

Chapter 6

PALPABLE EXISTENTIALISM:

AN INTERVIEW WITH EUGENE GENDLIN

Greg Madison and Eugene Gendlin

Introduction

My interview with Eugene Gendlin forms the centrepiece of this chapter. To frame the dialogue, I offer my own introduction to Gendlin's thought, with special emphasis on the experiential concept of *carrying forward*, followed by my concluding remarks about an experiential form of existential therapy. Although Gendlin agrees with much of the introduction and conclusion, he would want to derive it all philosophically, highlighting for the reader the actual process of concept formation and other specific aspects of his philosophy.

Gendlin's way from philosophy to psychotherapy

Gendlin's orientation to philosophy, and to life, seems to me to involve a mingling of the constantly inquisitive with the ubiquitously sceptical. At university he found that he could take up the vocabulary of any philosophical system and from within that worldview he could translate his own concerns into that language. His philosophical ideas could be expressed across many systems without losing what he wanted to say; his points were more than the language of any particular discourse. This is because he found a way to remain grounded in his own experience, allowing him to generate new concepts while also checking alternative theories and ideas with what he knows from his own living.

Gendlin realized that he was doing a kind of phenomenology, but a phenomenology that came *back to* experience after it formulated something *from* experience. He was discovering that there is a kind of unformulated experience that can be pointed to – *an experience that is not itself* just another formulation but implicitly includes everything that we have previously formulated and lived. There is *something* coming freshly that is more than set content and symbols (something that is not itself a ‘thing’). Gendlin was beginning to formulate the concretely felt *relation* between experience and concepts.

Gendlin imagined that psychotherapy would be a unique place to investigate how symbols such as words, images, phrases, or concepts arise freshly from unformulated implicit experience. He joined Carl Rogers’ counselling centre in Chicago, but there he found that therapists did not understand his philosophical inquiry. Gendlin was interested in ‘pre-conceptual feelings’ not just talk or defined emotions. He did not deny that the content of what a client says can be meaningful and revealing, but he insisted that words alone are never the sole avenue to the meaning that each person actually lives. Gendlin found that the extent to which clients refer directly to their bodily-felt experience during sessions correlates with ‘successful’ therapy outcomes as defined by various measures including the client’s own evaluation (Gendlin et al. 1968). Clients who can pause and ‘check’ their words and ideas with the body sense of their issue remain grounded in their actual experience – they sense a bodily-felt response when they express how they really live a particular situation. Gendlin developed the Focusing (1981) instructions in an attempt to assist more people to gain direct access to their lived meanings in this bodily felt way.

Gendlin's Focusing is a special kind of thinking that brings to awareness the ongoing *process of symbolizing*. He emphasizes the ground of thinking as much as the explicit fruit that it bears: 'The process of forming and thinking is never limited by the possibilities we formulate. Those are only products from it' (Gendlin, personal communication). In my view Gendlin's writing allows words to acquire novel meanings in order to point the reader to this process level where new concepts can be formulated from experience.

Gendlin's emerging philosophy

The comments that I offer here can only present some results from the philosophy Gendlin has worked out in two long texts (Gendlin 1997a; 1997b) and many articles. Gendlin's philosophy continues the existential tradition of phenomenological attention to concrete human living with his fundamental reconsideration and direct employment of the body. Human embodiment was crucial in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1962). Already for Sartre (1956) and Heidegger (1962) *the body* is not just the object that appears in the mirror. It is not just a fragile machine that medicine repairs, an inert lump for the sculptor to mould, a computer that needs upgrading.

In addition, for Gendlin the body is not a passive derivative of culture - Gendlin's conception of the body is always *more than* these models of the body: the living body *is interaction*. We *feel* our life events because our bodies are a *continuous experiencing of* the whole situation that we are living. We are not only taking in information through five senses and then computing that information in the mainframe of the brain. The

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whole body *is* interaction with its environment in an intricate way. This back and forth being--world interaction is so radically characteristic of 'body' that *to talk of a separate 'body' and 'environment' leads us into familiar but mistaken assumptions about living.*

For Gendlin 'environment' does not mean just what is 'out there', 'external'. Gendlin says that we *are* body--environment interaction, a vastly larger system than the body of medical science; this echoes Merleau-Ponty and others in the existential tradition. '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: 72)

I see Gendlin's practice of Focusing as offering phenomenological access to the sentience of the world, living right now *as* unique bodies. Attending to this sentience can generate a murky, difficult to describe *felt sense*, usually in the middle area of the body. Such a felt sense gives us information about our living in actual situations because life is not formed out of isolated internal objects or bits of perception: 'we humans live from bodies that are self-conscious of situations. ... "Conscious", "self", and "situations" are not three objects with separate logical definitions.' (Gendlin 1999: 233) Situations *are* body--environment process, and direct access to this is therapeutically vital for the client, because it offers a tangible *sense* that can *unfold* step by step into novel less restrictive ways of living these situations. It is this process of new bodily *unfolding* that we will explore further in the interview below.

As existential psychotherapists we also stress the importance of embodiment yet often without an awareness of *how* to pay attention to the body. We struggle to translate

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philosophical insights into moment-by-moment sensitivities in our sessions with clients (Madison 2001). A felt sense typically forms in the trunk area, as an unclear but tangible sensation. *If attended to directly where it forms in the body, a felt sense can respond with new meanings confirmed with shifts in the bodily feeling.*

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