

# **WILL AND GRACE: AN INTEGRATIVE DIALECTIC CENTRAL TO GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Within this paper, the author argues for the existence of dialectic, here called ‘Will/directed action’ and ‘Grace/receptivity’ that can be seen to act as an over-arching integrating paradigm for gestalt psychotherapy. The dialectic is traced to its origins in Augustinian philosophy and is proposed as a way of viewing different aspects of self-function, specifically middle mode/spontaneity. The author briefly locates contrasting schools of psychotherapy along the same dialectic and argues that this can also be seen as a way of comprehending some of the tensions within gestalt psychotherapy. Finally, implications of the dialectic are explored with reference to the practice of gestalt psychotherapy and its epistemological and philosophical roots.

**‘Gestalt therapy is a creative synthesis.’ Erving Polster-1995, (P9).**

I vividly recall reading this statement quite early in my gestalt psychotherapy training. My internal response was ‘Oh Yes Erv, Right On!’ A few days later a particularly pedantic clinical psychologist colleague of mine upon hearing me quote from Polster replied; ‘That’s all very well, but synthesis of what?’

In answer to this question, I was able to talk about the ‘Three Pillars’ of Field Theory, Phenomenology and Dialogue, (Yontef, 1983a). I wasn’t entirely convinced however, that by describing these three major maps we had identified all the Constitutive Goods, (values, attitudes, theories and methods), or the integrating principles that bind them, into the recognisable synthesis that is gestalt psychotherapy.

Within this paper I will suggest a particular integrating dialectic first explored some 1600 years ago by the Algerian Bishop, Saint Augustine. He combined ideas from philosophy and theology into a new theory of how human beings orientate towards 'The Good', (i.e. the good life).

Augustine's theory contained two principal elements that I will here refer to as 'Will' and 'Grace'; formulated here as directed action and receptivity. I will show that these can be seen as a key dialectic of human selfhood. They can also be viewed as an over-arching integrative paradigm encompassing many of 'the goods' of gestalt psychotherapy theory. I will argue that because of this, gestalt psychotherapy offers a holistic meta-theory alongside which other approaches can sometimes seem narrow, rigid and limited in applicability.

### **In The Beginning**

It is clear to anyone encountering gestalt psychotherapy that it is not a linear set of protocols that one can learn and follow in any instance. By contrast, the cognitive behavioural 'mantra' flows in a nicely linear direction: 'Thoughts cause feelings cause behaviour.' A feedback loop is acknowledged, but there is no doubt that when thinking of 'chickens and eggs', cognitions are chicken and behaviours the egg!

While gestalt psychotherapy theory does clearly argue for sensations as the ontological basis of experience, our models of the self are anything but linear or simple. We have instead a unique, dynamic and fluid description of self, formed as a function of the current environmental and phenomenal field and known to us through our experience of our body's primordial contact with the environment, (sensations). As Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, (1951), state;

'The self-function *is* the figure/background process in boundary contacts in the organism/environment field'. (P384).

Likewise;

'Self may be regarded as at the boundary of the organism, but the boundary is not itself isolated from the environment; it contacts the environment; it belongs to both, environment and organism.' (P 373).

This complexity and richness at the heart of gestalt psychotherapy theory, (which, like Phillipson 2001, is where I place notions of the self), is not surprising. It is embodied in our seminal text, ‘Gestalt Therapy’, (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951), with its implicit dialogue between Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman.

Taylor Stoehr, (1994), recounts in his work ‘Here, Now, Next’, how both of these founders of gestalt psychotherapy brought very different ingredients to the pot; that is, constitutive goods to the synthesis. Indeed, he even polarises their contributions somewhat in order to ‘comprehend more fully the integrating power of the amalgam the two founders achieved’. (P. 291).

I want to shine a particular light on this synthesis by arguing that gestalt psychotherapy theory is a combination of ideas of Will/directed action and Grace/receptivity. In drawing on these key concepts originated by Augustine, I will reach beyond the philosophical sources that are more commonly referenced in gestalt psychotherapy. That is, the writing of Martin Buber, (1965a), Merleau-Ponty, (1945), and Arnie Beisser, (1970).

### **Augustinian Philosophy**

The most famous of Augustine’s works ‘Confessions’, (1961), was written during the years 396 – 398 AD, when he was in his early forties. In this work, he develops a discourse that can be seen to crystallise the self in a way similar to that proposed in ‘Gestalt Therapy’(1951). In particular, he argues for a combination of the use of ‘Inner’ processes, such as thinking and feeling, with receptivity to ‘Outer-Other’ influences, in his view, God. These two aspects of self, I shall henceforth term ‘Will’ and ‘Grace’. I am proposing that taken together they can be seen as forming a dialectic of human selfhood, the integrating point of which produces the psychological phenomenon that in gestalt psychotherapy theory is referred to as ‘middle mode/spontaneity’. (A fuller discussion of middle mode follows later in the text).

I shall formulate Will and Grace individually, as Augustine did, in order to offer a fuller perspective on these differing dimensions of self-organisation. Prior to undertaking this however, it is important to note that Augustine’s name has appeared previously in the gestalt psychotherapy literature. Kennedy, (1998, p. 90.), argues that Augustine’s desire to move ‘inwards’ in

order to meet God, could be viewed as leading us away from the body. This would, of course, be antithetical to the ontological place of the body/sensations within gestalt psychotherapy theory.

I am proposing however, that a move 'inwards' need not be placed in dualistic opposition to the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (1945), when speaking of the world, described it as 'the field of experience in which I find myself.' Here, the body is neither subject nor object, but a mode of existence affecting all other knowledge. Thus, an 'inner' gathering of self is formulated as a means of becoming more receptive to the 'outer-other', rather in the same way a therapist becomes present for their client. Bodily sensations are not annihilated in this focusing of the self, rather constellated in a specific way to promote receptivity and awareness. It is now possible to view Augustine as suggesting use of inner processes of Will in organising self to be optimally receptive. This state of receptive self-organisation is what I am terming Grace.

Within the gestalt psychotherapy model of self, notions of inner and outer are of course, indivisible; failure to recognise this is to embrace a false dichotomy. In the same way that the horizon is always a meeting place of land or sea with sky, healthy self-organisation is always a *synthesis* of the inner/Will and receptivity to the outer-other/Grace. We thus have a hermeneutic view of self, (Beaumont, 1993), whereby what is interpreted as 'Inner' and 'Outer-Other' is determined both by the categories applied and simultaneously by what is experienced. At any point in time, what is determined to be in one category can be moved to the other, as part of the process of organismic self-regulation, (creative adjustment), within a changing environment. Jacobs, (personal communication), commenting on Will and Grace, describes this as 'surrender and initiative working seamlessly and in such an inseparable way, they cannot be parsed'. Similarly, Perls et al, (1951) while discussing unity of figure and ground in middle mode state;

'In all contacting, there is an underlying unity of perceptual, motor, and feelingful functions: there is no grace, vigor, dexterity without orientation and interest.....but it is only in final contact, perhaps, with its spontaneity and absorption, that these functions are all foreground, they are the figure: one is aware of the unity'. (P 417).

This statement raises the possibility that, aside from the point of final contact, the dimensions of Will and Grace may contribute differentially to self-organisation at different stages of figure formation and destruction.

### **Will-Go Get It!**

In Confessions, Augustine outlines how the ‘inner’ phenomena of thinking and feeling can be used to strive for something in a conscious and reflective way. He names this process ‘Will’, and outlines it first emerging in his experience at an early age, being necessary to his process of learning language.

‘It was not that my elders taught me words...in any set method: but I, longing by cries...and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts, so that I might have my Will, and yet unable to express all I willed, or to whom I Willed, did myself, by the understanding which Thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds in my memory.’ Confessions I.

Later in his account he writes,

‘I can picture to myself all kinds of different images based either upon my own experience, or upon what I find credible, because it tallies with my own experience’, (Confessions, X, 8, 1961).

I am proposing that these quotes can be seen as including concepts of both ‘Intentionality’ and ‘Intention’. These factors are combined to form the vector quality of Will, possessing both magnitude and direction, (Philippon, 2001, p48), and producing a phenomenon very like ‘excitement’, (Perls et al, p409). This aspect can be used to aggress upon the environment, thus moving from id functions to ultimately produce a dimension of self very similar to ego. Augustine illustrates this when he writes;

‘I knew as well that I had a Will, as that I lived: when then did I Will or nill anything. I was most sure that no other did Will or nill:....Thus, if I tore my hair or beat my forehead; I Willed, I did it’. (Confessions, Book VIII).

This demonstrates Will’s properties of being ‘deliberate, active in mode, sensorically alert and motorically aggressive, and conscious of itself as isolated from its situation’, which Perls et al, (1951, p 379), identify as ego

function. In making this categorisation however, they emphasise that middle mode and spontaneity are still pervasive. Thus, although the self-organisation defined as Will is figural, the dialectical aspect of Grace is ever present.

Goodman clarified this by writing about the ‘id of the situation’, (Perls et al, 1951, p 403). As Robine, (2003), states, this localises the origin of the drive/Will in the situation itself, in preference to any localisation within a self that is separate from the environment, (even though the ego function experiences itself as acting upon the environment). This emphasises the fundamental non-dualistic/non-cartesian nature of gestalt psychotherapy theory.

### **The Concept of Intentionality**

What is clear however, is that humans generally have a sense of acting upon the world. That is, of having a Will separate from and capable of transcending the environment. This aspect of psychological experience was, as I have shown, strongly felt by Augustine. In offering a formulation of his notion of Will I employed the concept of Intentionality, which I will now expand upon, as it relates directly to the dualistic fallacy at the heart of many other psychotherapy theories.

A deal of confusion still exists about Intentionality, which is defined by the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy as ‘the directedness or aboutness of mental states—the fact that one’s thinking is of or about something’. (Siewert, 2003). Influential perspectives on Intentionality, (which should not be confused with the more general term Intention, as in, meaning to do something), emerged within both the analytic and phenomenological philosophical traditions. The latter, which has been formative in developing and contributing to the epistemological ground of gestalt psychotherapy theory, was initially developed by Franz Brentano, (1867).

Brentano does not explicitly mention Augustine, but he acknowledges discussions of the concept he terms Intentionality, starting in Plato and going through history to Descartes. It is clear that his formulation is initially dominated by a concept of mental directedness towards objects, and specifically the question of whether these ‘objects’ are existant ‘internally’ in our heads or ‘externally’ in the world. Intentionality as a concept, thus

originally reflected a Cartesian view of the world, with a classical subject-object dichotomy. This is reflected in Augustine's formulation of Will.

This theme was taken up by the Phenomenologists, principally Husserl, (1913), who criticised Brentano's original notion of 'inner perception', as being a dualistic fallacy, particularly in the arena of sensations. Here, he argued from a phenomenological stance that the object of our perception, (e.g. a flower), does not exist in the mind, but transcends any (necessarily perspectival), experience. Pure perception can thus be attained via 'phenomenological reduction' and 'bracketing' of the perspectival/subjective component. Pietersma, (2000) terms this 'the transcendental turn to nonsensuous consciousness'. (P 127).

Later however, Brentano developed a third possibility, that of 'intentional objects', which offer and present themselves to us. They are not dissolvable into just 'the subjective actions through which we enter into relation with them', (Safranski, 2002, p24), but also stand in infinitely numerous relationships via which we can determine them. From this notion emerges a world occupying an intermediate position; a field existing in undifferentiated form prior to organising into figure and ground.

Heidegger, (1927), developed Brentano's 'Intentional Objects' concept further, by outlining a view of Intentionality as a means by which objects show themselves as 'ready to hand', or 'available'. (Dreyfuss, 1991). Here, objects are always presented to the mind in a context; that is, within a whole. They are attended to only if useful to the self achieving something it wants to do. Heidegger differentiated this from a view of objects as 'present at hand', which he viewed as a more Cartesian perspective whereby the mind perceives objects existent in the world independently of the 'context, or horizon of action'. (Pietersma, P 98).

Merleau-Ponty, (1945), under the influence of the Gestalt psychologists came to a view that perception is tied essentially to sensate experiences. In his formulation of Radical Reflection he outlines the way that we experience the world *prior* to being able to describe or comment upon that experience. In this view then, Intentionality refers to our world as shaped by sensation, rather than existing prior to, or independently of sensation, and the cartesian split is finally dismantled.

## **Intentionality and Gestalt Psychotherapy.**

As outlined earlier, Robine, (2003), views the concept of Intentionality as constitutive of the emergence of a figure, though acknowledges that other gestalt psychotherapists have seen it as characteristic of ego functioning. Robine's view is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's articulation and thereby ties Intentionality to id functions and forecontact. I would propose however that Augustine's concept of Will was dualistic and combined Intentionality with Intention. It can be seen therefore as necessarily occurring in both id and ego functioning. Will acquires more energy/mobilisation/excitement as the figure emerges during id functioning and an action imperative begins to form within the ego phase. In the omnipresent dialectic of Will and Grace, it can therefore be argued that there are differing dimensions of both properties within different phases of self-organisation.

Thus, in summary, I am proposing that within gestalt psychotherapy Will is a dialectical dimension of middle-mode, arising spontaneously in response to the situation/environmental field and thus occurring at multiple phases in the contact cycle. This is in opposition to the cartesian/dualistic way in which Will is commonly conceptualised and employed in other forms of psychotherapy. That is, as an isolated 'inner' or 'pre-field' phenomenon acting upon the 'outer' world and synonymous with classic notions of ego functioning and 'Will-power'. This in turn can lead to elaborate wishes and fantasies aimed at 'overcoming' the world, with corresponding disappointment and despair when the world refuses to conform to one's plan. Certain 'Will-based' psychotherapies can inadvertently reinforce these feelings of failure and give the illusion that with increased Will the universe would have been beaten into submission, or at the very least, ceased to have caused any problems in functioning!

## **Seeking the Good Life.**

Augustine employed the concept of Will in proposing that humans have both a sense of 'the good life' (via what would later be termed Intentionality), and can direct themselves towards it, (via Intention). This view of Will, had been implicit in some of ancient philosophy, for example in Plato's teachings about eros. Here, eros was defined as everything's innate striving to move towards a form in which it becomes fully consummated, (e.g. a bud's movement to become a flower). The human experience of eros is as an inner restlessness, a refusal to accept finality and a longing for a full and satisfying



life. Within a platonic discourse, eros can combine with ‘reason’, (‘human capacity for truth-seeking and problem-solving’, Honderich, 1995, p748), to impel humans to gain more comprehension of life and knowledge of the world.

Augustine was familiar with this view and Gilson, (1961), reports how he came to believe that this is achieved not through reaching some mythical paradisiacal land where one can settle and rest in a state of complete and stable satiation. Rather via a life that is dynamically unsettled, motile, fluid, and always intending towards something more and better.

Augustine thus promoted a theory of self as travelling and changing, which is the notion of the self we ascribe to in gestalt psychotherapy theory; as being constantly in process. As Phillipson says, (2001), what is extraordinary about the self is not that we are in motion, (fluid), but that we are ever at rest, (stable). This is of course very different from the traditional psychotherapeutic notion of the core/essential self that was largely informed by models of animal behaviour, Newtonian physics and Cartesian dualism. That static, inner, core self had to be rediscovered through archeological exploration of childhood and a whittling away of the layers of socialisation that had warped it, (via Psychoanalysis?). Alternately, it had to be reshaped and remodelled by reinforcement strategies learnt in the rat lab. (Via Behavioural or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?)

This is clearly so different from the epistemology of the theory of self in gestalt psychotherapy and the therapeutic focus that naturally flows from it. If the self is fluid and formed in relationship with the environment, then the only place any therapy can occur is here and now with both therapist and client showing up. Hence, the insistence on the existential and the dialogic and the corresponding need to be free of standard protocols and operating procedures. It is as impossible to encounter a fluid and motile self by following a set of rules and guidelines as it is to create a masterpiece when painting by numbers: the vital constitutive goods are missing. The creative spark, the flash of inspiration, the feeling of the artist for the work, her vision of the potential and the product in the piece-all are snuffed out.

### **Grace-I’m open to it!**

A fundamental question for Augustine however was how to find peace, bliss, and enlightenment, amidst all this dynamic turmoil and unrest. He found that

he could not just Will to have a good life and argued that God's revelation of His eternal ideas is needed to enlighten us. I will henceforth refer to this quality of receptivity to the 'outer-other', as the phenomenon of Grace. Here we are again looking towards the phenomenon of co-emergence at the contact boundary. The idea that we do not operate in a vacuum, (the cartesian paradigm), where we can control all events via our Will, but instead are always profoundly influenced by our receptivity, (or lack of it), to the 'Outer-Other'. Roberts, (1999), develops this theme in his paper 'The Field Talks Back', where he states, 'There is an organising force at work', (p 36). Our receptivity to this force, (which Augustine calls God), determines our quality of contact with the environmental field. Once again, for ease of explanation, I am here creating a false dichotomy between inner and outer, but within gestalt psychotherapy theory this does not exist. As Perls et al, (1951), state;

'There is *no* function of any animal that is definable except as a function of a (organism/environment) field.' (P 372).

They add that while this should be 'obvious, abstractions have become so ingrained that it is useful to insist on the obvious'. (P 372).

Augustine was also familiar with Ancient Judaic discourse, (Taylor, 1989, p138-139). Here, God meets humans with commands and Will should play no part at all. Instead the essential act required to achieve the good life is pure obedience. When this is not done, confusion, fragmentation and 'evil' set in. As Augustine himself says:

'It was I who willed to take this course and again it was I who willed not to take it, it was I and I alone. But I neither willed to do it nor refused to do it as my soul will. So I was at odds with myself. I was throwing myself into confusion.' (Confessions, VIII, 10).

This quote shows the turmoil that Augustine experienced occurring when Will is not mustered in a unified direction or surrendered without reservation. This of course is a common phenomenon, and one that in modern psychotherapeutic parlance we would not describe as evil, but rather as a fragile state leading to a disintegration in the self, with resulting confusion and tension being experienced. Perls et al, (1951), were keen to write about this sort of tension as a lack of clear figure formation resulting in

a de-energised and demobilised organism, with resulting ‘neuroticism’ and interruptions/moderations of contact. If experienced frequently enough, ‘fixed gestalts’, that is, changes in the embodied self and personality function, will occur. This self-function does possess a more enduring quality than the present centred concepts of id and ego that I have previously discussed.

Fortunately, as it was with Perls combining with Goodman, so it was with Augustine developing his ideas of Will existing harmoniously with Grace. Just as Goodman continually emphasised the importance of interaction with the environment in shaping the individual, Augustine argued for the importance of receptivity/Grace, in supporting us in finding God and making right decisions. He stated strongly that the very attempt to find the right path by oneself is doomed to failure, and that it is only in connection, (in his thesis- with God,), that health and a good life can be achieved.

### **Towards an Integration: Links to Gestalt psychotherapy theory.**

Ultimately, it is possible to formulate Augustine as arguing for a creative synthesis between Will and Grace. This looks very similar to the synthesis that underpins core ideas of the ‘good’(life), and healthy self, enshrined within gestalt psychotherapy theory. Here, a good life is not attained just through achievements in the outer world, but is also related to a basic level of self support which powers our sense of knowing deeply within ourselves when something is right with us. As Perls et al, (1951), state,

‘If he could come to recognise the object of knowledge as himself’, (p 328).

Thus, Health and integration/synthesis, are not ‘just what we long to see, but also what powers the eye which sees’. (Taylor, 1989, p 129). This synthesis between Will and Grace describes an aspect of self that Perls et al, (1951), called ‘middle in mode (as the ground of action and passion)’. (P 376). I would argue that at this point of integration on the dialectic dimension here called Will and Grace, I am neither subject nor object in my experiencing. Goodman, (1951), emphasises the problem of describing this in the English language, where there are generally only active or passive verbs. He stresses that at this point of synthesis ‘whether the self does or is done to, it refers to the process itself as a totality, it feels it as its own and is engaged in it’. (Note 2, p376). The other term coined for this state is spontaneity, where the self is ‘swaying between the passive, receptive mode

of id and the active, autonomous mode of ego', (Philipppson, 2001, p36). This is not to be confused with the state of retroflection where one aspect of self is working to contain and diminish another. Thus middle mode 'is the paradoxical process of allowing deliberateness and deliberately allowing', (McLeod, 1993, p. 34), which seems to me a perfect description of the dual aspects of Will and Grace.

### **Implications for Therapy.**

My sense is that at its creative best, fluid movement along the dialectic of Will and Grace informs gestalt psychotherapy practice. It is this very ability to be flexible in working with clients that is our strength, rather than, as is sometimes argued our weakness.

Regrettably, in the history of our discipline there is evidence that some therapists have mistaken this flexibility for laxness about professional boundaries. As the approach has matured, evolved and grown however, key figures have pushed for the introduction of ethical committees and standards and these are now enshrined within the discipline. These codes, combined with a deep immersion in the theory and practice of gestalt psychotherapy, contain all the guidance necessary regarding the values and constitutive goods that guide the interventions of the therapist. That is, they satisfy the 'legitimate need for certainty', (Staemmler, 1997, p 41), that gives confidence and discernment to the therapist.

Wheeler, (1992), comments that Gestalt is deeply value based and judgmental, albeit its judgements are not always the same as one might expect with traditional, medically orientated models. We tend to emphasise creativity, personal expression and self-responsibility; traditions that can be seen as deeply rooted in the romantic expressivist philosophies of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. These issues are fully explored in Jacobs' (2003). They are also beautifully articulated in the 2004 handbook of the Gestalt Psychotherapy and Training Institute (UK), when describing ethics and practice for trainers. I quote:

'Unless trainers carry within their hearts a love of truth, a thirst for justice and integrity and an abiding will to serve their trainees through their knowledge and skills, no multiplication of codes or rules will maintain GP&TI and its high standards'.

(GP&TI 2004, page 68).

This value base is of course similar to that governing our therapeutic work, and helps illustrate why protocol bound psychotherapies may often miss the spot. As Hycner, (1995) states, it is the task of the therapist to be flexible enough to move to the place where she can meet the client, not the other way round!

Employing the dialectic of Will and Grace, it is possible to formulate Hycner as proposing that the therapist be either the channel for, or the element of, Grace in the client's environment. (This is an important distinction that I shall return to later.) This necessitates from the therapist a lightness of touch, openness to novelty and non-attachment to claiming reality that Staemmler articulates fully in his paper 'Cultivated Uncertainty', (Staemmler, 1997).

### **Comparison with other Psychotherapeutic forms.**

I began by talking about some of the linear forms of psychotherapy that exist within the medical context where I practise. I named Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, but could also have put into this group Behaviour Therapy, Cognitive Analytic Therapy, etc. These are therapies where primarily the therapist is assisting the client to use their Will to achieve a particular change in their life. I should point out here that I do not want to caricature or be contemptuous about these therapies. I have trained in and use these approaches, and indeed integrate them into my practice as appropriate. What I want to do however, is point out that they do occupy a particular territory that can be perhaps best described by two key aspects. First, they are based on a belief in objective reality. Second, they formulate the client's difficulty as either lack of awareness of this reality or inability to use reason to deal with it. There is little doubt within these therapies that reality is stable and knowable, and that mental health problems arise due to a lack of contact with the stable world. As Clarkson states,

'Science and the psychologies derived from it, such as behaviourism and psychoanalysis, were deterministic and operated on the laws of cause and effect. There is such a 'thing' as the material universe and matter is dead and inert'. (1997. P30).

I would propose that what these psychotherapy theories lack, is an ability to orientate around Will and Grace as appropriate to a particular client at any specific moment in time. This requires a view of the world as fluid and changeable, rather than static and fixed. I would argue that gestalt psychotherapy is likely to be more effective with more clients, as it allows for calibration of our approach with each unique individual and their particular circumstances. This calibration process may not be deliberate via the use of Will. Alternatively, it can signal a fundamental openness to the contextually emergent quality of optimal therapy.

We have, in the Persian tradition, a range of experimental approaches that can work very effectively with stuck and fixed behaviours. That is, mobilise and enhance the experience of being an effective agent of change in the field. In addition, in the dialogic tradition, we have theoretical expositions of ways of contacting individuals who have been pushed to, or been born into, conditions where life has treated them harshly. Here we work to support the emergence of figures that might promote acceptance of what cannot be changed and a working through of what remains. This combination of these two approaches and methods is the integrative dialectic of Will and Grace in therapeutic practice and makes gestalt psychotherapy truly transdiagnostic, (E.g. Harvey et al, 2004).

It seems to me however, that many of the tensions arising between different Gestalt practitioners and theoreticians could be due to their figure ground organisation around the dialectic of Will and Grace, and the methodologies stemming from that. For instance, we can see that some workers favour a more action-orientated, creative, experimental, ego-based, and potentially challenging style. There is an emphasis on authentic person to person contact and emergence of work from this meeting. By contrast, the relational schools take more time focussing on id functions, fore contact, slow mobilisation, and receptivity towards the client's subjective experience. There is an emphasis on support in the relationship, with a preferring of the risk of confluence rather than the risk of shaming the client.

This is not to imply that workers from the former school do not work with grace, or that the latter cannot be confrontational and challenging. It is however, to say that in my experience, they tend to primarily begin by organising in different territory along the dialectic of Will and Grace. In the former Will/Ego functions are figure, in the latter, Id/Grace.

## **Key Questions.**

In this paper I have presented the dialectic of Will and Grace as an integrating paradigm for gestalt psychotherapy. I have offered it as an explanation of tensions between different aspects of gestalt psychotherapy practice that we hear voiced in the literature, as a way of locating gestalt in relation to other forms of psychotherapy and as a pointer to the constitutive goods of gestalt psychotherapy itself. I want to finish with some key questions that have arisen for me as a result of my writing. I have drawn inspiration from the work of Augustine, but of course he was a devout theist. To him it was fundamental that Grace is a result of receptivity to connection with God. The human task is to employ both Will and Grace in order to recognise the good; and in recognising the process of recognising it, receptively move towards it.

If we accept Will and Grace as an integrating dialectic for gestalt psychotherapy, this raises for me the fascinating question that is often debated; is gestalt psychotherapy then a spiritual practice? Over the years, I have heard very many impassioned responses to this question, which fall into a number of broad categories. Some from individuals who believe in a God, some who believe in ‘spirit/soul’ and some who are agnostic or non-believers. With the former two groups, my experience was that a number of key events and organisations in the environmental and/or phenomenal fields were ascribed as acts of God or Spirit/the Divine. Here then, the therapist is seen as a receptive channel for God to operate through and around. The concept of God/Spirit in these cases is an overarching organising principle, that many people feel ashamed to talk about in a psychological setting, but is nonetheless a deeply held and personal ‘hyper-good’ (Taylor 1989). Individuals who have this belief tend to make significantly different interpretations and meanings of life events than individuals who don’t.

Doubtless gestalt psychotherapy is an approach that tends to be attractive to people with spiritual and religious backgrounds. In its foundations, it contains references to Zen and Buddhism and in its conception of the self as being formed as a function of the field, it recognises that we are inherently relational/connected not isolated. To many who hold a spiritual or religious view this is a supportive, comforting and important ‘truth’.

Martin Buber, philosopher and theist, (1958a page 11), stated ‘The thou meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking’. This underpinning of

the dialogic approach enshrined in Buber's philosophy has led many to equate dialogue with some form of spiritual/soulful practice. Indeed, Hycner, (1995 page 93), states: 'It is inconceivable for me to steep myself in a dialogical approach without recognising a spiritual or transpersonal dimension. I feel more and more that in my best therapeutic moments, I am present to, and sometimes the instrument of, some spiritual reality'. It seems to me that what I am reading here is a spiritual description of the phenomenon of Grace and one that many writers, including Augustine, would certainly agree with. What fascinates me at this point in time however, is if Grace is not openness to the influence of God/spirit, then what is it? What are the elements of self-organisation that facilitate and enable transformation in Beisser's, (1970) Paradoxical Theory of Change? What are the creative principles, the motivations; an absence of which can render life a mere grey existence, a flattened wasteland that is so frequently now labelled as depression? I am looking for a psychological description that does not necessarily invoke the spiritual.

Jacobs, (1995), is quoted as saying 'we are wired to be dialogical' (Page 94)', and Stern, (2003), states:

'Our minds are not separate or isolated, and we are not the only owners of our own mind.' (P 23).

He supports this by a range of infant observational research and neuropsychological data, and concludes that the notion of a 'one person psychology', ought not to exist. Likewise, although Perls was 'totally against the whole religious bit', (Gaines, 1979, p. 259), he was described by Fritz Faiss the artist as representative of 'Baruch Spinoza and his theorem: The love of God and the love of man are one and the same. Fritz showed love of man to man'. (Gaines, 1979, p. 343).

So, I believe that Grace need not have a theistic interpretation, but is instead an ontological quality of receptivity to relatedness and inter-connection. It then becomes possible to provide a formulation where it is for the therapist to embody the key elements of Grace, rather than instead being a channel for them. This involves the offering of a specific type of relationship to the client. One where there is less immediate sharing of the therapist's authentic being, and more focus on becoming present to, and receptive of, the clients subjective experience as far as is ever possible. In this formulation, the



therapist offers their presence in the service of the client, as well as being available to meet the client.

Suurmond, (1999), in introducing the work of Emmanuel Levinas to the gestalt psychotherapy literature, reflects on the nature of the soul. He remarks that the original Greek word for soul, *psukhe*, conveyed our fundamental dependency on others. ‘I cannot live without the farmers who grow my food, the language developed and spoken by my community, the ground which makes my figures possible and gives them meaning.’ (Suurmond, 1999, p. 66). He thus reflects Levinas’ definition of the soul as ‘the other-in-me’.

These alternatives to a theistic view remain however, deeply mysterious and perhaps ultimately – yet – unknowable. They are questions of subjectivity that have fascinated philosophers for years. I am delighted to be part of the gestalt psychotherapy community which through its process of constant enquiry and epistemological optimism is one of the few approaches to attempt to answer these questions as they apply in the psychological, as opposed to purely philosophical, realm.

### **Conclusion.**

Ultimately, however we define the creative synthesis of Will and Grace, I know it deeply and profoundly from my personal and clinical experience. It is the self-organisation that, on a good day, gives me a life that flows and buzzes with impassioned vitality. The self-function that permits me to fully contact and connect with life. That creates the inspiration that lights up the therapy room in moments when I learn as much, sometimes more, than my clients. Then I hear my own voice saying words I have not rehearsed or consciously thought, but they sound wise to me, both in what is said, and also the how and when of the saying. At these times, I have used my Will and all I have consciously learnt to get me to a place where I let go, and the quality of Grace intervenes. As the Hindu Mystic Sri Ramakrishna, (1836-1886), stated, ‘ the winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail’.

In his writings about Ramakrishna, Paul Hourihan, (2002), states that it is possible to reframe grace as the archetypal feminine principle flowing through life, and required to save the individualistic/Cartesian/western world from itself! I am left wondering if gestalt psychotherapy, with it's emphasis

on flow, receptivity, subjectivity and transformation through meeting is the psychotherapy designed to validate Grace as well as Will when talking about human selfhood. The approach can thereby support a wholly different vision of mental health problems, organisational/management situations and human life in general. One that does not believe in the use of Will to overpower and overwhelm anyone or anything that gets in its way, but that is receptive to profound interconnectedness within both environmental and phenomenal fields.

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