

## Opening to the World through the Lived Body: Relating Theory and Practice in Organisation Consulting

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# **Opening to the World through the Lived Body: Relating Theory and Practice in Organisation Consulting**

Robert Farrands

This paper inquires into the practice implications of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of the embodied human being. I flesh out his theory of perceptual intelligibility by showing how it works in practice, and distinguishing it from conceptual intelligibility. In showing how the two modes of intelligibility relate, I follow Merleau-Ponty in drawing on the rich symbolism of Gestalt form. I relate theory to practice through describing, an indirect, affect laden way of working with clients. The practice descriptions explore in particular how the body may reveal the cultural background, and organisational history, that lies behind the consulting situations; also how my way of practicing relates to the use of language.

Running through these reflections on theory and practice is a first person inquiry into how Merleau-Ponty's theory has helped me to foster an attitude of greater openness. In the spirit of this inquiry I conclude with a series of questions that encourage other practitioners to be receptive to how Merleau-Ponty's theory might support them in cultivating an attitude of openness to the world.

**Key words:** Merleau-Ponty, Gestalt, perceptual intelligibility, phenomenology, organisation consulting

## 1. Introduction

This paper picks out a theme from my doctoral journey, in which I traced the way in which the insights of the pre war Gestalt psychologists were elaborated upon by the French existential philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The doctoral journey from Gestalt theory to the Phenomenology of Perception (Merleau-Ponty 1962) mirrors a more existential journey. Before I undertook the doctorate I was trained in a particular offshoot of Gestalt theory known as Gestalt Therapy (Perls/Hefferline/Goodman 1951), which I had sought to incorporate into my craft of organisation consulting (Farrands 2001 and 2007) with the support of my Gestalt teachers (Nevis 1987). It was while attending a conference in Paris on the roots of Gestalt Therapy, mid way through my doctoral studies, that I was introduced to Merleau-Ponty's work. I discovered that Merleau-Ponty envisioned human existence as based on an incarnate root, and that he had set out to fully explore what this rootedness might show us about living and knowing. In the course of this exploration he fleshed out what it meant to be an embodied subject. Engaging with his inquiry electrified my intellectual interest and transformed my engagement with Gestalt. As I travelled deeper into the French philosopher's work, I was simultaneously transported back in time to the works of the Gestalt theorists who had provided him with such inspiration. In this way the doctoral journey served to excavate an important aspect of my life journey, and to endow it with fresh sense.

Although the paper has its energetic roots in a personal journey, and a particular piece of intellectual history, I claim that it also has relevance to the way we live now: both how *I* live within my existence as an organisation consultant, and how *we* live with our action inquiries. More specifically for this paper, this claim translates into a belief that Merleau-Ponty's central insight that we live a complex perceptual life may illuminate the development of my consulting practice, and also our shared practice of action research. In particular I believe that it might arouse interest in our own attitude of openness to the world, and how the incarnate, lived, body might reveal the historic cultures within which we live and work.

## 2. Two modes of intelligibility – the shape of the idea

The Gestalt psychologists were famously concerned with perception. Their most famous experiments concerned the nature of vision, but they were concerned with all perceptual acts such as touching, smelling, and hearing. From their experimental work they offered the insight that we perceived objects within a nested set of contexts – a figure against a ground that receded into infinity (Koffka 1935: 184). As they explained it, perceptually things emerged to show themselves from out of a background that receded as the figure brightened. The movement back into absence by the ground was discovered to be constitutive of presence by the figure. By this reading, nothingness was not an abstract state that preceded something, but was intimately bound up with every manifestation. Moreover, each manifestation remained “bound”: the figure never became fully autonomous, even though it was not always clear how the ground exerted its continuing influence, despite having become necessarily absent (Kelly 2005). For example, the perceived brightness of a figure varied according to the colour of its background, whilst the measurable luminosity of the figure never changed. In this sense the figure continued *to belong* to its ground, and this figure-ground form, characterised by a relationship of belonging *is* a Gestalt structure - a field of manifestation and appearance. Merleau-Ponty thought these findings through philosophically. The figure ground construction of Gestalt form became an abiding metaphor for his thought (Burke 1997: 62). What does it mean for the action researcher to think through the consequences of a perceptual existence of the kind summarised above?

The very first sentence of Merleau-Ponty’s article ‘Eye and Mind’ reads: “Science manipulates things and gives up dwelling in them” (Merleau-Ponty 1964). The scientist, he contended, was primarily interested in the creative possibilities of conceptual thought. In terms of conceptual intelligibility, it is possible to imaginatively play with the world as ideas, which involves de-contextualising these ideas so they might become relatively autonomous figures transplanted from one context to another. This is the process of ‘manipulation’ to which he refers in the quotation above. In terms of Gestalt form, to effect this ‘manipulation’ requires disconnecting the figural concepts from their place or ground. In consequence, the argument runs, to know the

world through concepts means a withdrawal from the world – to give up “dwelling in” the world so that we might conceptualise it and think about it. The construction “gives up” also implies something lost or abandoned. For Merleau-Ponty the subject of “gives up” was the other, primordial, way in which the world becomes intelligible to us, through our embodied connection to an actual world. He explored how, in the perceptual mode of intelligibility, we are not thinking about the world, just as we do not think about our anger or our lust when we are in its grip. He sought to reclaim our experience of perceptual connectedness showing as he did so how, as we engaged imaginatively with the world through concepts and ideas, we abandoned our primordial inhabitation of the world. We became simultaneously free and disconnected. Merleau-Ponty thought through how a perceptual mode of intelligibility was still operative in our lives, and how our forgetting of this distorted the way we made sense of, and actually lived, our lives. In doing this he engaged with the complex ways in which our conceptual and perceptual intelligibility are woven together.

The American philosopher Samuel Todes (Todes 2001), building on his grasp of both the work of Merleau-Ponty and the Gestalt psychologists, accentuates the difference between conceptual and perceptual intelligibility outlined above. He attributes to Kant the source of a belief that there is only one way in which we might come to know the world, and that is through concepts. Put simply, Todes says that Kant offers the thought that we are thinking animals whose whole perceptual apparatus is conditioned by the categories of our mind that we either inherit or acquire in our living: this process of thought-full categorisation serves to direct our whole existence. Todes, following Merleau-Ponty, seeks to rebalance our understanding by filling in what he believes Kant missed by way of perceptual categories. Hubert Dreyfus, in his introduction to Todes’ works, starts with the question that summarises the direction of the philosopher’s inquiry: “Are there two fundamentally different ways we make sense of the world, or does all understanding consist in using concepts to think about things?” (Todes 2001: iv). Todes’ response is to assert that:

My solution is to show that there are two levels of objective experience: the ground floor of perceptually objective experience; and the upper storey

of imaginative objective experience .... I attempt to show that the imaginative objectivity of theoretical knowledge presupposes a pre imaginative, perceptual form of objectivity, by showing just *how* this is so (Todes 2001: xv).

As he does this Todes joins forces with Merleau-Ponty in illustrating how we might, as embodied human subjects, centre ourselves between our perceptual and conceptual modes so that we remain in touch with our sensuous body without abandoning rational thought.

For Merleau-Ponty, Samuel Todes and other thinkers who have followed, the secret to attaining and holding this middle ground lay with the lived human body. Not the body as an object of flesh and blood, but the body as we live it – the subject body. To open to the current possibilities of these philosophers for action research we must first engage more fully with how they made sense of the body. How does the body bear upon the general thesis of distinguishing between conceptual and perceptual intelligence?

### **3. The body and perceptual intelligibility**

Merleau-Ponty took the radical step of de-intellectualising the phenomenological concept of “intentionality”, by describing how the intentional relationship operated between an embodied subject, and objects in the world. He referred to this as *motor intentionality*. According to this re-conceptualisation the intentional relationship between a person and an object of attention was no longer a process of thinking. The person participated with objects in the world pre-personally and pre-reflectively. In this sense, the body was no longer to be thought of as just an object guided by a mind like a ship steered by a pilot, but as a fully participating subject in the world. The correlate of the incarnate human subject is the field of appearance, which is not constituted by a human mind, but illuminated, and completed by the human subject. We are, he asserted, embodied subjects thoroughly entwined with the things outside of our-self that constitute our situation in the world.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates bodily intentionality with examples of practical relationship to objects. He notices how very complex bodily processes act in the background to support and underpin apparently simple operations, such as lifting this mug of tea to my lips while reading through what I have just

written, or weaving, and balancing, my way through a crowded restaurant while attending to Bridget's welcoming face at the distant table. In these circumstances my body is normatively adjusting to its situation, based on habitual knowledge of how to raise the mug to the lips, and how to balance against gravity, as it manoeuvres between and around potential obstructions. In relation to these types of physical tasks his conception would be similar to what sportsmen might call muscle memory. However, Merleau-Ponty also maintained that the same type of bodily account holds true for more complex states of being. Now, instead of our body reaching for the familiar mug in just the right way, or slipping itself through a crowded room, it leans into an oblique deflective emotional style, or a lonely heroic stance towards the world that (for example) underpins a particular leadership style. According to his embodied way of thinking to have a certain style (of leading) means that, "I have made it my abode" so that while it is "not fate [that is it is not completely set or determined regardless of circumstances] it has a specific *weight* and is not a set of events over there, at a distance from me, but the *atmosphere of my present*."<sup>1</sup> (1962: 442, italics added). We are encouraged not to think of aspects of our behaviour as guided by a mental state, held as ideas in our head, but as a way of practically encountering, making sense of, and living in, the world. Our way of behaving is a quality of our corporeal participation in the world. By this account, some aspects of my situation evoke a certain style of response, which, through repetition, becomes even more habituated as part of my style. I do not, says Merleau-Ponty, necessarily deliberately *decide* to act as I do; correlatively, nor do I necessarily have a clear goal in mind. Rather, I lean into this way of acting as a natural way that feels right to me in the situation within which I find myself. The situation and my response are tightly geared.

We accrue a certain style because experienced events gradually lose their specificity, to become general structures that guide our ways of acting, and shape a "*style of being in the world*" (1962: 83-84). New perceptions and emotions arrive, but these affect the content *not the deeper structure of*

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<sup>1</sup> The language of "weight" and "atmosphere" evokes something that is felt and made sense of through bodily feeling not as a concept.

*experience*. In a sense this past comes to have some priority over present lived experience. If this past event is progressively reinforced by repetition, then, after a while, the general structure of response may outlive the specific memories: “it is of its essence to survive only as a manner of being, and with a certain degree of generality” (ibid.). The specific experience does not survive as thought, but as an embodied structure of meaning that shapes felt responses to particular situations in the world. It becomes an “abode” into which one continues to lean even as one grows into adult hood (1962: 455-456).<sup>2</sup> Experience, surviving as a kind of generalised feeling, regulates behaviour in the world through a subtle normative process by which one seeks a sequel to that experience.

#### 4. The Inquiring body and Gestalt form

The close relationship between the lived body and an actual world, experienced within the social settings in which we live, forms our perceptual intelligibility *as a dynamic process*. The set of our body is constantly under modification as it engages with the world. Through the meeting of a sedimented style, and the situations of a lived present, the body is variously *activated and adapted*. It is an inquiring body that *continues to learn about itself as it learns about the world*. The child’s body learns how to activate the complex muscular responses of ankle, knee and hip joints necessary to balance; as it does, so we may say that it also learns to understand gravity. By the same token, as our body learns how to land our hand in exactly the right configuration to turn the door handle without hurting the delicate hand, so we may say it also learns about the handle. In our social existence we learn how to respond to the authority exercised by our parents; as we do we also learn social norms about power. This learning is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a

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<sup>2</sup> “I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in a relationship to this structure..... this significant life, this certain significance of nature and history which I am, does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it. *It is by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present that I have a chance of moving forward...I can miss being free only if I try to by pass my natural social situation.*” (Emphasis added).



primordial sensuous, and unreflected way in which we come to simultaneously understand ourselves and our situation in the world: “Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting” (1962: 52). The process of creating a “familiar setting” may be understood through the lens offered by the Gestalt figure ground form.

From a Gestalt perspective, creating a “familiar setting” occurs as the sedimented know how held by the body is projected into the natural world to create a sensuously familiar ground for our existence. This “familiar ground” then supports the figures of current bodily engagement with the world. In this way “every [bodily] movement has a background and that movement and its background are ‘moments of a unique totality’” [quoting Goldstein] (1962, 110). The movement of our body, whether physical, emotional or thoughtful movement, takes place within a “familiar” carnal background that shapes and supports that movement.

The Gestalt metaphor helps show how figural contact with clients in the present moment is informed by the client’s background existence within their organisational setting. Their past experience gathers itself up into the present moment so that the present meeting carries the potential to illuminate the organisation within which the client exists (Fischer 2002: 55). How might our client encounters (even for example in a one to one meeting) reveal the organisations within which the clients exist, and within which their presenting needs arise?

According to Merleau-Ponty, engaging in such an inquiry requires us to return to the *corporeal sense* that, as we have illustrated, directs the body in how to support itself in standing, or turning the door handle, or responding to authority in a particular way. In other words, to return to the ground that supports the figure. Such a “return” requires the development of a certain kind of receptivity, because the background sense that directs us in how we mobilise our selves “is not [our] intellectual possession of [the situation, thing, person that] is felt, but a dispossession of ourselves in favour of it, an opening toward that which we do not need to think about in order that we might recognise it....”(1988: 198-199). Taking hold of a situation and acting with various levels of awareness towards objects in the world is only made possible because the body is already *opening to* gravity, the door handle and

the situation in which power is being wielded. Each moment of gripping hold is made intelligible through the perceptual sense arising from the body's experience of living in the world. The lived body is therefore simultaneously agentic and receptive. It closes in on something by opening to it, and opens to something by closing in towards it. Motor intentionality has this double incarnate quality of an active, "figural", reaching towards an object (thing, creature, person) allied to a more passive, or receptive opening towards the object as our body has "grounded" it in the world.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty was primarily concerned to reclaim our corporeal connectedness to the situations in which we exist – to our perceptual intelligibility, and its associated movements of agency and opening. However he, and other scholars such as Samuel Todes, were also interested in how this mode of intelligibility connected with our conceptualising mind. For them consciousness progressively emerged from the background of perceptual intelligibility to support our judging and deliberative selves. According to these thinkers, the apotheosis of figural activity occurred as we engaged imaginatively with our situation by opening up a conceptual territory in which we detached ourselves from our felt ground. We acquired the space within which to reflect on our situation, and deliberately exercise judgement in respect of what until then we had taken for granted. This amounted to a deliberate "effort to know" that tried "to take apart...the intentional tissue" (1962: 53). How might we understand more fully the deliberate effort to know, and how this connects to the thesis of double intelligibility?

### **5. Dialectic of perception and conception**

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty the way to access the actual world was through the body. For him this constituted inquiry as an act of rediscovery or genealogy – tracking back to discover the origins of our thought-full existence in our sensuous connection. This took him to the edge of what would traditionally be considered to be philosophy, because it took him to the edge of what could be comprehended intellectually. To an attempt to *radicalise reflection* by reincorporating our pre conceptual world:

...radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its [i.e. reflection's] own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xiv).

He is not arguing for mysticism or a form of irrationality, but rather for a freshly extended rationality. He wants to broaden the scope of human rationality to reconnect to the perceptual world. Here he fits into the broad thrust of Husserl's critique in *The Crisis* with its themes of narrow rationality and disconnection from the Umwelt or life world. How might this search for a more extended rationality be understood in the context of working with clients?

Merleau-Ponty provides us with an appreciation of the *dialectical relationship* between conceptual and perceptual intelligibility: a ceaseless dynamic interplay between conception and perception. In expressing this "dynamic interplay" he uses terms that are, again, reminiscent of the inter relationship between figure and ground (Burke 1997, 62). In Gestalt psychology the ground continues to influence the figure, which in turn feeds back to shape the ground; the essence of how the whole gestalt configuration dynamically transcends being a sum of parts, through a systemic capacity for ongoing transformation.

There is no longer the originating and the derived, ..... the condition and the conditioned, the reflection and the un-reflected, are in a reciprocal, *if not symmetrical* relationship, and here the end is in the beginning as much as the beginning in the end (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 35).

According to this dynamic interplay our thinking selves never quite break free from the unreflected ground of our perceptual existence. Our conceptualising 'I' is still contained within a "definite situation [which] sets bounds to the immediately available mental field" (1962: 162). Samuel Todes expresses this differently, whilst still retaining the sense of dynamic interplay between perceptual and conceptual realms. He expresses the intimacy of this connection in this way:

The mind is the interiority of the body as it is made to appear by changing our initial perceptual stance of standing in the actual world of our circumstances into our conceptual stance of standing back from the actual world.

Through this withdrawal our outwardly directed interiority is introverted, turned outside in... (Todes 2001: 268).

Positioning mind as interiority of the body suggests an intimate dialectical relationship in which our imaginative thought, our patterning conceptualisation, will feed back to influence our perceptual understanding. Whilst this is undoubtedly intended by Todes and by Merleau-Ponty, both scholars are unusual in the way in which they give priority within this dialectic to perceptual experience.

In the previous quotation from “The Phenomenology of Perception”, Merleau-Ponty asserts the significance of dynamic interplay between perception and conception, but his expression “if not symmetrical” suggests what we find elsewhere in his writings: an inclination to glance back towards the perceptual realm as having priority over the conceptual. We can conclude that for both scholars it is important to acknowledge the dialectic of conceptual and perceptual intelligibility, *and* also to acknowledge that it is through our perceptual know how that we most directly access the contingent situations in which we meet our clients. *What does it mean to live out in practice a tight dialectic between perception and conception in a way that also acknowledges the primacy of perception?* I propose to use this question as the basis for an inquiry into my practice as an organisation consultant.

To enable this inquiry, I will present practice accounts in tandem with key pieces of practical training that have shaped how I have related to my clients, and sought to do my consulting work. This will provide a fuller understanding of what I actually do in my consulting work, by underpinning the accounts with an explanation of the practical skills that have informed my work. The practice accounts I have chosen are ones that have been significant for me because they represent efforts to engage creatively with how I felt my teachers were encouraging me to act. In this sense they have become rather iconic in my practice. In consequence, what is not fully represented in these accounts are those times when I have failed and faltered.

My practice has been heavily influenced by teaching in Family Therapy from Sonia Nevis and Judith Hemming. Both have developed their deep understanding of Gestalt Therapy into unique practical methods for supporting families and couples experiencing difficulties. I have taken what I have

learned from them into the less intimate territory of organisational teams and larger organisational configurations of my consulting practice. Both are essentially practitioners. They are respectfully wary of intellectualisation, preferring to see their own work as a subtle craft shaped by what works. My own inclination has been to supplement my attempts to acquire some of their craft with a theoretical exploration borne along by writing such as this article. It is the effort to do both that has made me particularly susceptible to Merleau-Ponty's example of how to think through our perceptual groundedness, and its connection to our conceptualising selves.

## **6. Gestalt practice**

In this section I will show how my consulting practice has been shaped by a training in Gestalt based Family Therapy that has emphasised perceptual experience over the conceptualisation of theory and language.

In 1993-4 (shortly before I started consulting on a self employed basis) I undertook training with Sonia Nevis and colleagues in a Gestalt approach towards working with intimate systems - couples and families (Nevis and Melnick 2008; GISC website). Central to the approach taught on this programme were two lines of connected inquiry. The first question addressed by the therapist sitting with a troubled family is, "what is it that is working well here?" The question takes the therapist to the fact that the family (or the couple) are still co-existing and have, indeed, come together to seek help. What is it that holds this system together despite their obvious difficulties? The therapist is being encouraged to look beneath the figural difficulties that are exhausting so much energy, and clamouring for so much attention. This is tantamount to asking, what is struggling to emerge from the ground here? In responding to this question the therapist is encouraged to access the feeling-full impact that the family or couple are having on him. One might for example notice their brittle argumentative style with each other; however, as one sits with the experience of this figure, one might also notice a feeling of grudging respect for their persistence – how they keep trying to break through and communicate with each other, and to feel how touching it is to see the children valiantly trying to "peace keep" by sustaining the dialogic

effort. It is this kind of second noticing or emergent, sensed, ground that forms the basis of the first intervention.

The search for what works in the system is also likely to be experienced as affirmative by family members; in large measure this is because it expresses something felt but never articulated before, and as such broadens their appreciation of what it means to be this family. The skill with which the first intervention is delivered, and the astuteness of the noticing, may pay dividends as the family opens up to show more of its situation. In contrast, proceeding by way of directly addressing the manifest problems being presented by the family is more likely to result in some kind of embarrassed closing in by the family.

The first intervention opens the way for the second limb of the inquiry, which is to ask “what might be under-developed?” The therapist is trained to look for the under-developed as an aspect of what works well. For example an aspect of the persistent attempts to make contact may be a difficulty in closing in on any particular item; the persistence in attempting communication may not be carried through to a discipline of focused attention that enables any single subject to be completed. Once the family have considered the “under-developed” then it in turn may suggest an experiment. For example: “you have mentioned going to the cinema at the weekend, perhaps you could now agree what film you will go to see?” The idea is to give the family/couple direct experience of successfully (with the therapists help) achieving something in the domain of the under-developed.

The training, coming as it did just at the time when I was developing my idea of what it meant to consult to organisations, was particularly influential. It helped me to develop an oblique, existential approach towards my work. (1) What was presented figurally was to be seen as, at best, only half of the story. To complete the picture it was necessary to inquire in the direction of the ground; to see what was influencing the situation from the background. This would be likely to illuminate what it was that was holding the system together or sustaining it in its work. (2) What was “ground” was to be sought in my incarnate response to the system in which I was in some way becoming entangled. What did it feel like to be with them? The vagueness or ambiguity of this felt impact naturally led into an inquiry based approach; I could open

to the impact singularly, but closing in on what the impact meant in this situation was bound to involve those with whom I was working. After all, the impact could arise from some resonance with my own history that had little to do with the couple or family. (3) It follows from the above that understanding the client family could not be achieved simply through a detached looking in. It was necessary to be able to open to the affect of the system, and this required a motion of immersion, which then provided a deeper basis for stepping back to see them from more of a distance. As Sonia explained it, in the skilled practitioner this became a rhythm of moving in and out. I also thought of it as being like the rhythm of breathing: the way that an in-breath naturally exhausts itself and leads unthinkingly into an in-breath.

The symbolism of breathing was reinforced for me as, at the same time as I was being trained by Sonia, I learned Astanga yoga in the hands of teacher Derek Ireland. Yoga reinforces an awareness of the significance of breathing and also of bodily movement. Derek is dead now, but I still practice most days, going to the same place, laying down my mat and following his mantra – practice, practice, practice.

In 2001 (two years before I encountered Merleau-Ponty's work) I wrote a description of a consulting assignment (Farrands 2001) that illustrates how this training was reflected in my work. I had been assigned to work with a strategy team, working for a large oil company on how to approach the exhaustion of oil and gas production in the Brent field in the North Sea. My brief was rather vaguely cast as being to support the integration of the technically specialised work being undertaken on subsurface, infrastructure and commercial options. We were assigned to a disused Corporate office block awaiting refurbishment in the harbour area of Aberdeen. The team imported computers each linked to specialised data bases – geological, surface engineering, commercial etc. Most apparent, as the team started to work, was their relative isolation from each other. They did not know each other, and their main preoccupation was in exploring discrete technical problems associated with their own specialist areas. They had each taken separate offices into which they disappeared to work on their discrete agendas. As I spoke to them, I noticed that they all recognised the need for an integrated report, but that they had given no serious shared consideration to how this would be

achieved. My own feelings were bewildering ones; I felt isolated, and uncertain about how to relate to the team as a whole. I took these feelings as being in some way a reflection of the general situation, and I looked around for what I might do with them.

The building was being renovated so all the coffee machines had been moved out of our area...However we did have an empty kitchen ...together with coffee making equipment. I ordered coffee from the building supervisor and on my way to work the following morning bought milk and bread. Armed with these supplies, I set up the kitchen. This was large well lit room with a stunning view of the comings and goings of the oil supply ships in the old harbour. When I filled the kitchen with the smell of fresh coffee and fresh bread it was not difficult to cajole the team away from their computers to come and eat and drink together...My milk and bread buying became a tradition within the team. It became generative of our shared life. We went on to ...[arrange] dinners with sponsors and lunchtime visits to harbour side pubs. I was always insistent that these informal gatherings would be places where among other things we would talk about what we were doing – so they did not become an escape from what we were collectively engaged in, but were an intrinsic part of the collective enterprise (ibid.: 7)

The kitchen experiment illustrates my interest in oblique approaches towards my work that sought to fillet out emergent possibilities within the consulting situation. In keeping with Gestalt Therapy's existentialist tradition I did not restrict my search for possibilities to the dynamics of the team itself, but extended my gaze into what was afforded by the physical location. I eschewed a frontal approach such as directly addressing the dislocated working arrangements, or directly critiquing their apparent belief that integration could be left as a final stage of writing up the report, in favour of providing the team with *an experience of being together* that was likely to be attractive to them. My own feelings of uncertainty were mobilised to support an unusual approach. Over the six weeks of this assignment "I developed a consulting approach that built on my initial intuitive jump into being a kitchen host" (ibid). Broadly speaking, this addressed the possibilities for integration as an ongoing process. In the language of the training referred to above, I sought to build on their shared commitment to a single unified report by



addressing their under-developed idea of how this would happen. My kitchen experiment developed into a consulting approach where I was “simultaneously building internal coherence within the team while also developing the team’s connection to the broader world” (ibid.) by using the common theme of taking meals together – and inviting as guests various corporate stakeholders relevant to the project. Within this frame, I occasionally fitted in pieces of more direct process consulting in support of their team meetings, and, in the second half of the assignment, I wrote up brief summaries of our shared progress, which eventually provided the basis of the written report. These figural consulting activities were supported from the background by my hosting role.

The case does not show a straightforward commitment to the staged process taught in my family therapy training; however it does reveal an underlying interest in experiential approaches that sought to build on my felt response to underlying opportunities afforded by the consulting situation. The account I provided tends to highlight perceptual forms of intelligibility, as if they existed quite separately from the way that the situation was being conceptualised. In this sense, the account accurately reflects my own interest at the time; a certain blindness to the part that ideology and language were playing in the development of my consulting. This “blindness” came to be adjusted over the next few years as I developed a more explicit understanding of how ideas and language were playing a part in my consulting. This development was supported by further training in Family Therapy.

## **7. Constellations**

In December 2002 my partner Bridget and I organised a workshop in which we gathered together an audience of colleagues/friends for an experience of teaching and practice with Judith Hemming. Judith, who had a background as a Gestalt therapist, had become an expert practitioner in a process for working with families called Constellations. What particularly excited me was the way that the practice built on the embodied responses of participants; what I learned was that it also relied on very specific uses of language. My interest

in Constellations continued and in 2005 I undertook a longer period of training.

Constellations is a process developed by the family therapist, and phenomenologist Bert Hellinger (Hellinger/Beaumont/Weber 1998; Hellinger/ten Hovel 1999; Hellinger/ Beaumont 1999) to help distressed families, especially those living with the traumatic fall out from a European war that had left so many absences and questions – many of which, despite being ‘secrets’, continued to reverberate into the lives of succeeding generations. Hellinger acknowledges the influence of the work of Virginia Satir (1964), and that of Contextual therapists working cross generationally with family systems (Boszormenyi/Krasner 1986). The process works by bringing together a group of people who have an interest in issues within their own families and/or in supporting others in exploring their family issues. The therapist works with participants one at a time, making use of the others to represent people or themes within the participant’s presenting family issue. To do this the therapist publicly takes a brief history; just enough to identify the main players in the family drama, stopping short of the issue holder’s opinions about the presenting issue. The therapist agrees with the issue holder which family members need to be represented, and asks the issue holder to choose participants to represent them. The issue holder is then asked to “set them up” by gathering the representatives together in the centre of a circle formed by the other participants. Beaumont explains to the issue holder, “you try to forget [your] family story and the family myths. You take the person by the shoulders, usually standing behind them, you go down inside yourself, as deeply as you can, and you just move that person to this space here in the middle of the room. You’ll just have a feeling when they are in their ‘right place’ Then you move the next one [etc] and then you come and sit down” (Hellinger/Beaumont 1999: 14). What the issue holder then observes is like a slow formal dance as the therapist guides the representatives into (usually) small movements in response to their bodily feeling. The representatives movements are based on an encouragement to abandon themselves to their in the moment experience: “it’s really important to say what you are experiencing. Try to bracket out your beliefs and your preferences. ....pay attention to what is actually going on in your body, and in your heart and in your soul. In

some families you may feel something that is taboo or forbidden, a sexual charge, a murderous rage, or you may begin to weep.....but we ask you not to offer your theories about the family. That's information that is not helpful for this kind of work" (ibid.: 15). It was this physicality, and direct rejection of "theories" that most intrigued me, and seemed to resonate with my earlier training from Sonia. The physical locatedness of the representatives produced a kind of map of the family system that transcended space time: dead children would, for example, be introduced into the circle, along with Uncle who disappeared a long time ago, or who was now living in Canada. As an organisation consultant it was intriguing to see how somatic, visceral responses opened up systemic themes and helped to disclose the inner structure of the family. It was while pondering on and experimenting with this connection between the incarnate and the systemic that I stumbled across the work of Merleau-Ponty in June 2003. In retrospect I can see how my experiences of training with Sonia and Judith had prepared me for this experience; I doubt if Merleau-Ponty's thought would have arrested me in the way that it did if I had not been sensitized by these Gestalt trained teachers, and the practice inquires they inspired.

A case from 2004 further illustrates how I was experimenting with the relationship between embodied responses and systemic understanding. The background to this case example was that a long term client, who I was supporting as he retired from an international company, had asked me to speak with a more junior colleague of his who was facing an important career choice. I phoned the new client and we decided to meet in the Hague in Holland where she worked. As I wrote up this experience for my PhD, the first thing I noted about arriving was related to the place within which my client worked. I explored my response to her place to see if it could provide me with any clues about her.

I took particular pains, while waiting for the client to meet me, to walk around the open spaces on the ground floor of the building, taking in the absence of people, the expanses of modernist architecture, noticing an involuntary shiver of coldness and a heavy sense of insignificance; also noticing my admiration for the sweep of the interior roof line, and the rich mixture of materials – glass, stone metal, brick and wood. Here in the heart of this multi-national I fancied some confirmation for the precise yet

distant organisation of the engineer, a priority for rules and procedures over responsiveness and flexibility (allied also to some understanding of how this kind of culture might serve the purpose of the system). (2004, Unpublished doctoral papers).

As it turned out, this pre meeting exercise proved to be valuable in the consulting situation. My client had brought along a questionnaire on emotional intelligence that had been scored for her within the company. She was troubled by some of the judgements in the instrument concerning her emotional range; she had fully taken on the perspective that these were personal problems for her, and she wanted some advice about how to tackle them. As we spoke I took the opportunity to share with her some of my feelings as I entered the building. I asked her, “what kind of emotional life might be encouraged by this kind of place?” We wondered at the contrast between this kind of place, and our respective homes – how did we behave differently in each place? Gradually her anxiety about her own deficiency diminished, as we conducted a more existential analysis of her situation at work, and we eased into a more direct consideration of her decision to leave or stay. My deliberate attempt to immerse myself in her situation, by allowing myself to feel the impact of her place, enabled me to share this impact with her as a support for her to see herself in context. She stepped away from a psychological judgement of herself to see her situated self more clearly.

This commitment continued as the assignment unfolded. She told me that she had approached her decision about whether to stay or leave by conducting some research of her own, which had taken the form of holding conversations with members of her family, and trusted friends and work colleagues. As we discussed how she had done this, and what she had learned, it became clear that she was still in an inquiring kind of space in relation to her decision – she was not impatient to decide there and then. I also found myself *feeling impressed* by the work she was already doing, involving her social network in her inquiry. As this feeling emerged from our conversation together, I also looked around at what was afforded by the room which she had booked for our meeting. It was a large room dominated by a conference table that nearly filled the room, squeezing us into a space around one corner of the table. The room was well lit, opening onto a large atrium that had been carved out of the

centre of the old building – the glass, steel and other “rich materials” mentioned earlier. This is how I described what I did next in my doctoral papers:

I proposed a *mock meeting* to which she would invite significant others to discuss her issue..... aided by the information revealed in our earlier conversation, we agreed to invite: her past; .... her future self; P\_, a senior xyz Co manager, who she knew and respected; F\_, a close personal friend; and her husband, H\_. I wrote the names of the invited guests on sheets of paper, and asked her to go round the table in the conference room, where we were meeting to make place settings for each person. I then asked her to go to each place in turn to give the advice that person would give to her. I told her that I would ask her only two questions from each place: “what do you notice in your body as you take each place”, and then, “what advice do you have for W (the client)?” I told her I would [sit in the corner away from the table and] make notes in particular of the advice she received. Then I explained a short procedure for moving which involved physically leaving the last place, standing up stamping her feet, and taking a series of breaths, before slipping into the next seat. [I paid particular attention] to carefully accenting her reports of shifts in bodily state so as to support this least familiar part of the process. [At the end I also gave her my write up of the advice she had been given]. (Farrands 2007(a). Square brackets are my subsequent additions.)

We can see here an attempt to build on the experience of the client, and to organise an intervention that made an attempt to stay in imaginative connection with the incarnate aspects of Constellating. The two questions, one about feeling and the other about ideas, sought to evoke perceptual and conceptual modes of intelligibility. In the thesis what most grabbed my attention, and therefore what I wrote about, was the way that the response to the feelings question surprised me:

I was surprised by how much information became available when I just concentrated on the physical, such as changes in voice tone, body posture and emotional loading of the voice. She was, for example, mischievous and playful as her husband; in tears as her past; slow, contemplative, and softly spoken as her friend; very brief yet sympathetic as the [company] manager. In the conversation that followed we both registered our surprise at the richness of this part of the process. (ibid.)

What I was taking from Merleau-Ponty at this stage was a sense of priority for the perceptual realm. His thought was reinforcing the perceptual content

of the training I was receiving. Ironically, my conceptual understanding was influencing my practice towards a non conceptual realm. However, as I became more bound up with Merleau-Ponty's work, in the context of the daily practice of writing required by my doctoral task, so concepts and the language with which they were expressed came to be of more figural interest.

## **8. Language**

During 2004-6, I continued to attend training programmes in constellation practice as I wrote my thesis and read Merleau-Ponty. As I did so I became curious about other aspects of Judith's Constellations training, and retrospectively what I had been taught by Sonia Nevis; especially how the therapist made careful use of language to attempt to resolve the problematic situations with which they were presented. For example, resolution of the systemic tangles laid out by the Constellation usually included the issue holder (either their representative, or they may have been personally re-introduced into the Constellation at the end) either giving or receiving sentences carefully crafted by the therapist. This often involved touchingly brief exchanges, such as when a daughter and a dead mother completed on a long period of illness during which the daughter cared for the mother – an experience which had continued to haunt the daughter, and prevent her from getting on with her life with her own family. As the Constellating therapist crafted these phrases, they revealed their own conceptualisation of the family situation. However the words and their form (how they were said, when they were introduced etc) clearly had a felt impact on the system, frequently moving speaker and listeners to tears. The language seemed to me to stimulate the system. The words were both articulating some idea *about* the system, but also *moving* it – they had conceptual and perceptual significance.

Merleau-Ponty referred to the perceptual aspect of language as the “gestural” content of language, meaning by this expression, to capture the more affective sense that englobes the literal meaning. We can connect with what he means when we reflect on how we might be roused, and moved (think of this physically as a weeping or a joyful bodily response for example) by the words of a poem, or, in a different context, by the rhetorical style of a leader

such as President Obama. For Merleau-Ponty, such arousal was to be seen as opening to a fuller sense of the situation in which the words were being uttered. Joy and tears were all a part of a systemic understanding, to be taken in along with the more conceptual way in which the situation might be becoming intelligible. It is the perceptual content of language that leads Merleau-Ponty to describe language as “an organism of words, establishing in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 182). Think here of a word as, quite literally, a newly acquired sense to sit alongside our ability to smell or see.

This way of thinking of language is more poetic than scientific. T. S. Eliot says “The chief use of the ‘meaning’ of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog” (Eliot: 93). I take this rather startling sentence as doing something of what it speaks about – the burglar metaphor arouses an immediate snort of respect and disbelief, which launches an inquiry. What is the implied real work of the poem? Working with my perceptual/conceptual frame, I wonder if the work is to explore the perceptual ground; to open the reader more fully to the aspect of the world being addressed by the poet. In which case, the significance of “distraction” would lie in the need to hold the conceptualizing mind at bay; to prevent it grasping too quickly and squeezing the life out of the unfolding situation. This allows *making sense* to occur in a non frontal way, that has more to do with opening to the situation with our body than gripping hard with our intellect (Camus 1963; Merleau-Ponty 1962: 179)<sup>3</sup>. Wallace Stevens, working the same theme as Eliot, suggests a more respectful metaphor for concep-

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<sup>3</sup> Slowing down is a persistent metaphor used to try and capture the more passive opening or receiving aspects of our inquiries. Camus, for example, associates receptivity with patience and suggests an association with embodied skill: “You cannot create experience. You must undergo it. Patience rather than experience. We wait patiently – or rather we are patients. It is all practice: when we emerge from experience we are not wise but skilful. But at what?” The indirect aspect of this waiting for emergence is also captured in Merleau-Ponty’s use of the word “re-awakens” when he writes, “the writer and philosopher ...re-awakens primordial experience anterior to all traditions” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 179).

tual intelligibility when, in his “Adagia,” he writes that, “There is no wing like meaning”. In other words meaning, in the narrow sense of conceptual understanding, is not the end, but a means of conveying the poem (and the reader) somewhere else. It seems to me that this “somewhere” is for Eliot, Merleau-Ponty and Stevens a fuller opening to the situation being revealed through the poem. All three seek to deepen understanding, through the weaving together of figural concept and background perception.

Making these connections to the poetic use of language has encouraged me to develop my own writing practice to support my ongoing inquiry (Marshall 2001). I carry a notebook and write at length each day as a mode of reflection. This includes moments when I intersperse “free fall” writing into my client contact, either while waiting to see a client, or during breaks in an assignment. Free fall writing is a way of relaxing the grip of the conceptualizing mind. I give myself ten minutes, a question, and an injunction to just keep the hand moving (Marshall 2008a, 2008b; Porter 2004; Goldberg 1986). With practice, I have been able to achieve states where the body seems to take over, and reclaim the “gestural” aspect of the written word, opening me to difficult and/or unexpected places. If I have time, and/or the brief freefall session is in some way compelling, then I read it through several times, underlining the words or phrases that seem most stimulating. Then I turn to a fresh page and place the words in the centre of the page in the order that just seems to feel right. Having “constellated” them in this way I embark on lines of fresh inquiry opened up by this configuration of words, writing margin notes that expand upon a word, or making connections between the words. Sometimes the words scan into a basic poetic form that I then play with. Most recently this exploration of the form of the written word has led me towards poetry classes, entering poetry competitions and joining a local “Stanza Group” where we read our own work to each other.

Developing an understanding of language as described above, has helped me to feel and to act differently in respect of my work with my clients, and the sense I have made of my teachers use of words. What is clearer now is the way that, in the hands of Sonia and Judith, language was used to articulate the feelings exposed by the embodied relationships within the family (or couple), and put them to use in healing the system. I see a particular disci-



pline and purpose behind their use of language. Words, it seems to me, were attached to the affect released by the system to give it expression, in a way that turned attention away from the pressing immediacy of the clients personal difficulties, towards seeing these difficulties within a broader systemic context. Now I notice that, under Sonia's guidance, I was taught to use felt resonance with a family to craft words that side stepped the figural difficulty, and suggested some sustaining quality in the family's emergent ground; or how Judith showed me how to build on visceral responses to a situation to articulate a fresh attitude towards a underlying trans generational relationship. In these ways both practitioners invariably used language to illuminate the systemic variables in a particular way: the pain or difficulty was not usually directly addressed, *but more importantly was re-grounded into a wider felt context*. In consequence, it became understandable in a different way. This fuller understanding was usually less disabling than focusing directly on the figural difficulties. In consequence the couple or the family felt supported to move towards resolution. Seen in the light of this reappraisal of their method, I was moved to consider how the conceptualisations involved in language might remain connected closely to the feelings emerging from the perceptual ground; also how this perceptual ground was illuminated by the care with which it was languaged.

In 2007 I was invited to the Corporate Headquarters of a potentially new client, to discuss concerns over the management of safety within the corporation. The meeting turned out to be based on serious concerns over a terrible accident in which four men had run into a stainless steel gas pipe to rescue a colleague who had collapsed – all five had died from asphyxiation.

As I listened I noticed my own shocked response to the story. I remember imagining briefly the turmoil of thought and feeling that must have gripped the men in the pipe and the feelings of pity and anger that arose in me. I was aware that I was controlling my feeling, looking for signs that the men in the room felt some compassion for those who had died so I could remain balanced. As I listened it seemed clear that those present were indeed highly concerned; however, the conversation ..... was dispassionate and impersonal (no names for example), which was not how I was feeling. What sense could I make of the contrast between what seemed to me to be a disembodied dialogue and my own disturbed feel-

ings? There were clear risks here that if I spoke I might sound self-righteous or indignant, which would be likely to lose my audience. What I did was to wait while I tried to distance myself from my feeling state, or, in that telling phrase, to collect myself. As I did so..... (Farrands 2007: 145-146)

The intuitive flash that shocked me with a brief picture of the men struggling in the pipe was in danger of overwhelming me. Whilst I wanted to be receptive to such emergent feelings, I was also seeking to think through the consequences of speaking such feelings, and trying in the moment to design an appropriate strategy that would sustain my ability to be useful as a consultant. Put more bluntly, what was the affect, and what was I going to do with it? The writing failed to capture the complexity of the reciprocation between thought and feeling as I moved rapidly between evocative contact with the group of senior executives, and a more detached reflection on what to do. Eventually I channelled my turbulence into the form of a question, essentially using it to both buy time and to explore the territory being opened out by my felt state. It was a question designed, with intuitive support from my experience working in these settings, to flesh out our shared understanding of the situation without alienating the audience. I asked if we were not forgetting something, and wondered if we had fully recognised the *courage* of the men who had lost their lives rushing to save their *friends*. I asked if, as well as focusing on procedural breaches (the main preoccupation to this point), we should also *honour* them for their *bravery*? It was this question, founded on my own felt response to the ghastly story, which made contact with the other men in the meeting room. Notions of courage, friendship, and honour were introduced into the room to add fresh dimension to our conversation. They were not so far away from the life experience of these men that they closed to what was being said – contact was sustained – yet the possibilities in the conversation were expanded. The conversation turned towards reflecting on whether the preoccupation with procedural rules had led to detachment from how men and women would be likely to respond in emergencies. Would it have been possible, for example, to have made emergency breathing equipment more readily available so that the men might have more safely helped their friends? How could we build on their sense of comradeship?

This conversation led, via an attachment to an inquiry conducted by a safety consulting firm, to a three year assignment with a large project, operated jointly by two European companies, to develop a large deep and toxic gas field in central Asia. My work has most evidently been team building with the Executive leadership group, and a wider group of managers (including the safety team). Running on beneath, the themes emerging from the story revealed in the Corporate Office have continued to resonate. My contribution to the safety report was to illuminate the centrifugal forces (different languages, different company cultures, extreme weather, soviet legacy etc) that made coherent management so difficult. The underlying work has been to support the felt identity of the men (mostly) and women, working on the distant project, as a way of enhancing the centripetal forces at work. The friendship that motivated the rush into the pipe transmutes in collegueship; the courage that led men to knowingly risk their lives is expressed differently in an Executive team – a willingness to speak the truth and to bear disappointment for example (Torbert 1998). Nevertheless, I still feel an underlying connection moving me in my work. For example, when I prepare myself, as I now do, for my next visit, I notice how I think again of that time in the office when I first learned of the men's death; how I was moved to try and honour them.

## **9. Conclusions**

The trajectory of my practice has been illuminated by Merleau-Ponty's thought. I have been inspired to try to develop an attitude of greater openness, buoyed up by the philosopher's approach towards bodily sense, and his insights into how, through its rich carnality, the body opens to history and culture. I have sought to hold Merleau-Ponty's ideas openly rather than having them grip too tightly on the practice. A metaphor that has helped me in this task has been to consider his theory as a kind of conceptual bowl, holding the practice without crushing it. According to this metaphor the theory has encouraged the practice to show particular aspects of itself, without having the life squeezed out of it. However, we might also see that the way I was working had already predisposed me towards the thought of

Merleau-Ponty, when I discovered it in 2003. His thought appeared as familiar, because it corresponded with aspects of my practice. Then, the acquisition of an understanding of his thought invited a continuation of my way of working: a reinforcement and refinement of what was already embodied. As I have inquired into my practice, it seems filled with such reversibilities of conception and perception. Yet I also feel my story acknowledges Merleau-Ponty's commitment to a lack of symmetry in the movement of the dialectic between theory and practice. A commitment to the precedence of an essentially corporeal sense that flows on beneath what is rendered explicitly figural by our conceptualising mind: to the underpinning sense of an accumulating "body of practice".

Training and practice have encouraged me to explore how practitioners might nurture, or refine perceptual sensibility. These "explorations" have led to a certain incarnate obliqueness in my practice. As part of this overall pattern, I have engaged with the sensuous aspects of language. This engagement has led me to frame the development of language skills, such as learning how to write poetry, or adopting a free fall writing practice, as another way of nurturing bodily sensitivity – somewhat akin to a yoga in the emphasis placed on practice and stilling the mind. I have inquired, how does language support me in opening to client situations through a greater capacity for sensuous engagement? I have not ignored a correlated question; how does language enable me to gain a conceptual grip on what is unfolding, and to negotiate with others just what this opening might mean? However, following Merleau-Ponty, I have tended not to give equal weight to this second question, either in my work or in this paper.

Inquiring into the perceptual aspects of my consulting practice has led me to reflect on it as less about the possession of knowledge, and more about an inquiring spirit. I have explored the idea that consulting, cannot be reduced to knowing, no matter how multifarious we seek to make the forms of knowing. In the language of Gestalt, to wondering how each figure of knowledge is accompanied by a sensuous ground, falling away from consciousness (Fiumara 2001: 21-29). In such inquiries the form of a question, with its implication of absence, has seemed to be profoundly appropriate. For the practitioner, formulating a question might be seen as a kind of archaeology – digging

back to the point where what is *known* separates from what is *unknown* – to the juncture of something and nothing, or the point when something emerges. It is at this point that taken for granted faith in the perceptual world stutters into presence, and opens up a conceptual realm. The question inquires into what lies behind the activity presented by the client system – such as in the case of the men in the pipe; should we honour these men for their courage? The consultant might also ask what is missing, or what is struggling towards presence here? Questions such as these conjure up something lost, which calls out to be found; also provokes the client to search for their own dimly apprehended questions.

Merleau-Ponty teaches us that to prefer perception leads back to the body. A lived body that sediments experience beyond specific memory, which then guides our style of being in the world. His teaching redeems incarnate sense making and, correlatively, re-enchants the world as a source of active mystery. Terms such as “re-enchantment” and “active mystery” suggest sources of creativity that are rarely acknowledged in organisational life – they are more usually considered the preserve of poetry. What if we *chose* to work within the frame of Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual/conceptual dialectic, including his proposed precedence for the perceptual realm? Would this be a *useful* basis from which to launch our inquiries in the situations in which we work? Might it be *helpful* to be sustained in our inquiries by ideas that urge a tight connection between the contingent practicality of the perceptual realm, and the idealism of our imaginative conceptualisations? Would it *support* us and our clients if we truly could work ourselves closer to the real by opening our body to the world?

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