Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Relational Determination in Interpersonal and Intrapsychic Experience

To me the greatest gift of Gestalt theory is its faith in the human capacity to know, to understand, and to care for more than just ourselves, which would not amount to much without a credible theory to support it. Gestalt theory is grounded on a compelling view of the (relational) nature of experience, a capacity for insight based on awareness of relations, and for an indwelling sense of care. From the start, Gestalt theory's respect for truth and veridicality set it apart from mainstream schools of thought (e.g., behaviorism, psychoanalysis). Those theories shed needed light on human blindness, but left no room for truth or authentic value alongside darker or self-centered interests. Their reductionist accounts not only undermine the truth-value of their own pronouncements,¹ they invite us to live down to the low level they set for our species. Gestalt theory has a broader conception of human nature, and, indeed, of order throughout nature, with enough credibility to engage minds which realize that we are capable of something more.

Central to the Gestalt-theoretic view is its principle of relational determination (Asch, 1952), which provides a basis for relational understanding, that is, insight into the fitting relations that give rise to experience. In my eyes, this principle remains a goldmine for further development—not only for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (GTP), but for Gestalt theory in general. There is much more we can do to apply the insights of Gestalt theory to critical—but as of yet underserved—problem areas that GTP faces daily, and, more pressingly, to the clients we hope to better understand and help.

I admit that I am only now beginning to acquaint myself with GTP, which is virtually unknown in America, and further burdened by a language barrier. Of course, it is hard to find much trace of Gestalt theory in America generally. I am thankful to GTA for connecting me with ongoing work. And I continue to find inspiration from earlier generations—including a second generation of American Gestaltists. Among them is Solomon Asch, a giant in American psychology, whose work, regrettably, is little-known in Europe. When I think of relational determination

¹ If indeed "science can have no more weight and sense than it itself attributes to the human insight by which it is produced" (Köhler, 1938, p. 38).

(at least as it regards thought, value, social cognition), it is mainly Asch's view I have in mind (as described in his 1952 masterwork *Social Psychology*), especially as regards value, that account expands upon the work of Karl Duncker. Duncker's critique of ethical relativism (1939) includes an extraordinary hypothesis—of an *invariant relation between meaning and value*²—which is integral to Asch's view of relational determination. This notion of an organic relation between the meanings (apprehended) and valuations (ascribed) opposes the assumption of *meaning constancy* (see Duncker, 1939, p. 47), a core presumption of the elementaristic psychologies that Gestalt theory arose to reject.

Asch, a social psychologist, applied that principle of relationality mainly to interpersonal and cross-cultural value differences. The first order of business here will be to explore that application. His relational analysis of interpersonal and social conflict has immediate implications for psychotherapy. It will also prepare us to apply relationality to a deeper level of human experience—to the intrapsychic conflict around which consciousness and psyches are organized, which that organization is called upon to manage. In fact, intrapsychic conflict appears to have the same structural characteristics as interpersonal and societal conflict. Hopefully relational determination can offer as much to our understanding of intrapsychic organization and development as it does to our understanding of interpersonal or cross-cultural differences.

In the course of this discussion, I will explore some other Gestalt-theoretic topics and themes from the viewpoint of relational determination. Relational determination certainly invites—indeed, demands—the use of *phenomenology*, not only as a starting point for science, but in the service of conscious development generally. But while indispensable, phenomenology cannot be said to be a consistent source of unvarnished truth. For naïve experience regularly yields misapprehensions. Gestalt theory employs *critical realism* (Stemberger, 2021; Sterneke, 2021) to help identify and correct for blindspots and distortions naïve experience. One huge and consequential area of blindness concerns the common experience of “ego” and “self.” We might ask how critical realism might improve upon phenomenology there. For that matter, it is not clear to me not how well even Gestalt-theoretical conceptions of those terms stand up, in the full light of relational determination. We might also wonder how “I” or “me” might think or feel—or experience self and others—were that conscious sensibility to fully awaken to its own relational determination. We will explore these concerns in the following discussions.

So, the topic of this discussion is the *relational determination of meaning and value*, as described by Asch (1952), at the heart of which is Duncker's (1939) hypothesis

² Which I can imagine one day becoming an axiom in psychology, if not a psychological law.

of an *invariant relation of meaning and value*. Let us consider how relational determination bears upon our understanding of interpersonal or societal value differences and value change. Societal morality and its differences across place and time are commonly considered from the point of view of either absolutism or relativism. Gestalt theory takes issue with assumptions (e.g., meaning constancy, elementarism) underlying each of those “extremes.” To see this, we need to take a closer look at both relativism and absolutism, to more clearly see what corrective value relational determination may have for both.

First consider moral relativism, and Duncker’s (1939) critique of it. Relativism begins with an assertion that is hard to deny—that values differ and change. Duncker objected not to that fact, but to relativism’s interpretation of it. In overlooking the role of meaning and context in value experience, relativism takes the mere fact of value differences as evidence of fundamental differences in values. Value differences are thus assumed to be basic and irreconcilable, deprived of any basis in human understanding. Duncker pointed out that this conclusion rests on the (then apparently implicit, still largely untested) assumption of *meaning constancy*—which is the “essential proposition of ethical relativism” (Asch, 1952, p. 376). Meaning constancy assumes that practices receiving different valuations by different groups have the same fixed meaning for those groups. Accordingly, different groups may offer opposing valuations to practices they view identically (presumably regardless of differences in context or cultural setting).³ Duncker, and later Asch, rejected the idea that (in Asch’s words) “a fixed object of judgment [may suffer] change of evaluation” (1952, p. 420). Instead, Duncker provided anthropological evidence that differences in the valuation of a practice (e.g., infanticide, euthanasia, usury, dress codes) involved differences in the meaning it acquired in the context in which it was understood. If so, then meanings are not fixed, despite differences in context or valuation. Instead, change in valuation may signal change in meaning, due to change in underlying context. This exemplifies Duncker’s hypothesis of an *invariant relation of meaning and value*, which posits fitting and understandable relations between context and meaning as well as between meaning and value.

Asch (1952) further developed this relational viewpoint and its implications for absolutism. Moral absolutism, the common form of all traditional morality, views the truth or morality of a belief or practice to be absolute and unconditional—inherent in its very nature, and thus immune to contextual influence. So absolutism also partakes of meaning constancy, in denying a role for context in determination of meaning (and, by extension, valuation). Out of absolutism,

³ Meaning constancy in fact applies to two conjoined constancies, one with respect to differences in valuation, another with respect to differences in valuation, which in fact are mutually entailing.

relativism is born, inheriting its same questionable assumptions. Relativism builds its case on its collection of local absolutisms, which are categorical claims by their very nature, are bound to conflict some times. In their shared disregard for the role of context in the determination of meaning and value, both view differences in moral outlook to be absolute and irreconcilable. Absolutism's assumption of meaning constancy, with respect to different contexts, leads inevitably to relativism's assumption of meaning constancy with respect to differences in valuation. These otherwise opposing viewpoints yet agree that moral differences are absolute and irreconcilable and they neither recognizes relational determination as an alternative to a set of assumptions that often blindly, and perhaps all too blithely, disregard the potential for both understandability and reconcilability in value experience.

The principle of relational determination concerning values and value differences may be boiled down to the following: The meaning of a thing (e.g., a belief, practice, or other object of judgment) is a function of the context in which it is understood; and its valuation is a function of that meaning. In short, valuation depends upon meaning, and meaning depends upon context. If so, then differences in valuation of an object need not represent basic differences in morality, but instead secondary differences in meaning or interpretation. Value differences may thus be attributable to differences in factual belief, rather than basic conflict in moralities. This relational view allows for an authentic, and even universal, moral sensibility, in which conflicting valuations may become understandable in light of corresponding difference in contexts. This potential for understandability across different moral outlooks allows for the possibility of reconcilability of their differences. (Of course this by no means skirts the moral challenge of assessing validity—for example, through bogus views of moral equivalence. Obviously some ways of construing a moral situation may be better informed, or more insightful, than others. Instead relational determination forces attention onto meanings and contexts, to explore questions of validity and veridicality there.)

So far, Gestalt theory has applied relational determination mainly to instances of interpersonal or societal conflict. This application alone has significant implications for psychotherapy onto at least to the extent that interpersonal and societal conflict contributes to internal distress and dysfunction. Note first the tendency for persons, particularly in more agitated states, will be to consider (possibly relational) differences to be absolute and irreconcilable. Moreover, this appearance of reconcilability may increase distress, since it offers virtually no hope or means for conflict resolution. On the other hand, relational determination makes room for the possibility of understanding across divergent moral views, when the contexts underlying those views more clearly recognized.

Were relationality better respected, persons might be better motivated to consider the contexts underlying not just others' value judgments, but their own as well.

Such exploration might help us realize that ultimately we are all part the same moral universe, which is not entirely blind. GTP is the ideal setting for this consciousness-raising.

1. Phenomenology

Clearly relational determination invites (indeed, requires) phenomenology onto to help clarify the meanings underlying our valuations, and to illuminate the contexts that give rise to those meanings. Allow me to revisit Köhler's familiar observation that...

There seems to be a single starting point for psychology, exactly as for all other sciences: the world as we find it, naively and uncritically. The naivete may be lost as we proceed. Problems may be found which were at first completely hidden from our eyes. For their solution it may be necessary to devise concepts which seem to have little contact with direct primary experience. Nevertheless, the whole development must begin with a naïve picture of the world. This origin is necessary because there is no other basis from which a science can arise. (Köhler, 1947, p. 3)

This statement certainly seems to apply in the work of psychotherapy, not only because it is scientific aspect, but also because phenomenology is the basic modality of conscious life generally.⁴ A comment by Asch (1952) lingers in memory as a constant reminder:

“... The first step in understanding action or conviction is to establish the way in which it appears to the actor and the reason it appears to him to be right” (Asch, 1952, p. 381).

As Stemberger (2013, see also Böhm, 2021) notes about the psychotherapeutic relation – where the therapist seeks to understand the client, who seeks to understand herself—it seems, there are two phenomenal fields in interaction, each with its own phenomenology: The client is challenged to describe her actual experience faithfully. The therapist tries to take in that communication with maximum fidelity to what is being communicated (i.e., to respect her phenomenology). This is not to say that the therapist should not have, or make, judgments and interpretations, but rather to distinguish those beliefs and assumptions from the client's actual report, so as to avoid filtering the latter

⁴ Surely consciousness brings knowledge and valid inference to bear on naive experience, but phenomenal objects regularly assimilate those superimpositions, which indistinguishable from the phenomenon itself. Experience, implicitly informed in such ways, may thus itself become naively held.

through the lens of the former. I find it striking, and rather daunting, that my consciousness—indeed, my psyche—is the lens (i.e., the virtual sense organ) upon which I must depend to “know” the other. The more I know myself, the better I can understand where I stop and my client begins—so as to minimize conflation of the two realms. Of course I do not expect to reach a place of full clarity and fidelity of perception in this lifetime. This general human limitation illustrates a larger truth about experience in general: Even when we seek to honor only the “primary observational data,” in the manner of Gestalt phenomenology, common experience is already overlain with all manner of (often implicit) assumptions and predispositions—some enculturated, some universal, some distinctly personal—which shape experience, generally unbeknownst to the experienter. Gestalt theory wisely draws attention to one virtually universal misapprehension—naïve realism, which is largely taken for granted across our species, even by those who “know” better.

2. Naïve Realism

Naïve realism, of course, errs in its failure to distinguish between the phenomenal and the physical object (Henle, 1977, in 1986, p. 3). It’s “identification of percepts with physical things” (Köhler, 1938, p. 405) takes the phenomenal (in this case, perceptual) experience to *be* physical reality. Here phenomenology regularly misapprehends common *experience* of the world—mistaking it for unvarnished, subject-independent physical reality. We cannot conclude from this that relational determination here fails to apply, but instead that that experience is liable not to fully recognize it. In short, relational determination need not entail “relational understanding” (Asch, 1952, p. 434). That is, perception (nor perhaps phenomenal experience generally) may not fully possess the “direct awareness of determination” that Köhler (1947) describes as “insight.” (p. 341; see also 1938, p. 257).

Naïve realism represents a particular class of misapprehensions, whose shortage of relational understanding includes a failure to detect that shortage. Persons are oblivious to the participation of the sensory-perceptual system in establishing the percepts they assume constitute “actual reality” (whatever that is), as experience gives no hint of other factors involved in the relational determination of the percept. Instead, the percepts themselves appear the sole cause of our experience of them—as though their shape, size, color, as well as other, secondary characteristics emanated directly from actual objects themselves (as though independent of the perceiver). All these properties seem to be fully real and self-evident in the object of perception. My point here is that this inadequate awareness (of crucial determinant of perception) itself alters the apparent constitution of the percept

(and by extension the associated physical entity), imbuing it with something of a sense of absolute, independent existence.

I suggest that naïve realism represents a class of misperception, which is but a subset of a more general kind of misapprehension, which applies not just to perception but throughout the phenomenal world—at least to the extent that we fail to fully recognize the utterly relational basis of all phenomena. We may simply lack full awareness or differentiation of the phenomenal contexts that give rise to conscious experience, often with no indication in the experience of its measure of blindness. (This limited contextual awareness may apply to the larger context of which the object of judgment is a part, or the object itself, which is a part-context with its own internal organization.⁵)

It seems likely to me that conscious experience is riven with relational blindness (in varying degrees), whose effect far exceeds mere lack of understanding. For what goes unseen may powerfully, yet tacitly, alter one's apprehension of what is seen—enough to distort its apparent constitution. In the following, Asch (1952) laments this general problem, but does not try to explain it. But, most helpfully, he notes one of its regular consequences:

... It is hard to escape the conclusion that our naive understanding of complex situations fails to take adequately into account their structured character and that we often endow social events with an *absoluteness* that is unwarranted.... Thinking, when it reaches the level of explicit self-awareness, may incline toward *absolutism* of method.... We shall not consider the reason for this shortcoming, but will attempt instead to show why we should think more resolutely in terms of relational determination if we are to do justice to social realities. (pp. 442-443, italics added)

Asch makes this comment while discussing his research on social and political beliefs, but it would seem to apply generally. For example, it draws attention to the human predilection for absolutist morality. In fact, the cases that Duncker and Asch make for relational determination were likely based on reports from absolutist moralities. Absolutism may have little trouble legitimizing its moral judgments within its wider context of enculturated beliefs and assumptions, some of which may appear as implicit truths. Clinging to their own cultural

⁵ So far context-bindness has been described from the viewpoint of the larger context within which the object of judgment is apprehended—where there is need for further conscious articulation or differentiation. The problem can also be described from the point of view of the object itself—which is also a context (i.e., a “part-context”), with its own internal organization. Thus Asch (1952) describes the “too easy assimilation of part to context” (p. 434). In this case, the object of judgment, a “part-context,” unconsciously absorbs (takes for granted?) the context within which it derives its meaning. Here the meaning, which was in fact relationally-derived, appears indwelling in the object itself. From either point of view, the need is for further conscious differentiation—of either the larger context of which the object is a part, or the context represented by the object itself, with its own internal organization.

perspective, it may be hard for persons to imagine different contexts that might sensibly support quite different valuations. Perhaps even where meanings *appear* fully grounded in an immediate context of perceived interrelations, the person may not fully recognize the relational basis of that context itself—the *context of the context*, as it were.

Let us return to consider the absolutizing tendency that Asch identifies, seemingly at times when relational understanding is in short supply particularly. By now, this surely deserves some attempt at explanation. Should not the principle of relational determination be able to account for even the appearance of absolutism it calls into question? Can it be that a restriction of relational understanding may itself give rise, at least, to a misleading appearance of absolutism? Here I am reminded of an article by Henle (1971/1986), whose theme is captured by a quotation within it, that “a well packed question carries its answer on its back as a snail carries its shell” (Henle, 1971/1986). As it turns out, the (false?) appearance of absoluteness that seems to arise in states of limited relational understanding may be implicit in the principle of relational determination itself. Moreover (in the fluctuant manner of field-theoretical dynamics—where causes are effects, and effects are causes) that absolutizing effect may provide further cause for the (relational) blindness that sustains it.

Where there is limited access to the contexts that give rise to the meanings we impute, perhaps we may have no recourse but to (mistakenly) attribute characteristics arising from those (unrecognized) contextual relations, to the object of judgment itself, as though it alone were the source of those characteristics. This misattribution of properties, borne of (unrecognized) contextual relations, to the object of judgment alone may confer upon that object a false sense of absoluteness. This seems partly due to the fact that there is no indication of this relational blindness in conscious experience. Where the relational basis of phenomena has not (through some process of differentiation or deconstruction) been fully revealed, not only does this limited relational awareness go unrecognized, the resulting experience may appear to be fully whole and convincing—both despite and because of this absolutization.

My conclusion here is that consciousness is perhaps rarely if ever fully informed of the contexts upon which its meanings and valuations rest. Where relational understanding (cf. *insight*) falls short, conscious meanings and valuations tend to acquire a false sense of absoluteness (proportionate to its degree of context-blindness). I use the word *absolutization* to refer to the attribution, in varying degrees, of fixed, inherent meaning to objects and situations whose meaning is nevertheless relationally determined. Thus relational determination serves not only to explain absolutization, but to predict it—as a natural consequence of a lack of relational understanding. In this case, the absolutization of experience

would serve to hide its limited understanding behind that false appearance of absoluteness.

Let us step back to consider various factor that give rise to a false or misleading attribution of absoluteness. Simple ignorance (of contexts) alone would seem to provide sufficient cause for absolutization. (Here I refer more to a local, piecemeal ignorance than more general blindness to relationality). At least two other factors, each presaged in observations by Henle, seem bound to intensify it.

Consider first the role of need states in the formation of contexts (Henle, 1955/1961), whose effect may be to further obscure the relational basis of experience. Up to now, we have looked at contexts only as cognitive regions or fields. But valuation is not simply a product of the relational determination of meaning. Experience is likely valuative throughout its arcs of conscious activity. For example, without some initial interest or motivation (including simple curiosity), there would not be an object of interest to consider. Consistent with this thinking, Henle points out that a “need or attitude may supply context” (1949/1961 p.179):

“... Under the influence of a need or an attitude, we are attuned to events to which we would not otherwise be sensitive. Under pressure of an unresolved need, we find things to be angry or worried or hurt about. ((Henle, 1949/1961 p.177)

Henle’s observation seems not only accurate, but worthy of expansion: Conscious contexts perhaps invariably arise within motivated states, whose interests and agendas serve, *often tacitly*, to organize and direct the further cognitive articulations and differentiation of those contexts. Stemberger (current issue) draws a similar conclusion:

This [phenomenal] field is mainly organized by the needs and quasi-needs of the phenomenal ego on the one hand, and the attractive and repulsive properties in its phenomenal environment on the other. (Stemberger, 2021, p. 5?).

Consider how the affective/motivational field might contribute to a false (or at least misleading) appearance of meaning constancy: For example, if one is caught up in a state of desire or fear (cf. attraction or aversion), attention generally focuses upon the object in which that fear or desire instantiates, rather than the subjective state itself. The object of that (positive or negative) interest will acquire a meaning reflective of the person’s interest in it, which may overlook other aspects or potentialities outside the current area of motivational engagement. In extreme cases, the object may seem to exist for the sake of the one perceiving it (as in the sexual objectification of one person by another). If one is held captive

by that affective/motivational state, the object of interest of that state may acquire of absolute goodness (or malignity) within that implicit affective field, reflective of the intensity of that interest.

If indeed experience is organized around underlying interests and motivations (either conscious or implicit), cognitive fields could perhaps be viewed as extensions and cognitive articulations of their underlying affective/motivational field. This cognitive differentiation would (1) define the object of interest in which underlying motivations and conations instantiate; (2) often reveal some fitting relations that render that interest understandable; (3) consider the means by which the object is attained or avoided; and thus perhaps (4) identify obstacles its attainment or avoidance. If one has the presence of mind, one might (5) consider implications or consequences of pursuing that interest (which would involve adjacent realms of interest). Within this affective state, not only the main object, but other objects of experience that bear upon satisfaction of the need or desire will also acquire meanings that reflect their role in that affective state (means, obstacles, alternatives, further costs or rewards, implications, consequences). In sum, while it may be said *that contexts give rise to valuations*, it also seems true that *valuations (in this case, preexisting valuative dispositions) give rise to contexts*.

A final factor in the absolutization of experience—which brings us to the destination of this article—expands upon the fact of underlying affective/motivations, to recognize that human motivations are themselves multiple and often poorly integrated, which regularly gives to *conflicting* construals and valuations. Henle addresses this experiential fact by way of the multiplicity of internal voices that consciousness sometimes quietly utters (and at times internally shouts). Her phenomenological study of the self (Henle, 1962) finds that self's most obvious aspect is "... the multiplicity of aspects it presents." (1962, p. 396) She draws from literature to illustrate this wide range of inner voices, and their modes of relating to one another. Some are quite inconspicuous, as in Plato's description of thought as "the unuttered conversation of the soul with herself ..." (in Henle, 1962, p. 396). Other voices may impose themselves more strongly in inner life—at times angrily, at other times supportively, as when Montaigne observes that "we have a soul that can turn upon itself, that can keep company with itself; it has the wherewithal to attack and defend, to receive and give ..." (Treichmann, trans, vol. 1, p. 238, in Henle, 1962, p. 396). T. S. Eliot, again quoted by Henle, draws attention to the quiet madness and vexation of some of these internal dialogues:

What is this self inside us, this silent observer,
Severe and speechless critic, who can terrorize us,
And urge us on to futile activity,
And in the end, judge us still more severely,
For the errors into which his own reproaches drove us?

-T. S. Eliot

The Elder Statesman (1959, p. 44)

These internal voices—at times attuned, at other times impossibly discordant—come literally to personify the particular value realm from which they arise. The tenor of its silent speech points to a fractious, unruly, and rather insecure inner society. The element of personification is important here, since it illustrates the role of personal identity as *agent* of the value realm with which one currently identifies. Just as objects of judgment acquire meanings that reflect the context in which they are understood, so too does self assume personal identity reflective of the value realm with which it currently feels a part. That identity represents that realm's interests in ongoing experience, which provides the basis for its relation with other realms.

We know of course that interests and motivations regularly conflict (or perhaps more precisely, they instantiate in currently incompatible ways). That is, that satisfaction of one interest (or realm of aligned interests) entails dissatisfaction of others interests or value realms. As Köhler (1938) writes, "in actual life, one requiredness is often the enemy of another ..." (p. 210). With the emergence of absolutist morality, this internal division becomes institutionalized as a structural characteristic of conscious (and psychical) organization. The establishment of (explicit) moral consciousness demands a moral partition of self. I use the word *polarization* to describe this psychical organization around internal opposition of co-arising parts. In keeping with enculturation, the self establishes a primary, societally aligned identity, which is defined in part by its categorical rejection of other, socially scorned contents (which may further meld around their common fate as objects of societal scorn). I find value in Erich Neumann's (1969/1990) depth psychological account of societal moral development, and use his designations of these two opposing inner selves, *persona* and *shadow*. This primary, prosocial identity "persona" is often what one assumes oneself simply to be). Persona-identity of course dis-identifies with personal contents that run afoul of the shared morality (which may unite to form a melded realm of rejection). Persons can often acknowledge (at least internally) a less well-scrubbed self, which may feel like the truer reality. And at times the attractions of this shadow realm may prove irresistible, and self resurfaces within that realm, with a different identity, which may elevate interests that persona scorns.

Consider moral enculturation through the lens of relational determination. It begins with a differentiation of the psychical whole, along moral lines, which sustains an ongoing capacity for moral differentiation. This gives rise to two part-contexts, in which each is organized around a categorical rejection of the other. The self maintains acceptable identity (moral and societal) through identification with the persona realm that repudiates its shadow. Each value realm thus arises through a process of mutual determination, with each organized to reject or deny the role of the other part in this co-determination. This relational co-determination not only lacks much relational understanding, but actively *resists awareness* of the role of each disowned part in the relational determination of the other. This willful blindness to relationality manifests in one's imputation of absolute-ness to each realm and one's presumption of absolute differences between them. Relational determination serves to reveal the massive imposture of the conscious identities that serve as its agents. Moreover, this psychical (and likewise, societal) structure does not seem to be aging well.

To make better sense of current societal morality, it helps to have some historical, developmental perspective. Sadly we lack evidence of the moral sensibilities of earliest human societies, that is why so much is left to conjecture. It seems unlikely that formal morality existed throughout human history. Other social species can surely do without it. There was probably a time in human history, when groups were small in number and deeply bonded, within an unquestioned sense of devotion to one another and the common good. Problematic behavior could be checked in part by dominance hierarchies, and what did erupt may have been largely tolerable and thus tolerated (perhaps more often from higher-status males, since "boys will be boys")—thus without the kind of moral stigma that attaches, at times arbitrarily, to persons today. This view accords with Erich Neumann's (1969/1990) credible, if speculative, account of the evolution of societal morality. He posits an early phase, of *primal unity*, prior to emergence of formal morality, when one's acceptance and belonging within the group was implicitly understood. However, past a certain point in population growth and societal complexification, this implicit sense of care may no longer suffice. There comes a need for a more explicit and concrete specification of do's and don'ts. Neumann thus describes the emergence of what he calls "the old ethic" —his term for traditional absolutist morality. As noted, this seems to require a moral partition of self, and a moral polarization of experience. Individuals must give up some comfortability within themselves, and their secure sense of belonging within the group. One's acceptance by the group, and thus one's self-acceptance, is now conditional upon meeting a new level more explicit level of moral responsibility. This new moral commitment requires persons to divide within themselves, and effectively against themselves. They are enculturated to embrace one part of self,

a persona-identity that is in an ongoing war with another part-context, shadow, that persona rejects. Moral consciousness requires one to identify with one part of self, which provides the basis for judging the other part. While we are all destined to fall short of absolutism's perfectionistic demands (by succumbing to shadow in one way or another), we may succeed on more modest, yet crucial, front—by at least establishing an explicit moral consciousness—the basic ingredient of which is a capacity for moral differentiation. This provides a basis for making prosocial moral choices, and, perhaps more importantly, for inhibiting harmful impulses. There would seem little potential for further psychical and societal development without internalization of an explicit moral sensibility.

Let us return to our earlier concern, essentially as to whether or how the moral polarization (arising from internal value conflict) further fuels absolutization (whose context-blindness thwarts relational understanding). Clearly, moral polarization heightens absolutization. For one thing, polarization itself amounts to absolutization and in this case, absolutization of moral differences. This heightens the sense of absoluteness within each realm, along with their sense of mutual irreconcilability. But perhaps we can begin to sense the necessity of absolutization, given the psychological conditions under which absolutist morality arose. The absolutization of differences seems unavoidable, if only for the strength and unruliness of human motivations and their need for containment. In this case, one absolute (e.g., sexual or aggressive urges) may require another (societally reinforced, categorical condemnation) to subdue it. The overriding need is to cleave to the good and resist the bad, even if that involves some misconstrual of the nature of moral categories and moral differences. Moreover, absolutist morality, taken with good conscience, may yet suffice to meet the needs of some societies, with a minimum of individual harm. But that appears less and less with the general rule.

Neumann describes some of the psychological and social consequences of rigid absolutist morality, in which one embraces a persona-identity to resist its now evil shadow. The better evolved and more responsible means of repudiation is suppression, in which persons consciously suffer their moral impurity. The more common method has been repression. Perhaps the worst result of this, perhaps more common in repression, is the externalization (cf. projection) of the darkness they cannot admit in themselves—onto scapegoats.⁶ Ready targets are minority groups, “aliens,” and, on occasion, even those whose morality surpasses the group standard. Additionally, repression tends to produce moral inflation. Denial and

⁶ The field-theoretical approach—mindful that experience of the external world is yet confined to one's own phenomenal field—captures the simplicity of the externalization process, which requires only a slight realignment of a phenomenal boundary within the phenomenal field. One adjusts the phenomenal border of self, such that the disowned content is now outside self's narrower phenomenal boundary. This formulation drives home the fact our moral judgments of others arise within our own phenomenal world, meaning ultimately that we bear some moral responsibility for the judgments we make of others, which sometimes reveal more about ourselves than those we judge.

externalization of badness within, leads one to over-identify with the good—as though it were already fully perfected in oneself. However one deals with one's personal shadow, it is invariably in absolutist terms: Moral imperfection, whether admitted in oneself, or recognized in others, or externalized onto them, is viewed as a permanent stain, with no allowances for circumstance, motivation, or intent. Problems of living with that might be amenable to practical solutions may instead be viewed as moral failures—justifying, if not demanding, full condemnation. There is so much more to describe here—including confirmation biases, regressive reactions, “recollectivization” processes (Neumann, 1969/1990, p. 70), societal moral contagion, etc. but I will mention only two: one concerns the level of hypocrisy and outright duplicity that moral absolutism may come to nurse, in both individuals and societies, beneath the flimsy veneer of simulated virtue, whose effect is to erode trust both in morality, in societal institutions, and in one another. This debasement of morality draws attention to deeper structural problem. Absolutism's means of instilling a firm sense of good and bad—through an absolutization of differences—may serve to dig people deeper into their psychological afflictions. Its readiness to define all matter of cultural irregularity to moral fault, often strands persons in their torment, with only themselves to blame, absolutely.

There are many ways in which a field theoretic perspective helps to illuminate psychodynamic explanations, as for example Neumann's depth psychological account (which draws heavily upon Jung). The time of primal unity that Neumann describes suggests a state of psychological being with greater sense of wholeness (though it would not have been identified as such), with an implicit sense of societal acceptance and belonging. With the group united around an unspoken sense of care for the group and its members, there was not yet need, nor perhaps facility, for a more formal and explicit morality. Hurts and disruptions and disappointments would occur, which might be punished, or might also be tolerated—perhaps without lingering condemnation, or significant threat to social bonds. Conditions permitted life to unfold without the morally differentiated consciousness that absolutist morality would later require.

Of course conditions did change, requiring some increased personal accountability, and a more formal delineation of specific do's and don'ts. Individuals come to accept a new burden of moral responsibility to live in accord with a shared morality. Acceptance within the group now becomes contingent upon meeting those social expectations, which come to be embraced as absolute and indwelling truths (with little reason to examine the specifics of contexts that gave rise to them, which are easily taken for granted). Thus is established a new level of conscious and psychical differentiation, which distinguishes between contrasting interests and motivations, and recognizes the priority of some interests over others, and

elevates those preeminent interests to a place of prominence—such that that realm of value becomes a basis for evaluating other value realms. And persons seek to live in accord with those shared, socially confirmed values. Thus they come to identify themselves with these values, and thus to disidentify with beliefs and interests that run afoul of this gold standard.

This new psychological situation creates conditions that prompt changes in the organization of the experiential field. These changes can be described in terms of phenomenal boundaries or in terms of levels of differentiation of the phenomenal entities within those boundaries. Consider first what I describe as the psychical (or moral) partition. This more formal boundary is not some arbitrary addition to the experiential field. It is best construed as a stronger and sharper delineation of phenomenal boundaries, which prior to moral polarization, had much less significance. Moral partition might require some heightening or exaggeration of pre-existing boundaries, due to new moral imperatives. This indicates a heightening of differentiation between the two realms.

This contrasts with tendencies ongoing within each separate realm. Inside the pro-social, persona realm, self (in its persona-identity), rallies to embrace the shared beliefs and values of the group (which persona-identity seeks to represent). This persona identity cleaves not only to the belief system but the group who champions it. To embrace one is to embrace the other. The person may strive for seamless connection with the group and its cherished beliefs, and, on that basis, demonstrate one's acceptability to oneself. Throughout this persona experience (when viewed from within) is a readiness to accept, which is in contrast to persona's readiness to reject its shadow on the other side of the moral divide. This readiness to accept evinces a kind of credulousness, which is disinclined to the critical examination of contents within its own realm. This strongly contrasts with person's attitude toward its shadow, where it is primed to look for inconsistencies and differences. All of these suggest that there may be something in the nature of polarized psychical systems that systematically alters one's perception or understanding of them, much in the manner of psychological defenses. Like defenses, they operate to perpetuate their own status quo, so they present a major obstacle to new learning.

The new learning that is needed—as an antidote to our willful, obstinate, and increasingly treacherous blindness—requires a fuller and deeper realization of relational determination. After all, our systematic non-awareness of relationality must itself be relationally determined. It is in the further growth of relational understanding that this blindness is exposed and eventually uprooted. Interestingly, Neumann's depth psychological account here again converges with the Gestalt theory's field-theoretic view, as to the needed remedy. With some urgency, out of some genuine horror at what the old ethic has wrought, Neumann presses for a reorientation of moral understanding, linked to a "new ethic." The challenge of

the “new ethic” is to “‘work through’ our own evil in an independent and responsible way.” Within this moral vision, “becoming conscious becomes an ethical duty” (1969/1990, p. 113).

The main function of the new ethic is to bring about a process of integration, and its first aim is to make the dissociated elements, which are hostile to the individual’s program for living, capable of integration. The juxtaposition of opposites which makes up the totality of the world of experience can no longer be resolved by the victory of one side and the suppression of the other, but only a synthesis of these opposites. (1969/1990, p. 101)

The insights of Gestalt theory, which GTP serves to engage, are tailor-made for this work—which is the work of growing consciousness. This relational view may be invaluable in laying out a “royal road” to greater consciousness, through cultivation of relational understanding. Moral absolutism (with its inevitable dualism) has been indispensable in establishing moral consciousness, but at the price of moral polarization, whose costs are becoming too great to bear. The current challenge is to maintain and even deepen that moral consciousness, by shedding our dependence upon polarization to sustain it. This requires something like peace talks between warring factions of the self. There is perhaps no better illustration of this challenge than that found in a familiar therapeutic tool of GTP—involving “work with the empty chair” (e.g., Stemberger, 2014). The exercise not only captures the essence of this theoretical suggestion, but the nature of its ongoing emotional work it requires. Here for example one may come face-to-face with one’s inner opposite—with a ready presumption of incomprehensibility and irreconcilable differences—often to find some measure of understandability and common interest in the communication. Not unlike the understanding of the Gestalt theory that brings to the problem of interpersonal and societal conflict, GTP may similarly address the problem of intrapsychic conflict—with the possibility of awakening new moral imagination and realizing greater wholeness.

3. Critical Realism

The task of critical realism, as I see it, is to recognize and correct for any ways in which naïve experience alters or distorts or superimposes onto the percept, things that are not present in the actual physical reality. The easy part of critical realism is just in recognizing that the phenomenal event and in this case, the percept is not the physical reality (see Sterne, 2021) and moreover my attribution of independent physical reality to the phenomenal event is riddled with misconstrual. The problem here is not just in mistaking the percept for the actual physical reality. Further, the failure to account for sensory/perceptual processes in the relational determination of experience also leads to a false sense of absoluteness or

independent reality being implicit to the physical object (which is merely inferred on the basis of my perception of it). In this case the physical object is assumed to exist independently, with perceived characteristics (e.g., secondary qualities) that the sensory perceptual system introduces, appearing to reflect indwelling (context-independent) properties of the actual physical object (whatever that could be). (I think somewhere Nabokov said something like...“Reality’ is the only world that deserves to be put in quotations,” but I can’t confirm that. I just know that I’m inclined to add “physical” to that list as well, since, the older I get, the less I know what that word means either. I might do well to employ Kohler’s term, *transpersonal*, which has less epistemological or ontological baggage.) It seems impossible to construe anything that exists outside of one’s relation to it—though I know that is the job of science. Is it true that the more we know about reality, the more ineffable it seems to be?

The main point I would like to make here addresses not just the perceptual world that that naïve realism misconstrues, but the broader phenomenal world, of which perceptual experience is just a part. And it makes little sense to restrict critical realism to perceptual experience only. We need to know if any distortions are woven into our phenomenal experience generally. One standard we, as adherents to Gestalt theory, may wish to apply is relational determination, which is understood to apply universally, at least across the phenomenal world. Earlier I introduced the term *absolutization* to indicate a false or misleading attribution of absoluteness to experience, that (if relational determination applies) exists only relationally. Relational determination is not negated by any lack of awareness of it. Relationally determined characteristics will arise regardless of any lack of awareness of where they came from. But where relational understanding is at all lacking, some relational aspects will, if only by default, be attributed to the object of judgment alone, as though they were inherent in them. In this case our lack of relational understanding is masked by a blind imputation of absoluteness to the phenomenal event or entity. This does not mean that persons with different degrees of relational understanding cannot meaningfully communicate about phenomenal or physical things. I simply wonder how things would look were I to achieve full relational understanding. I also wonder what the term “realism” means as regards critical realism. I want to make sure it does not carry any excess baggage of absolutization.

4. “Ego” and “Self” in Phenomenological Experience and Theory

I am delighted to find that earlier discussion prepares us somewhat for this topic. I was equally pleased to have recently read the following statement by Wertheimer, as quoted by Stemberger (2021)

Here I am – the ego – first a part of the field. I am not fundamentally an Ego standing in relief against other Egos, as has usually been maintained; no, the genesis of an Ego is one of the strangest and most remarkable of phenomena which, it would appear, is also controlled by whole-processes. As I have stated, I am part of this field. (Wertheimer, 1924, in 1944, p. 90)

I have not considered the statement in any context, but know that it speaks to me, and for me. It is hard for me to understand the way that I exist, since the “I” that I claim to be is not, and will never be, a free-standing entity. I am not only a part of a larger whole, but I am a part of larger that itself keeps changing. There is clearly an illusory aspect to my experience of selfhood, since that experience of selfhood is merely a phenomenal representation which I happen now to identify with. Similarly, my naïve realism mistakes the perceptual representations for the physical reality in the same way; I take a particular image of myself to constitute my actual being. Of course something has to serve that role, if only to provide the needed agency. But I am routinely taken in by the image—particularly when that image is threatened, or inclined to aggrandizement. But it is pretty clear to me intellectually, at least when I think about it, it’s not quite “me” (whatever that could be). This seems particularly true of self-identity as it arises as a part of a larger psychical system under stress, as are polarized systems. Here a psychical part presumes to be the whole, by denying or dismissing its co-arising twin (cf. shadow), who even in this denial, remains an active participant in its own relational determination, and all the more for this very denial. Self-experience—at least where it invests in maintaining a particular image or impression, or feels need to defend that image against outer besmirchment—relies upon defensive operations, which preserve not the actual self, but a mere construct. Gestalt theory helps to expose these defensive operations as artifacts of particular psychical structure, upon which various images of self may depend. But would happen to the idea of self were the system that gives rise to it were to arrive at a state of balance, free of emotional investment in any particular image or outcome?

Summary

The task of this article is to review the principle of relational determination, as described by Solomon Asch (1952) which expands over Karl Duncker’s (1939) critique of ethical relativism. Relational determination has much to offer to the therapeutic community first with regard to interpersonal relations and social relations. My main goal is to extend this relational analysis to intrapsychic life, which may expose new potentialities for internal conflict resolution and personal integration, predicated on the cultivation of relational understanding (i.e., recognition of relational determination in organization of conscious experience). But this approach is best illustrated in its application to value differences and conflict across societies, which are typically viewed from the absolutist or relativist perspective.

The principle of relationality casts doubt on elementaristic assumptions common to both (e.g., meaning constancy). Such assumptions lead to some ill-considered conclusions: of irreconcilable moral differences dividing both individuals and groups, deprived of any basis in understanding. Those views fail to consider the contexts underlying the meanings and valuations we impute. When these are taken into account, Duncker's hypothesis of an invariant relation between meaning and value finds support. Value differences (or changes) need not represent fundamental differences in morality, but instead (factual) differences in understanding of the situation. If so, then value differences may indeed be both understandable and reconcilable. Relational determination reveals this same potentiality with regard to intrapsychic conflict, where the same presumption of irreconcilable differences must be overcome. Work by Erich Neumann provides a valuable depth psychological perspective on this inner conflict, which accords surprisingly well with the relationality principle in particular and field theory in general. From that vantage point, psychological defenses may be recognized as structural properties of yet unreconciled psychical fields. Gestalt theory's relational view, which aligns well with Neumann's account of a "new ethic" helps to reveal the processes by which these defensive postures might abate, as value realms that earlier dwelt in hostile opposition develop more of a conscious and respectful relation with each other, as the individual inches toward greater wholeness.

Keywords: Relational Determination, interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict, organization of conscious experience, Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy

Zusammenfassung

In Ergänzung und Kommentierung der Beiträge in diesem Heft zur Gestalttheoretischen Psychotherapie stellt sich der Beitrag die Aufgabe, das Prinzip der relationalen Bestimmtheit zu überprüfen, das von Solomon Asch (1952) in Erweiterung der von Karl Duncker (1939) vorgelegten Kritik des ethischen Relativismus beschrieben wurde. Das Konzept der relationalen Bestimmtheit hat der psychotherapeutischen Gemeinschaft viel zu bieten, zunächst schon einmal für das Verständnis zwischenmenschlicher und sozialer Beziehungen. Mein Hauptziel ist es, diese relationale Analyse auf das intrapsychische Leben auszudehnen, was neue Möglichkeiten der inneren Konfliktlösung und der persönlichen Integration aufzeigen kann - vorausgesetzt, man kultiviert ein relationales Verständnis (d.h. man anerkennt die relationale Bestimmtheit in der Organisation der bewussten Erfahrung). Dieser Ansatz wird am besten durch seine Anwendung auf gesellschaftliche Werte-Unterschiede und Werte-Konflikte veranschaulicht, die üblicherweise aus einer verabsolutierenden oder relativierenden Perspektive betrachtet werden. Das Prinzip der Relationalität stellt elementaristische Annahmen in Frage, die diesen beiden Perspektiven gemeinsam sind (z.B. Bedeutungskonstanz). Solche Annahmen führen zu unüberlegten Schlussfolgerungen: etwa von unüberbrückbaren moralischen Differenzen, die Individuen oder auch Gruppen unüberbrückbar voneinander trennen

und jedes Verständnis zwischen ihnen verunmöglichen. Diese Ansichten berücksichtigen die Kontexte nicht, in denen die jeweiligen Bedeutungszuschreibungen und Bewertungen zustande kommen. Berücksichtigt man diese Kontexte, so erweist sich Duncners Hypothese einer invarianten Beziehung zwischen Bedeutung und Wert als wohl begründet. In unterschiedlichen Bewertungen (oder in deren Veränderung) müssen sich nicht grundlegende Unterschiede in der Ethik zeigen, sondern (faktische) Unterschiede im Verständnis der Situation. Wenn dem so ist, dann können Wertunterschiede tatsächlich sowohl verständlich als auch einer Verständigung zugänglich sein. Das gleiche Potential zeigt sich bei der relationalen Bestimmtheit im Hinblick auf intrapsychische Konflikte, wo es ebenso gilt, die voreilige Annahme unversöhnlicher Differenzen zu überwinden. Die Arbeiten von Erich Neumann bieten eine wertvolle tiefenpsychologische Perspektive auf solche innere Konflikte, die erstaunlich gut mit dem gestalttheoretischen Relationalitätsprinzip im Besonderen und der Feldtheorie im Allgemeinen übereinstimmt. Von dieser Warte aus können psychologische Abwehrmechanismen als strukturelle Merkmale von noch miteinander unversöhnten psychischen Feldern erkannt werden. Die relationale Sichtweise der Gestalttheorie, die sich gut mit Neumanns Darstellung einer "neuen Ethik" deckt, kann zu einem besseren Verständnis der Prozesse verhelfen, die zum Abklingen solcher Abwehrhaltungen führen; Wertebereiche, die früher in feindlicher Gegnerschaft zueinander standen, können eine bewusstere und respektvollere Beziehung zueinander entwickeln – das Individuum nähert sich einer größeren Ganzheitlichkeit an.

Schlüsselwörter: Relationale Bestimmtheit, interpersonelle und intrapersonelle Konflikte, Organisation bewusster Erfahrung, Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie.

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