of “self” still too confusing. If so, you can short-circuit the problem by considering “self” to be a shorthand label for “the present contact-processes.”

The Aftermath of Contact

Unless a successful creative adjustment was merely annihilating – removing an annoyance or a danger from the field of experience – the organism after creative adjustment has assimilated something from the environment; it has “made it its own.” The sequel of this accomplishment is the maintenance and growth of the organism, e.g. “increase in size, restoration, procreation, rejuvenation, recreation, assimilation, learning, memory, habit, imitation, identification” (*GT*, p. 200 / 421). The fate of the purely maintenance adjustments is fairly obvious – they complete some unfinished situation that allows some organismic function to proceed as it has been proceeding. The fate of the various kinds of growth achieved is less obvious, and deserves some comment.

The question is: After an achieved creative adjustment passes from awareness (during the post-contact stage), what effect, if any, does it have on subsequent experience?

The answer is that it becomes an entirely *instrumental* function: one of the “powers” or “faculties” of the organism that subsequently will be called upon, or not called upon, depending on the needs of a given contact-situation. By the key word “instrumental”, I mean two things.

1. It will never again, in its present form, be a matter of *intrinsic* interest. It has, so to speak, had its day in court. It is now learned, an “organ of second nature ... a part of the non-conscious physiological self-regulation” (*GT*, pp. 206-207 / 427), and there is no point in learning the same thing again. In short, there will never again be a contact-process devoted to acquiring this function. To the extent that, in the form in which it was acquired, this function is appropriate to a given subsequent creative adjustment process, it will be one of those processes that, when initiated, remain in the ground of the experience (recall page 14).

I should point out some subtleties in this. The achieved function (let me label it “function X”) does become a matter of intrinsic interest, in a sense, when function X is activated and proves to be *inappropriate* to the creative adjustment process in question. For example, when function X is an acquired skill or knowledge being applied in a different situation or is being combined with other functions into some larger, more complex function, it will likely need some modification to be appropriate. This will require that function X be contacted again. This may occur just briefly during some adjustment process or, if the modification is large or difficult, it may be necessary to stop and devote a whole new adjustment process to it. But now notice the difference between this “modification” situation and the situation in which function X was first acquired. In the “modification” situation, function X presents itself early in the process, as one of the *givens* of the situation, not as the *solution* that climaxes that process; the “coming solution” is some new function Y that hasn’t yet been achieved. (Though the new function Y may be only a variation on function X, nevertheless after this process the person now has both X and Y at his disposal.¹⁵) By contrast, in the creative adjustment in which function X was first acquired, function X was the solution that climaxed the process, not one of the givens at the start of the process. It is the “coming solution” that is of intrinsic interest during a creative adjustment, not the “givens.”

This is the experienced difference between a function that has already been acquired and one that has not.

¹⁵ X may be “forgotten”, i.e., never activated again, because Y proves to be more useful in every subsequent situation. Whether X then remains as a potentiality that is just never actualized again, or whether it actually decays, is a pseudo-question since the functioning is the same in either case. The important rule is that “it is not by inertia but by being used that a function persists, and it is not by lapse of time but by lack of use that a function is forgotten” (*GT*, p. 70 / 292, paraphrased slightly).

2. Then there is the difference between a function that has been acquired in a fully successful contact process (i.e. assimilated) and one acquired in a process that ended with passive acceptance, compromise, or defeat. (Recall page 18. The never fully-completed process is said to have resulted in a **fixation**, rather than a flexibly available assimilated power. See *GT*, pp. 227-247 / 447-466, for examples.) The difference is that the former represents a completed creative adjustment, but the latter is still an unfinished situation, which is now “inside” the organism. And an important practical difference follows when these functions are activated during subsequent contact-processes. The fully assimilated function is *only* a technique, hence one can use it, not use it, change it, ignore it, discard it, or whatever, subject only to the imperatives of the contacting that is at hand; it is instrumental in this sense. By contrast, the fixated function, like any unfinished situation, is continually tending toward completion and hence embodies some imperatives of its own: When this function is activated in some subsequent process, the self is suddenly confronted with *two* unfinished situations it must contend with – the one that initiated this subsequent process and the one represented by the introjected function – with the frequent result that neither of them reaches completion. For example, an interpersonal function such as “bullying” (*GT*, p. 205 / 426): assimilated, it is a technique that can be employed when it is useful for other ends and ignored when it isn’t; as a fixation, it is something that one “must” do for its own sake. (This may be variously called a need to prove one’s potency, an obsession or compulsion, a fear of feeling or looking weak, etc. For more interpersonal examples of the above contrast, see *GT*, pp. 202-207 / 423-428. For more on the effect of uncompleted adjustments, see “The Aftermath of Chronic Emergency: Neurosis”, page 33.)

Generalizing from the specific successful assimilation to the whole of the assimilations that have been achieved, we may begin to see what the **personality**¹⁶ is in its brighter aspect. (The gloomier side we’ll get to later.) It is a set of techniques – skills, memories, concepts, facts – that are flexibly and instrumentally brought to bear on the activity of completing the present unfinished situation; in that process, these techniques may be freely modified, supplanted, abandoned, and perfected as the situation requires. Thus at the outset of a creative adjustment process, the optimal situation may be described as consisting of a dominant unfinished situation (an appetite, an environmental danger, a

¹⁶ The word “personality” like the word “self,” has a double meaning in *GT*. In the meaning I employ above, it is essentially synonymous with the “organism” – i.e., it is the past adjustments that present themselves as the “givens” of the organism at the start of a contact-process. In its other meaning, it is essentially the “self-image” – “the assumption of what one is, serving as the ground on which one could explain one’s behavior, if an explanation were asked for. It is that which answers a question or a self-question.” (*GT*, p. 160 / 382) It is only that part of the organism that the organism has recognized (or invented), accepted as a description, and formalized into sentences. As such, it is likely to be an encumbrance to effective activity. In the first sense, the personality is the ground for further growth; in the second sense, the personality is likely to function as a limit on that growth. It is in the second sense that it is true that “in ideal circumstances the self does not have much personality” (*GT*, p 206 / 427).

curiosity, or whatever) and a large and diverse repertoire of techniques that will help in creating the solution.

The Acute Emergency

Now let us turn to the *difficulties* encountered in the process of creative adjustment, which have been mentioned only tangentially so far. In this section, we will consider the “acute emergency” and the “safety-valve” processes that come into play. In the next section, we will examine the situation where the difficulty persists as a “chronic emergency” and the consequent hardening of the “safety valve” functions into neurotic habits, which prevent the self from flexibly and harmoniously drawing on the powers and faculties of the field.

The **acute emergency** is the disruption or long delay of a particular process of creative adjustment. Goodman distinguishes two kinds (*GT*, p. 37 / 261): “the situation of danger,” where contacting must stop because of injury or expected injury from the environment, and “the situation of frustration, starvation, and illness,” where the contacting breaks down because, during delays in it, the needs of the organism have become intolerably intense, and hence painful. The range of possible difficulties suggested by these two categories is more important than the dichotomy between them. The distinction in practice is none too clear, and as Goodman notes [*GT*, p. 40 / 264] if one sort of difficulty persists, it tends to beget the other sort as well.

The **emergency functions** are the “safety valve” processes that now come into play, permitting the organism to “wait out” an acute emergency rather than being destroyed by it. They are identified as being of two types (*GT*, pp. 37-38 / 261), which roughly correspond to the dichotomy of difficulties mentioned just above. The “subnormal” emergency functions temporarily “desensitize” the contact boundary to the difficult stimuli (usually environmental dangers); they include “panic ‘mindless’ flight, shock, anesthesia, fainting, playing dead, blotting out a part, amnesia”. The “supernormal” emergency functions exhaust some of the painful energy from the difficult stimuli (usually too intense “internal” excitations), and include “hallucination and dream, lively imagination, obsessive thought, brooding, and with these motor restlessness.” (Again, the range of these functions is more important than the dichotomy.)

Let me stress that these emergency functions, employed in acute emergencies, are healthy ones. They are among the “powers” of the organism, techniques that are flexibly and appropriately activated to facilitate creative adjustment – in this case, by making delays bearable so the organism can try again. They are not necessarily even “symptoms” of psychological disease. This needs emphasis because they sometimes seem “so spectacularly crazy” (*GT*, p. 89 / 311) to someone watching from the observer’s perspective, and also because the observer, if such actions affect him, may find them ugly, inconvenient, or threatening, so he may find it comforting to define someone who acts in such a disturbing way as “sick” or “crazy.” (Similar remarks apply to aggressive behavior, which as already noted is a healthy and necessary technique in creative adjustment. One of *GT*’s strengths is that it evaluates a person’s behavior in terms of the

good and bad it does for that person, not in terms of how pleasant or proper others may find it.)

In terms of getting on with the interrupted contact-process, the acute emergency and the emergency function reaction to it create a stalled but unstable situation: stalled, in that no progress is being made toward completing the unfinished situation; unstable, in that the now-painful need is getting more and more intense. The next situation, which must come soon, can be one of three.

- The difficulty may pass, and the adjustment process can resume or begin anew.
- The emergency may persist too long at a high level, in which case the person gives up and/or dies (depending on the nature of the need and the situation).¹⁷
- Third, the emergency may *partially* pass, enough so that the person at least survives, but partially persist, so that the satisfaction is only minimal, the need is only partially fulfilled, the unfinished situation persists, “there exists a chronic low-tension disequilibrium, a continual irk of danger and frustration, interspersed with occasional acute crises, and never fully relaxed.” (*GT*, pp. 39-41 / 263-264) This is the **chronic emergency**.

The Chronic Emergency

During a chronic emergency, as always, the “simplest structure of the field” principle still prevails. The contact-processes are still taking the “givens” of the situation and making them as simple as possible. In a chronic emergency, the important givens are the environmental danger and the organic need, which (it seems) will persist until satisfied.

The actions appropriate to dealing with either one of these givens are incompatible with those appropriate to the other. Satisfying the organic need requires venturing in the environment, but the environment is dangerous. Fending off the danger implies withdrawing from or armoring against the environment, but then the need will become more painful. One of the two problems must be postponed, ignored, or blotted out for the moment. It is the excitations representing the organic need that are “the more controllable threat in the mutually aggravating troubles” (*GT*, p. 40 / 264).

So now it is against the “proprioceptive”¹⁸ stimulation, the “organism” side of the contact-boundary, that the “subnormal” emergency functions are directed. If these

¹⁷ From the observer’s perspective, death is what results when “the field can no longer organize itself with that part in that form,” where “that part in that form” refers to the organism (*GT*, p. 131 / 351), so the structure that is the organism is “destroyed, i.e., simplified to a structure of a lower order” (*GT*, p. 40 / 263, footnote). Note that from this perspective the organism/structure is destroyed in the same sense as environmental material is destroyed by the organism in contact (recall page 9). “We are destroyed just as, growing, we destroy.” (*GT*, p. 131 / 351)

¹⁸ “Proprioception” is Goodman’s term for the expression-in-awareness of the unfinished situation(s). At first glance, it may seem a misnomer, since “proprioception” conventionally

excitations can be annihilated, removed from awareness, then the remaining powers of the organism can be directed toward dealing with the environment.

For reasons that will soon be apparent, it is worth mentioning some of the means by which the proprioceptive excitations may be eliminated from awareness (though this list is neither detailed nor exhaustive):

1. The body, especially the parts most involved in the unfinished situation, may be held tense and immobile, diminishing excitations from there. You may recall doing this in response to a strong need to urinate during a meeting you didn't dare leave – sitting very still, crossing your legs, tensing your abdomen somewhat, and avoiding any pressure or agitation of it.
2. The various exploratory, aggressive, manipulative, etc., behaviors that the need tends to initiate may be inhibited. This by itself does not fully prevent the excitations from reaching awareness, but it prevents the need from becoming defined (for a need is defined only by the objects, actions, and situations that would satisfy it) and from engendering energy and excitement. With their motoric expression inhibited, the excitations are experienced only as pain or discomfort.
3. Distractions may be sought and found, deliberately diverting attention from the proprioceptive.

In any actual instance where the body-feeling must be blotted out (e.g., the urinary crisis mentioned above, which is one of the few clearly experienced examples in adult life), it is probably some combination of these three and others that proves sufficient to reduce the excitations to a tolerable level, or eliminate them completely.

Simultaneously with the blotting-out of the “organism” side of the contact-boundary, and somewhat less importantly, attention and activity are turned toward the “environment” side, in an attempt to locate, define, and eliminate or escape the danger. (Note that this also distracts attention from the proprioceptive difficulties.) This point in the narrative is the last chance for the person to get out of this mess without acquiring a neurotic habit. This final hope is that the attention and activity will succeed in locating, defining, and eliminating or escaping the danger. If so, the inhibition of the musculature, of the appetitive behaviors, and of the spontaneous attention can then be released, and it will still be possible for the postponed creative adjustment process to resume or begin anew, and for the unfinished situation to be completed.

includes all bodily sensations, whereas needs are usually thought of as represented by sensations just from the internal organs and the chemicals in the bloodstream. But on second thought, “proprioception” probably is appropriate after all, for the news that an organic function is malfunctioning because of deprivation tends to spread and be represented by excitations from the body generally, if only as sensations of pain or weakness. Whatever the case, “proprioception” properly emphasizes that the whole pattern of somatic sensation (to say nothing of the environment) is relevant to defining the need.

But – because we have postulated that this is a chronic emergency – the last chance for satisfaction does not work out either, and the “postponement” turns out to be permanent. Either the chronic danger cannot be located and defined, or if it is it cannot be eliminated or escaped. The organism is stuck, as it were, in the “orienting response”: It is alertly ready for “fight or flight”, but there is nothing that it can effectively fight or flee. So the alertness becomes mere staring (supported also because it distracts from the proprioceptive), and this eventually leads to a dimming of exteroceptive perception as well: “A man stares, but does not thereby see any better, indeed soon he sees worse” (*GT*, p. 41 / 264).¹⁹ And the muscular readiness for fight or flight becomes mere tension and rigidity (maintained also because it dims the proprioceptive excitations). In the chronic emergency, an awareness reduced to this extent – to “underaware proprioception and finally perception, and hypertonus of deliberateness and muscularity” (*GT*, p. 41 / 264) – by the unrelenting activation of the emergency functions in the way just described, is the simplest structure of the field.

Here you may be objecting that what I describe sounds fantastic, melodramatic, too extreme, and hence rather unreal; that our orderly, civilized lives don't contain such catastrophic emergencies and reactions; that what I describe applies, if at all, only to the genesis of extreme mental disorder. To this, I say:

- First, that of course the functions just described do not eliminate all proprioception and inhibit all appetitive activity all of the time. If they did, the organism would die. Rather, they bring about a dimming and obscuring of these sensations, the severity of which can range from moderate to total and will vary from situation to situation. And however severe the suppression, if neglected long enough, the organismic functions will fail drastically enough that the pain of seizure or disease will break through into awareness, presenting the self with one of the “occasional acute crises” mentioned above. Note that the blotting-out doesn't have to be total because the chronic emergency isn't total.
- Second, I assume that the events I have described so far, comprising the initial encounters with chronic emergency, occur mainly in infancy and early childhood, when the powers are poorly developed, experience is limited, and dependency on the environment is high. An observing adult, especially if he observes without much empathy, may view as only an unfortunate inconvenience a situation that, to the child experiencing it, is a life-or-death ordeal.

The next development, the transition from aware suppression to **repression**, is simple but very important. A tension-inhibition-distraction pattern that achieves the requisite kind and degree of blotting-out has been activated, and it must be maintained chronically. It is now an achieved power of the organism that is constantly active, analogous to the functioning of the heart or the kidneys. Like these vegetative functions, the chronic tension-inhibition-distraction function becomes one of the “constants” in the experiential

¹⁹ You can experience this somewhat by forcing yourself to fixate rigidly on a single point on some visual object, inhibiting even the eye-movements with which you normally scan it. For a fuller version of this experiment, see *GT*, p. 305 / 58.

field, one of the processes that remains in the ground of subsequent contact-processes because it is no longer novel (recall "The Aftermath of Contact", page 25). It becomes a part of the organismic self-regulation. As such, it proceeds without awareness (recall page 9, and see *GT*, p. 41 / 276). "So long as nothing is to be changed in the ground inhibition, the self forgets how it is being deliberate, as it turns to new problems. The motor and perceptual powers involved in the inhibition become simply strained bodily states. In this step, thus there is nothing remarkable about the transition from aware suppression to repression; it is ordinary learning and forgetting how one learned it; there is no need to postulate a 'forgetting of the unpleasant'" (*GT*, p. 211 / 431).²⁰ The tension-inhibition-distraction function becomes a habitual accompaniment to every subsequent contact-process, or at least to every subsequent contact-process of a particular kind, but the fact that it is occurring is not represented in these subsequent experiences. When the fixation, the tension-inhibition-distraction function, reaches this stage and becomes unconscious, I call it a *repression-habit*.

There is one more chapter in this story of repression. From the description up to this point, it would seem that the present status of the repression-habit is that it is an "available memory" (*GT*, p. 211 / 431). That is, it is one of the acquired powers of the organism that can be flexibly activated, deactivated, modified, supplanted, discarded, etc., as each subsequent creative adjustment process requires (as described earlier, page 26). Thus it would seem that as soon as the chronic emergency passed – either because the environment changed or because the organism developed sufficient powers to cope with it – the repression-habit would once again (because of the new context) appear in experience as novel, and in the new contact it would be modified, relaxed, and supplanted by new adjustments that are appropriate to the new situation. Not so.²¹

Not so, because the repression-habit has one property that differentiates it from the other acquired powers that comprise the "second nature" of the organism: It is holding down an unfinished situation – that is, keeping it from coming clearly to awareness, generating activity and excitement – whereas the habits acquired in successful contacting are not. So suppose, in the new situation, the repression-habit again becomes a part of the contacting and begins to relax.²² The excitations from the unfinished situation immediately surge into awareness.

Now from an observer's – a rather omniscient observer's – perspective, the situation is that excitations from an unfinished situation are leaking into awareness. If only the organism would further release the repression-habit, the excitations would now find expression in action, the unfinished situation could be completed, and the organism would be much better off. But from the experiential perspective, the situation appears very different. Because the excitations have been blotted out and their meaning (i.e., the

²⁰ The final remark is in response to the Freudian theory of the origin of repression.

²¹ Unless the person has great luck or a good therapist (possibilities I will explain later).

²² This is likely to happen sooner or later, as a result of (a) the tendency of a need to increase until it is satisfied, which may make the excitations "break through" the inhibitions; (b) the difficulty of avoiding tempting objects and situations in the always somewhat unpredictable environment, and/or (c) the need to relax the repression-habit in the interests of some other contact-situation.

actions and objects that would satisfy the need) obscured, they come through as intense bodily and emotional pain.

The experience is that of an acute emergency once again. And the response – still according to the “simplest structure of the field” principle – is, once again, to mobilize the emergency functions to blot out the pain. The repression-habit is again tightened. If necessary, some more of the organism’s powers are enlisted to extinguish the “danger”.²³ Then, as before, the whole adjustment hardens back into a repression-habit, one now perhaps even more complex than it was.

It may seem that the self, the process of contacting, is what malfunctions in the situation just described, for if it would just “bear a slight discomfort, ... locate the contraction and loosen it deliberately” (*GT*, p. 211 / 431), the excitation would turn out not to be a heart attack after all, but a need that might then be satisfied. But the contact-process is properly functioning as it always has, tending to the simplest structure of the field, given the information and techniques available to it. The problem, rather, is that the earlier, now-forgotten adjustment is depriving the present contact-process of the crucial information about the nature of the excitation.

The Aftermath of Chronic Emergency: Neurosis

From all this we may assemble the following general picture of the neurotic life. First, throughout it all the self is functioning healthily, in the sense that it is still synthesizing creative solutions as best it can, given the problems presented to awareness and the powers available to it. “The areas of contact may be restricted, as in the neuroses, but wherever there is a boundary and contact occurs, it is, insofar, creative self” (*GT*, p. 153 / 374). Neurotic behavior and experience – the self-defeating actions, the intemperate emotions, the breakdowns, the obsessions and compulsions, the nameless fears, the weariness, the meaninglessness, the distortions, the arrogance, the deadness, the clinging to security, etc., etc. – occur because every attempt at creative adjustment occurs in a field containing repressions, the presence of which greatly reduce the likelihood that any given attempt will succeed.

You will recall that, for the healthy organism, contacting began with essentially two conditions: an unfinished situation and a repertoire of techniques that were flexibly available as instruments for completing the situation. Even under these optimal conditions, there is risk and uncertainty, for the situation is novel and final contact may not be achieved. But now let me list some of the difficulties that the repression-habit adds to the contact process.²⁴

²³ This latter process is what Goodman means by **reaction formation**; see *GT*, pp. 211-212 / 431-432.

²⁴ In this list, I am speaking from an observer’s perspective. The nature and even the existence of these handicaps are not at all clear in the experiential perspective of the person in question.

1. The permanently postponed organic needs make the organism weaker and wearier.
2. The neglect, hypertension, and cramping of the body make the somatic processes subject to various “meaningless” but contact-disrupting aches, pains, and sicknesses.²⁵
3. Certain of the organism’s powers, namely those that would facilitate expression-in-action of the repressed need, are inhibited. They are kept out of awareness by being kept inactive. They therefore are not flexibly and appropriately available as processes that can be initiated in the service of the present contacting. Trying to initiate them, the self experiences just a “blank”.
4. Certain other powers, namely those involved in maintaining the repression-habit, are activated and must remain activated as long as the self cannot relax the repression. So they too are not instrumentally available. Rather, they obtrude into the present contacting as ends-in-themselves, as real needs with which the self must identify. They comprise much of the neurotic’s experienced personality, which “looms in awareness” (*GT*, p. 213 / 433).
5. The repressed unfinished situation itself may intermittently leak into awareness with some of its original meaning. It disrupts the present contacting, organizes some behavior, and perhaps leads to “sublimations: direct but imperfect gratifications” (*GT* p. 212 / 432; see also pp. 223-224 / 442-44). But the powers mentioned in the previous point, which operate antagonistically toward the repressed excitation, are mobilized further when it begins to leak through. The resulting dynamic is that the person experiences, and behaviorally oscillates between, mutually contradictory impulses that abort one another before either or any of them reaches any final contact. And both are irrelevant to the unfinished situation with which the present contacting began.²⁶
6. Certain environmental objects, events, and situations must be avoided as temptations of the repressed need. Certain others must be clung to, because

²⁵ This is not to say that *all* diseases are psychosomatic in this sense, that a psychologically healthy organism would never get sick. But Goodman contends that the strains of neurosis have a bigger role than is usually realized. He also bemoans the distinction between sufferings that are seen as not deserving of serious medical attentions and “real physical” disease. As he pungently remarks: “It is estimated that more than 60% of visitors to medical offices have nothing the matter with them; but they obviously have *something* the matter with them.” (*GT*, p. 45 / 269)

²⁶ Goodman adds that many of these reaction-formations are currently socially disesteemed: “Righteousness, obsessive cleanliness, thrift, stubborn pride, moral censure, spite, and envy are ridiculed and disapproved; they seem small instead of grand.” (*GT*, p. 225 / 445), and so the self is pressured to form reaction formations against its achieved reaction-formations! It is “an annihilating of the annihilating, and we get an empty politeness, good-will, loneliness, affectlessness, tolerance, and so forth. (*GT*, p. 225-226 / 446).

they are essential in maintaining the repression-habit and/or because they seem to be (and given the neurotic habits, indeed *are*) the only objects, etc., that can provide the few “direct but imperfect” satisfactions that remain. Thus, the present contacting cannot draw flexibly and instrumentally upon the energy and resources of the environment. The contacting breaks down because the environment, thus restricted, does not offer the requisite “givens”.

7. And even if a present process makes it through the most precarious stages – fore-contact and contacting – it is almost certain to be unable to relax in the way that is necessary to the full absorption of final contact and the tranquility of post-contact (recall page 22), because the tension, inhibition, and distraction functions of the repression-habit must continue. In figure/ground terms, a disturbance persists in the ground that cannot be integrated into the figure. The ground is not “empty.”

If now we consider how all of these neurotic occurrences manifest themselves when viewed from the experiential perspective, the situation appears quite different. Neurotic experience is at the same time quite complicated and fairly easy to describe.

It is complicated at the “content” level: The specific objects, impulses, gaps in experience, pains, fantasies, etc. vary immensely, and Goodman’s attempt just to categorize them somewhat (*GT*, pp. 227-247 / 447-464) is not very satisfactory. But it is fairly easy to point out some common factors among the experiential manifestations of the neurosis. On the one hand, there is diminished awareness, because perception of body and environment is dimmed and because avoidances limit the range of situations experienced. Being relatively continuous and constant, this under-awareness is experienced as “natural”; there is nothing given in experience to indicate that anything is missing. On the other hand, there are the “positive” manifestations, which are noticed in experience, but not correctly identified as expressions of an unfinished situation or the actions and objects appropriate to it. Instead, they are experienced as excitations that are painful and mysterious – in short, as threats of vital injury that cannot be coped with. This is the experience of **anxiety**,²⁷ “the pervasive factor in neurosis” (*GT*, p. 7 / 231). It elicits a new reaction-formation, a new attempt to blot out these excitations. A reaction formation seems (from the experiential perspective) to be the only adjustment possible, for the “simplest structure” principle requires that the disruptive excitation be eliminated somehow.

²⁷ Goodman has a strikingly simple theory, which I don’t feel qualified to evaluate, of what anxiety is from the observer’s perspective, i.e., as a physiological occurrence. To quote briefly: “It is a very simple psychosomatic event. Anxiety is the experience of breathing difficulty during any blocked excitement. It is the experience of trying to get more air into lungs immobilized by muscular constriction of the thoracic cage.” (*GT*, p. 375 / 128) It is the same as **fright**, the reaction to an unexpected and (at least momentarily) undefined danger that pops up during a contact process, as a result of which “the excitement is interrupted; the breath is held” (*GT*, p. 188 / 409). The difference is that fright is momentary, whereas anxiety persists. Anxiety can be described as chronic fright.

The Normal Neurotic

It may seem that the neurotic life as described here must be one of constant escalation, where the crises and emergency adjustments intensify and pile onto one another until the organism blows up or falls apart. Nervous breakdowns, severe psychosomatic diseases, psychoses, etc., testify that it sometimes does come to such a breaking-point. But more often, if the original chronic emergency and the subsequently encountered problems of living are not too extreme. The neurotic reaches some fairly stable adjustment, and he lives that way for a long time. The two factors that enable this to happen despite the repressions are (a) the fact that at least the most vital unfinished situations inexorably intensify when neglected, and (b) the fact that the self always acts “healthily,” always generates a creative solution given the problems and powers available. So the repressed needs leak through the repression until they are somewhat recognized, so that some way is found to assuage them enough that the repression-habit can hold them down.²⁸

These factors, operating in an at least minimally provident and predictable environment, force and enable the person to carve out a set of adjustments that at least minimally satisfy his survival needs. Then he can stick to this straight-and-narrow (as long as it continues to support him). Then, with a little more luck, his unfinished situations, repressions, and reaction-formations will stabilize into a self-regulating, self-contained system that presents only occasional pains, urges, etc., to awareness (as long as he sticks to the straight-and-narrow). In contrast to the neurotic who hasn't yet achieved a routine overall adjustment, this normal neurotic does not much experience the “positive” manifestations of neurosis (page 35) – only occasional pains, illnesses, bad moods, yearnings – nothing strong enough to upset the adjustment for long. The other manifestation of neurosis is still effective, perhaps more than ever – his awareness is dull and dim, his experience is narrow – but this seems natural. As long as the world lets him stick to his hard-won routine, the normal neurotic does not experience much suffering. He does not experience much at all.

Restoring Psychological Health

Having described the healthy life, the stable neurotic life, and the conditions that lead from health to neurosis, I conclude here by describing the road back from neurosis to health. My description is mostly in terms of a therapeutic method. But the important subject is not psychotherapy per se. I use psychotherapy only to define the general conditions that the theory sees as necessary to remove the burdens of neurosis. These conditions may be achieved through intentional therapy, intelligent friends, extraordinary luck, social change, or whatever. In any case, the same principles apply.

²⁸ In another jargon, this is described as a negative feedback system. When the organismic function in question deviates too far from its optimal state, the self acts as a servomechanism that is active until the condition of the organismic function is back within acceptable limits (the limits being determined by the severity of the repression-habit).

The agent of cure is, and must be, the self – the contacting processes, creatively functioning as always to make the best solution possible, the simplest and best-integrated structure of the field, given the “givens” that come to awareness. The problem, as already noted, is with the “givens” that are presented and withheld by the repression-habit. The aim of therapy is to bring about a situation where:

- The repression-habit, including all of the reaction formations added to it and now part of it, once again is contacted – is experienced and understood as it operates in the present.
- Simultaneously, the situation is experienced as safe: The renewed contact does not come as a mysterious vital threat, so that the tightening of control in further reaction-formations no longer appears to be the only way to integrate and simplify the field.

When these two conditions are achieved, the repression-habit is further relaxed, and the accompanying anxiety, conflict, and suffering are tolerated. They turn into the excitement of a *new* creative adjustment process as the unfinished situation, now released so the person can draw on the knowledge, abilities, and resources of the present field, finds definition and motor expression, and moves toward a solution.

Reaching this point, the person is over the hump. The archaic repression habits are discarded as irrelevant. Healthy organismic self-regulation is regained. The needs can be recognized and accepted as they arise. The powers and energy bound in the repression-habit are now flexibly and instrumentally available.

Many changes remain ahead as the consequences of the cure ramify through the person's life, but from this point on “he is psychologically healthy, for he is exercising his best power and will do the best he can in the difficult circumstances of the world.” (*GT*, p. 11 / 235)

Thus dramatized into a single clear-cut sequence, the road back seems short and simple: just a little courage and effort, and a cure is certain. But now consider the difficulties involved – whether or not the situation is one of intentional therapy – and it begins to be clear why the road to health must be paved with more than good intentions, why it almost inevitably involves spending much time in detours, in dead-ends, and in being lost. I mention the difficulties in roughly the order they would become relevant during progress toward a cure.

1. The total repression-habit is complex and includes mechanisms that distract attention from it (recall page 29ff). Moreover, it is not a thing that is constantly lying there to be found, but is a process that exists and can be experienced only when it is active. So just “locating” the habit so it can be experienced is quite a task. The gestalt therapist tackles this by having his patient do “experiments” aimed at, first, getting his patient's mind out of the future, the past, the abstract, or the otherwise remote, and back to how he is functioning “here and now” (see *GT*, pp. 279-320 / 30-135); and second, at

directing this present awareness toward the ways in which his present functioning defeats and confuses him (see *GT*, pp. 321-362 / 139-224). If these “explorations of the dark and disconnected” (*GT*, p. 42 / 266) succeed in restoring some contact with the repression-habit, the formerly random symptoms begin to fall into an experienced pattern that can be dealt with.

2. But the more the repression-habit is contacted, the greater the anxiety and the resulting tendency to blot out the whole thing with a new reaction-formation. Thus the therapist must keep the patient aware that his present situation is safe, at precisely the time when he is pushing the patient into contact with the most frightening and “dangerous” aspects of his life. This implies a gradual series of “experiments,” slowly “extending the areas of vitality to include wider areas” (*GT*, p. 145 / 365), so that the person acquires new powers and confidence before the final confrontation. It also implies that setbacks are likely.
3. When some coherent contact is achieved, however, there is often more than a moment’s anxiety to be endured, because the repression-habit embodies many long-standing conflicts, which are now experienced anew. Here the important thing is that the conflict be accepted and suffered through to a novel solution in the present rather than being “prematurely pacified” by again blotting out one or both of the competing desires, attitudes, or whatever. (See the chapter on “conflict and self-conquest”, *GT*, pp. 133-147 / 353-368.)
4. Finally, even if health is regained in therapy and the person now “will do the best he can in the difficult circumstances of the world,” there remains the possibility that the person’s inevitable environment – his family, his society, his world – still, despite his best efforts and his adult powers, presents him with a chronic emergency. If so, the best he can do is to go back to his neurosis, or invent a new one. The neurosis turns out to be a condition of the whole present field, and trying to cure an individual within it is a losing battle. “To the extent that the conditions of life inevitably involve chronic emergency and frustration, the chronic control will prove to be functional after all” (*GT*, p. 213 / 433).

This last point leads Goodman beyond psychotherapy and into social criticism. On societal questions and other human subjects discussed in the book – art, other psychological theories and therapies, language, philosophy – Goodman says it much better than I could. His words on these matters need no advertisement or introduction.

Appendix (2007): Perls and Goodman

To clarify the difference between “Gestalt therapy” and *Gestalt Therapy*, in this second edition I have made a distinction that didn’t seem to matter 40 years ago: a distinction between the two volumes that constitute the *Gestalt Therapy* book – and between two heroes of my youth: Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman.

The book *Gestalt Therapy* consists of two very dissimilar volumes. One volume presents the theory of this approach; the other presents its techniques.

It is the theoretical volume that this paper advertises and introduces. *This* is the Gestalt therapy that you won’t have encountered in the teachings and techniques of Fritz Perls and his heirs. Perls’ contribution to the theoretical volume was, in the words of his biographer, “disheveled notes and lots of ideas” (Shepard, 1976, p 62) about the therapeutic approach that he was inventing in his practice. Perls hired Paul Goodman, a poet, novelist, psychotherapist, and social critic, originally on the premise that Goodman would simply edit these into a publishable manuscript. But Perls’ raw material evoked a torrent of creative ideas from Goodman, and Goodman’s role rapidly evolved from editor to a collaborator to the principal author of this volume. In the end, according to Goodman’s biographer, “It was Goodman who was creating the theory as well as the prose in which it was couched, and Perls settled comfortably enough into the role of the expert who approved the results.” (Stoehr, 1994, p 87) So I feel it is valid and appropriate to attribute this theoretical masterpiece to Goodman and to entitle the second edition of this paper *Paul Goodman’s Gestalt Therapy*.

The volume of techniques could reasonably be labeled *Fritz Perls’ Gestalt Therapy*. It was a collaboration with Ralph Hefferline, a Columbia University experimental psychologist and a patient of Perls. Perls provided the experiential exercises that he was already using in his practice; Hefferline tried out these “experiments” on his students and wrote up their reactions. Experiential techniques like these were cornerstones of the “Gestalt” that Perls would make famous two decades later. In 1969, at the peak of his prominence, Perls declared that “the Gestalt experiments included in [the volume of techniques] are as valid today as they proved to be the first time we conducted classes in awareness expansion.” (Perls et al., 1977, p. ix) By contrast, almost from *Gestalt Therapy’s* first day in print, Perls acted as if its theoretical volume did not even exist.

Perls’ Gestalt evolved into what Naranjo (1992) accurately characterized as *atheoretical experientialism*. In this mouthful, *experiential* refers to Perls’ exclusive focus on immediate, “here and now” awareness and expression as the whole of psychotherapy (and, it seemed, of all of the good life), and *atheoretical* denotes his view that conceptual structures (implicitly including the one that Goodman built out of Perls’ own bricks) are sterile “fitting games”, “verbiage”, and “elephant-shit” – neurotic avoidances of living and acting in the present. Here is some vintage Perls:

“Why” and “because” are dirty words in Gestalt therapy. They lead only to rationalization, and belong to the second class of verbiage production. I distinguish three classes of verbiage production: chickenshit – this is “good morning”, “how are you?” and so on; bullshit – this is “why”, “because”, rationalization, excuses; and

elephantshit – this is when you talk about philosophy, existential Gestalt therapy, etc. – what I am doing now (quoted by Naranjo, 1993, p. 53).

Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy centered on Perls' own special genius – live, spontaneous, incisive, sometimes outrageous, often wise performances of therapy-as-theater. He could bring a person vividly, dramatically, intimately in touch with a core issue of her life – in ten minutes, on a stage, in front of an audience of fifty people. In a one-on-one encounter, with a single gesture, Perls could teach a total stranger volumes about himself. (I know this directly; I was one such stranger.) In place of systematic theory, Perls substituted a repertoire of pithy, provocative pronouncements like those quoted above, delivered with utter certainty in the glow of one of his magical performances, and further armored against challenges by the taboo on “bullshit”. This is what the world came to know as Gestalt.

The difference between Goodman's Gestalt therapy and Perls' Gestalt therapy is not a disagreement about content. Most of the ideas expressed by Perls' catchy one-liners can also be found in Goodman's volume, though in quite different words and in a unified intellectual context. More importantly, Goodman's theory and Perls' practice both rested on the same foundations: the direct experience of human beings as they live as well as they can in their actual world. Goodman and Perls shared a determination to ground all of their work thoroughly in experience and a disdain for ungrounded abstractions. Here are some of the first words of Goodman's last book, published just after his death in 1972:

I can't think abstractly. Like everybody, I suppose – how would I know? – I start from concrete experience, but I have to stick to it (Goodman, 1972, p. 3).

Experience is prior to the “organism” and the “environment”, which are abstractions from experience. It is prior to “I” and “that there”, which are abstractions. They are plausible, perhaps inevitable abstractions, except for moments of deep absorption. They are said by every natural language, and it is the devil to try to invent a phenomenological language that avoids them. But we must be careful not to forget the matrix from which they are abstracted (Goodman, 1972, p. 6).

...and a piece of Goodman's description, published on the dust jacket of that same book, of his own orientation:

Goodman chooses (and is stuck with) experience that is concrete and limited; its terms are Here, Now, and Next, and Darkness beyond the horizon. So in his politics, sociology, and psychology he tries to restore the matrix of primary experience in a society bedeviled, in his opinion, by political, social, and moral abstractions. (Goodman, 1972, dust jacket)

This common ground, shared by Perls and Goodman, set Gestalt therapy radically apart from other schools of psychology, which built towering abstract edifices on narrow experiential foundations – limited (for example) to experiences from the psychoanalytic couch, the experimental laboratory, or the data delivered by particular research methodologies.

A partnership based on this unique common ground and their complementary talents – Perls the practitioner, Goodman the theorist – could have had a deep and transformative impact on psychotherapy, psychology, and society. Alas, this partnership never came to pass.²⁹ *Gestalt Therapy* turned out to be the closest that Perls and Goodman ever came to a collaboration. After its publication, the distance between them widened into a rift, which widened into a split of the Gestalt therapy community into what came to be called “East Coast Gestalt” and “West Coast Gestalt”. The East Coast Gestaltists continued to base their practice on Goodman’s *Gestalt Therapy*, even though Goodman himself had moved on to achieve his years of fame as a social critic and a guru of the New Left activists of the 60s.³⁰ The West Coast contingent consisted of Perls and his followers at Esalen Institute in California and Lake Cowichan in British Columbia. Occasionally, the factions exchanged cheap barbs. Occasionally, they engaged in the kind of creative conflict that was one foundation of their shared tradition. Most of the time, they simply ignored each other. It was Perls’ West Coast version that became a household word in the 60s and 70s. Goodman’s integrated theory was largely eclipsed, and what the world came to know as Gestalt therapy lacked any theoretical content beyond Perls’ pronouncements – including the pronouncement that the lack of theory was not a defect but a virtue.

²⁹ For a fuller account of the history, politics, and personalities of this book and its authors, the best source is Stoehr’s history (1994, especially Chs 4 and 12). Other useful views are Shepard’s biography of Perls (1976, esp. Chs 5 and 13), Perls’ own autobiography (Perls, 1969), the preface and introduction to Naranjo (1993), Perls’ preface to the Bantam edition of *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls et al, 1977), and From and Miller’s introduction to the 1994 edition. The latter two can be read online at <http://www.gestalt.org/phgintro.htm>

³⁰ “More than any other person, Goodman articulated the point of view, at once utopian and practical, of that remarkable political movement. And at every point Gestalt insights and therapeutic experience informed his ideas.” (Stoehr, 1994, p. xiv) The activists were receptive when Goodman attributed human suffering to “the disgrace of the Organized System of semi-monopolies, government, advertisers, etc.” (1960, p. ix), but they weren’t interested in anything that might complicate that picture by extending it to include other causes, such as individual psychology or the inevitable human condition. So *Gestalt Therapy* seldom made it onto New Left bookshelves – which is a shame. Had they assimilated its wisdom, their movement might not have degenerated into the “fanaticism and self-righteous violence” that finally drove Goodman by the end of the 1960s to despair of them as the hope for a better world: “Compared with the tempered enthusiasm of my previous books, this one is rather sour on the American young. In 1958 I called them my ‘crazy young allies’, and now I’m saying that, when the chips are down, they’re just like their fathers.” (Goodman, 1970, pp. xi-xii)

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