The self, the field and the either-or

JOHN ROWAN

70 Kings Head Hill, North Chingford, London N4 7LY, UK

Abstract It has become fashionable both in psychoanalytic and in humanistic circles to talk about dialogue, the interpersonal field, language and the socially constructed self, and to say that the old idea of the self as central, as real, as essence, is outdated and even patriarchal. But there is something strange about this. In discovering the field (which perhaps we could liken to the wave function in physics) and in denying the individual (which perhaps we could liken to the particle) many people seem to be denying or ignoring the principle of complementarity.

The whole point about the authentic self is that it can relate authentically. I see no contradiction between saying that and saying that authentic selves in relation form a field, which has to be respected in its own right.

Ken Wilber uses the idea (taken from Arthur Koestler) of a holon. A holon is a unit which is also a part of other units. Holons as a whole form a field, within which are numbers of sub-fields. In this way we can see how a holon can be regarded at one and the same time as a separable unit and as part of a larger field. There is nothing difficult about this. We don’t have to give up one in order to have the other.

It has become fashionable to talk about dialogue, the interpersonal field, language and the socially constructed self. It has become quite the thing to say that the old idea of the self as central, as real, as essence, is outdated and even patriarchal. But there is something strange about this. In discovering the field (which perhaps we could liken to the wave function in physics) and in denying the individual (which perhaps we could liken to the particle) many people seem to be denying or ignoring the principle of complementarity. In physics, there was for a while a conflict between the particle theorists and the wave theorists, until Heisenberg promulgated the theory of complementarity—both could be right, and which would be the more useful could be decided by the situation. Some experiments would produce particles, others would produce waves. I want to say that the same thing is true in psychology, and that the real self and the social field can both be valid conceptualisations, each in its place.

The real self and the ego

Before we get on to that, however, there is a preliminary issue to be clarified. Many people do not distinguish between the real self and the ego, and this adds to the fury of the debate. Yet it is a crucial distinction. The real self is a genuine centre, something like an internal gyroscope, independent of external influences. The mental ego is a false self, bound by roles and social influences and a prisoner of its time.

This distinction is perhaps most clearly and persuasively made by Ken Wilber. He says that
in the process of psychospiritual development there are a number of clearly marked way-
stations. One of these he calls the Mental Ego. The other he calls the Centaur.

The Centaur is more developed and less role-bound than the Mental Ego. It works on
vision-logic rather than the fixed categories (Aristotelian, formal, Boolean logics) of the
Mental Ego. It corresponds to the real self, the true self, the self, the ‘I’. Those who wish to
go into all the ramifications of this can find the finer detail in Wilber’s books (Wilber, 2000).
Suffice it to say here that Centaur consciousness has been well described in Maslow’s account
of the self-actualised person (Maslow, 1987).

The real self and the field

In recent years, Gestalt therapy has become much more sophisticated and well developed
than it ever was in the 1970s. There are Gestalt journals, Gestalt texts (mostly very good) and
Gestalt conferences, some of them international. But a strange things has been happening of
late. Some of the Gestalt writers are embracing the idea that there is only the field, and that
we can drop the whole idea of the real self, considered as a central process within the person.
Similar arguments have gone on in psychoanalytic orientations, and in social psychology
(Fogel, 1993). In other words, we need to consider neither the Mental Ego nor the Centaur
self. Let us look, for example at the work of Gary Yontef, one of the main exponents of this
strange view.

I first picked this up in the article which appeared in the first issue (1991) of the British
Gestalt Journal. In recent years, Yontef has been coming out with a number of statements
about Gestalt which seem to me highly dubious and certainly worthy of critical examination.
It is all about a radical distinction between two ways of acting in a Gestalt context, one of
which he does not label, and the other of which he labels as the boom-boom-boom. This first
came to my notice in the paper already mentioned, but this piece also appears in the book
of collected papers (Yontef, 1993) and so I shall use the page numbers from the latter.

They are described in the following ways:

YONTETF APPROACH
Hard-working, person-to-person, contact-oriented. (p. 8)
Centres on the paradoxical theory of change. (p. 12)
Supports the patient growing and the next step emerging, rather than a next step
being aimed at by the therapist. (p. 12)
BOOM-BOOM-BOOM
Technique is accentuated. (p. 8)
Arrogant, dramatic, simplistic, promising quick change. (p. 11)
Replaced careful therapeutic exploration with gimmicks. (p. 11)
The results were often unintegrated, inauthentic and inflexible. (p. 11)
A behaviour-modification approach: getting the patient to take the next step. (p. 12)
Resistance is broken down. (p. 12)
Met narcissistic needs of the therapist, not therapeutic needs of the patient. (p. 13)
People were injured in obvious and subtle ways. (p. 14) (Yontef, 1993)

It seems quite clear to me that the boom-boom-boom description is a caricature. It is not
at all clear who exactly it is a caricature of. Yontef says that it is not Perls, yet Perls is the only
name mentioned. Yontef does accuse these people of being philosophically naive. My own
view is that Perls cannot be accused of these things, which is not, of course, to claim he was
perfect or never made therapeutic mistakes. So it is anonymous people with no record, no
references, no identity, no evidence. But nowadays Yontef is assuming that he has shown that
Perls did not understand about the field. Skipping on now to the present, others have taken up the cudgels.

John Wheway (1997) wants to say that there is a great gulf fixed between the old bad type of Gestalt therapy which believed in the real self, and the new good type of Gestalt therapy which adopts the position of intersubjectivity. ‘When we focus primarily on the intrapsychic—or take the essential criterion of maturity to be that of becoming autonomous to the extent of not needing others—we conform with the conventional emphasis. Perls’s Gestalt Prayer encapsulates and represents this attitude in pre-dialogical Gestalt.’ (p. 18) And he speaks on the same page of ‘the myth of the isolated mind’. I want to argue here that it is right to emphasize intersubjectivity, but wrong to try to lose the concept of the real self. The mind sometimes actually is isolated, either by choice or through pathology.

Lolita Sapriel (1998) is also concerned to rescue Gestalt therapy from the threat of the real self, and to replace all such talk with the idea of dialogue. She takes up an either-or position, contrasting the idea of an autonomous self with intersubjectivity theory, which ‘posits that one’s sense of self is an emergent phenomenon of intersubjective relatedness’ (p. 42). What I want to argue here is that the idea of dialogue is a good one, full of useful meanings and important to therapists of all persuasions. I then want to add that the idea of the self is a good one too, full of useful meanings and important to therapists—perhaps particularly to Gestalt therapists.

Gordon Wheeler (1998) contrasts ‘developmentalism’ and ‘contextualism’ and again wants to say that the former is wrong and the latter is right. He too embraces the either-or, saying for example, ‘Adapting Goodman, we do better to picture self-process not in the hidden centre of the person, but “at the boundary” between me and my environment, actively poised to resolve the worlds I think of as “outer” and “inner” into some workable, liveable whole’ (pp. 116–117). I want to argue here that we do not need to dump the one in order to believe in the other. Why shouldn’t there be a centre to the person? To those at the Centaur stage (sometimes called the existential stage or the authentic stage), it does certainly feel as if they have a centre, and they very often talk about it a good deal (Bugental, 1981).

I write as someone with a wide and deep humanistic background, who believes that Gestalt therapy is part of a family of humanistic approaches. This is also argued in a number of recent books, as for example Greenberg et al. (1998). I write as someone who grew up therapeutically in a time when Fritz Perls was regarded as the major proponent of Gestalt therapy, and when the word ‘dialogic’ was hardly used in therapeutic circles. My introduction to the practice of Gestalt therapy was through Paul Lowe, Julian and Beverley Silverman, Will Schutz, Marty Fromm, Serge Ginger, John Enright and others whose workshops I attended in the 1970s and 80s. The whole idea of a dialogical relationship is relatively new, and entirely valid and important. Where I think its proponents go wrong is when they think they somehow have to give up the idea of a central self in order to pursue the idea of dialogue. I am not quite sure why this is.

The self

Perls regularly contrasted the self with the self-image. The self was something central, the self-image something peripheral. The self was real, the self-image largely illusory. Perls became much more insistent on the importance of the central self after his LSD experiences in Israel in 1962–3. My own view is that he had a mystical experience at this point, and became aware of his own soul. He got more interested in Zen Buddhism, which he had in fact been interested in and impressed by many years previously, and started to talk about the breakthrough in therapy as a ‘mini-Satori’.

The person who has written most clearly about the self and its vicissitudes is Ken Wilber
(1996). He says that in the process of psychospiritual development there are a number of shifts in our self-concepts. In infancy we experience a body self. In childhood we experience a membership self. In adulthood we experience a mental ego. In the next stage of development we experience a Centaur self: that is, an existential self, characterised by bodymind unity. In the next stage we experience a subtle self, or soul. In the next stage we experience a causal self, or spirit. And in the next stage, which is as far as he goes, there is no self at all.

My own view is that Gestalt therapy operates mainly in and from the Centaur level of psychospiritual development. Its characteristic moment is the breakthrough into getting in touch with the real self. This is not the final breakthrough, though in the 1970s many of us thought it was. But it is a real mystical experience, even though it is located, so to speak, in the foothills of mysticism. It is this experience which Perls enshrined in the Gestalt Prayer. There has been a lot of discussion around, and even dismissal of the Gestalt Prayer, in recent years, but if it is regarded as the expression of a moment of insight it does no harm. It expresses very well the moment when the mental ego is replaced by the real self. I have seen it happen many times, both in individual psychotherapy and in group work. It is always a significant breakthrough. Of course the mental ego does not disappear—as Wilber makes clear, all our previous selves are nested within the present version, like a set of Russian dolls—but the ability to leave it behind is a great experience and a great moment. It gives a person the sense of ‘I AM!’ as distinct from being simply a role-player. Rollo May has described such a moment very well. Here is his example, taken from the writing of a client of his, a woman of 28, who had a way with words:

I remember walking that day under the elevated tracks in a slum area. Feeling the thought, ‘I am an illegitimate child.’ I recall the sweat pouring forth in my anguish in trying to accept that fact. Then I understood what it must feel like to accept, ‘I am a Negro in the midst of privileged whites.’ Or ‘I am blind in the midst of people who see.’ Later on that night I woke up and it came to me this way, ‘I accept the fact that I am an illegitimate child.’ But ‘I am not a child anymore.’ So it is, ‘I am illegitimate.’ That is not so either: ‘I was born illegitimate.’ Then what is left? What is left is this, ‘I Am’. This act of contact and acceptance with ‘I am’, once gotten hold of, gave me (what I think was for me the first time) the experience ‘Since I Am, I have the right to be.’

What is this experience like? It is a primary feeling—it feels like receiving the deed to my house. It is the experience of my own aliveness not caring whether it turns out to be an ion or just a wave. It is like when a very young child I once reached the core of a peach and cracked the pit, not knowing what I would find and then feeling the wonder of finding the inner seed, good to eat in its bitter sweetness ... It is like a sailboat in the harbour being given an anchor so that, being made out of earthly things, it can by means of its anchor get in touch again with the earth, the ground from which its wood grew; it can lift its anchor to sail but always at times it can cast its anchor to weather the storm or rest a little ... It is my saying to Descartes, ‘I Am, therefore I think, I feel, I do.’

It is like an axiom in geometry—never experiencing it would be like going through a geometry course not knowing the first axiom. It is like going into my very own garden of Eden where I am beyond good and evil and all other human concepts. It is like the experience of the poets of the intuitive world, the mystics, except that instead of the pure feeling of and union with God it is the finding of and the union with my own being. It is like owning Cinderella’s shoe and looking all over the world for the foot it will fit and realizing all of a sudden that one’s own foot is the only one it will fit. It is a ‘Matter of Fact’ in the etymological sense of the expression. It is like
a globe before the mountains and oceans and continents have been drawn on it. It is like a child in grammar finding the subject of the verb in a sentence—in this case the subject being one’s own life span. It is ceasing to feel like a theory toward one’s self… (May, 1983, pp. 99–100)

The trouble with the dialogical enthusiasts is that they all fail to distinguish between the mental ego and the real self. This woman had an experience of contacting the real self.

As all the existential thinkers tell us, what the real self gives us is the ability to choose. Authenticity is all about the ability to see through our own eyes, to choose for ourselves. Existential choice is central to the ability to be a full human being. But for there to be a choice, there has to be a chooser. I remember Carl Rogers telling us about one of his clients who at the end of therapy said, ‘I don’t know what I’m gonna do, but I’m gonna do it’ (Rogers, 1967, p. 48).

**Own therapy**

Of course the intersubjective people are right in rejecting such things as reification, the assumption of therapist correctness, therapist over-empathising and so forth. But Perls never did these things: much of the critique of the intersubjectivists is in any case directed at psychoanalysts, rather than at Gestalt therapists. One of the things I don’t like about them is the way in which they develop weapons to attack the psychoanalysts, and then turn them, willy-nilly, on the Gestaltists—on themselves.

But what the intersubjectivists miss completely, it seems to me, is the value of our own therapy. The whole point of my own therapy, in terms of my professional being, is that it makes me more objective in the good sense. That is, it enables me not to be at the mercy of my compulsions. There is a kind of exasperating false humility about the intersubjectivists, whose unintended consequence is loss of their own personhood. They seem often to be saying that the therapist and the client are not only part of the same field, but even interchangeable parts of the same field. My own view is that the therapist is ideally (more often than not) ahead of the client in terms of self-awareness and self-understanding. One of the great concepts in Gestalt therapy is awareness, and one of the results of therapy is increased awareness. We can develop a disciplined awareness or subjectivity which is optimal for our work.

Sapriel (1998) says that ‘The idea of “objectivity” being possible or desirable has a tenacious hold in many domains … Intersubjectivity theory regards objectivity as a fallacy’ (p. 37). But I would argue that there is a good sense of the word objectivity, which is not like objectivism. As we go through our own psychospiritual development we inevitably and desirably become more objective, in the sense that we are less taken in by our own illusions and our own compulsions. It could be said, in fact, that the whole point of psychotherapy were to lose our fixed patterns of thought and action.

I once had to say what I had got out of 15 years of therapy, and the answer that came was: ‘I can learn; I can choose; I can be; and I can be with another person.’ These are simple things, quite basic things about becoming a human being, and yet in my experience they are rare. Not many people can walk the line between oppressive freedom and oppressive love. If as therapists we have developed and learned these things, often at the cost of great pain and great struggle, we can help others to get there: if we haven’t we can’t.

It saddens me that the intersubjectivists, who make so many good and valid points, have to spoil it by their either-or mentality. One would have thought that field theory might have enabled them to be a bit more inclusive. The whole point about the authentic self is that it can relate authentically. I see no contradiction between saying that and saying that authentic
selves in relation form a field, which has to be respected in its own right. Of course our clients are clients in relation to us, and would be different clients with another therapist. Why should I want to maintain otherwise?

Wilber (1995) helps us to understand this area better than most, in my opinion. He uses the idea (taken from Arthur Koestler) of a holon. A holon is a unit which is also a part of other units. Holons as a whole form a field, within which are numbers of sub-fields. In this way we can see how a holon can be regarded at one and the same time as a separable unit and as part of a larger field. There is nothing difficult about this. We don’t have to give up one in order to have the other. Perls certainly believed in the self:

> Many people dedicate their lives to actualize a concept of what they should be like, rather than to actualize themselves. This difference between self-actualizing and self-image actualizing is very important. (Perls, 1969, p. 19)

This is a general and widely held idea within the humanistic community, and also among the Jungians, for that matter. Perls always talked about the self as something real, something to be respected.

> ... the therapist’s initial awareness questions are a way of getting through to the patient’s self ... The therapist’s primary responsibility is not to let go unchallenged any statement or behavior which is not representative of the self, which is evidence of the patient’s lack of self-responsibility. (Perls, 1976, pp 79–80)

If this is not Gestalt, what is? The intersubjective enthusiasts have to somehow accommodate this, rather than trying to undermine or exclude it. Why should it not be true at one and the same time that the person is a real self and that the person is part of an intersubjective field?

Moving from the issue of authenticity, to that of isolation, it is here that the question of needing people also comes in. If we say we see the aim of therapy as not needing people any more, that at first sounds arrogant and incorrect. But once we grasp the difference between needing people and wanting to be with people, it does not sound so strange. Need is compulsive: it means being driven by our unexamined urges. As has been said many times in different ways, ‘People do not have hunger—they have appetites.’ We can choose what we want to eat and drink. We can choose who we want to be with—unless we are subject to some unawareness.

**Early experience**

One other problem with the intersubjective position needs to be mentioned. We have experiences before we have relationships. In the womb, in the birth process, no one else is present for us. Janov, for all his failings, makes a good case for the difference between first line, second line and third line experiences (Janov & Holden, 1977, esp. ch. 7. They are different in time, the parts of the brain involved, and their content. Even the earliest and most primitive of them can influence us, and have connect with later life. Because they are about life and death, they are intrusive. Yet so far as I can see they are not part of a relational field. They are experiences of an isolated body self. At this stage the ‘isolated self’ is not a myth at all, it is reality.

Gestalt therapy, like most other forms of therapy, usually ignores all this. Intersubjective approaches in practice often do too, although the appeal to Stern (1985), who is a key figure for the intersubjectivist, yet who evokes pre-intersubjective phases, might have made for greater caution. Yet there is no reason to do so. If this kind of experience is part of the field, it is part of the field, and needs to be dealt with. Every therapist has to deal with things which the client brings up which have not been part of the therapist’s own training. The difference
between a good clinician and a poor one is that the good clinician goes with the client into the spaces where the client is, and does not try to bring the client out of that and into something that the therapist is more familiar with.

The basic paradox

What we are faced with in our life as human beings is not a comfortable resting place either in a separate self or in a social field. I think Maurice Friedman put it quite well when he said: “The self experiences the vertigo of being a free and directing consciousness, on the one hand, and an “eddy in the social current”—to use George Herbert Mead’s phrase—on the other’ (Friedman, 1964, p. 169). To take just one horn of this dilemma and make it the whole, as the intersubjectivists seem to do, is not on, in my view. It is not right, it is not existential, and it is not Gestalt. Exactly the same arguments seem to apply to the psychoanalysts and the social psychologists who hold one-sidedly to the ‘eddy in the social current’ aspect of the question.

References


Resumé Il a devenu à la mode dedans les cercles aussi psychoanalytique et humanistique parler au sujet du dialogue, le champ interindividuel, la langue et le soi construit socialement, et à dire que la vieille idée de le soi comme central, réel, essence, est démontée et même patriarchale. Mais je trouve quelquechose bizarre autour de tout ça. En découvrant le champ (que peut-être nous pouvons dire pairiel aux ondes en physique) et en niant l’individu (que peut-être nous pouvons dire pairiel à la particule en physique) beaucoup des gens ont l’air de nier ou ne tirer aucun compte du principe de complémentarité.

Le point essentiel autour du soi authentique c’est qu’il peut établir un rapport authentique. Je ne vois pas aucune contradiction entre cette déclaration et dire que les sois authentiques forment un champ interindividuel, que demande le respect en pairiel façon.
Ken Wilber emploie l'idée (après Arthur Koestler) d'un holon. Un holon est une unité qui est aussi une partie des autres unités. Holons dans leur ensemble forment un champ, au dedans lequel sont les nombres des sous-champs. En cet façon on peut regarder un holon au seule et même temps comme unité séparable at aussi une partie d'un champ plus grand. Aucune difficulté parler en cet façon. Nous ne sommes pas obligés renoncer l'une pour avoir l'autre.

Zusammenfassung  Es ist üblich geworden sowohl in psychoanalytischen wie auch in humanistischen kreisen ueber dialog, das zwischenmenschliche feld, sprache, und DASS sozial knstruierte selbst zu reden, und zu sagen dass die alte idee vom selbst als zentral, real, essenziell uberholt, ja, sogar patriarchalisch sei.

Daran ist nun aber etwas merkwuerdig. Mit der entdeckung des feldes (DASS man vielleicht MAT der wellen funktion in der physik vergleichen kann) und der gleichzeitigen verneinung des Individuellen (was mat dem partikel angleichen koennte) verneinen oder ignorieren wir aber doch das prinzip der komplementaritaet.

Die bedeutung des authentischen selbsts ist doch gerade das es authentische beziehungen einge gehen kann. Ich sehe keinen widerspruch zwischew dieser aussage und der behauptung dass dass authentische in beziehungen eingebundene selbste ein feld formen dass in sich respektiert werden muss.