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Gestalt, the Good and the concept of Ethical Presence

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Abstract: Building on the core Relational Change 'SOS' framework and the central notion of presence, this paper makes the case for introducing a new concept of Ethical Presence as a foundational orientating principle for relational and Gestalt praxis. It begins by highlighting the risks of harm and evil in polarising presence and dismissing aspects of power and privilege that are frequently lying implicitly alongside notions of presence. This in turn leads to an examination of Lewin's core organising principle that 'needs organise the field' from a dialogic as well as phenomenological perspective, which results in a relational reformulation. Ethical Presence is a concept that synthesises the dialectic of egological and ecological self-organisation while attending to others and the situation. Finally, the paper proposes that practitioners reflexively inquire, through the elevation of a dialogic and field orientated stance, and assess the presence of themselves and others since, when I judge myself as 'present', an ecological ethical perspective asks what factors in the wider field (power, privilege, etc.) support me to be that way?

Keywords: ethics, presence, Ethical Presence, ecological, egological, relational, Gestalt, evil, Lewin.

Introduction

Situated in mid-Brexit UK in 2020, it appears to us that ethics and notions of goodness are increasingly debated in our world. Does the concept of truth still have weight in our 'post-truth' world? How do we tell data, news and evidence from 'fake news' and can we trust our so-called 'experts' (be they in medicine, climate science, law, etc.) to do anything more than push their particular agenda? These more publicly debated questions make for frightening times with notions of corruption, trauma and fragmentation frequently raised.

In our particular slice of the field, we see growing demands on psychotherapists, coaches and consultants to demonstrate both that they are promoting health in their practice and also not doing any harm. This remains potentially difficult in Gestalt as, classically, our theory sees practitioners working from a stance of creative indifference, trusting what emerges in the moment rather than being orientated to protocols and predetermined fixed methodologies or outcomes.

Associated with the notion of creative indifference is the belief that the client's self-organising process is fundamentally 'orientated towards health' (Mann, 2010, p. 60), and can therefore be trusted to move towards the Good. Creative indifference was an innovation of Salomo Friedlaender (1871–1946), and positions creativity at a pole from adherence to discernible outcomes and measurable, achievable goals. Instead, the client (individual, team or larger system) and practitioner are encouraged to fully inhabit the space of creative indifference as, according to Williams (2006), this is the place from which all phenomena arise and where maximum creative possibilities can be explored.

In our experience however, this is an ever more difficult position to justify and defend. Clients want outcomes and frequently require them quickly. Investing resources in exploration and open-ended dialogue demands confidence that creative indifference does produce a strong enough move towards health or goodness to guide our practice.

Building on our previous work with specific reference to the Relational Change SOS framework (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013; Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2018), we have formulated that when the three lenses of 'Self', 'Other' and 'Situation' are contacted in conscious awareness and reflexively aligned, then this three factor awareness means that we become present in a way that supports ethical praxis. This definition of presence brings together, in our view, the key aspects of Gestalt practice. In this paper, therefore, we examine whether this notion of presence and the concept of good form are enough to guarantee safe and effective intervention for practitioners, clients and larger systems. Is making the three SOS lenses figural sufficient to ensure an ethical unfolding

or are more specific interventions and governance strategies required?

In response to some of these pressures, we conceived of, and will explore in this paper, the concept of *Ethical Presence*. The latter lies at the heart of Gestalt praxis and acts as a subtle, but potent, orientating concept for practitioners: one that, through a synthesis of egological and ecological reflexivity (see Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2018, for more details), prioritises a bespoke, situated, relational unfolding as it attends to issues of power, potency and privilege.

It is worth stating from the outset that while we consider this paper as an extension of our previous work (see Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2007; 2018), we also see it as a beginning: a re-examination of some of the key organising principles of our relational Gestalt praxis across a wide spectrum of application including individual psychotherapy, coaching, and working with larger systems, groups, communities and organisations. As such, at times readers may (correctly) judge that we fail to do justice to the breadth and complexity of the Gestalt concepts we refer to or the implications arising. Indeed, some of the key issues we will touch on, for example, creative indifference, aesthetics and good form, research outcomes and different ethical/governance frameworks, have provided sufficient material for many books and the major Gestalt conferences around the world in recent years. On reflection, it is this that has made this paper both so difficult and also so immensely stimulating to write. Rather than look at the details of any one part of Gestalt theory and praxis, we have chosen to look at the holistic, dynamic and situated process that is Gestalt. We hope readers will bear with us and share thoughts, embodied and emotional responses.

The SOS model and Ethical Presence

We have developed the Relational Change SOS framework in which we use the letters to refer to a threefold consideration of 'Self, Other and Situation' (Figure 1). We propose that each of these elements requires exploration, and possible intervention, in any change process. More specifically, this relational orientation means finding an optimal balance between three interrelated elements:

- Self: which can be seen as either the individual, group, community or organisation;
- Other: as the 'Other' in the relationship at any given moment; and
- Situation: in which the issues are rooted.

These elements are always embedded in a moment in time, the 'here and now' (see, for example, Melnick and March Nevis, 2005), and in a given context and culture.

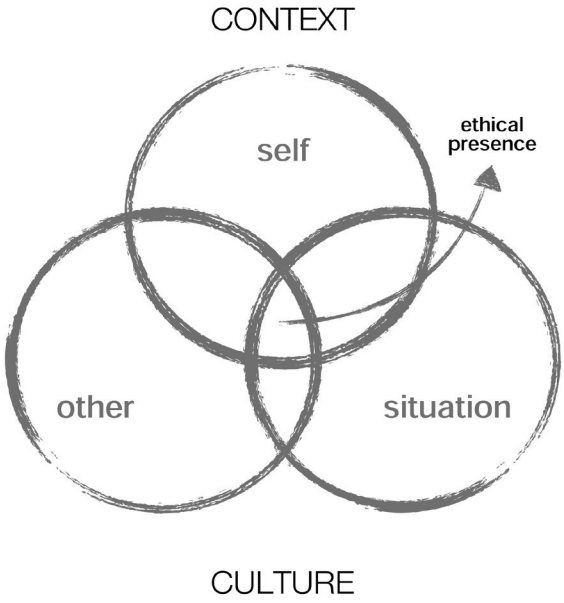

Figure 1. The SOS framework

The three SOS elements correspond respectively to the three pillars of Gestalt theory; phenomenology, dialogue and field theory.

We have called the alignment of, or having awareness of, these three lenses Ethical Presence. But what does this mean in practice? Clearly, it does not mean that the lenses are equally figural at all times as, at some times and/or in some situations, we may want or need to attend more to ourselves or to the Other or to the Situation. But it does mean that lying at the heart of this dynamic relational model (SOS) is an ethical imperative not to lose sight of any of these three lenses when we act in the world. This requires ongoing shifts in the focus of the practitioner's directed awareness which we have referred to as holding a dialectical tension between 'Will and Grace' (see Denham-Vaughan, 2005), or egological and ecological self-organisation (see Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2018). In this paper we are proposing that Ethical Presence is the synthesis that emerges from this focused organisation of the practitioner's Self and which supports creativity, impartiality, safe and 'non-indifferent' Gestalt praxis.

Dimensions of evil

It may be helpful to begin by looking at the inherent dangers (risks of harm and opening to evil) that lie in an unbalancing of the lenses – either by polarising into overly attending to one of the lenses or alternatively by dismissing one of the three lenses.

As illustrated in Figure 2, attending to only one of the lenses leads to familiar situations where concerns with either Self, Other or the Situation dominates. Concern for Self alone places self-interest beyond anything else and can potentially lead to a self-orientated, privileged and narcissistic worldview that could be called hyper-

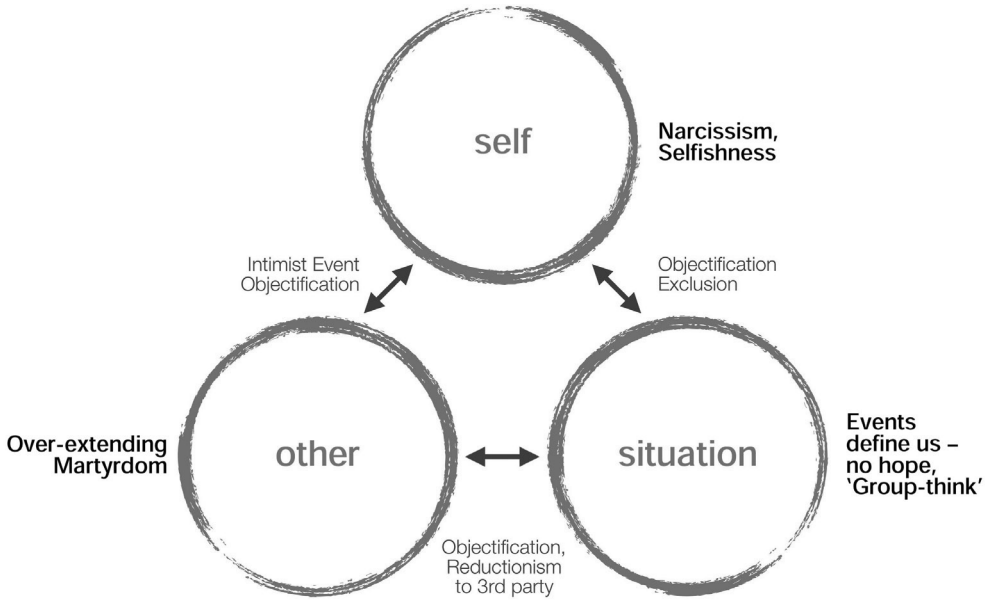

Figure 2. Polarisations of the SOS lenses

individualised. Indeed, a possible critique of the classic Gestalt contact sequence is that the individual's need becomes dominant; organising the figure and rising 'up and over' the needs of the Other and the Situation, with the latter being seen as resources to aggress upon. Writing this paper, we reflected whether any of our personal sense of current political crisis in the UK or the wider climate emergency could be the result of this type of polarisation. We could see how people who could be viewed as 'others' had been pushed into the background politically. Similarly, we could formulate the whole non-human world (other life forms and the wider situation/context), as being subsumed to human needs for energy and growth, leading to the current climate emergency.

Over-extending towards the Other can be equally dangerous as it may lead to lack of self-care and all too familiar situations where practitioners – in an attempt to help their client – try to rescue and sacrifice, losing a sense of themselves and the wider situation. This movement is an 'inversion' of the first, modelling what Levinas refers to as 'The Curvature of Intersubjective Space' by an 'elevation' of the Other (1961, p. 291). While this self-sacrifice may be seen (at times) as preferable to throwing others or the planet into the background, it nonetheless brings a range of problems and causes significant harm.

Finally, polarising in the Situation lens leads potentially to confluence, 'group-think', decrease in mobilisation and stuckness, as the emerging needs of individuals are not taken into account. We often find such situational polarisation in war zones where the overarching narrative of the situation dominates and suicide bombings or other forms of Self or Other sacrifice become viable options. We also reflected upon the suppression of certain personal truths or narratives as being the cornerstone of our sense of a 'post-truth' discourse arising in the UK.

If we focus on a lens becoming occluded or absent, we see that dismissing or objectifying one of the lenses leads to equally toxic situations. Focusing only on the Self–Other dyad invites the trap of the two-person intimist event and a loss of reference to the external world. Such situations can lead to toxic co-dependency and fail to anchor learning and growth outside the intimist context. We might argue that certain psychotherapeutic or coaching dyadic situations could be criticised for exactly this failure to examine the relevance of session meetings and material to others or the wider field. Indeed, at a recent conference presentation, we were challenged that to include thoughts of others or the wider field would be unethical since the client comes to therapy to focus solely on themselves.

On the other hand, dismissing the 'Self' experience leaves us with no stable phenomenological reference from which to know and engage with the world. This can be found in various aspects of scientism, for example where overwhelmed individuals hand over responsibility for their recovery to others – so called 'experts'. Indeed, an over-reliance on evidence-based outcomes and protocols leads, in our experience, to both clients and practitioners doing exactly that: it is the only defence against claims of scientific unreliability and introduction of personal bias.

Finally, exclusion of the Other is a recognised evil encountered throughout history. The pretext of a given situation leading to objectification of the Other is familiar; there are many examples of this, such as the demonisation of homosexuality during the AIDS

epidemic or the canonical case of the Nazi identification of the Jews as the void of the German situation.

Standing alone, the SOS model might therefore give the impression that being fully present (rapid shifting of awareness across all three lenses in the moment) is all that is needed to support a healthy and ethical process. As therapists, for instance, we often assume that if we are well-resourced and present, if our meeting space is safe and welcoming, then we are setting the scene for a meaningful meeting. If this does not happen we often problematise either the Other (the issue is the client and the way they may be moderating contact), the Situation (lack of supportive others or infrastructures), or ourselves (lack of self-care or skill).

We believe that this can be a problematic perspective, however, as it does not always take account of the wider context or culture in which we are embedded and the potential issues of power and privilege that, explicitly or implicitly, affect a person's ability to be present. In what follows we want to propose that consideration of these wider and longer-term field organisers are therefore necessary for Gestalt to be viewed as contributing to more than the good form/health of the momentary situation and figural individual, and leading to sustainable improvements across time.

Power and privilege

We propose that it is far easier for us to enter a given situation and be completely at ease and present when we are coming from a privileged position. Indeed, we might suggest that a subtle, implicit but effective diagnostic of privilege is any situation where we are feeling 'present' and unconcerned with our self-support: contexts where we speak the dominant/agreed language, where our size, gender, skin colour, age, sexual preferences, able-bodiedness, etc., afford us access to an ease of being and fluidity in responsiveness. For example, as fluent English speakers, we find ourselves able to access the widest range of Gestalt literature and travel to many events throughout the world where this one language dominates. Indeed, we have attended conferences in non-English speaking countries where a condition of entry is the ability to speak proficient English. This 'privilege' is an exercise in historically-based colonial and imperialist power that affords access, while denying equity and opportunity to others. Explicit recognition and naming of this fact does not 'level the field' but does at least encourage us to moderate both the complexity of language and the amount we talk. We can recognise situations where 'the English voice' has already been heard too much, sometimes in dangerous, traumatic and exploitative circumstances.

In contrast, when we are not in this present, potent (able to act), and privileged state, then we are likely to need more support from others embedded in the situation, or at least more structural support to enable us to reach into our own resources and become more present. Indeed, self-care practices within the Gestalt field may be formulated as aimed at creating fluency in accessing self-support and reaching for environmental supports.

Power as a moderator of the co-emergent field

We know from the work of Foucault (2000) and others, that use of power is rarely explicit or top-down but rather is a pervasive influence that affects and impacts our behaviours and actions. It is therefore possible to consider power as a wholly relational process that might not be visible at the Self/Other/Situation level but rather inhabits the context and culture dimension of the SOS model (see Figure 3). In Gestalt terms, we could say therefore that power is a field moderator and as such may support (or not) co-emerging figures.

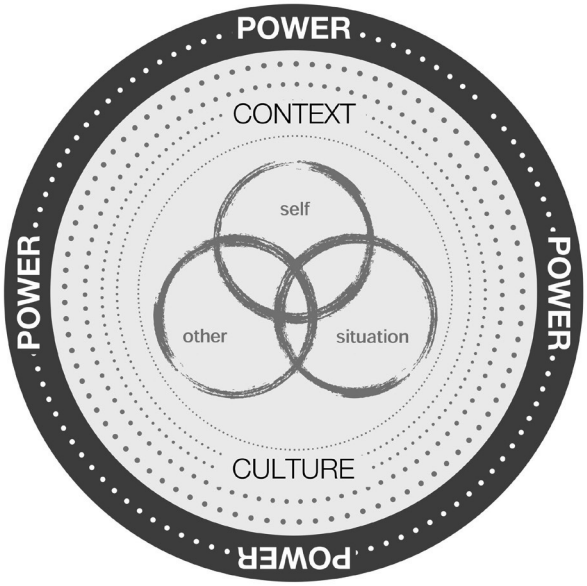

Figure 3. Power as a field moderator

Husserl and later phenomenologists write of the lifespace as a phenomenal field – attached and wedded to the individual, his experiences and the impact of his situation. In his writing on field theory, Lewin (1936) uses the same terminology of a 'lifespace' to denote the totality of all the influences on a person at a given moment in time, both the outer environment and inner personal environment. Lewin believed that within this lifespace, 'psychical forces' were at work similar to the forces of physics. Each 'psychical object' within a person's lifespace existed not in isolation, but in constant relation to others, with areas of tension, and boundary zones between them. All actions and behaviours were seen as a result of an ever-changing resolution of a multitude of 'psychical tensions' such that the whole maintains an equilibrium.

In Gestalt we therefore perceive forces acting on the field as phenomenal (i.e. pertaining to the individual field either in the present or historically). We would like to propose that power is a contextual force acting on the field, one that does not necessarily arise from the phenomenal sphere but from the relational one.

A relational and ecological perspective: mutual not equal

What examination of power from a relational and ecological perspective invites us to consider is that, in contact with others and situations, we also inhabit and create a shared field in which power relations and dynamics are alive. This shared, or co-emergent field, is an intersection *and dynamic re-organisation* of the phenomenal fields (or lifespaces) present in the moment, influenced by context, culture and the ubiquitous power dynamics in which we are embedded. We can, for example, imagine going for two job interviews where the process and questions asked are identical but where the interviewer is either a man or a woman. Most of us would acknowledge that even that basic gender difference would result in a totally different meeting. Influence of culture, wider context and power are all playing out.

The concepts of atmosphere (Griffero, 2014), or responsive phenomenology (Waldenfels, 2003), support such a view. For example, Griffero argues for a 'rehabilitation of the First Impression' (2014, p. 34), that is, an involuntary embodied global response incorporating emotion, motivation and a sense of value (which we interpret to stand for power) upon encountering others. In other words, we have an immediate pre-reflective and pre-cognitive felt sense of attraction/repulsion, desire to approach/avoid and of relative 'status'. This can be assumed to be very similar to that observed in all animal species and conveyed by a glance, gesture or movement and unassailable to rational argument or so called 'objective' facts. It is our first 'gut response' and often a potent guide to the quality of relationship we will create, or want to create, with another. Indeed, these almost instantaneous first impressions can be thought of as 'pre-personal lived experience' of the relational field (Schmitz, 2005, p. 22). We suggest that we potently react and respond to this because we have perceived the *significance*, even though we may be unable to articulate exactly *what* was perceived.

As with all contemporary phenomenology, this first impression is wholly 'spatialised', situated and contains the 'specific emotional quality' of this given lived space (Griffero, 2014, p. 46). As such, we believe these phenomena are wholly embedded in the Self/Other/Situation matrix existent at a given moment. They therefore act as vital field signifiers of relative power and potent indicators of the quality of co-emergence that might unfold. In other words, our pre-reflective, sensate awareness is signalling information about implicit field relations in any given moment. These signals are our 'gut feelings'; hard to evidence or defend, but nonetheless, potent organisers of our emerging relationship with our environment. They give us a glimpse of the always-and-already 'thereness' of our relational field and of the power relationships embedded within this space.

Similarly, Waldenfels (2007) speaks of a different perception of things in contact, a kind of pre-reflective process that organises our perception. We could, from a Gestalt perspective, view this as fore contact or embodied id functioning; a state of pre-reflective pre-awareness. So, expanding on Lewin's theory of behaviour, we could say that the needs and atmospheres of *both* 'person' and 'environment' organise the field: indeed, this formulation of Lewin's classic statement affords us a much more relational, ecological and, we would argue, ethical perspective on the principle of co-emergence.

Co-emergence as an ethical dimension of field relations

This view of reorganisation of phenomenal fields in contact sits well with the principles of self-regulation and co-emergence in a shared context. In highlighting the influence of atmospheric and contextual forces however, it also invites us to review our trust in a creatively indifferent stance which only considers individual processes as being orientated towards health. If both 'person' and 'environment' organise the field, we have an ethical responsibility as practitioners to shed light on personal, interpersonal and contextual processes at play. When sitting with a client suffering from domestic abuse, we do not just trust that co-emergence and good form in the moment will lead to change in the wider context. Being creatively indifferent to outcome does not keep us from shedding light on the toxic nature of the situation and the power dynamics at play.

According to our Gestalt theory, if we align our awareness of Self, Other and Situation, in other words if we bring phenomenology, dialogue and field theory to the table, then a Gestalt with good form will naturally emerge. This is precisely what we call the autonomous criteria and the aesthetics of health: the Law of Pragnanz. Indeed, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951/1994) (hereafter PHG) described these as the only criteria that are needed to evaluate what is Good. We don't need metrics, we don't need governance, we don't need assurance, we can rest

on this idea of the self-organising good form within the current field (PHG, p. 52). Indeed, the principle of aesthetics guiding self-organisation in Gestalt not only underpins our theory of presence but also our theory of the contact sequence and cycle of experience. These principles do however need to be applied not only from an individualistic perspective (Self), but also considered in the Self–Other and Situation dimensions. What is 'good form' and healthy for me may not be for others or the wider field and while it is generally not the practitioner's responsibility to judge the action taken we argue that the concept of Ethical Presence reminds us that it is our responsibility to raise awareness of possible impacts. Indeed, in some cases it does fall to the practitioner to try to prohibit or limit actions where there is significant risk of harm to an aspect of the SOS framework.

As we wrote this paper, we reflected again on our domestic violence example: at what point do we find ourselves as practitioners moved to introduce possibilities of leaving the situation, removing others from the situation or, if we are seeing the violent person, suggesting they remove themselves? Similarly, in the current climate emergency – if we judge it that way – when and how do we begin to suggest that carrying on with 'business as usual' is an act of direct harm perpetuated against the planet and other life forms (see Orange, 2017, for fuller discussion).

With the perspective of power moderating the field, the question remains of how to distinguish between a naturally 'good/healthy' co-emergent form, and a simulacrum of good form prompted by implicit or explicit power dynamics that moderate behaviours and actions in the moment. Importantly, as described above, these moderations might not explicitly belong with me or the Other in this momentary situation but instead are atmospheric relational constructs emerging from the ground in which we are both embedded. They can therefore be highly implicit and, at best, are made figure and consciously moderated for the Good as we meet. More commonly though, we suggest they operate implicitly, out of awareness and contribute negatively to the co-emergent moment by promoting habitual moderations of contact.

To summarise, we propose that both implicit and explicit power structures (including aspects of privilege, trauma and effacement), organise a field, and at best, can be made figure in specific Self/Other/Situation configurations so that co-emergence with good form is supported. Power can therefore be considered a field moderator that comes into being in relationship.

The concept of Ethical Presence – the ecological turn

Gestalt has classically encouraged a heightening awareness of individual needs. If we get in touch with our most pressing need and act upon that uninterrupted, then we are getting close to 'good form' – an aesthetic of being.

Viewing power as a vital field moderator, however, enables us to examine more closely the classic Gestalt premise that 'individual needs organise the field'. Although Lewin gifted us with this important theory, it raises the issue of 'whose needs' are dominant. In explicitly dangerous or threatening situations, relationally traumatic situations, we can often all recognise that one individual is seeking to gain power over another or others, with a view specifically to exploit, terrorise and/or abuse or misuse them. These are situations however, where, although we may define the dominant as very 'present' (possibly compellingly so: e.g. Hitler in some of his many speeches), with a potent self-organisation and an aesthetic of good form, our criteria of attending to the three SOS lenses to support co-emergence is not met. In other words, the dominant individual is not calibrating their presence in response to the Other and the Situation, even if they are acutely aware of and adapting to the Other and the Situation. Intent matters for Ethical Presence and requires opening a space for the needs of others and the situation to be explored.

Also difficult are those situations when an individual who experiences feeling 'present' explicitly contracts with others to co-emerge an outcome but fails to recognise their implicit privilege and power in that context. An example of this could be a senior manager stepping into a project group which includes people reporting to her, and assuming she could just be 'another team member'. Despite her willingness to calibrate her presence and make room for the needs of others, conditions for ethical co-emergence are fragile. Without awareness, this manager's state of presence may be signalling implicit atmospheric power dynamics that require surfacing and examination. It is our hope that introducing the concept of Ethical Presence as we have defined it in this paper reaches for a form of co-emergence that considers the aesthetic of contact alongside issues of power in the three SOS dimensions.

In a state of Ethical Presence described by the SOS formulation, we suggest we can extend beyond our self-interests. The SOS framework calls us to explicitly check our self-organisation in response to the demands of others and the wider situation, as well as our own state of self-support and presence. We can think of this as transcending the impositional axis of our

intentionality and moving to a more emergent position (Crocker, 2017), or mitigating our Will (intentions/plans), through an explicit acknowledgement of the impact of the field (Grace) (for more details see Denham-Vaughan, 2005). Latterly however, we have referred to this as a move from a primarily egological self-organisation to an ecological one (see Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2018, for more details). Ethical Presence implies a certain intentional flow which does not begin with the needs of the 'I' but rather an ecological focus on exploring context and situation, and how arising figures organise 'us'.

Whatever these changes in self-organisation are termed, it is important that they are seen as holding a dialectical tension (with both aspects accessible), rather than polarising. We call this dialectical synthesis Ethical Presence and suggest that this enables us to extend our selves from (to use Haidt's (2014) updated Homo-Duplex theory) 'selfish chimp' to our most generative, potent and supportive presence where we can dialogue and inquire about the impact of our presence on others and the situation. It is through this process of mutual inquiry and assessment of impact that Ethical Presence becomes a field-relational, holistic process of gestalt formation and destruction, rather than a potentially egotistical self-assessment of my state of embodied presence and influence. Pragmatically, this may take significant time, support, safety and commitment to going forward together rather than advancing individual needs. Our belief is that attention to the effect of power as an atmospheric/implicit and/or explicit field moderator is critical to this process.

Interestingly, here we can again sense the importance of atmospheric phenomenology; arising in the first impression, but conveying a whole history, and configuring the emergent relational ground. If my 'chimp' is activated, how effectively can I transcend this 'reaction' without sacrificing my own genuine response or becoming confluent and compliant with the situationally demanded behaviour? We view this as an essential, ongoing ethical issue presenting in the unfolding situation and spoken to, in our SOS framework, by the concept of Ethical Presence.

In summary then, we do not consider it a 'given' that the trifold awareness we call the SOS framework will 'naturally' occur in our relational work. Indeed, our premise is that our personal access to this state of presence is a reflection of our state of privilege in that moment and is therefore often mediated by a set of implicit power relationships operating in our favour. At these times, we suggest that the state of presence, while giving rise to a sense of potency, may result in an out of awareness enactment of deeply embedded power relationships. Our theory is that increased awareness of these power dynamics, together with a reflexive, explicit and conscious use of power to support safe inquiry involves taking a stance that we are calling Ethical Presence and that is a hallmark of a radically relational approach. In this state, while we remain creatively indifferent to specific pre-formed outcomes, we are continuously and actively assessing the quality of relational unfolding to discern whether it is supporting health/the Good across the three SOS domains. Of course, it is not possible for one person to assess this independently, so in practice the approach rests on mutual inquiry and dialogue. We propose, taken together, as is the case in Gestalt work, this leads to the attitudinal stance of 'creative indifference' being wholly different to indifference or to an 'anything goes' stance. Instead, assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning and risk assessment are positioned in every moment of the situated relational encounter rather than being a front-loaded 'event' that then aims the unfolding towards an outcome that may, upon closer examination and as time passes, be judged inappropriate, superficial, unhelpful, risky or dangerous to others, or just outdated.

Conditions for Ethical Presence

So what are the conditions for Ethical Presence to flourish and what is it that I – the practitioner – need to attend to and be alert to?

In this we find some answers with Alain Badiou, a French philosopher who in his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001) rejects what he views as sentimental ideologies of contemporary liberalism (Downing and Saxton, 2009, p. 8) in favour of a selfless pursuit of the truth. For Badiou, an ethical stance is that which 'helps to preserve or en-*courage* a subjective fidelity' to an 'event site' (Badiou, 2001, p. iii, original italics). The latter can be understood in Gestalt as a new figure which introduces a major shift – an 'aha' moment or defining awareness. Badiou calls to us to have the *courage* to stay faithful to this unfolding moment or situation. Fidelity to an event is not easy and demands us to be faithful to something that transcends our own personal interest. It is exciting to note the similarity to the Gestalt paradoxical theory of change which invites us to stay with experience in the here and now and trust that something useful will emerge from staying with the moment. Examples which Badiou gives of surrendering to the event are the conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus which led him to become a follower of Jesus, or even the act of falling in love. For Badiou, fidelity to an event is what constitutes a subject (a Self), and so there is no Self without fidelity to an event. We would suggest this statement can be viewed as very similar to PHG's notion of Self as the ongoing outcome of the process of contact; or more accurately,

'the system of the person's contacts' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p. 51); and therefore necessarily 'regarded as at the boundary of the organism' (PHG, p. 427), and in contact with the event (site).

Badiou cautions us, however, that in being faithful to the event in this way via our Self-ing process, there is a demand to be aware of the three types of evil that can beset the subject of truth:

- 'Terror' which is the act of imposing a truth on others which results in a totalitarian perspective such as imperialism, fascism, etc.
- 'Delusion' which is the act of restricting the universal nature of a truth event and locating it in a particular community or place. The particular event or situation is no longer 'real' but gets attributed to a given person or group as a way of avoiding the co-emergent nature of the situation. The event/situation emerges from a wider context and inevitably holds a universal truth. A fraudulent act in an organisation has as much to do with the organisation as it does the fraudster; it is important to keep sight of that.
- 'Betrayal' which describes the lure of temptation that might beset the subject of truth and send him or her off course. Fidelity to the truth is a tireless, passionate work of not betraying or abandoning that truth. What is mostly associated with this betrayal is a lack of resilience which invites us to address our self-care in holding an ethical presence. This is easily seen in organisational life when rates of burn out, sickness absence, or non-responding in meetings or emails are probably early signs that all is not well. These are typical conditions for unethical behaviours to ensue.

To summarise, the conditions we are therefore proposing to be vital to the assurance of the Good include the following four principles that coalesce into the concept of Ethical Presence:

- To adopt an ecological stance which invites us to stay faithful to the immediate situation and context in which the event (figure) has arisen.
- To stay curious and exploring of the context – beyond the immediate situation – with explicit awareness of power and privilege. The reflexive responding to these issues is *in itself* an ethical act that brings us into a relationship with both other humans and non-human species in the world.
- Neither to impose nor restrict emerging figures on, or from, others. Ethical Presence requires the practitioner to hold the uncertainty and the space for others to step towards, and away. These movements or dances of Presence and Absence (or as Buber calls them, Distancing and Relating (Buber, 1959; 1965), are the relational and ecological stance of the relational practitioner.
- Last but not least, Ethical Presence relies on resilience and self-care on the part of the practitioner in order to avoid – as Badiou puts it – the evils of fatigue and betrayal.

Summary and conclusions

We hope that this paper raises many issues for discussion and debate amongst Gestalt and relational practitioners; be they psychotherapists, coaches or consultants. We have found it a difficult paper to write, wrestling as it does with explicit and implicit power dynamics and their impact on the field: all intangible factors that are hard to grasp. We view this paper as a pointer to issues that are of increasing importance in our own praxis and, we judge, within the wider field, which we view as getting more competitive, urgent and demanding of practitioners.

In particular, we believe that if we are to protect our beloved, bespoke Gestalt approach from extinction at the hands of critique by demands for evidence that meets criteria for replicability and standardisation, then we must be seen to meet the highest ethical standards of doing good and of doing no harm. In this spirit we have discussed how and why we have extended the Gestalt notion of presence to include an explicit ethical dimension. Inclusion of this adds a requirement that the practitioner constantly uses their own sense of presence to reflect on what affords them access to power and privilege in the moment. Equally, what aspects of Self, Other or Situation and wider context leads them to lose their presence, and potentially thereby gain access to important data about the wider field and the ecology emergent in it. Pragmatically, this theoretical extension rests heavily on a dialogic approach where we can learn about our impact in order to guide our next move. We have argued that receiving this feedback requires explicit attention concerning how power might be configuring the situation so that some players are afforded more than others and thereby have more support to reply.

We realise that by raising these issues in this age of the Anthropocene with all the attendant issues of climate crisis and potential 'political and spiritual nihilism' (Critchley, 2007), we are demanding from practitioners ever more reflection on their practice and reflexivity in the moment. By doing this however, we hope to underscore the potential for psychotherapy, coaching and organisational consulting to have enormous potency for good in the world by advocating for a relational and ecological values-based approach that elevates diversity and recognises mutual (if not equal) power relations among living things. In proposing this move, we hope to have explored and extended 'a rich vein to be mined by further study

of the I-Thou stance in organisations' (Maurer and Gaffney, 2005, p. 250).

Again, we would underscore the need to hold this approach in dialectical tension with a more egological (Will-based) stance. However, since 'starting with the individual Self' is so culturally normed in the hyper-individualised West, a corrective of leaning into an ecological, Grace-based stance (referred to by Lynne Jacobs as 'Engaged Surrender' (2019)) may be required within this culturally biased context, and specifically in light of the current climate emergency. Indeed, this particular stance denotes our personal formulation of the relational turn in Gestalt praxis and we look forward to hearing comments and thoughts of others on this point.

In developing the concept of presence to explicitly include an ethical dimension, while not prescribing any specific ethical stance or values, we recognise the potency of practitioners to demonstrate, steward and advocate for humane, mutual and sustainable relationships with other humans and, we believe, the wider field. This seems ever more important in our practice.

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