

# Focusing, Intersubjectivity, and “Therapeutic Intersubjectivity”

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As I sit across from a client, my intention is to be with them as they explore their life experience. To do this, I let my attention fall down into my body. There I can hover with a physically felt sense that includes a present feeling of the other person, how we are together, my present mood, what I understand about therapy . . . in fact, many aspects of the situation all at once without grasping onto anything in particular. In this non-attached state, I can be with another person without trying to figure them out or fix them. It is “being” rather than “doing” and is what I recognize as an essential aspect of existential-phenomenological therapy.

But it doesn’t always happen. At times, I find myself distracted and constrained by preconceived ideas, and often these are theories I have come across about what therapy is, how people *really* are, how we function, or worse, how we “should” be. If I can’t validate ideas in my own experience, they remain above, as theory. And they stand as a barrier between the client and me.

In practice I want theory to fall away, after making something previously hidden stand out. Theory can do this for me when it matches something in my own experience. Otherwise it is imposed upon my experience and I must hold it upon myself continually by an act of will. This is uncomfortable, it gets in the way of being with a client, and—dare I say it?—feels “inauthentic” to me.

Something in the theories about intersubjectivity brings this uncomfortable feeling in my body. Although there is much that I agree with conceptually, intersubjectivity has a vexing tendency to exaggerate the shared world and disparage the individual. I need to reconcile something in this theory before I can “embody” it. And I need to make it mine before it can inform, rather than hinder, my work with clients. This paper is an attempt to explore intersubjectivity, mostly through the writings of Merleau-Ponty and Eugene Gendlin. My aim is to sketch their insights and see how they can fit my own experience and then how they might influence my work as a therapist.

I know that I am not a tightly sealed skin-bag, packed with the permanent details of an insular life. I realize there is no personal “I” separate

from my body. Intersubjectivity rightly challenges the Cartesian mind/body dualism that splits our science, culture, language, and the way we interpret our own experience. It questions the notion of “inner” life and “outer” reality, subject and object. Intersubjectivity encompasses philosophy of language, consciousness studies, phenomenology, developmental psychology, ontology, and more. Sometimes, these ideas seem to point toward the East and anonymous consciousness, egolessness, and the illusion of individuality. At times, I think the stance we take toward intersubjectivity relates to our personal views of individual finitude, especially mortality. Perhaps it also signifies where we presently find ourselves along the existential potentials of authenticity and “fallenness.”

However, I want to concentrate on what we mean by individual experience *after* intersubjectivity. In this discussion, I will artificially postpone issues of philosophy of language, psychology of perception, child development, etc., except where they impinge upon the question of “individual” experience. I will sketch the ideas of Merleau-Ponty: the primary role he ascribes to perception, his view of the body, and his comments about the possibility of “inner” individual experience. I will compare these ideas with the philosophy of Eugene Gendlin; the primary role he ascribes to bodily interaction, and an alternative view of “inner” individual experience. All the time, I am looking for a way to find the insights of intersubjective theory in my own experience so I can incorporate them into my psychotherapeutic practice.

#### WHY DO WE NEED AN INTERSUBJECTIVE UNDERSTANDING AT ALL?

Man is not an object, locked within his essence like a chair. Although we stand out as objects, we also connect to other objects through our consciousness. We are intentional, directed toward things without being simply reduced to a thing ourselves. Intersubjectivity is an attempt to understand that we are both subject and object, where “the subject *is* his body, his world, and his situation, by a sort of exchange” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 72).

The Cartesian *self-contained* subject cannot account for our lived world. Culture and community are based on a human “interworld,” a “world of shared meaning which transcends individual consciousness” (Crossley, 1996, pp. 3–4). Merleau-Ponty says society is a between-world, neither “inside” subjects nor “outside” like an object. It is the fabric which connects us and to which we belong.<sup>1</sup> Rationality and language rely upon an appeal to common evidence and the reciprocity of different “individual” perspectives. A world of solitary solipsistic beings cannot explain this.

The existential-phenomenological perspective emphasizes “the totality of the lived situation” rather than “an abstracted subjective aspect of it” (Cohn, 1997, p. 25). This is not a total denial of the existence of the

individual. Nevertheless, it creates the tension that I want to explore between individual experience and this intersubjective field. Merleau-Ponty's view of child development suggests that intersubjectivity is our primordial experience and individual subjectivity develops out of this.

### THE WORLD OF THE CHILD

According to Merleau-Ponty, we begin life intersubjectively and we gradually discover ourselves through the other. The parent's treatment of the child as an other allows the child to discover that he or she *is* a subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> The child feels they are "in" the other's body just as they are "in" their image reflected by the mirror. "There is thus a system (my visual body, my introceptive body, the other) which establishes itself in the child, never so completely as in the animal but imperfectly, with gaps" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 135).

From about 6 months of age, we begin to leave behind an initial phase of "pre-communication," a kind of anonymous collectivity, and start the never fully realized process of distinction as individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 119). The child progresses to the realization that his body is closed in on itself, "the visual image he acquires of his own body (especially from the mirror) reveals to him a hitherto unsuspected isolation of two subjects who are facing each other" (*ibid.*). Seeing his body as an object establishes his difference.

In *The Child's Relations With Others*, Merleau-Ponty says that the child lives in an "elasticity" that sometimes makes him find his own solutions to the challenges of the environment. This means that the "internal characteristics of the subject" intervene in his way of relating to what is "outside" (p. 108). The child discovers his point of view and thereafter always takes a position on every situation. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is not possible to separate what is acquired for the child through his upbringing and what is natural—these are two indistinct aspects of a "single global phenomenon."

As adults, intersubjectivity remains the ground of our experience. Out of it grew a realization of our subjective dimension, but this development does not replace our initial anonymous connectivity. Intersubjectivity sustains our ability to relate to the world—it makes us forever connected. Nicola Diamond (1966, p. 129) points out, from Merleau-Ponty's *The Child's Relations with Others*, that emotional ties between people are possible only because we continue to live primarily in the other's gestures and responses.

For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity allows us to comprehend "the primordial community which sustained both conflict and so-existence" (Schmidt, 1985). He said the fundamental experience of "common ground" between people was what allows us to have a community, whether harmonious or discordant. According to Diamond, "The individual lives in a

multipersonal field and conversely this inhabits the individual” (1996, p. 305). We remain always exposed to the other and can take the other’s different perspectives on ourselves. We are always in relation to this “exteriorized look” and so are “seen” even when alone. In this sense, there remains an “anonymous” aspect to our perception. It is not I or the other who sees, for example, but a “vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh” (Schmidt, 1985, p. 96). This is reminiscent of Heidegger’s dictum that we have eyes because we are a “seeing being”—not a seeing being because we have eyes. Merleau-Ponty is stressing that perception (of all types) is our primary means of being-in-the-world.

#### THE PRIMACY OF PERCEPTION

Merleau-Ponty asserts that we are always in the world of perception and that our consciousness is thus a perceptual consciousness. By perception, Merleau-Ponty means all perceptual modalities *and their interrelationship*. Perception is seen as an “originary process, rooted in the dialectical relationship of the organism and its environment, which gives birth to both the subject and the object of perception” (Crossley, 1996, p. 27). It is clear that Merleau-Ponty means much more than is usually meant by “perception.”

Perception in this sense is not only an experience of objects, but also a connection with them. It includes a kind of pre-condition that makes perception in the usual sense possible. This “perceptual consciousness” or “perceptual field” forms in “the space between perceiver and perceived by means of the active engagement of the two” (Crossley, 1996, p. 29). So perceptions are not “in” the perceiver, but out there connecting us to the world. Perception is not an inner representation of the outer world, but an opening into that world. It is the line between us, held by us both, and on which our various interactions hang.

Our perceptual openness enjoins us to an interworld . . . given that perceptual consciousness is the basis of all consciousness for Merleau-Ponty, human consciousness itself is therefore defined as an opening onto alterity (Crossley, 1996, p. 29).

Perceptions always presuppose the body as the place from which the perspective is taken. These different bodily perspectives, plus differences in culture, intention, mood, etc., mean we will not respond to the environment identically. Merleau-Ponty says that an “intersubjective system” forms between the body-subject and another. This system is not broken by “reflective objectification.” It is not reducible to either pole, but calls forth the action of each. Two subjects interlock and engage. They become absorbed in a system that is more basic than the individuals that form its parts. For example, it is only *after* a conversation that

one reintegrates it into one's own personal life and personal history; that is, that one attributes certain ideas to oneself and some to the other. At the moment of the discourse all thoughts belonged only to the system of interactions which forms between the interlocutors. . . . Ideas are not a property of the individual in such cases but a property of the pair. They form in an interval or between (Crossley, 1996, p. 33).

Merleau-Ponty (and his commentators) oscillates between acknowledging subjective experience as an aspect of intersubjectivity and radically questioning all assumptions of individual "inner" subjectivity. He wants to emphasize our connection, "the flesh," rather than our discrete appearance before each other.

It is an affair of what Merleau-Ponty termed "the flesh," a name he chose to designate that for which "there is no name in traditional philosophy." Neither "matter" nor "some 'psychic' material," nor "a fact or sum of facts 'material' or 'spiritual'," nor "a representation for a mind," nor "the union or compound of two substances"; the flesh—in one of the few positive definitions Merleau-Ponty ever gave—"is the sensible in the two-fold sense of what one senses and what senses." It is an attempt to designate, without untangling, the chasm which is our primordial relation with the world (Schmidt, 1985, p. 100).

Beginning with perception is potentially confusing, especially when "perception" is defined in such an unusual *and twofold* way. We end up again with a subject/object or two "subjects," who are both mixed together *and* distinct. Each is a perceiver and a perceived—a separation within the intersubjective field that also connects them. But this connecting field, according to Merleau-Ponty, is also "perception." Perhaps Merleau-Ponty used "perception" for both the necessary conditions of perception and for perception itself, because there wasn't a term for the underlying ground, or an understanding of how it works implicitly in human life. For the past thirty years, Eugene Gendlin—philosopher, psychologist, and psychotherapist—has been working on this implicit ground of being.

#### THE PRIMACY OF THE BODY

Gendlin argues that the subjective/objective approach to understanding comes precisely because we mistakenly start with perception. He says we can move beyond this distinction if "we become able to speak from how we interact bodily in our situations" (Gendlin, 1997, p. 15). I think "interaction" is a useful term to distinguish between Merleau-Ponty's two uses of "perception." Interaction signifies the connecting field in which perception is possible. Interaction does not divide into two perceptions—between two people, there exists one interaction.

Gendlin is aware that Merleau-Ponty tries to widen perception into an interactional unity in the body. But, he argues, perception involves a datum, “something that exists *for* someone, happens *to* someone, or is present *before* someone. . . . If one begins with perception, then interaction seems to consist of two individual percepts” (Gendlin, 1992, p. 343). According to Gendlin,

Animal bodies, including ours—sense themselves, and thereby we sense the interactional living we are. In sensing themselves, our bodies sense our physical environment and our human situations. The perception of colors, smells, and sounds is only a small part of this (Gendlin, 1992, p. 344).

In order to point out the role of interaction, Gendlin returns “perception” to its classical psychology sense. Merleau-Ponty wanted perception to include the way our body is an interactional being-in-the-world. But, can perception really mean not only the sensing of cold air, but also breathing, not only the sight, smell, and taste of food, but also feeding? Can perception mean growing, sweating, and walking—all the ways the body usually senses its living in context *including* its constant implying of a next interaction?

Gendlin writes of a “...”, the sense of a situation, and the implying of a next move in that specific situation. Since it includes implying an action that has not yet taken place (and possibly never will),

the “...” is not just a perception, although it certainly includes many perceptions. Is it then a feeling? It is certainly felt, but “feeling” usually means emotion. The “...” includes emotions, but also so much else. Is it then something mysterious and unfamiliar? No, we always have such a bodily sense of our situations. You have it now, or you would be disoriented as to where you are and what you are doing. . . . Isn’t it odd that no word or phrase in our language as yet says this? “Kinaesthetic” refers only to movement; “proprioceptive” refers to muscles. “Sense” has many uses. So there is no common word for this utterly familiar bodily sense of the intricacy of our situations. . . . In therapy we now call it a “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1992, p. 346–347).

Gendlin agrees mostly with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy while objecting to Merleau-Ponty’s exaggeration of “perception.” Expanding “perception” to include the unnamed underlying “system” has contributed to confusion and contradictions in theories of intersubjectivity and a downplaying of the implicit role of the individual’s body. Gendlin, like Merleau-Ponty, describes a bodily interaction that is prior to language, that is not fully formed, and that is interactional. He has also shown how it is definitely more than perception. It is, significantly, our sense of a situation *and* the implied next step for us in that situation. Situations are process, and this is therapeutically useful. It shows a body sense that is always intersubjective.

This sense is never separate from the situation and never merely internal. It is also not chaos, a mish-mash of perceptions or concepts. It exceeds ambiguity because it is intricately woven. It includes more than we can bring into our awareness or our language. Yet it is readily accessible in experience and thus we are able to work with it phenomenologically. It is not a theory. It is *there*.

Merleau-Ponty rescued the body from being thought of as a thing. For him the body is an orienting center of perception, not just perceived. Gendlin wants to show how the body is more than the precondition for perception. He sees the human infant's body at birth as already implying its environment—very intricately. “The human infant implies the breast and the mother” (Stern, 1985, cf. Gendlin, 1992, p. 350). Perceptions are received into this intricate environment with the senses already forming a system (as Merleau-Ponty also says). “Infants come with good mothering already implicit, interpersonal communication already ongoing, and the complexity of syntax already in place. They need not first be made from perceptions” (ibid.). We can abstract nature and nurture as two aspects but phenomenologically they *always* exist together in interaction. The interaction is what *is*—our *living* from (before) birth to (after) death.<sup>3</sup>

Gendlin concedes that of course after language is learned, the body changes. But that first body, as Merleau-Ponty also argued, continues to function now. *That* is intersubjectivity. As the primary intersubjective field continues to function in the adult, it also continues to imply itself in language, and continues to move beyond language. Gendlin summarizes his thought,

If one begins with the body of perception, too much of interaction and intricacy has to be added on later. Perception is not the bottom. There is an implicit interactional bodily intricacy that is first—and still with us now. It is not the body of perception that is elaborated by language; rather it is the body of interactional living in its environment. Language elaborates how the body implies its situation and its next behavior. We sense our bodies not as elaborated perceptions but as the body-sense of our situations, the interactional whole-body by which we orient and know what we are doing (1992, p. 350).

#### “INSIDE” / “OUTSIDE”—RETAINING A PHENOMENOLOGY OF “MINE”

Speaking of the individual subject has traditionally implied speaking of inner experience. The accepted intersubjective view is that the inner/outer distinction is a faded remnant of dualism. This seems at least partly true, but also problematic. What do we say when our clients, and we, insist we have “inner experience”? Is it just an artifact of dualistic language and concepts?<sup>4</sup> If we work phenomenologically, we want to clarify our own and

our client's understandings but do we want to contradict our lived experience in order to adhere to a theory of intersubjectivity?

Where does the gradual shading of world and personal perspective become the specific hue of "my own" experience? Intersubjectivity (in both Merleau-Ponty's view and Gendlin's view) certainly challenges the everyday sense of having one's own "pure" experience, of being a self-contained and defined subject standing back from and perceiving a world of objects and others. Yet, starting with Merleau-Ponty's twofold definition of perception appears to result in an intersubjective theory that at times emphasizes connection to the point of negating individual experience while at other times it appears to restore the subject to its dualistic stronghold. It is confusing if not contradictory ("Merleau-Pontians" may say it is "ambiguous").

*Merleau-Ponty's first meaning of perception* emphasizes connection and the between-world. He even says the meaning of an emotion is not an internal fact, but a variation in our relations with others, expressed in our bodily behavior. "If I try to study love or hate pure from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart-throbs, in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 52). Merleau-Ponty says introspection gives almost nothing and he fundamentally questions the idea that a person has privileged access to his or her own experience.

We must reject that prejudice which makes "inner realities" out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. xii).

In his book, *Intersubjectivity, The Fabric of Social Becoming*, Nick Crossley writes that not only are "mental events" equally visible from the outside as from within, but "it follows from this that we become aware of our own mental states in the same way that we become aware of the mental events of others. Thus, our mental states are, in principle, always intersubjectively available by way of our performances" (1996, p. 34). In this view emotions are not inner states but are visible actions, connecting us in the "system" we form with others.

Crossley seems to construe equally visible as equally aware. However, if I am experiencing a mental event (say, the emotion of anger), it may be actually *more* visible to others than to me, but at the same time I may still have more awareness of its meaning. Others *perceive* the expression on my face and interpret it. I *feel* a "something" in my body while being unaware that it shows on my face at all. I am aware of my own "mental state" (the wrong term) through my body. They are aware I am feeling *something*

because it is visible on my face. If we work phenomenologically, we will not want to assume we know what that something “is” in ourselves or in another. To become aware of its meaning, the person experiencing this “something” needs to approach it openly, *as it is experienced in his/her body*. Merleau-Ponty was wrong to assert that this “inner observation” gives “almost nothing.” It gives information about the whole life situation as it is being lived. And how it is being lived for one is not equally accessible to the other.

Of course, as has been mentioned previously, Merleau-Ponty and Crossley are aware they need to take account of some form of individual perspective. Here *the second use of the term “perception”* is introduced and begins to overtake the first. It is not a return to a solipsistic dualism but it approximates the classical psychology use of perception. It may presuppose connection but it emphasizes different perspectives, different subjectivities.

Since others are not for me what they are for themselves, I have no experience of others. Even if I wanted, by a kind of spiritual sacrifice, to renounce my cogito in order to posit that of others, it would still be from me that he would have his existence, and by which he would still be my phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 41).

Crossley says we can only respond “pre-reflectively and pre-reflexively” toward others if they do. “If they elect to hide their pain and to contain it within a private space, then there is nothing we can do” (*ibid.*, p. 37). This suggests that a person can keep their “mental events” from the other. And it makes intersubjectivity into a potential rather than the ground of our being-in-the-world. Crossley identifies these various intersubjective “stances” as egological intersubjectivity and radical intersubjectivity. To Crossley, we swing between these two poles of relations with the world. The person can be open to the communicative relationship with others and the world, or the person can withdraw from this. And who, or what, is this person? This points to a subject of sorts that is not anonymous but is negotiating the individual boundary between self and other, in a motivated way.

Nicola Diamond offers a kind of reconciliation of these two emphases in the intersubjective theory. Any reference to an “inner” or “outer” world is placed within a broader frame of interpersonal reality. “Inner experience in this context is always connected with interpersonal communication, and is not viewed as existing inside an individual per se. It is not a private world which has reference to itself and is cut off from a world” (Diamond, 1996, p. 306). Diamond is not implying there is no internal organizing personality, but that in understanding human relations, there is no ontological divide between subject and object. “We dwell in each other.”

Any differentiation between inner and outer world from an intersubjective perspective is an experiential division not to be confused with a metaphysical reality. . . . An experiential division requires an establishment of a boundary in an interpersonal field. As such, it is not a fixed, static boundary, shored up once and for all, but on the contrary, it is a boundary that can be renegotiated within the context of ongoing relationships (Diamond, 1996, p. 311).

We can have an experience of an inner world, but that should not lead us to an ontological claim about a discrete inner world separate from external reality. Of course, our “inner experience” is of our whole situation, not a discrete “inner.” But what Merleau-Ponty, Crossley, and others write is often not at all true of our experience as we live it out superficially. This is an issue for phenomenologists, especially those practicing therapy.

Gendlin wants to think directly from our experience, our living in situations. He points out that the distinction between “outer” and “inner” is merely derived. “What is wrong is that our lives in situations now seem merely inner, not quite real, because the space of pattern-things is taken as independent, as if the bodily-situational environment were merely added-on” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 117–118). Gendlin sees the bodily-implied situations as more real and intricate than the empty space of patterns. But they end up seeming subjective, inner, divorced from “external reality.” Our human meanings become secondary, only interpretations. Returning explicitly to the phenomena of how we live as bodies interacting with the environment gives us an insight into how we are intersubjective.

#### EMBODYING INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN PRACTICE

Gendlin has described the hermeneutic interactions between our experience and symbols in a way that supports an intersubjective understanding while remaining verifiable in our lived experience. He calls it “Focusing.” It is a way of paying attention to the “between” as it is *in* the individual’s body. The bodily felt experience is the intricate interaction of self and world, elaborated by perception and language. “Gendlin’s analysis always directs our attention to the phenomenological and hermeneutical intricacies of meaning-forming and meaning-altering processes” (Levin, 1997, p. 62).

The psychotherapeutic usefulness of Gendlin’s philosophy is that it is “methodologically individualized.” But he is concerned this might be “misunderstood as individual rather than social or historical. The historical process is individual when we think further. History moves through individuals because only individuals think and speak” (Levin, 1997, p. 95). So, our experience is not “subjective” or “intrapsychic” but interactional. Its location is “inside” but it is the outside-inside. According to Gendlin,

what we feel is not inner content, but the sentience of what is happening in our living with others.

A “...” may come. Then one finds that one’s whole life-situation was in this at-first murky body-sense. We see: The body-sense is not subjective, not just internal, not private, it is the implicit situation (cf. Levin, 1997, p. 241).

We cannot construct a life situation by combining bits of our perceptions. We need to recognize and dwell with the implicitly intricate bodily sensing in order to think about our situations. “We humans live from bodies that are self-conscious of situations. Notice the ‘odd’ phrase ‘self-conscious of situations.’ ‘Conscious,’ ‘self,’ and ‘situations’ are not three objects with separate logical definitions” (Gendlin, 1999, p. 233).<sup>5</sup> An important aspect of our human situations is how they imply steps of “carrying forward.” These steps can come from the bodily awareness that “is” our situations.

Thinking and speaking from awareness of this “...” is exact and not arbitrary. I cannot convince “it” to be something other than what it is. It is my facticity, my thrownness, my living situation, and I may not like it at all. But I am not free to just change it, to mold it into something nicer.

In therapy, I can pay attention to it in a specific way. This brings new information about my interactions in the world of other people. This process allows the bodily “...” to take steps forward. It is never permanent content. It is further process. Language, when it speaks from this “...”, is a way to live the situation forward. “Such sensitive phenomenological attention to an implicit speech which is ‘not yet formed’ is precisely what is precluded by standard conceptual thinking about the body” (Wallulis, 1997, p. 277–278). The body becomes person and world together. It is subjective and intersubjective as they are always, together. *There is no pure subject and no pure intersubjective.*

The body is more than the precondition for perception, as Merleau-Ponty sometimes suggests. If it was only that, then of course it is not surprising that life must happen in the “between” (wherever that is), and that paying attention to bodily sensations gave Merleau-Ponty so little. But Gendlin has shown the body *is* our way of living in situations *and* the process of generating our next situations. Situations are both demandingly precise and so vague that they are usually hardly known and never known completely. In fact, the process of “knowing” them already changes them into the next situation, so that no situation is ever quite captured.

The important point here is that I don’t need to be familiar with or even agree with Gendlin’s philosophy to apply his insights in the situation between my client and me. His philosophy is also a phenomenological pointing. That’s what I embody and use in therapy.

My client’s tight facial expression reveals something about his state, but what? The intersubjective theory says “I live in the other’s expression,”

but how do I use this concept/hypothesis with my client? The theory says I have equal access to my client's "mental state" but what do I do with this as I sit across from him? Surely, I'm not going to tell him what his own expression is about!

The meaning of my client's tight face is not as accessible to me as it is to him. It is only visible to me. Contrary to Merleau-Ponty, one person is experiencing the meaning of that tight face in a potentially accessible way. I could guess about my client's experience and be right because I potentially know my own experience of a tight face. But I could also be very wrong. I can have an intuition that carries a lot of truth. I can pick up an impression of what is "between" us. But the tightness does not fall in the "between." Its *effect* is there, shared, but its coming is in one of us.

It is a non-phenomenological assumption to think that the expression is shared, like it could have appeared on either face. *For some reason*, it appears on his face. It is tied up with *his* experience of the whole situation, his view of *our* shared present, past, and future interaction, crossed with *his* specific meanings. It is certainly not a pure subjective phenomenon. When he pays attention to his bodily experience, he will find what *salien-**cies*<sup>6</sup> in him are living in that situation. It is the outside, or the between, that his body crosses with its own perspective, including its forward implying. That brings the tightness *in him*. His tight expression is the implicit crossing of many multiple strands of past, present, and future interaction, intersubjective and individual. It is not *before* him as a perception. Although it is before me, it is also a part of my implicit situation, not just a perception. From both of us the session is capable of being sensed from "inside." Whether we are aware of it or not, this sensing *is* the session.

I can invite my client to sense what he is feeling bodily with me right now. If he elects to do this, after some silent "focusing"<sup>7</sup> he may say he is tense, and it feels like he is holding back from me. After another silence, he might say it's like he really wants to say something but is afraid how I will react. Then, "No, it's like I feel I want to *confess* something." This word brings a deep breath and a slight easing. Saying the word carries the process along briefly. Then he is silent again. Slowly, he eventually says this feeling reminds him of the time he tried to tell his father he is gay. Now his expression softens, his eyes become moist. He begins to speak more freely, emotionally, about his relationship with his father and about seeing me for twenty sessions and not being able to talk about his sexuality. We both feel the poignancy of this moment. We begin to discuss his feelings around his sexuality. As the session continues, it carries our interaction forward, because our attention is on our one intersubjective world, as it exists each moment in our individual bodies.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I am aware that there are many different readings of Merleau-Ponty and many different emphases in his writing. All I claim is that this paper represents an initial struggle to engage with these ideas and to find a way to make them more than ideas. For now, Gendlin's intersubjective philosophy points me back to my own experience. In doing so, I can embody these ideas and have them as a part of who I am. This makes the insights of intersubjectivity available in my way of being with a client. It does not remain hypothetical and it does not land between my client and me, making our contact more difficult. It allows me to understand "inner experience" in a new way, rather than feeling I have to deny it. *In a sense* (only) it is "inner" by location, not content. It also suggests that the individual perhaps just *is* this process of constantly dipping the personal in the shared, resurfacing as a new individual over and over.

## NOTES

1. In his recent book, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World*, the Dalai Lama argues that our affluent Western society is more than ever a denial of this shared fabric and this is the cause of our increasing isolation and unhappiness.
2. An intrusive parent can inhibit the child's ability to develop their own sense of separateness and thus their subjective space. Likewise, I would suggest that a depriving parent's absence could jar the child into a sense of separateness too soon. This is reminiscent of the object relations theory of schizoid development (especially the theory of the "existential" psychoanalysts Fairbairn and Guntrip).
3. We now know that the embryo interacts with its environment before birth, but the corpse also interacts. Decomposing is the interaction of corpse and environment. We could even say that the "life" of the corpse begins with the death of the body.
4. Terms such as "psyche," "subject," "mental events," etc., are used by intersubjective thinkers who have, in essence, modified or rejected their conventional uses without explicitly re-defining them. This complicates an attempt to explore the issue of inner/outer and what is now meant by "my" experience.
5. Gendlin offers a process model of "consciousness": "consciousness is the self-sentience of making and re-making itself-and-its-environment. It is an organismic-environmental interaction process" (Gendlin, 1999, p. 234).
6. "Saliencies" is a term I want to use to refer to what sensitivities are currently standing out in our interaction. What the process between us is at that moment highlighting from our bodies of inheritance + experience.
7. "Focusing" is what Gendlin has called this style of self-reflection on bodily felt experience. It has been the subject of intense university research and is highly correlated with change in psychotherapy.

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