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The gestalt cycle of experience: early formulations

In *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* Fritz Perls proposed the concept of the cycle of inter-dependency of organism and environment (Perls, 1947: 44) in which he outlined a map of experience covering six phases in the process of the organism contacting the environment. Below I offer an example of this cycle in relation to an activity (my writing this point):

1. The organism is at rest
   A task then emerges for me and I settle to write Point 13 of this book on my computer.
2. A disturbing factor that may be internal or external comes into awareness
   Whist writing this example my three-year-old granddaughter comes bouncing into the room demanding that I tell her a story.
3. An image or reality is created
   'Hell, my wife knows that I'm busy!' is my initial reaction. That then subsides as I make contact with the yearning face and wide-open eyes before me.
4. The answer to the situation is aimed for
   I decide to leave this work until later and put my energies into creating a story for my granddaughter.
5. There is a decrease in tension as achievement of gratification or compliance with the demands result in . . .
   The tension created by an interruption to what I had planned subsides as I reconfigure my field i.e. shelve my original task in favour of the new demand from my environment.
6. The organism returning to balance
   The story is created and told.

With its roots in the above cycle PHG (1951) conceptualized a process of contacting that journeyed through four phases. These four phases in forming a gestalt were identified as: fore-contact, contact, final contact and post-contact. The sequential process

demonstrates how the figure/ground dynamic shifts during the experience of contact. To illustrate this process let us take the example of the individual responding to a need for food.

Fore-contact – Excitement or energy surfaces in the individual in response to sensations of hunger. These sensations stand out from other bodily and environmental factors that remain background.
Contact – Following excitation the individual responds by contacting their environment and mobilizing in search of food, exploring possibilities. The desired food now becomes figure; the initial sensations recede into the background. In order to meet the figural need, the individual needs to alienate other options that may be present. This may mean alienating competing needs say, a need for affection/touch. The emerging need will then be refined; for example, the individual chooses between eating something sweet or savoury and hence sharpens the figure.
Final contact – Contact with the food is sharply figural as the individual bites into and tastes the food. The rest of the environment and the body will now have receded into the background. For a few moments the sharp figure of the taste of the food is the only gestalt in existence for that individual.
Post-contact – The individual feels the satisfaction of the fulfilling meal and digests it. The on-going digesting of the food will continue in the background – unless s/he has eaten it too quickly and has indigestion! The recent figure that called for attention has now faded into the background and there is space for a new gestalt to emerge.

To fully appreciate the cyclical nature of phenomena, we need to appreciate and experience the void between gestalts. In relation to the above maps, this void would fall between 6 and 1 in the first example and is the space that is emerging in the post-contact phase in the second example. When we let ourselves go into the emptiness of this void fullness can emerge. Consequently, this space is known as the *fertile void.*