

## CHAPTER FOUR: Re- thinking my situation in the world

### Introduction

In Chapter Four I continue to inquire into sources of energy and excitement in my life, although now with a particular focus on the energising effect of ideas and concepts. How can ideas bring new interest and sources of energy into a life? How is it possible for new ways of thinking to cut through the accretion of habitual practice that constitutes a life? Put a little differently, how do new ideas *find purchase* in an established, and, in many ways, successful life? Questions such as these are the main concern in this chapter of the thesis. In the process of the overall doctoral journey this was a time of exciting encounter with my past and a possible future. I felt more purposeful as I struggled with Merleau-Ponty's, frequently difficult, texts, and also revisited some equally difficult texts from the history of Gestalt psychology. My interest in Merleau-Ponty began to spread more generally into phenomenology as I became interested in his friendship and disagreements with Sartre, his connections with Husserl's thought, and how he was being recognised (or not) currently. I was determined and resilient in the face of my own low levels of familiarity with existential phenomenology, borne along on a conviction that this was important for me. I felt as though I was feeding the ground of my life, investing concepts and ideas that would support fresh practice, and new interests, without knowing exactly what these were. I felt as though my doctoral studies were becoming more central to the flow of my life.

Although the Chapter focuses on my engagement with ideas I also describe how my intellectual interests were deeply connected to people in my life. The first two sections of the chapter are committed to an explanation of the way my connections to new ideas were socially enabled. The *first section: Phenomenology and my life*, describes how my engagement with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology derived from connections with existing colleagues and friends, and goes on to show how I develop a connection to the person as well as to his ideas. Above all else this first section demonstrates the connection between my newly arising interests in phenomenology, and my life with other people. The *second section: Gestalt and friendship*, continues this theme to show the connection between my Gestalt interest and people in my life. This includes showing how my initial engagement with Gestalt succoured me during a time of personal stress. The section also shows how my engagement with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology influences what I take as important from my Gestalt background, as I increasingly focus on the core Gestalt idea of a figure against a ground. In the *third section: Ground as world* I develop this interest further and show how my intellectual interests led me to re think the nature of my existence in the world. This section concludes with an attempt to synthesize my understanding of how "I" am situated - not inside myself, but in the world, and describes attempts to explain my new realisation to others. In *section four, Exploring ground in my consulting*, I describe a way in which this growing realisation was taken into my consulting by

describing the case of 'W' from late 2004. This case demonstrates my attention on being situated, and also a connection between sensual knowing and being in the world. More personally I also notice how the design of the case distances me from the client. In the *final section: Experiencing, inquiring and knowing*, I synthesise my growing intellectual understanding using a model as a basis for inquiry and clarification. This is accompanied by personal turbulence as I am moved to ask further questions about my own use of self, and in particular my apparent detachment.

The chapter shows the interweaving of my thought and my life from several dimensions. The way my thought was embedded in social connections; the way my personal relationships supported new thinking; also how my attachment to new ideas was facilitated by personal feeling - even in respect of the dead author, and philosopher, Merleau-Ponty. It also shows how the relationship between sets of ideas proves to be fruitful to me as my existing base of knowledge interacts with the new thinking offered by phenomenology. This interaction creates a new way of seeing what I already knew and shapes how I take on what I am learning as new.

#### 4.1. Phenomenology and my life

In this section I show an energetic reciprocation between my intellectual interests and my life world. I show how energy arises from the interaction between intellectual and social aspects of my life. Important decisions are made concerning the direction of my research journey based on contact with friends and colleagues. This section contributes to the thesis by showing how I came to engage with phenomenology, particularly the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and how this engagement was entwined with aspects of my life. I also show how writing continues to enable the growth of new sources of interest in my life.

The starting point for this Chapter in terms of the history of the doctorate is the Summer of 2003 a year after the events in my supervision group that inspired much of the reflection in the last Chapter. Why am I choosing to focus here? To start to address this question I want to quote from something I started writing in November 2004 and which I took through a number of revisions with my supervision group before submitting a crafted version to complete my transfer from MPhil to PhD in January 2005. The piece is called “Body and Process”. The piece shows that, from the perspective of early 2005, I thought I could discern a change of focus in my writing that originated from the Summer of 2003. It also refers to a conference on “Critical Psychology” (at which I was introduced to Ken and Mary Gergen) that focused on social construction. Here is what I wrote and what my supervisor offered by way of comment.

In the first part of my doctoral journey I had spent a lot of time re –exploring my own history and re evaluating my own experience in the light of the doctoral journey including my engagement with my supervision group. The direction of my gaze had on the whole been inwards and backwards, touching on many aspects of my working and my personal life: relations with my wife, childhood memories, embedded beliefs about how my most intimate relations had formed me. In the Summer of 2003 I had come to see the limits of this way of proceeding as my writing teetered on the edge of self-indulgence, and a rather myopic sentimentality (highlighted in my [failed] transfer meeting in July 2003). An important spur to my dissatisfaction with this way of proceeding had arisen from a flirtation (*Judi: “mmm. Feels a bit dismissive.”*) with social constructionist texts which de centred individual origins as the main plot in the story of the self in favour of more external socially constructed origins. This had come to some kind of a head in August 2003 when I attended the “International Conference in Critical Psychology” at Bath University [[www.bath.ac.uk/psychology/critical](http://www.bath.ac.uk/psychology/critical)]. I could appreciate the radical return to the world implied by social construction for psychology but found it more difficult to locate it creatively in the story of my own development. I felt challenged by social construction but not much succoured (*Judi: maybe interesting data?*): I was finding it hard to relate it to my own history and developing interests. (*Judi: “ will there be a place in the thesis for what you did take from this?”*) I did make a rather half hearted effort to bring to my Gestalt colleagues on Cape Cod a social constructionist critique of what we

were doing but half a heart was not proving sufficient to sustain and nourish my interest (*Judi*: “*nicely put*”) (*Body and Process*, Jan 2005, 25).

Judi’s questions about my attitude towards the Critical Psychology conference can only be addressed properly by taking account of the fact that there were two conferences to attend in July/August of 2003. My eventual response to the psychology conference was shaped by my experience two weeks later when I attended a “Roots of Gestalt” conference in Paris. At this conference I had my first encounter with Merleau-Ponty, and was introduced to the way in which he had drawn upon Gestalt psychology as an inspiration for his philosophical reflections. It is the second of these events that is destined to be more explicitly significant for my doctoral journey, because it is Gestalt and Merleau-Ponty’s particular reading of phenomenology that preoccupy the period through to the end of 2005, rather than social construction. Why is this?

When I first wrote about my interest in Merleau-Ponty I tried to capture the sense of familiar strangeness with which I experienced his ideas through a metaphor. I said in *Body and Process* that the ideas spoke to me “not like unknown territory but like a territory passed through at some distant time and now incompletely remembered. I feel disturbed by memory even as I venture forward into what is new, as if the new path was in reality a path back to what will in time be understood as familiar” (*Body and Process*, 12). That was the feeling of strange new familiarity that drew me on. This was due partly to the substance of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas as I engaged with them directly and also what I was learning about his biography. At one level his whole philosophy seemed to be a meditation on the primary idea from Gestalt psychology that something comes to be present against or from a ground that recedes as the “figure” appears. This idea seemed to be worked and deepened in ways that were a surprise and also a reminder. How does the emerging part relate to the ground? How does the figure turn back to illuminate the ground which then turns back to shape the figure differently? I found myself being challenged and heartened. I learned from “The Structure of Behaviour” to see my lived body as a configuring process; I lean on the table and the contact of hands to table becomes figural while the rest of my body flows behind the hand /table contact; what does it mean to see bodily behaviour as an emerging figure? What I perceive is always already tied to a context Merleau-Ponty says to me – it is a figure emerging from a ground: how, I wonder, does the ground continue to influence the figure? If the ground is invisible how can it be perceived without destroying it as ground by making it figural? These were the kind of generic questions that were being inspired by my encounter as I wrote and re wrote of my interest in the philosopher: the questions seemed to take me forward even as they took me back to the root idea of a gestalt. But it was not just that I was noticing connections at the level of abstract ideas for I also felt a more personal connection with Merleau-Ponty’s journey. How was I being more personally affected?

I was heartened by a feeling that Merleau-Ponty and I were following parallel paths in the sense that he was drawing inspiration for his own work from Gestalt, and I had been sustained by my own encounter with Gestalt: it seemed to me that we were both *nourished* by Gestalt. We had both drunk from the same pool and this connected me to the dead philosopher, and through him back to the founders of Gestalt. Through this imagined parallelism I became interested not only in how he was elaborating Gestalt ideas, but also in how he had connected to the people in the Gestalt world: had he had a similar experience to me? I quickly learned that we had been influenced by different stages in the development of Gestalt ideas: while I had made contact with Gestalt at a point when it was being transformed into a therapeutic method in 1950s and 60s USA, Merleau-Ponty's engagement had been with Gestalt as a psychology at its intellectual peak in pre World War Two Germany. In 1935 Merleau-Ponty returned to Paris from a teaching post in Beauvais to take up a position as a junior member of the Ecole Normale. At about this time he attended the lectures of Aron Gurwitsch (1966) on Gestalt psychology and three years later in 1938 he completed his first philosophical work "The Structure of Behaviour" (Merleau-Ponty, 1963). Pulled on by my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's journey I re visited the work of pre war psychologists such as Kohler (1947), Koffka (1935) and Katz (1951), guided by Gurwitsch's volume of articles on Gestalt psychology and phenomenology (1966). I also learned something of their history by reading Ash (1998) on the intellectual history of Gestalt psychology in pre war Germany. I was drawn to the tale of dispossession and exile; also by the psychologists struggle to establish themselves in a different context in the USA. I noticed, as I read on, a connection between their experience and that of Edmund Husserl who was also hounded from his University post by the Nazis. This provided another connection with Merleau-Ponty for the Gestalt psychologists were pupils of Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty had taken him as the starting point for his own philosophical investigations. I was touched by the stories and then moved to see Merleau-Ponty honouring and reviving these German psychologists and philosophers. Here was a Frenchman, who was captured and probably tortured by the Gestapo during the allied retreat of 1940, who was so full of German culture that his writing is littered with un-translated German words. He seemed to me to be honouring a broken, distant, civilisation – this touched my heart as well as my head.

It also made an impression on me as during the end of 2005 and into early 2006 I began to think about the method for my own thesis. I noticed more clearly that Merleau-Ponty used the work of the Gestalt psychologists as a starting point for his own reflections. He seemed to me to be respectfully absorbing their scientific conclusions and then finding fresh meaning in them even when this involved finding in their work things that they had not found themselves. This led to a "deliberately non adversarial dialectical strategy" (Carmen and Hansen, 2005: 4-5) in which he "often avoids staking out a thesis directly" or else he "only does so obliquely after extended preliminary discussion, exploration and imaginative unfolding of the problem at hand" (ibid). Instead he would be more likely to

imagine himself into the philosophical perspectives of the thinkers and the ideas he is critically examining, which will involve him in borrowing terminology and working with the flow of their ideas before asserting positions of his own<sup>1</sup>. This idea of really stepping into the position of the other thinker interests me as an example of trying to explore the grounded position of the other through a thorough engagement with their thought. Such an approach parallels one way in which I have approached Merleau-Ponty's thought: I have sought *to think with him* by deliberately adopting his positions and modes of seeing the world. In this way he has been a companion to my thinking in the second half of the doctoral journey.

An example of deliberately adopting a Merleau-Ponty type approach occurs in a piece I wrote in April 2005. It's a draft article for publication in the *British Gestalt Journal* in which I sought to describe through writing aspects of my experience using the conceptual space opened to me by Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the pre-personal engagement of the body with the world. I seem to be writing my way into (my understanding of) his embodied subjectivity. In this case the door handle becomes figural for the hand, which seems to be steered towards the handle by background knowledge stored in the body. The impression I create is of the inanimate object calling to the body.

As I return to the front door of the house my right arm ascends towards the door handle and my hand forms itself to grip the familiar handle. In smooth action I swing the door outwards and step through the opening; as I do so my right hand slips from the handle and grips the edge of the door pulling it back to close behind me with a gentle thump. Such is the intimacy of the contact between hand and handle that MP would say the handle calls to the hand to shape itself and guide itself into just the right form of connection. My expectation that I will navigate my way through the door is fulfilled through my contact, and my embodied skilfulness; there is no need for conscious awareness. ("Body, Field and Practice: Merleau-Ponty's Life World" P 5)

Now I start to think about other examples in the previous chapters of the thesis where I have sought to bring bodily feeling into my written descriptions of unfolding events; I am reminded of the way in which Merleau-Ponty's re thinking of the body (to follow) rhymed with my own experience of yoga as a practice of re connecting to my body and through it to the world. As I think these thoughts my body warms and my fingers slow into a more measured pushing at the keys – I realise the feeling as one of coming home to a right and familiar place. I'm /realising /and /expressing /something / that /I /feel/ I /have /long /known.

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<sup>1</sup> For example many of the Chapters in "Phenomenology of Perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) are based on examples of the work of Goldstein and the Gestalt theorist Gelb – particularly their work with the brain damaged German soldier Schneider.

Considering Merleau-Ponty's method of working from within someone else's conceptual frame, leads me to reflect on how I am trying out Merleau-Ponty's ideas within my own existence. This raises a question about the connection between thinking and experiencing. In Chapter Two I considered what Rilke had to say about the way in which writing may emerge from the rich ground of a life. Surely though writing may fold back to enrich that ground; that is all that is being proposed here is it not? Or I might say it in figure/ground terms as a particular way in which structuring of the ground with conceptual space might shape experience. In the case of the above extract the attempt to step into a Merleau-Ponty way of describing my experience is mannered, in the sense that it is deliberate, but it alerts me to the possibilities that, through adopting a thinkers form into my writing, I might begin to shift the basis of my own experience.

*My social network and Merleau-Ponty*

Returning to the question of why I was attracted to Merleau-Ponty rather than social construction I have outlined above an argument that my attraction was based on a pre existing connection. I felt a familiarity with the ideas of Merleau-Ponty through Gestalt and yoga that was partly explicit, in the sense of being understood at the time, and partly implicit in the sense of operating without being in determinate awareness. To the extent that this was true then my pre-existing connection to Gestalt ideas and to bodily practice operated (to some extent) *normatively from the ground*, shaping my preference through unaware inclination or disposition. Noticing such a point and expressing it in this way is another inheritance from Merleau-Ponty; he continually returns to the way in which our normative attitudes or dispositions operate interdependently with the existential worldly conditions in which those attitudes and dispositions are enmeshed. In this case I am setting out the ways in which Gestalt and yoga ready me for my encounter with Merleau-Ponty so that when it occurs it is accompanied by a felt connection that develops throughout the rest of the doctoral journey. I am excited without always knowing why. I lean into the experience of Merleau-Ponty as if it was meant to be so. I feel the contact as familiar but also as new. It is at once an affirmation of something already grasped and a radical extension. So far I have largely expressed this grounded connection in terms of ideas but it also had a counterpart in my social and cultural background. How was my interest in Merleau-Ponty being supported socially?

You may imagine that at the Gestalt conference there were many people I knew, some very well indeed, and that from a social point of view my interest in Merleau-Ponty felt like the extension and deepening of an existing network. In other words it was not just the ideal or conceptual content that was drawing me on but also my place in a world that I knew and felt a part of. For example, Malcolm Parlett, who had also been a teacher and a therapist to me in the past, had supervised one of the speakers (Kennedy, 2003) on Merleau-Ponty through his doctorate. He introduced me to the speaker who then sent me a copy of his thesis and a recommendation to read the introduction to the "Phenomenology of

Perception”. The mixture of social and intellectual engagement is captured in this description I made of the Paris conference.

As I engrossed myself in the conference proceedings I found myself returning to M-P’s work, by *seeking out others who already knew him and quizzing them*. My curiosity about him seemed to be focusing in on two sources: on the one hand I found that his use of concepts such as “figure/ground”, “attention”, and “form” (Gestalt) were strikingly familiar to me from my Gestalt training, while on the other I was intrigued to find that he seemed to be taking them further, using them in service of a wider theory of consciousness based on what seemed to be an extended use of the notion of “perception”. He also seemed to be making a more general move away from psychology towards a view that consciousness in some way suffused the whole body. *I found there was sufficient pre existing connection between my own nascent ideas about the world, and M-P – through Gestalt and the emphasis on the body – to make me feel as though here was someone who might be a useful guide and stimulus for my own inquiry*, while also recognising that following him would take me into new and unfamiliar places. (Body and Process, January 2005, P24. Emphasis added.)

I had also spent the first half of 2003 trying to sustain energy during a review of my Gestalt connection and finding it all a bit flat – I was I suppose primed to find some direction for my work on Gestalt. I notice now the personal tone to my references to Merleau-Ponty (“following him”, “my curiosity about him”) as reinforcement to the point I am making about social engagement; not only with the people at the Conference but also with the dead man as a person not just a collection of ideas; I was interested in the way his ideas were grounded in the life of the man.

By contrast I did not, at the psychology conference, feel the same depth of pre existing connection. I felt more of a stranger and less connected through my history and my heart. I did not have the same sense of felt engagement as I discovered when I was introduced to Merleau-Ponty in the presence of long standing friends and colleagues at the Gestalt conference. I imagine now that if Ken and Mary Gergen were here, staring over my shoulder as I tap away, they would nod to each other at my account of my social entwining in the Paris conference as if to say “of course”: they would not only understand, but they would take my account as evidence of the social construction of my doctoral journey. I notice now how I call them up, and am slightly surprised that I should want them to understand, and “nod” in approval. I only met them briefly so why should they make an appearance here<sup>2</sup>? This takes me back to my use of “explicit” when referring to my interest in the Gestalt Conference, and to the

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<sup>2</sup> I intend no disrespect. They have every right to be included as scholars in their own right. I mean to reinforce the connection between human contact and ideas.



implication that something implicit was involved in my attendance at the Psychology conference. What was this?

I feel now that my attendance at the critical psychology conference represented something in my relationship with the supervision of my doctorate by Judi. She had raised the conference to my attention and had gently encouraged my attendance. At the conference she had taken pains to introduce me to Ken and Mary Gergen. I felt all this, and I feel it now, as a firm encouragement to lift my head towards the wider world and to the ideas that had helped psychology away from individualism towards a more socially connected perspective on our existence. The fact that I didn't dive straight into social construction, but found my own way towards a realisation of my embedded-ness in the world is a tribute to the way in which the supervision was being offered. In the context of the pending discussion around figure and ground I would say that the supervision was very respectful of the context in which I am working the doctorate. (On reflection this is one of the more subtle things being afforded me by the doctoral process; not an inconsequential thing for a process consultant either). Judi was throughout the doctoral journey carefully seeking the right balance between guidance and not forcing her view onto me.<sup>3</sup> In the context of figure ground it seems that Judi was acknowledging that the figure of my doctoral thesis needed to arise from the ground of my life. If I see the psychology conference in this wider context then "flirtation" does grate with me now. I see how my language appears to be dismissive and wince at the implication that it is not only dismissive of the conference, but also of my supervisor's encouragement towards a more socially contextualised view of existence<sup>4</sup>. An important aspect of my journey turns out to be towards my situated-ness in history and culture, and in this respect I am

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<sup>3</sup> To illustrate here is Judi writing about her supervision of K through her transfer meeting:

"I tried to tell her how interesting, multi dimensional and related to her research topic I thought the meeting had been. She seemed to agree, but I was wary lest I seem to be forcing my view onto her, and so pulled back. I did not ask her if she thought I had helped her enough to prepare her transfer paper. That was too stark a question, within one potential sense making frame, which polarized authority about her work in ways I resisted." (Living Systemic Thinking P133)

The care with which Judi feels her way into contact in this exchange, partly through the grading of the question, has been a largely silent, but nevertheless significant influence on my doctoral journey. She shows a subtle sensitivity to the situation even as she moves to influence how the situation unfolds. This type of "tactical" interactivity is something that I have noticed and taken from the supervisory process. I hesitate to announce it as a "learning" for this seems to offend the implicit nature of how I have come to appreciate this quality of contact.

<sup>4</sup> When she saw an earlier draft of the thesis my supervisor said in relation to this sentence: "Which you were already showing by then. I was taking my clues from you."

following a path pioneered by the social constructionist critique of a longstanding tradition of a positivist/empiricist science. It's just that I had to find my own way: one that was supported by a conceptual frame that emerged out of the conjunction of Gestalt and phenomenology.

*My personal connection to Merleau-Ponty*

The theme of the interaction between ideas and my life continues as I take on Merleau-Ponty as if he was a living person – a friend and guide. This is relevant to the thesis because he is a considerable presence to me throughout the second half of the doctoral journey. I feel my connection increasingly to be with the man and not just with his books and ideas. I can illustrate the effect of this by providing an example that occurred towards the end of the journey in January/February 2007 when I broke off from writing this thesis to write a separate paper which was a final attempt to synthesise the effect that Merleau-Ponty's thought was having on me. I introduce parts of what I wrote then to illustrate the way in which I was conceiving of my relationship with him.

The context for this example is a rather surprising interlude in preparing this thesis. By the beginning of this year (2007) I had submitted a first draft of this thesis, and had a meeting (mid November 2006) with my supervisor, after which I had gone away to further develop the draft. As I reflected back on the draft I found myself thinking back on my engagement with Merleau-Ponty and I engaged in a rather extraordinary diversion: during late January and February of this year (2007) I put my draft to one side and wrote another 18,000 words that made no reference at all to the draft! It was as if I needed to finish something not properly completed in the draft. Eventually, following a long conversation with my supervisor on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2007, I returned to finalising my original draft. The piece I wrote during January and February is so detached from the thesis I had written that I propose to deal with it as if it was another (final) piece of documentation for the thesis. I said in the first sentence to this paragraph that this extra writing related directly to my "felt connection" with Merleau-Ponty; in what way was this so?

The content of the writing is mainly concerned with deepening and synthesising my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's thought. I describe it in the piece as being somewhere between what we might normally understand as history of his thought, and a kind of interpretive appropriation, in which we see *the history of my understanding*. With hindsight I can see that I needed to think through the position of Merleau-Ponty's thought, and phenomenology more generally, in my doctoral journey. The implicit question from this interlude seems to be, how was my engagement with his thought (and the people involved with it) exciting and

moving me? It was in the midst of writing about this that on February the 21<sup>st</sup> I had a kind of half dream. I described it like this<sup>5</sup>:

[In the days before the 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2007] I kept returning to the way I had been so moved in the last year. From this returning I conceived one morning of the idea of drawing [Merleau-Ponty's] intellectual realm as a kind of chart of a journey. I imagined that I had discovered a roughly sketched map with some scribbled notes attached in the pages of an ancient journal. I imagined a wise and courageous originator whose steps I was now bound to follow. The scenario unfolded like a Boys Own tale. In this slightly regressive emotional state I drew the journey I imagined the original explorer had taken together with some scribbled notes. .... I'm aware at one level of feelings of presumption. (I'm embarrassed by my cheek.) I presume a connection of something like apprenticeship! (Myself and Merleau-Ponty, 13)

I added in a footnote related to this piece that discloses my uncertainty about reporting what was happening. I think it also discloses more sensual feeling aspects of why I was writing:

I hope this will not prove too fanciful an introduction. The thought of this metaphoric description came to me in one of those early morning reveries when only half awake. Frequently what arises in such moments is best left to private memory, but on this occasion the images of journeying, and following with their mixed up emotional overtones of assurance (coming home) and dispossession (discovering a strange land) proved too persistent to ignore. The notion of following someone who had journeyed into difficult territory and who had left behind notes for the follower spoke to me at an emotional level as representing part of my experience as I sought to describe my contact with Merleau-Ponty. I imagined myself exploring territory already traversed – picking up tracks and trying to interpret the scribbled notes in an old journal. On the morning of this oneiric reverie the metaphor was reinforced as I took my dog Feste for a walk to discover that the Thames was overflowing our normal path, and we had to strike out into the muddy hinterland of Iffley Fields. I'm afraid to say that as I splashed along with Feste I sought out the features of my imaginary map in the reality of the countryside around me (Myself and Merleau-Ponty, 13).

It strikes me that in resorting to a drawing in my notebook I was seeking in some way to stay closer to the point at which these thoughts and feelings emerged. The image came first as a kind of sensual encounter that I then sought to understand through words. As I started to explicate, scribbling in my notebook with duvet drawn around me (ignoring the sleepy protests from my wife!), the words that came sent me back to my drawing to refine and amend it. The scenario of being a traveller in my own right, yet also being a follower, evoked a complex web of

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<sup>5</sup> The text I produced in January, February 2007 was so separated from the preparation of the thesis that I'm going to treat it like a separate document as if it was one of the other documents I have used as information and evidence in writing this thesis. I have called the piece "Myself and Merleau-Ponty".

thought and feeling. It was like recognition, appropriation, and dependence all at the same time. It's not so easy to break up the feeling into neat categories. In the first extract above I speak of "apprenticeship". Perhaps there *is* a sense in which an aspect of this doctoral journey has been an apprenticeship to phenomenology, and to this particular man, who stood for a particular way of taking on phenomenology. However, my connection to the man and his thought has also been supported by the way in which it originated in the warmth of contact with real people at the Roots of Gestalt conference. As Gestalt is another important part of the intellectual framework for this thesis I would like to say more about how my Gestalt connection has been reinforced by friendship and personal connection.

## 4.2. Gestalt and friendship

In this section I explain how my engagement with Gestalt ideas took place within a social context to reinforce the theme of ideas as part of my lived existence. This leads me into explaining which ideas from Gestalt I have taken on as important, especially the way in which the fundamental notion of figure/ground has underpinned the intellectual structure of the thesis, and also provided a significant point of contact with the thought of Merleau-Ponty. I explain how this contact has invigorated my existing connection to Gestalt and brought new things into my life.

From the summer of 2003 through to the summer of 2004 I was re-working, refining and re-submitting to supervision a single piece of material that is a mixture of Gestalt theory and personal story. One of the main themes of this writing is the strong personal impact Gestalt has on me, partly as a result of the ideas, but, perhaps more importantly, because of the people I met. The practitioners, who became my teachers, had a quality of being alertly in the world that appealed to me, and seemed to offer me something I needed, and wanted. (I went to therapy for the first time during this period - with a Gestalt therapist). I was emerging from a difficult job in the aggressive environment of a large car manufacturing plant. My job had required me to place myself in the heart of the industrial relations conflict between a domineering management and an aggressive Trade Union movement, causing me to learn how to survive personally in this “piggy in the middle” role. Under pressure I developed a style of deflecting<sup>6</sup> tension and conflict so that it would wash around me and not engulf me. (I think I can see traces of this approach in the way that I handled my feelings of discomfort in my supervision group). Of course the deflection was only partly successful and I did become stressed by the situation. As a result my subsequent engagement with Gestalt was laced with personal healing and therapeutic support. The need for personal support as I recovered from my experience drew me to the people as much as to the ideas. I found that they supported me whilst also challenging me to move back into fuller contact with them and through them with friends and family. My engagement was further deepened and also complicated when, towards the end of this period in my life, in 1996, I left my Corporate existence to become an organisation consultant, drawing upon the ideas and the personal support of two Gestalt teachers, Edwin Nevis and Malcolm Parlett, as I made this transition. This is the account I now hold of this meeting with Gestalt: how did this particular rendition help me as I re-engaged with Gestalt on the doctoral journey during 2003?

This personal involvement tended to cloud the distinction between ideas and personal experience. When I re visited my Gestalt beliefs I found that

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<sup>6</sup> “Deflection” is a term used in Gestalt therapy to indicate an inclination to avoid contact such as when a person turns away a compliment with a self depreciating joke.

understandings taken at face value from teachers were likely to be presented differently in the literature, or seemed to be more contested in the Gestalt community than I had allowed for. This was how I described this when writing in January 2004. I discovered that:

....what had started out as a descriptive effort has turned out to be also a journey of discovery. I have found myself returning to the original texts of Perls and others in order to substantiate something I wanted to say only to discover that I appeared to be labouring under a misunderstanding, or to discover some new meaning that was of more interest to me. So over the three months I have been focussing on trying to write 'a piece' about Gestalt I have been revising my understanding of Gestalt as I have gone along. (Gestalt and Organisation consulting version 1, 2003: 2)

My understanding of Gestalt ideas was being flexed as it was brought into juxtaposition with what I was taking from phenomenology. The result was a slow weaving together of aspects of Gestalt and phenomenology to produce a new conceptual framework for myself. In my transfer papers from January '05 I pulled together an account of this period in which I made a summary description of what I had initially taken from Gestalt as an "antidote" to the "closing down" I had experienced in the motor industry. I went on to describe the benefit as a "re-expanding of my awareness of my self and the world, and attending to the quality of my contact with that world". I continued on citing an article by Malcolm Parlett called "On Being Present at One's Own Life" (Parlett, 43) as seeming to "sum up what my contact with the Gestalt world of people and ideas was giving me." This seems to me to capture the essence of my initial engagement: the period was marked by influential teachers, who showed as much as told me about Gestalt; and the succour I drew was to metaphorically lift my head and take in the world in a deeper and fuller way through the Gestalt *practice of awareness*. What did I understand by this concept at the time?

Awareness is a classic place to start with teaching Gestalt therapy in the form it was being offered to me. In a personal communication Sonia Nevis has told me that the therapeutic method largely attributed to Fritz Perls was nearly called "Concentration Therapy". It was located by my teachers, especially by those who taught me on a Gestalt and systems dynamics programme I attended from 1991 to 1993, within a psychology of needs fulfilment, itself in service of my healthy functioning in the environment. This was expressed in terms of a course of action designed to enable me to "discover [my] self and to mobilize it for greater effectiveness in satisfying [my] requirements both as a biological organism and as a social human being" (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 3). Let one of my teacher's from this period pick up the story from here. As he was my teacher this will be a fair representation of what I was being taught, and, as he is also a leader in the field of Gestalt, he will also speak more generally; he will provide a bridge between the personal and the broader Gestalt world. Edwin Nevis places awareness in the context of the fundamental notion of a Gestalt figure appearing

from a ground that becomes progressively less distinct as the figure brightens and clarifies:

To form a figure is to become interested in or concerned about something and to strive to give meaning to the experience. Being in touch with a figure as it forms is what we call “awareness”. This is our way of taking in what our senses tell us and of knowing what is happening at any moment. This is the beginning phase of the Cycle of Experience (Nevis, 6)

Edwin then goes on to describe a process where the person moves through a stage of increasing energy and mobilisation to act to satisfy the perceived need through some form of contact, before subsiding into a satisfied state (from where fresh awareness might arise).

What I took from this at the time was a focus on the progressive emergence of the figure and by analogy on the progressive emergence of myself. As I re read the actual work of Nevis I appreciate that this was more to do with what I was taking than with what was being offered. For example the model of the cycle of experience situates the person as always already connected to their environment, or their situation; the cycle is describing a relationship between the emerging clarity of the perceived thing, and the needs of the perceiver. In my early encounter though I was to become interested in the emergence of the figure, and correspondingly, as I have said, in the emergence of myself. In taking this perspective I was not alone because, as Gordon Wheeler was to convincingly argue, Gestalt Therapy did become “figure bound” (Wheeler, 1991). The core Gestalt therapy texts, particularly the book *Gestalt Therapy* from 1951 by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman focused on the brightening and strengthening of the figure. For example, the authors, having introduced the idea of “the forming of a figure of interest against a ground or context”, go on to say as follows:

The *figure (gestalt)* in awareness is a clear, vivid perception, image, or insight; in motor behaviour it is the graceful energetic movement that has rhythm, follows through, etc. In either case the need and energy of the organism and *the likely possibilities of the environment are unified in the figure.* (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951: 231. Emphasis added.)

The authors go on to say that the “urgencies and resources of the field” continue to “lend their powers” (ibid) to the coming into being of the figure.

While the contextuality of the figure is formally recognised, a strong or bright figure is honoured as an ideal, and, by this account the *figure is able to break free from its dependence on the ground.*

The figure is specifically psychological: it has specific observable properties of brightness, clarity, unity, fascination, grace, vigour, release, etc.....The fact that the gestalt [that is the figure] has specific observable psychological properties is

of capital importance in psychotherapy, for it gives *an autonomous criterion of the depth and reality* of the experience. It is not necessary to have theories of “normal” behaviour or “adjustment to reality” except in order to explore.” (Perls Hefferline and Goodman, 1951: 231-232. Emphasis in the original)

This amounts to a conflation of figure to gestalt (that is the ground is forgotten), which inflects into an individualistic approach towards the therapeutic process. It marks for me a separation of self from other, and the idealisation of self as an independent identity. This was reflected for me in the way I was first taught about how the smooth flow towards the fulfilment of needs could be interrupted by what were known as “resistances”. For example deflection is a “resistance” clouding the ideal of my unclouded awareness. In the beginning I was taught (I took up from the teaching) what I now consider to be a naive attitude that awareness might be purged of all resistance so that it could serve a clear and “real” encounter with the world.

As I revisited my understanding of my Gestalt roots during late 2003 I came to see how I had taken in this naive view. Largely as a result of my engagement with phenomenology, I began to recover the “ground” more fully into my notion of Gestalt form. In the course of this I re-engaged with developments in Gestalt thought that had made a similar move towards re-contextualising the figure in the figure/ground concept (Wheeler, 1991; Parlett,). As 2003 progressed into 2004 I was engaged in a fruitful dialogue between Gestalt ideas and phenomenology that was focused particularly around the inter relatedness of figure and ground (or thing in its situation in phenomenology). With hindsight I can see that the energy from this dialogue was in part due to the reversing figure ground dynamic of my conversation with Gestalt and phenomenology: I would make Gestalt figural against a phenomenological ground, and then switch the figure ground relationship to use aspects of my Gestalt knowledge to help my understanding of phenomenology. In this way I was enriching my understanding of both. In this kind of way phenomenology and Gestalt were feeding off each other and arousing my interest in both.

Gradually as 2003 moved into 2004 my doctoral interest was locating itself more firmly around the ground: how could we inquire into the ground? How could the idea of “ground” help me to understand my own life experience?

#### *My commitment to the ‘ground’*

In these paragraphs I demonstrate my commitment to “ground” and to the way in which I was re-working my understanding of this concept as I discussed it within the CARPP supervisory process and subjected it to the new perspective being provided by Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

Towards the end of 2005 I began to draft an article for the “Gestalt Journal” about a consulting assignment. In it I summarised my understanding of figure/ground. I



include it here as evidence of how I was fleshing out the concept partly aided by re-visiting some of the primary Gestalt psychology texts produced before the advent of Gestalt Therapy; also because the comments from my supervisor and fellow student lead me to question my own presentation in one particular aspect, which re-opens me to a phenomenological reading of figure/ground. Here is my extract from the article due to be published later in 2007. I have edited out the cross-references to the consulting assignment, because I am mainly interested at this point in the presentation of the concept. I will return to the consulting assignment in a moment.

Gestalt psychology proposed that the basic units of experience were organised wholes, which had the form of a figure against a ground. These units of figure and ground were the irreducible matter of experience. As they were already configured or organised they were already meaningful. In making this proposition, based on their own experimental findings, they were placing organisation at the heart of their conceptual method.... a gestalt **is** an organisation of parts.

*(C: This gives the impression of a rather static “figure/ground” rather than hinting at the flux between the two. I think of lava lamps here for some reason, constantly framing and re-framing”.)*

Taking the core concept of the gestalt as an organised form or whole the Gestalt psychologists proposed two interdependent rules of organisation: a) the principle of unity or inner coherence, and b) the principle of contextual relevancy. It is, they asserted, the interdependent operation of these two principles which gives rise to the meaning of any form of organised experience.

*(Judi: Writing I can skim more –factual tone. O.K. not a criticism. Will you come onto gestalting?)*

Both the reference to the liquid lava lamp and the question about “gestalting” highlight this “rather static” presentation. This is reinforced by the use of past tense, which helps to give the whole presentation a rather abstract feel – the “factual tone” that Judi refers to. This abstraction continues, and leaves me now with a rather unsatisfactory impression that the I am presenting the gestalt form as not only static, but also objective; as if it existed separately from the person who was “gestalting”.

Nothing could be further from the intent of the gestalt psychologists. Lyotard (1991) makes the point succinctly in *Phenomenology* when he says of a gestalt: “it is not in itself – that is, it does not exist independently of the subject” nor is it “constructed by the subject in a simplistic sense” (Lyotard, 1991: 81). The point was important for the Gestalt psychologists such as Koffka, and also for Merleau-Ponty when figure ground became a conceptual space within which to examine human behaviour. If an aspect of behaviour such as my colleague crying becomes figural to herself or to me this is not an objective fact that can be understood

without more, nor is it just a subjective construction open to any interpretation I wish to make. Her crying is contextualised for her *and for me*. As the observer my ground influences my observation of her in ways that are partly open and partly closed to me. It is the same for my colleague – the figure of her experience of crying is informed by her “ground”, which is only partly transparent to her. Koffka critiqued Watson<sup>7</sup> for assuming behaviour to be objective. Merleau-Ponty defined human behaviour as being ambiguous: neither objective fact or subjective constitution (behaviour only means what the subject constructs it to mean). I continued.

The principle of unity or inner coherence is what Koffka called the “Law of Good Gestalt” (Koffka, 110)). This is a phenomenal concept whereby a state of organisation tends to be the best that it can be where “best” indicates a state of maximum stability (*Judi: dangerous in our times. C: Ah ha! That’s interesting from a business, organisational viewpoint, but I really don’t believe it*), clarity and good arrangement. David Katz reinforces and adds to this when he says “It should be emphasised that ‘good’ refers to such characteristics as regularity, symmetry, inclusiveness, harmony, maximal simplicity and conciseness” (Katz, D. p40). Wertheimer adds a more clearly normative aspect to the idea of a “Good Gestalt” when he describes a “Law of Pragnanz” as indicating the way in which certain impressive configurations tend towards completion; they unfold towards their best possible state. The focus here is on internal coherence and what we might call “rightness” as judged by a range of perceptual facilities including some aesthetic ones.....the way a situation feels for example.

My presentation of the figure as if it *achieves* its state of maximal clarity arouses a response in C and Judi. I go on to damp down the suggestion that the figure might complete itself (and thus transcend the ground) later as I speak of things emerging “*towards completion*”.

The aspect of the figure *emerging but never completing its emergence* is destined to become important for me in my reading of phenomenology. It also becomes a point at which I begin to grasp the connection between Gestalt and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology around emergence, as I will show in a moment. There is a paragraph deleted here relating the above to something earlier in the article, and then I continue.

The principle of contextuality derives from the figure ground nature of experience. What is figural acquires meaning from a relationship that the figure has with its ground. The figure may retain its integrity or coherence, but acquires different meaning because the context shifts. The Gestalt psychologists for example discovered that a dark colour would invariably appear brighter against a lighter background without any change in the luminosity of the figure, and *visa versa* for lighter colours. Unambiguous determinate meaning for any figure can

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<sup>7</sup> Lyotard, Phenomenology, 82

only be achieved by de-contextualising it or by privileging one context over all others. [I have deleted four sentences relating this to something earlier in the article]. It is the principle of contextuality that lends an essentially ambiguous aspect to experience of the world.

Gestalt thus proposes a double movement of organisation: an inward movement whereby any emerging phenomenon seeks to complete itself in unity and an accompanying outwards movement which emphasises the situatedness of any theme or emerging form, and tends to de stabilise any fixing of form or meaning (Farrands, 2007).

It is not clear here in this abstracted quotation what exactly I mean by “inward” and “outward” movement; I mean “inward” to refer to the figure emerging from the ground, and by “outward” to the ground continuing to frame or contain the development of the figure. It is this notion of a kind of compromised freedom that Merleau-Ponty picks up from the notion of a Gestalt. It is also at this point that I become interested in the intersection of Gestalt and phenomenology; it is this point of intersection that is now of interest to me in this thesis for it opens up new conceptual space for me to make sense of my experience on the doctoral journey and invigorates the final year of my doctoral journey. What is this point of intersection? What do I mean by “conceptual space?”

Let me respond to both these questions by quoting a short piece in which Merleau-Ponty shows his own reading of figure and ground. I can then use this as a text from which to describe how my own understanding was being influenced, and is still being influenced.

Everything that is produced is never anything but a ‘*Gestalt*’ (a form, which is related to something else, hence, not ‘free’<sup>8</sup>; which has not yet overcome itself; and which does not quite know itself fully yet).”

I take “form” here to be synonymous with “figure” as I have been using it so far. The reference to “not yet overcome itself” I take as a reference to the incompleteness of the form in its perpetually situated state. The form has not “overcome” its own situation, or to put it differently fails to realise its urge towards transcendence. It is, on this account bound, and “not free”. However, I also notice the “not yet” and the “know itself fully yet.” What do these conditional words mean here? If Merleau-Ponty wanted to assert the strength of context – to emphasise its hold over the figure then it would be clearer not to include these words. I take them not to mean that the figure will never arise from the hold of the ground, but that it is in the process of moving in this direction; emerging but never fully emerged. I gain support for this view as I read on and find him responding to

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<sup>8</sup> These scare marks indicate where Merleau-Ponty left a word in German, not bothering to translate it into French. The editor of the notes subsequently translated the word and left the scare marks to show where he had done so.

the question, “why is the form related to something else?” and responding with, “Because it is engulfed, non transparent to itself, but, according to its very nature, it is *in the process of ‘appearing’*.” Here we have the dual movement at the heart of his reading of phenomenology and arguably also at the heart of the figure ground gestalt: on the one hand the dynamic of engulfment, which, above, I referred to as “contextuality”; on the other the process of appearing or in the Gestalt sense configuring. In the language of freedom that Merleau-Ponty adopts in the centre of the above quotation we can say that a figure is always seeking with out ever fully realising freedom from its ground.

This sense of an essential dynamic that is never fully realised is an important element in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. It establishes an essential ambiguity in phenomenon and experience, which is a characteristic signature of his thought. In life things – ideas, people, values etc – don’t quite break free into absolute self-determination. It takes considerable effort or blind dogmatism to freeze the ground long enough (in a laboratory for example), to stabilise the figure for long enough to claim that it might be free of the disruptive power of changing context. As this is an aspect of this thought that I have come to take up and to try on as I have engaged with a renewed curiosity in figure / ground let me explain how I have come to understand Merleau-Ponty in this regard. This will enable me to stand back to examine how Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation has enabled me to re think my practice and to develop a different way of thinking about my place in the world.

### 4.3. 'Ground' as world

In this section I show how I re-commit to a revised formulation of the 'ground' in the Gestalt figure/ground configuration as I deepen my connection with Merleau-Ponty's thought. The interaction between his thought and my pre-existing understanding of Gestalt, produces a fruitful interaction, which leads me to connect 'ground' with Merleau-Ponty's existential notion of being in the world. This connection produces an energetic exchange which has the effect of directing my doctoral interests towards my own groundedness, and I begin to ask how am I grounded in the world? This deepening interest in being situated shapes the remainder of the thesis.

The way in which Merleau-Ponty took up and used the idea of figure ground has provided me with an ideological underpinning for an existential journey. This journey is the one I have sought to track and share within CARPP through my doctoral writing. My writing has given me a way to recover the journey and to seek to make sense of it for myself. In the last half of the journey, from the Summer of 2003 onwards Merleau-Ponty has been a constant companion to my sense making efforts. This time has included the revelation of my daughter's illness in the Autumn of 2005, a discovery which has disturbed my progress whilst also deepening my experience. It has been a terrible gift. My reliance on the ideas of the French philosopher and phenomenologist has been rendered all the more poignant because of his connection to Gestalt, because this is a connection which has been a source of nourishment to me in the second half of my life. Merleau-Ponty has refreshed the stream from which I have been drinking. How has this excited my interest and influenced my practice? I said that Merleau-Ponty had "used" the idea of figure and ground: what did I mean?

One way I mean this is that Merleau-Ponty followed and then exceeded Heidegger in leading phenomenology back into the world. He discovered close at hand through our body a primordial connection between our selves and our situation, including other people and a world that we shared. In this sense he re-connected the figure of separate selves with the ground of our existence on this earth under this sky. As I track the development of this re-entry into the world I am led to think of a primary dialectical relationship between thought and existence, and also of the idea that expression through writing might be the thinking process that expresses one part of this dialectic. In my mind this dialectic has a figure ground aspect where my expressed thought is the thematised figure emerging from the ground of my unthematized, and therefore silent, life. What warrant for this thought do I find in Merleau-Ponty?

To respond to this question I want to show how Merleau-Ponty departed radically from his inspiration Edmund Husserl. Merleau-Ponty took from Husserl in particular a concern to provide as rich and full a description of things as possible before entering into speculation about those things – whether they be objects,

living creatures or abstractions. However he departed radically from Husserl in his definition of how to do this. Both thinkers recognise that we only ever have a partial grasp of things - they appear as things for us and these are referred to as “phenomena”. Husserl considered phenomena as abstractions which could be analysed, while for Merleau-Ponty they were something living within a context – a figure against a ground. Metaphorically, we might say that Husserl was to lay the phenomena out as an idea on the bench of his mind and to dissect them, while Merleau-Ponty was to try to observe them wild in their habitat. What do I mean by this?

To understand the difference between the two philosophers we first have to look behind the difference, and grasp their shared commitment to the principle of intentionality. This principle holds that all consciousness is “consciousness of” or an ‘experience of’ something or other” (Sokolowski, 2000: 8). For the phenomenologist we only have ‘consciousness’ because there are things to be ‘conscious of’. If we use the idea of energy as a metaphor here, then I picture the phenomenologist as turning attention to the energetic movement of things towards us as opposed to paying attention to ‘constituting’ energy moving from the person out to shape the world. Hence the, sometimes strange sounding, ways in which things are said to ‘appear for’ or ‘to’ us. Things in the world are given dignity and presence of their own; and also *foundational sense* for us – the things of the world *found* our consciousness. Husserl<sup>9</sup> developed a method for realising this insight, which became a source of difference with Merleau-Ponty (and others such as Heidegger); however Merleau-Ponty never lost his commitment to the things themselves, or to the significance of the world for human being. In fact he was to arguably take this commitment further than any of his fellow phenomenologists, through his insight into the way the body was correlated to its situation in the world.

The source of the methodological difference between the two philosophers was that Husserl was to focus attention onto things *as immanent states*, and to focus away from direct contact with things in the world, whereas Merleau-Ponty was to join Heidegger in engaging fully with phenomenon in the world. Husserl’s method was to reduce the phenomena to mental content, and then to analyse the essential content of the thing – the intentional content. The two steps were known as reductions: first the transcendental reduction which removed the thing from its natural habitat to make it a thing for us – a phenomenon of our mind. This is

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<sup>9</sup> I rely here, and throughout the thesis, primarily on my reading of Husserl in the *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl, 1960). Intellectually, the thesis may be said to hinge around my attempts to grasp the significance of this intentional way of seeing myself in the world. Eventually I come to grasp a fundamental participation between myself and the world, but, under the influence of these phenomenologists, not a participation that is symmetrical – I reach to understand that the things come first, and that I am only conscious because of these things of the world. I grasp it as an essentially poetic insight in which true understanding trails some way behind intellectual consent to the idea.

based on the assumption that we cannot know the thing directly – that we always perceive a particular perspective on the thing in the world, based on our mental representation; it becomes a phenomenon for me. This leads to a second move, the eidetic reduction, which focuses on identifying the normative, ideal, and relatively fixed, element of any thing, and the way in which this ideal has become a structure for the mind. What is the normative content of our mind that exists as fundamental ideas to shape the content of what we bring to consciousness as phenomena? This was the question addressed by Husserl, motivated by the insight that any rational science would have to start by exposing these taken for granted “intentions” as the basis of all subsequent thinking about what was real. The method produces a transcendent [because the mind exceeds the world] idealism [everything is reduced to an idea].

I return to the e-mail that I sent to Judi just after my experience in the supervision group, to read in particular the first move I made towards an explanation for my behaviour. It is interesting for me to remember here that the whole incident had been precipitated by my deliberate attempt to withdraw from my situation – to sit outside my group’s consideration of myself and my writing. I had offered a story to explain my subsequent behaviour that related to how my parents had sent me away when I was a child. Are there similarities here in the way I think the reasons for my behaviour and Husserl’s constructs? I bring forward an *idea of my parents and of my childhood* to account for my behaviour. Does this not then provide a frame through which I see, at first, the whole incident? Do I not turn back to the ideal content of my own consciousness, to an account that has become a conceptualisation? My behaviour has a cause in me – my taking up of the figure of my mother, and the sense I make of a particular period of my life. The humanistic move to not blame my mother – to understand her situation, and to accept responsibility for my interpretation, while worthy in itself, only makes the self centred turn more pronounced: I become prime cause. Is this kind of centripetal turn with its narcissistic overtones a consequence of turning from the world in the way that Husserl demonstrates? The change of stance towards the event that gradually works in me throughout 2003 is to see the events as much more a question of a kind of engaged coping with the situation and the relationships within my group. Others, real live others, rather than frozen memories or conceptualisations of others, become more significant in understanding what happened. I struggle with making sense of feelings as a descriptive effort rather than directly seeking causes. As an accompaniment to this turn I also find that issues of identity become less central to the account. Issues of whether I am blaming my mother or taking responsibility for my own interpretation simply become of less significance in the sense making process. Is this the style of movement that is needed to step away from my own centripetal swing? Is it also the style of move that steps away from the picture that has held us prisoner? Is this shift of stance paralleling in some way my growing understanding of Merleau-Ponty?

Merleau-Ponty understood Husserl's purpose in trying to separate our own intending from the world towards which it was directed. However he brought the attempt to do this back into the real world rejecting the attempt to reduce all phenomena to an immanent state of mind in favour of an existential phenomenology. The purpose was still to see our intentional content so that we might have a fuller grasp of things themselves; however this was an effort to be made while things still subsisted in the world. He expresses his process in worldly terms as one of detaching ourselves from our intimate binding to our situation so that we can see the things as they are. The effort (never to be fully achieved<sup>10</sup>) is to understand the common sense, taken for granted attitudes that "provided the presupposed basis of any thought" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, xiii) which "go unnoticed" and which can only be brought to view when "we suspend for a moment our recognition of them". He thought that the best formulation of the reduction was that offered by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant when he spoke of "wonder in the face of the world":

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis [*that is the kind of transcendental idealism proposed by Husserl*]; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence [*that is our intentional content*] fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical. (ibid)

Merleau-Ponty here discloses a fundamental aspect of his thought<sup>11</sup>. What is ontologically prior for him is a perceptual world to which the body is already geared before thought occurs. The intimacy of the body to its situation is such that body and situation are taken for granted and therefore not seen. It is a "perceptual" world because it is based on a participatory perceptual process, which flows from how the body gears itself to its situation. It does this through a form of contact which discloses the things of the world to the body at the same time as this contact feeds back to inform the body of its own presence. There is an echo of a position adopted in Gestalt Therapy in which it is said that "contact is the first reality", leading to the creation of a field of presence in which world and self become manifest<sup>12</sup>. The mutuality is so intimate in this contact that Merleau-Ponty later

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<sup>10</sup> "The most important lesson the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (PP xiv)

<sup>11</sup> What is fundamental for Merleau-Ponty is a relationship between a perceiving body and a phenomenon that by its nature is for it: "It is the relation perception-phenomenon that is primitive, and all others - the relation of consciousness to nature included - can be understood only if this is recognised" (Bannan, 48)

<sup>12</sup> "We speak of the organism contacting the environment but it is the contact that is the simple and first reality.....Now the purpose of all the practical experiments and



refers to it as a form of dehiscence as when a seed-pod opens forth. The body opens reaching out into the world and simultaneously folding back onto itself. In this way I can only become “conscious of my body via the world.”(Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 82). My senses of sight, sound, hearing, smell, touch come together in the objects to which they are directed so that I learn about the senses as I learn about the object.

Samuel Todes<sup>13</sup> describes this as a kind of need fulfilment but arranged differently from the conscious goal direction of the Cycle of Experience, which is a conceptual rather than a perceptual presentation. In perception the body feels a vague lack or displacement (it is not conceptualised or appreciated as an idea), which it moves to rectify; as my body makes or improves contact in a normative adjustment to the world it gains simultaneous knowledge of what that need was, and what satisfied the need – world and body are known together<sup>14</sup>. Merleau-Ponty would describe this kind of fulfilment as “motor intentionality”. These processes of close mutual revelation create a situation where “our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, xv), which is why he speaks of slackening

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theoretical discussions in this book is to analyze the function of contacting and to heighten awareness of reality.” (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman 227)

<sup>13</sup> As suggested earlier Samuel Todes has an indirect connection to Merleau-Ponty. “He stands in two connected intellectual movements brought to the United States in the 1940s by German refugees: Gestalt Psychology and Phenomenology. The connection between them was first pointed out in the 1920s by Aron Gurwitsch. Gurwitsch worked closely with Husserl in Freiburg until the Nazis came to power in 1933. He then spent seven years in Paris lecturing on the confluence of Gestalt Psychology and Transcendental Phenomenology, where his lectures were attended by Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty subsequently transposed Gurwitsch’s Husserlian phenomenology of perception into his own existential account of the role of the lived body in experience. Gurwitsch fled France in 1940, and by 1948 he was teaching at Brandeis University and living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There in 1955, he met Todes, who had worked with Wolfgang Kohler as an undergraduate psychology major at Swarthmore. Gurwitsch and Todes had weekly discussions centred on their mutual interest in the Gestalt theory of perception and its relevance for phenomenology. (Hubert, L. Dreyfus in Todes, xii)

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty sees us becoming alive to the perceptual capabilities of our bodies as we become alive to the world. “In the gaze we have a natural instrument analogous to the blind man’s stick. The gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over or dwells on them. To learn to see colours is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one’s own body; .....our body is not an object for an “I think”, it is a grouping of lived through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium.

the intentional threads<sup>15</sup>. We have to stand back and in so doing we move from a perceptual to a conceptual stance towards the world. In his words we require the “field of ideality” to become acquainted with (as a personal ‘I’) and to “prevail” over the “facticity” of our embodied intertwining with our situation. For Merleau-Ponty this conceptual world is a secondary revelation that occurs as we “slacken” our perceptual entwining with the world to “reveal” the world

What are the consequences for me of engaging with this way of re-thinking my connection to the world? How does this intellectual reflection affect the themes of the thesis? To respond to this question I would like to reflect first on how I start to account for myself differently as I come to my own understanding of what I am taking from phenomenology.

*I start to synthesise a new world -view for myself*

The following paragraphs show how my intellectual engagement with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty was supporting me in thinking again about my life as well as my commitment to Gestalt ideas. Especially how I conceptualised my self in the world of others. This section provides evidence that the dialogue between Gestalt and phenomenology, especially around the parallel (to me) ideas of being grounded and being in the world are beginning to re-shape how I see myself in relation to others. In this section I describe how I start to try and explain my shifting sense of myself to others.

I have already sought to suggest a parallelism in my own methodological shifts and what I am learning about this difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty; I start to account for myself differently to myself and to others also, by paying more attention to my situation. A part of this is an inclination to see my own identity as less figural; or rather, in so far as I pay attention to identity, I do so increasingly as a figure within the ground of my situation. Husserl’s procedure of reduction leads the thinker back to her own core identity because this is the location of the core beliefs that provide the intentional content. It requires the perceiver to see himself in the act of perceiving (the eidetic reduction) while simultaneously disregarding concrete lived existence (the transcendental reduction); it creates a worldless transcendental subject, who is constantly in the act of turning back on themselves. This then, says Charles Taylor (2004), creates a model of how human beings relate to the world, which is *through something else*. We see the world through a screen of our own creating. This “something else” starts out in Husserl as normative ideas or beliefs (normative in the sense that they pull all subsequent thought into their orbit), and progresses to include language as

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<sup>15</sup> “...in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world.” (PPxiv)

mediational structure: language rather than inner forms or ideas existing in some abstract way becomes the vehicle for our intentional constitutive acts.

Despite this move to externalise the process it still remains one where thought is paramount; ideas shape perception and contact with the world. Charles Taylor makes the point that this “through-structure” or “representationalist view” is still a pervasive one. It ties us to the view, he says, that “beliefs are the only accepted denizens of the space of reasons” (Taylor, 2004, 29), because the logic of the representationalist stance drives the view that it is impossible to get outside our beliefs and language. There is no external reference to which we can have access. For Taylor this is what Wittgenstein meant when he said “A picture has held us captive”. “Picture” here is a metaphor for the representational view of how we encounter things in the world – as a picture held in our mind<sup>16</sup>. I am suggesting that I too have unthinkingly adopted this perspective, and that once it is adopted it frames and shapes everything else, including the relief and support I have taken from the principle of awareness as taught me by Gestalt therapists. I frame awareness as *my* awareness; I constitute *myself as the primary source*; I learn to take responsibility for expressing my self, and for aiming at seeing myself and my part in all that happens to me. These do not seem in themselves to be wrong moves, but I think I have in process got things round the wrong way: I have seen myself, my identity, as primary, and the world has become an idea I think. Well this is what I tell myself – a little harshly perhaps partly for the sake of my rhetoric, but I feel the truth of it; the centripetal spin of my way of being. *I believe that this turning inwards has been degenerative and de-energising for me*. I also believe that in my 50s it is no simple matter to change. How is Merleau-Ponty and my re connection to Gestalt providing resources for me to do so? These questions involve consideration of how an idea can change a way of being. In this case I follow Merleau-Ponty into an exciting (for me that is) new set of ideas about my relation to the world?

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<sup>16</sup> Recent developments in thought have critiqued Husserl’s preoccupation with identity and presence – the way that things are presented to the mind, and the transcendental consciousness that surveys the world. However, arguably the consequences of thinking in this way have been absorbed into taken for granted assumptions about the inaccessibility of the real and the power of our own constituting beliefs and language; the taken for granted nature of the assumptions is, says Charles Taylor, what it means to be held “captive” (Taylor, 2005: 29). Arguably the effect lingers even in those who most fiercely deconstruct the philosophy of identity or presence (the continual return to our own intentional acts) inherent in Husserl. For example Patrick Burke argues that Derrida takes on “the language of transcendental reflection” when he seeks to remove difference from the realm of being a concept with a presence of its own that can be questioned, and assert it as a fundamental structure of our mind, *which, as such, is then unquestionable*. (Burke, 1997: 61-62).

Merleau-Ponty simply starts from a different place from Husserl.

The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible. ‘There is a world’ or rather ‘There is the world’; I can never completely account for this ever-reiterated assertion in my life (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, x).

Merleau-Ponty asserts that we live first through the world not through ideas about the world: the quotation reiterates his fundamental position (see the previous section) whilst clarifying his belief that we open to **the** world that is shared by all. Our common sense feeling that there is a single world for us founds, for Merleau-Ponty, a belief that we start, before thought, in contact with a shared reality. “The real has to be described not constructed or formed”. He asserts that: “My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations .....which I ...immediately ‘place’ in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams round things. I imagine people and things whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved in it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary”(ibid). In our perceptual world of embodied contact, he says, we have no doubts about what is real. Yes, we might occasionally make mistakes as when we set our body to lift a heavy weight to discover it is made of paper, but the mistakes only confirm our grasp of the real – it is the comparison we make to conclude that something is not real. Perceptually we move with confidence of the world in which we exist; we are naturally able to “incorporate the most surprising phenomena” and also to reject “the most plausible figments” (ibid). Our perceived contact with the world is not: “an act, a deliberate taking up of a position it is the **background** from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.” (ibid). The world is the ultimate ground of our situated being. How though is this compatible with the unique gearing, which our bodies have to our situation? Surely this suggests fundamental difference even at this level of perceptual fore-contact?

Recently I was struggling to explain my reading of Merleau-Ponty to Edwin and Sonia Nevis over the dinner table when I found myself, in my inarticulateness, reaching for dinner plates and glasses to try to explain what I was taking from all this. I grabbed hold of a dinner plate to designate as the world. Then I placed a side plate within the world as my situation. Then an upturned glass inside my situation as my self. I asked them to imagine the glass as having two vertical levels: the lower one was tightly geared to my situation, which created for me a foundational perceptual aspect and an upper conceptual aspect. The conceptual aspect was disconnected from my situation and the world by my perceptual foundation. This I said gave a horizontal and a vertical field to my existence. I existed *horizontally* through the interlocked fields of situation and world; I also existed *vertically* through the interlocked fields of my conceptual and perceptual

worlds. The world was shared with all other creatures. My situation was interlocked with the world but also geared to my perception; it made for a kind of inter-world. While resorting to a drawing when trying to describe the same system to my friend Margareta I replaced the glass with a house built on two levels and the side plate with a garden. I imagined the lower floor of the house as open to the garden and invaded by the plants from the garden, while the upstairs was pristine and clean. The elements of a conceptual self, a situated self and the world stayed the same: I called the drawing: my situated self – the house of being.

Now I recall the drawing by turning to the pages in my notebook I'm reminded of the other building metaphor I used for my body in my poem – the palace. The house is more modest an image; less monolithic and more disturbed by its garden with which, in the lower floor, it is intertwined. When I later described the drawing to Sonia in a phone call her first reaction was to see the plant life that fills the garden and invades the house as representing introjections. In Gestalt therapy these are taken for granted assumptions swallowed whole without (following the oral metaphor of Perls) being chewed over before being ingested. I take from this – or read into it - an implicit preference for the rationality of the upper floor; there is a suggestion that it is “wrong” for other to remain foreign to us, and that it must be completely assimilated to ourselves<sup>17</sup>. I notice by comparison my own romantic attachment to the wild flowering of the garden and the invaded lower floor. I find myself trying to value the engulfment that defies assimilation. *I am taken by the incompleteness that Merleau-Ponty sets alongside the conviction he has in our mutual contact with a shared real world.* We are in touch with but do not own the real: “the real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement....”. *The world is “inexhaustible” source, which is beyond our “possession”.* Is there than an interim state in which we recognise the introjects as a form of the larger than us world; in which they can be valued and inquired into without being assimilated to us? An element here of patient acceptance, perhaps associated with a “letting be” and even a “complying with”? Slackening the voracious mind as in a yoga? Is this the stance that we – in our partness – should take towards the larger field of our ground: our situatedness in the world?

This clustering of questions invokes a surge of feeling in me as I write. It's a warm flowing up-welling in me; hard to find the words, but I reach for “joy”; although it is not quite as dramatic a feeling as I normally associate with that word. It's a gentler suffusion. I remember a similar feeling I had when writing an

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<sup>17</sup> An introject consists of material – a way of acting, feeling, evaluating – which you have taken into your system of behaviour, but which you have not assimilated in such fashion as to make it a genuine part of your organism. You took in on the basis of a forced acceptance, a forced (and therefore pseudo) identification, so that, even though you will now resist its dislodgement as if it were something precious, it is actually a foreign body. (PHG, 189)

earlier part of the thesis and that helps me to locate the feeling more accurately. It is that feeling of strange familiarity again as if I have just said something I knew and was re discovering; that path again crossing into an ancient land that in some way I once inhabited – a land that was clearly once inhabited, but is now empty of people; a place in which is deposited the sediment of an old way of being, which turns out to be my own past. Merleau-Ponty asserts that the world pre exists us and “provides the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions” It leads him onto encourage me to look to this shared world for any glimmer of truth. It is not, he says, to the inner man that we should look for truth but to the world: “there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, xi). How do I understand this?

The world exceeds us spatially and also temporally in the sense that my reflection removes into thought a dynamically unfolding relationship that is passing on even as “I” remove it: when I think the feeling it is already passing as my body’s relationship with its situation moves on. So are my thoughts permanently playing catch up? Is this displacement one reason why the world of thought does not coincide exactly with the perceptual world? The question provokes me to think on to another reason why I might not quite coincide with my primordial experience; this is because this experience speaks the language of the body before expression in thought – is language then an effort in translation and like all translation does it run the risk of inadequate equivalence? Merleau-Ponty says that language is the means of removing ourselves from the world of perceptual intertwining: “The sensorial agent = the body-----The ideal agent = speech” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 171). The subjectivity of the body is an “incarnate subjectivity”; it is “not the psychic in the sense of the psychological” (ibid, 167).Merleau-Ponty refers to this primordial perceptual being in the world as “The brute or wild Being” in order to capture its fundamental stature. He also calls it “wild or vertical world” resonating with the idea of the vertical field that is created by our rising from the ground to balance against the planet’s gravity. The implication is that we have come from the ground into figuration as we have come into thought: hence the two floors of the house of my being. This perceptual world “is a world of silence” (ibid, 170) which is “hidden forever or provisionally – the mode of being of antipodes.” It is a “world that is before expression [yet] sustains it from behind”(ibid, 167) (as the ground supports the figure). How might I explore – inquire into that which is “hidden forever or provisionally”?

I would like to respond to this flurry of questions concerning the ground by illustrating an attempt to work with the ground in a consulting assignment. This case I use is only partly successful, and both more and the less successful parts will enable these intellectual reflections. The case will also provide an opportunity to ground further conceptual discussion.

#### 4.4. Exploring 'ground' in my consulting

This case contributes to the thesis by enabling me to show how my practice as a consultant was responding to my reflections on the Gestalt ground and the phenomenological idea of being situated in the world. It illustrates me seeking to help my client explore the situatedness of her life. This is the main focus of attention for this case in this section. However the case also provides me with another experience of detaching myself from the consulting situation and this provides the basis for reflection in the concluding paragraphs of the chapter.

The background to this case was that a long term client<sup>18</sup>, who I was supporting as he retired from an international company, had asked me (October 2004) to speak with a more junior colleague of his (W) who was facing an important career choice (they were part of the same professional network but had no direct reporting relationship). I was uncertain about aspects of the situation to begin with, because career counselling is not really what I do. My friend was unworried by that, believing that there were some deeper issues that needed exploring, concerning her motivation and deeper life choices; he thought that more practical advice on opportunities inside the company, or on concrete opportunities elsewhere might come from someone else. I understood this to mean that he thought that some kind of inquiry into the background to her choices might be helpful, and this felt like territory where my lack of technical knowledge in career counselling would be less of a problem. I spoke on the phone with her on three occasions in October/November 2004, and it became clear that she was in a tangle of indecision about whether to leave the company or not, and what she might do if she left – after fifteen years (she was in her late thirties with three small children) she was feeling uncertain about corporate life. This was potentially difficult as the company was paying my fee so I asked her if she would mind speaking with our mutual friend (who had not yet left the company) to see if an inquiry encompassing the leaving issue would be in order. She did in the end speak with him, and I received a phone call from our mutual friend, who said that he was not surprised, and I should go ahead if I thought I could help. I phoned W and we decided to meet in the Hague in Holland where she worked, which we did on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004.

I wondered how to approach this meeting, given that there would not be budget for either of us to fly across the North Sea again (although we could continue to have phone calls). What might give value in a day? My thinking about this question was influenced by my attendance at two demonstrations by family therapists in November 2004. They were both working with a process called

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<sup>18</sup> My work often arrives like this through a network of pre existing connections with executives who hold developmental or other budgets.

Constellating<sup>19</sup>. I had been drawn to these demonstrations because they promised to provide a method for using bodily contact to unpick systemic issues within families. As I was at that time in the process of dialogue between my Gestalt inheritance and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body I wanted to see how this process worked at the physical level. The process was extremely interesting (in 2005 I undertook some training); however it was also a bit impractical as it relied on a relatively large group of volunteers (12-20) to represent the family situations that were problematic for clients. What I took from it at the time of this case was reinforcement for bringing bodily feeling, and attending to the client's ground into my work. I was excited that this might be one way in which the intellectual work around Gestalt and Merleau-Ponty might find practical expression. Before I travelled to Holland I reminded myself of some basic Gestalt methods concerning physicality in therapy by consulting Gaie Houston's books (1998, 2003) and made these notes in my book under the clients name:

A solution orientated discussion

- What has moved her to be here with me? Feeling state?
- How would she notice if things changed in a desirable way?
  - a. Search for 2/3/ things
- Desired state = 10. Non achievement = 0
  - a. Life in general
  - b. This particular issue { What can a tell b?
- Miracle question
  - a. Keep looking for levels of detail
- Being in focus and out of focus
- Writing as well as speaking

When I look back over the papers from January 2005<sup>20</sup> in which this account was first written up I notice that the first thing I note about arriving is related to the place within which my client worked. Here is an extract from my transfer papers in January 2005 to illustrate my noticing about place.

I was in The Hague at a [x] Co Head Office building, preparing to meet a senior manager..... I took particular pains, while waiting for the client to meet me, to walk around the open spaces on the ground floor of the building, taking in the absence of people, the expanses of modernist architecture, noticing an involuntary shiver of coldness and a heavy sense of insignificance; also noticing my admiration for the sweep of the interior roof line, and the rich mixture of materials – glass, stone metal, brick and wood. Here in the heart of this multi-

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<sup>19</sup> [www.familyconstellations-usa.com/about.htm](http://www.familyconstellations-usa.com/about.htm)

<sup>20</sup> The case is described in a piece called "Body and Process" that I wrote at the beginning of 2005. This paper was subsequently included in the papers I prepared to support my successful transfer from MPhil to PhD programme at CARPP (January, 2005)



national I fancied some confirmation for the precise yet distant organisation of the engineer, a priority for rules and procedures over responsiveness and flexibility (allied also to some understanding of how this kind of culture might serve the purpose of the system). Yet I was also conscious of having taken a warning from MP about this kind of information – that it was inherently ambiguous, and in need of further refinement or clarification, perhaps in dialogue with my client.

This description seems to be retrospectively supported by the attention Brady places on “self conscious knowledge about being in place” and attempts at “self conscious immersion” (Brady, 2005: 981). Such a process is rendered further significance because this is my clients “place” – in some unique way for her this is a part of her situation. Brady speaks of “Personal space [as] a collecting centre for experience and identity construction” (ibid: 982). Tracking my own feeling for her place could be considered an important aspect of entering her situation. If she is to be found in the world and not in some inner place <sup>21</sup> then am I looking and feeling into where she will be “found”?

I also think this being in place in relation to this thesis. This case description is documenting a part of my life world – trying to show me in the places in which I work. These large anonymous places are typical of where I work. The sense of being a stranger in them was what I sought to capture in the case description at the beginning of Chapter Two. How does this reflect onto my interests as they emerge into the thesis: for example, with the concatenation of themes around emergence and excitement? It strikes me that one of the things evidenced by the early case (Chapter Two), and also by this one is how I move to immerse myself in the place of my client. There is a “sensuous-intellectual continuum” involved in these processes of immersion – I feel and think my way into them. We notice aspects of this with this thesis. Not only do I *set out* to explore emergence, and excitement (I’m using a simplification of the themes as I have described to help me make my point), but I also *wait to see* where excitement emerges as I journey with my inquiries. If the doctorate can be thought of as a place then I seem to be experiencing the place as a part of deciding what I will do. In this sense could we say that fundamentally my method is to accompany the thesis as it emerges from the larger journey of the doctoral research? Has the doctoral research also not had some of the qualities of accompanying an emergence?

W and I talk for about two hours in the morning. We are in a conference sitting around the corner of a large conference table that almost completely fills the room. She has brought along a questionnaire on emotional intelligence that has been scored for her within the company. We speak about it although, as I tell her, I’m not really qualified to interpret it. I take the opportunity to share with her

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<sup>21</sup> “.....man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xi).

some of my feelings as I entered the building. I ask, “what kind of emotional life might be encouraged by these kind of places?” We wonder together at the contrast between this kind of place and our respective homes – how do we respond differently in each place? As we discuss this and other aspects of her life I realise that she is open, not only to her particular problem, but also to the way she habitually approaches problems like this. For example, she tells me she has spoken to friends and family about her next career move, but the advice appears contradictory. As she talks about others in her life, and as I feel our presence together in that corporate meeting room I conceive an idea. With hindsight I can see that it owes something to my observing the group process of constellating family issues, and to my own Gestalt background in so far as Gestalt therapists make use of physical movement (Huston, 1995). It also provides evidence of my growing interest in the ground – in the situatedness of all persons. I tell her what I have in mind without letting on that I have just invented the process, and have never done it before – I want to create a confident space where she will feel comfortable enough to do the work, and my omission seems justified in these terms.

Here is what I did next as I wrote it up in *Body and Process*, one of the pieces of writing I submitted for my transfer in January 2005.

I proposed [to W\_ my client] a *mock meeting* to which we would invite significant others to discuss her issue..... We concentrated on discussing who would come, and, aided by the information revealed in our earlier conversation, we agreed to invite: her past (she referred to the “thin red line” that connected the events of her past [to this current situation], and we invited this line); her future self; P\_, a senior xyz Co manager, who she knew and respected; F\_, a close personal friend; and her husband, H\_.

I wrote the names of the invited guests on sheets of paper, and asked her to go round the table in the conference room, where we were meeting to make place settings for each person. I then asked her to go to each place in turn to give the advice that person would give to her. I told her that I would ask her only two questions from each place: “what do you notice in your body as you take each place”, and then, “what advice do you have for W (the client)?” I told her I would [sit in the corner away from the table and] make notes in particular of the advice she received. Then I explained a short procedure for moving which involved physically leaving the last place, standing up stamping her feet, and taking a series of breaths, before slipping into the next seat. I then concentrated on doing three things: taking notes of the ‘visitors’ advice; keeping my client on track and unembarrassed by what she was doing; and carefully accenting her reports of shifts in bodily state so as to support this least familiar part of the process. [At the end I also gave her my write up of the advice she had been given]. (“Body and Process”, January, 2005: 45)

It strikes me that the process I designed places less emphasis on *seeing herself* from different perspectives and more on *seeing how she was situated*. Although I was not using this language in the transfer papers, or with my client, the case

appears to me now as an attempt to help her find her direction in her world, rather than inside her self. This also helped support a process she had already embarked on, which was seeking advice from her friends and family so, in this sense, the process builds on something she was already doing. The journey around the table re-creates on smaller scale as a kind of simulation the larger journey she was already making as she engaged with her world.<sup>22</sup>.

The distinction between encouraging her to look inside herself in some way and looking to her situation in the world is for me subtle but significant. My focus arises from my growing interest in the way people are located in situations – my interest in the ground of life. Seeing *herself* from different perspectives carries for me implications of multiple personality – it would invoke a psychological move where the focus would be more towards an interior landscape (despite the *calling in* of characters out in the world). Here I am exteriorising more by having the client see how she behaves in the different situations in which she exists.

I was surprised by how much information became available when I just concentrated on the physical, such as changes in voice tone, body posture and emotional loading of the voice. She was, for example, mischievous and playful as her husband; in tears as her past; slow, contemplative, and softly spoken as her friend; very brief yet sympathetic as the [company] manager. In the conversation that followed we both registered our surprise at the richness of this part of the process. (Body and Process, January, 2005: 46)

Although the process design was grounded in my recent experiences it was not very explicitly framed for the client; moreover it was not very explicitly clear to me why I was doing this. My intervention had some qualities of an intuitive movement. In such circumstances I might ask, *looking afresh at the process design as an answer to a question, what question or questions was I, as a process consultant, responding to?*

Distancing myself from the event with this kind of question, sends me into looking again at the circumstances rather than just racking my memory. It would seem reasonable to respond to such questions with answers such as, how might the client engage with her situatedness so as to inform her, and support her in her choices? How can she gain support from her situation? If another process consultant was to press for a more theoretical answer the response might be to draw on Brady, and speak of trying to open a space where the client could *experience* their place, or home, in the world (Brady, 2005: 985). The emphasis on

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<sup>22</sup> She followed this meeting by going back into a further round of discussion with friends and family, and quite rapidly decided to leave the company, and to take a job with a smaller more entrepreneurial business. We had three more meetings on the telephone before she left the company. I then lost touch with her. In this sense I did not accompany her. At our last meeting she gave me permission to use this case in my transfer papers. I have disguised her name, the name of the company, and those of all the others involved.

“experience” allows in the idea of helping the client towards a *sensual* as well as intellectual engagement with their place or home in the world. This would engage the client with the way in which they were held within a social context (Campbell, 2000: 9-10) and help them to look for external sources of support, rather than just look to solve their problem themselves. In this way the intervention might be framed around the proposition Brady suggests: “personal space [is] a collecting centre for personal experience” (ibid: 982).

I experience this as quite a useful way of inquiring back into my own process. I think of how I might respond to others asking me the question highlighted in the previous paragraph – an action researcher for example. I think then I would be inclined to respond by saying that the intervention was designed to enable the client to explore their experiential ways of knowing (Heron, 1996: 2-3; Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 9). The client experiences again the qualities of her relationship with the people in her life, even though she might not have been able to fully articulate these had I just asked her. In the event in the following discussion we were able to make some connections between bodily feeling, and steps she might take to realise that potential for support. She left the consultation with a plan to go back to her friend and her father (in particular) to have further conversations. In both cases she told her correspondents something about the mock conversation, and she reported to me in a subsequent phone call how, in the case of her father, this had led to a more intimate, and helpful encounter. My notes don’t reveal that we had much discussion about how to approach the people in the best way (she took it on herself to tell about the mock conversation), but this would also seem to be an obvious possibility in the method. It also occurs to me now, that the conversation around the experience could have been filled out in other ways; for example the client and I might have inquired into what kind of support had been offered in other circumstances. Overall, the attention to experiential knowing seems to open up the possibilities of less focus on *who* she was, and more on *how* she was in her entwining with different situations of her life. This might then support a fuller contact between client and consultant where there might be a mutual exchange about being in a family, or with friends, and how they supported her or not (I feel this as an unrealised potential rather than anything that happened – more about this in the final section of the paper as I bring a critical eye back to bear on this case).

### *Sensuality and experience*

In these paragraphs I extend the connection between experience and knowing by exploring the sensual nature of experience and how this is attended to through a discipline of slowing down. I recognise that this has always been an aspect of my consulting, although my current thinking is bringing this aspect more to the fore. Recognising sensuality helps me to see the vital role it plays in experiential ways of knowing.

Now I also notice the element of *slowing down* that is intrinsic to the process I designed. The questions resound in their simplicity like a mantra while the movement of her body around the room with its intervals of standing, shaking and sitting afresh adds to a dance like quality: quite stately and measured. The simplicity of question and movement added to a sense that time was slowing down: just the slow movement round the circle of the table, and the two questions. This also seems to me to deepen the experiential qualities. I'm now beyond what I noted and what I can remember, but I would like to speculate a little to extend thinking about this process and ways of knowing. It seems to me that in interventions like this slowing down works like a form of *sensuous abstraction* in the same way as it might for a gourmet (Todes, 2001: 272-276). Completion is deferred in favour of savouring the relationship. I might also say that completion is "inhibited." In this sense the phenomena (it might be an act with another person such as having sex, or a thing such as stroking a fabric, or a process such as listening to music, or looking at a painting) is held open for longer: our experience of the person, thing, situation is prolonged to possibly be deepened.

Seen from this perspective might I also understand this thesis more clearly as an exercise in experiential knowing? I'm trying to convey some of the *feel* for aspects of my life world (Strake, 2005: 454-455). I'm also following writing practices that are aimed at providing an *experience of the journey*, such as by editing lightly, and speaking of what I see and feel as it occurs. I'm reminded here of Stewart when she speaks of keeping a track of the trace of things (Stewart, 2005: 1040). Experiential knowing then seems to be encouraged by processes of *interrupting* what is normally completed automatically. If I had asked W "what advice does your father have – or do you think he would like to give you?" my client and I might have achieved the same effect as my experiment, if I had been a skilful enough interlocutor, inquiring into her feelings as well as her thoughts, encouraging her in imaginative transference; however, the process I designed seems to me to provide more opportunity for her to engage with her situations, and to disengage from her situation with me. I move from the centre of her vision into a more peripheral place, and free her to roam. I interrupt the completion of her ways of going on in that situation by offering an opportunity to connect to other situations in her life: there is a kind of *fattening out*, which also seems to me to have *sensual qualities*.

This quality of sensual engagement also seems on reflection to have been present in the earlier case I reported at the beginning of Chapter Two although I did not highlight this at the time. Here is another extract from the paper I wrote on that case in 2001, which I believe illustrates the point.

The building was being renovated so all the coffee machines had been moved out of our area: the nearest one was two floors and a long walk away. However, we did have an empty kitchen as part of our suite of offices together with coffee making equipment. I ordered coffee from the building supervisor and on my way

to work the following morning bought milk and bread. Armed with these supplies I set up the kitchen. This was a large well-lit room with a stunning view of the comings and goings of the oil supply ships in the old harbour. When I filled the kitchen with the smell of fresh coffee and fresh bread it was not difficult to cajole the team away from their computers to come and eat and drink together. . . . . My milk and bread buying became a tradition within the team. It became generative of our shared life. We went on to establish eating and drinking as a tradition of the team, arranging dinners with sponsors and lunchtime visits to harbour side pubs. (Farrands, 2001: 7)

The kitchen, the smell of coffee and fresh bread, the interruption of the team's isolated thinking; breaking bread together. These all seem to me to support the possibility of sensuous abstraction as it might be reflected in relationships within the team. It occurs to me now that the setting up of the kitchen was partly for myself. I test this thought by proposing a question that slightly distances me from the situation. What question was the kitchen intervention in response to? One answer seems to be possible was that I was trying to create a home for myself, which might support me in making a contribution. I appear to take a creative initiative, which also creates a place for experiential knowing within the team (Brady, 2005: 982). This makes more sense than "role" – I didn't want to be a caterer to the team!

The question of how I distanced myself from the situation as I designed the intervention is another interesting aspect of this case. From the moment that I design the intervention I begin to withdraw myself. My client takes centre stage and I withdraw to watch, ask one of two questions and observe. This strategy, of course, bears comparison with what I did in my supervision group, and bears on the question of detachment. I notice my detachment now as an aspect of my skilfulness as a process consultant. This does not prevent detachment being less generative in other aspects of my life. It may be that my very skilfulness is a problem for me more generally in my life; an example of my accomplished self blocking my energy in some way perhaps? I will return to the way competence might be a problem in this respect in a short while in the closing section of the paper. First though I wish to engage more fully with how the idea of being situated in the world is changing the way in which I conceive of myself as an inquirer.

#### 4.5. Experiencing, inquiring and knowing

In this section I draw conclusions of a theoretical and a personal nature. Theoretically I reflect upon how to present my new understanding of myself as situated in the world – especially as an inquirer. What does my revised self-conception mean for the kind of questions I ask? Personally, I find myself disturbed by aspects of the W case as they relate to my detachment from my client. I can see how this was a helpful move in the case but I also worry about how it is similar to the kind of detachment that provoked my crisis in the supervision group. This leads me to recognise how paradoxically I can be selfless and selfish. My new way of thinking is shown to be causing me to raise difficult questions about my own paradoxical nature.

All human inquiries might benefit from inquiring into the complex bodily states of those involved, including the inquirer. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body this arises because each human being is already fundamentally, and primordially connected to their situation in the world. This type of fundamental connection is specifically incorporated into action research through the adoption of a participative world-view (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 6-8). Merleau-Ponty also believed that to start to think about our situation was to start to separate our-self from it – to *look upon it* rather than to be *in it*. This same sentiment is incorporated into action research by Reason and Heron who distinguish propositional ways of knowing from knowing through “empathy and resonance” (2001: 183). Heron further relates participation with resonance and feeling:

...[experiential knowledge is] knowledge through participation in, and resonance with, one or more beings in the unified field of being ; the knowledge, in short, that comes with feeling... (Heron, 1992: 162-163)

This could be a Merleau-Ponty speaking. Furthermore there is general recognition that whilst awareness can shift the boundary between tacit experienced knowledge and explicit propositional knowledge (Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2002) not everything can be made explicit, because the world is suffused with possibility and latency. It follows that some element of implicit or latent knowledge is likely to be present in all action inquiries. I would like to examine this claim by examining the following Exhibit, which proposes four categories of phenomenological territory as a way of summarising the discussion so far. I have included a column that suggests possible inquiry approaches to each “territory” and followed up with a description. This description draws together material from the chapter so far (supplementing with new knowledge in a small number of cases) and proposes how this might be useful for an action researcher.

EXHIBIT 4.2: INQUIRY AND EXPERIENCE	
Phenomenological territories	Questions for an action researcher
1 I – Emergence to me; a subject body and integrated consciousness. Inquiry is directed towards the body/consciousness. Preconceptions, habits, inclinations, vague urges, interrupted by possibilities and disjunctions?	What do I normally do in this situation - and why? What am I leaning into? How can I feel differently about this thing? Do I have habitual responses in this situation? Have I felt this before?
2 Things - body as object, and other things emerging within my situation (places, people, objects, ideas, named feelings). Inquiry is directed towards the qualities of things as they appear. They have poise.	How is this thing poised (poising) for best articulation? How can I see it more clearly? What other feelings does it evoke? Is it growing clearer brighter or vaguer/duller? How does this thing empathise with me? How does it respond to me? How open to me?
3 Situation/ground – the context within which all things appear. The location or context of things. Inquiry is oblique and non figural. Sensual engagement at the point of emergence. Inquiry is opening, receiving. How are things wrapped in sensuality and vague (but maybe powerful) sensing?	What is vaguely felt in this situation? How will I say ‘yes’ to this kind of situation? What would the situation have to be to support this thing? What is the question to which the figure is the answer? What other possibilities exist here? How does latency register now with this thing in its situation
4 World –Disturbance of all poise. Penetrates other three territories. Evocation of bewilderment and wonder – maybe fear and joy (death, love).	How am I bewildered? What wondering arises from my bewilderment?

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y oblique as one progresses into the “situation” and “world” aspects of the chart. The top boxes in the chart focus on a direct assessment of the researcher’s own feeling response to being in the presence of this thing<sup>23</sup> (research project, person, group, idea, object set of circumstances etc), and a testing of felt ground in respect of the thing. Action research takes it as read that the researcher will bring their subjectivity into account in a research project (Torbert, 2001; Heron and Reason, 2001; Ladkin, 2005). None of these authorities restrict the researcher’s self-inquiry to purely propositional forms of knowing. Through the forms of question on the right hand side of the chart I am reinforcing the necessity of penetrating beneath any propositional or other statement. “I’m frustrated by the client” is , I assert, a statement that needs investigating in experiential terms by the researcher

<sup>23</sup> I would like to use a non technical word with a wide scope so I have selected ‘thing’ rather than ‘phenomenon’, or ‘object’.



in relation to themselves. How am I frustrated by this person? What does it feel like now? Here is an example of a famous Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls, encouraging a client to get down to experiential detail. The authors encourage us to notice the prevalence of “What” type questions as ones going to the experience rather than, for example, “why”, which would be likely to take us to propositional forms of knowing. (The form of our questions to ourselves, and others, will be likely to shape the answers we give or receive<sup>24</sup>.) Whilst this is a case from therapy it serves to accentuate the focus on present in the moment experience as a mode of first person inquiry for a action researcher.

- L: Feels like a spider  
 F: *What* do you feel? *What* do you experience personally?  
 L: Do you mean physically?  
 F: Physically, emotionally, so far we have had mostly think-think, talk-talk, things.  
 L: I feel like I'm - there's a spider sitting on me and I want to go do something.  
 F: *What* do you experience when the spider sits on you?  
 L: It feels like black up here.  
 F: No reactions to the spider? If a spider really would crawl over you now *what* would you experience?  
 L: Adrenalin and jump and scream.  
 F: How? (Liz half heartedly brushes away a spider). Again. Spider's still there....  
 L: I'd scream and –  
 F: How? ..... *How* would you scream?  
 L: I c- I don't know if I could do it. I can hear it though when I do it. It just comes out.  
 F: How? (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993: 94-95. Italics added by the authors)

## 2. *Something in its own right*

The second box from the top of the chart concerns experience of the research object etc as a discrete entity. Although it appears to me it is also something *for itself*. In this thesis I have taken pains to try to recognise the dignity and separateness of things from me – even to the point of endowing my own ideas as other than me in some way.<sup>25</sup> The experiential focus here is on being able to engage with the thing and express it in some way that is as uncluttered as possible by our own pre judgements and prejudices. Merleau-Ponty supports the view that I can never see what is other than me completely clearly – my perception is always bound up in my point of view. Hence the descriptive process has to be one of gradual illumination of self and other. (1962: xiii-xiv). I try to do this by

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<sup>24</sup> “It often happens that we only become aware of the important facts, if we suppress the question ‘why?’ and then in the course of our investigations these facts lead us to the answer” (Wittgenstein quoted by Watzlawick et al, 1974: 84)

<sup>25</sup> According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's genius lay in his ability to create characters and then give them independent life as a separate (from the author) subjective existence. (Bakhtin, 1984: 5 & 59).

seeking to weave together a description of myself and the other thing I am engaging with so as not to abstract either one.

### 3. *In a situation*

Inquiry into the territory represented by the third pair of boxes – “situation” – is more oblique, because, by definition, I cannot approach frontally or directly. If I do then this becomes figural for me. Oblique inquiry may involve being alert to vague sensations as they emerge. Stewart (2005) and Brady (2005) offer approaches towards inquiry that involve trying to stay close to the point where things emerge – in other words the point where they start to break up or configure themselves, or the opposite where they break up and disappear into vague sensuality again. I would describe this as a strategy for trying to stay alert to the situatedness of things. Eliot’s phrase “the unknown, remembered gate” (Eliot: 222) captures the elusive, paradoxical nature of this kind of knowing. Think of catching something out of the corner of one’s eye while attending to something else. Think of a sudden intimation of danger that causes a driver to reduce speed approaching a corner (an example of a mixing of practical knowing –driving a car – and experiential knowing. You may also formulate a proposition – I’m going too fast!). Think of that “something” that draws a smile from another. Experiential knowing does not exist in a vacuum as can be seen by the other representative questions. We can formulate specific questions to induce or encourage us to bring into awareness what might be implicit; in these situations our answers are likely to arrive with surrounding feelings or other premonitions. Merleau-Ponty says that everything that appears to us comes wrapped in possibility and latency that is present but not visible. As he describes the potentiality or latency of our situations Merleau-Ponty is anxious not to stray too far from in the moment experience: invisibility refers to the “depth” of the visible present to which it is a “lining”. The invisible for him is an “*operative, militant, finitude.*” (Visible and Invisible: 305): a *dimension* of possibility. In this way Merleau-Ponty is seeking to stress that this invisibility is presented with the visible - it is not some remote and distant state. It is this type of present, but invisible, that Varela and Shear commend as a potentially rich ground for inquiry (1999: 4-5). It is the territory I have been drawn to in this thesis as I seek for sources of energy and excitement in my life through emergent process.

### 4. *In the world*

The obliquely present “situation” *shades into* something that is totally other (not just the other side of something I conceive), which is named “world” in the chart. This invisible is not just the absence of *some thing* in the sense that there is now an absence of tea in my mug, or there is another side to this laptop, or an increasing feeling of tension behind my eyes now as I tap away. These things may be thought of as graduations of something in my situation (that is contained in the previous boxes). If you like numbers then you might like to think of a reduction down to zero, but not into negative numbers. In thinking the category “world” I’m wanting to open a space for dropping below the horizon into true negativity. As

Sue Cataldi *graded* emotion she inquired into different depths of emotional experience (1993: 27). She remarked that some emotions dropped into a space where they were considered “blind”<sup>26</sup>, and where they seemed to suffuse our whole being. We are totally “in” them (falling in love; in the depths of despair; overcome by grief), and can get no external point of leverage. This is a radical kind of absence that is normally felt like hole, or deep pit in existence. Experientially it occurs as a dis-possessive force, which is fundamentally felt or sensually experienced. It may be deeply troubling – a kind of existential anxiety, or it may be fundamentally unsettling as in bewildering, or it may be experienced as truly awe inspiring. “World” captures the grading off of experiential knowing into something that can only be experienced in forms of “not”; it seeks to register a form of experience that is not subordinated to a consciousness – a primordial openness to the world. Something not positively created by an imaginative consciousness. This is by definition beyond active inquiry. We open (or not) to such forces as they surge in. Simpson and French borrow from the poet Keats the phrase “negative capability” for the ability to stay in this place and still function (Simpson and French, 2006: 245-255).<sup>27</sup> They see the ability to stay open to the other in the face of a desire to either close or impose our own construction as a hallmark of dialogue. They consider it particularly significant for leaders, who are often faced with choices about whether to make themselves vulnerable in the face of many opportunities to never do so. The movement into radical otherness seems to me to justify on its own a separate category from “situation”, but there is another reason also for its separation. This is the realm in which we powerfully connect to the experience of other human beings – and maybe other creatures as well. Senses of bewilderment, wonder, and, more physical, sensations such as standing against gravity, or being besottedly overwhelmed by love, or recoiling against a sudden clap of thunder, are shared experiences, and evidence of a shared existence in a shared world. At the end of Chapter Three I sought to occupy the space of a colleague by drawing on common experiences of being in tears in front of others, and used my writing to also wonder what it must be like to be an impoverished child in Sao Paulo.

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<sup>26</sup> “We have noted some ‘dark’ dimensions to emotional experience – some space of nonfeeling; and we have seen that certain emotions (like shock, love and rage) are regarded as ‘blind’.....From our ordinary speech we have discovered that the ‘deeper’ the emotion, the more appropriate it is to apply the locution *in* to it. We say, for example, that we are ‘in love’ or ‘in mourning,’ ‘enraged,’ ‘in wonder,’ or ‘in terror.” (Cataldi: 27)

<sup>27</sup> The phrase occurs in a letter to his two brothers dated 21,27 December 1817: “...at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”. (Keats, 2002: 41-42)

*How do I feel, what am I thinking as the chapter ends?*

This section, and indeed this whole chapter, has concerned itself with being in the world, and with the world as “ground”. Mainly the focus has been on theorising with the aid of new knowledge of existential phenomenology I have acquired over the research journey. But this theorising has also evoked my own experience – my own feelings. I would like to end the chapter by just opening up a little to what comes as I let my writing self fall into the ending, guided by the questions, what am I feeling, what am I thinking? This will aid the thesis by seeking to demonstrate some things I have been talking about concerning emergent form, also it may serve to bring the chapter to a satisfactory conclusion, and might pose some questions for the next chapter.

My intention in adding the chart contained in Exhibit 4.2, and providing the associated commentary, was to summarise my developing understanding of how to theorise about myself, and my experience in the world. Doing so enabled a reflection on Gestalt, phenomenology and action research in relation to experience, and knowing. I found that writing to connect up the three areas of thought sharpened what it was I thought I knew about these different territories of knowledge. This “sharpening” was rather like that feeling, of which I have spoken before, of being on a path that I feel I already know, but have forgotten. Writing these sentences now also brings to mind the people in the different communities that support these different perspectives: people I know in CARPP, Gestalt and phenomenology. I also imagine with a feeling of warmth, these people being able to better locate me within their different traditions. I imagine myself being welcomed – taken in. This feeling reflects back to illuminate the other side of this – not being a part but being marginalised. Something that does not feel quite so positive, but is a familiar aspect of the doctoral journey as a whole. If I attend to the emerging feeling more closely, and try to track it, then it emerges to be named as a kind of loneliness. As I *write the word* “lonely”, the feeling blossoms into a more jagged dislocated feeling, like a shell-burst throwing out splinters. Then what comes is a kind of familiarity – like a kind of home for me. As a result it’s not a completely negative feeling. As I write this sentence I realise that something else is being evoked. It is a feeling of fate – this is how it has to be. My body stiffens. I’m bracing myself, as if I was going to be hurt and I should be brave. It’s heroic, but with a difference. I know that I can’t win – I’m kind of sacrificing myself. What might these feelings and premonitions mean in relation to the thesis?

One thing my reflection does is to move me to think again about the W case. The other aspect that comes to mind is that my intervention involved me carefully positioning myself on the edge of action. In the circumstances it led to a creative and elegant solution, but I wonder how much of the design was informed by a life position of mine. As I said at the time of describing the case the feeling reminds me a little of the event that featured so strongly at the beginning of Chapter Three

when I introduced a 360 degree type process into my supervision group; that also involved me in sitting out from the main action. In the case of the W consulting case, and in many others, this approach of marginalising myself to some degree is highly successful. One aspect of this I recognise is that clients have reported to me that they experience me as being quite selfless in service of their needs. Let me pursue that a little as a next step as I feel it might be taking me somewhere important.

First some evidence of what I asserted at the end of the last paragraph. I want to produce a piece of feedback for us to look at together, and then use that to take on the reflection started above. The feedback dates from August 2004, four months before the W case, when I was coming to the end of an assignment with the Group Human Resources Director of a large UK retailer. I asked her if she would provide me with feedback, and if I could record the conversation for possible use in my PhD. She agreed. The total conversation took ten minutes and I have extracted a paragraph from the centre of the conversation. I will refer to her as B (she asked that don't use her name or the name of the company). It's relevant to know that I have known her as a client for about ten years (and before that as a work colleague for about five years). I think it may also be relevant to know that she is successful, and we are about the same age:

R: Because it's the end of a period I wouldn't mind getting some feedback about why you have kept seeing me, I mean when I think of all the people you could speak to....

B: (After five minutes and twenty seconds). You come across extremely well in very senior executive groups, and you flex your style to suit theirs, and try to extract the best from them. You're very, very, very, committed to what you do, and you are *reliable*. You are also in terms of creation...think of all the things you have had to create with me *24 hours before I'm about to do them*, over the telephone. *So responsive, gosh* you know! So the things that matter to me, the contribution, the input is at a high level, its *reliable* and it fits the purpose. And the fact that you really are *so flexible, you know, I catch you in the car at 11pm at night* – saying 'I've got to do this tomorrow, what am I going to do?' Also what you did, Rob, was you really *listened and understood* what I was trying to achieve,..." (Private conversation, 19<sup>th</sup> august 2004. Italics added)

There are positive points being made here, and her intention is clearly to be supportive. However I would like to inquire into another aspect of the feedback, which I believe has a bearing on my themes for the thesis. What is this aspect?

In respect of this feedback I notice, now, in March 2007, how differently I'm connecting with it than I was in 2004, when it was first documented for the doctoral journey. Then I was flattered, now I'm slightly dismayed by the emphasis on reliability, flexibility and responsiveness. I appreciate that it is not the whole picture, but I now find the phrase "bending over backwards" comes to mind. On

an especially negative reading the feedback almost seems to report servility. Where am I in this account? Elsewhere in the piece B says that I am “modest”. Yes, I feel now perhaps too much so. Applying what I have been learning on the journey, and expressing in this chapter, two questions arise for me: a) how am I taking up and living the consultant’s role? b) What effect is this having on the rest of my life? In response to the first question it would seem reasonable to deduce from the strategy case reported at the beginning of Chapter Two, and the W case that I hold strong values about serving my clients, and setting up processes that will be successful for them. I would claim I show signs of being creative and *selfless* in their service. For example the contribution B reports is about responding quickly to her needs, no matter how unreasonable they might be in terms of time of day or length of notice.

As confirmation here is a sentence from an American consultant, giving me feedback when I was on the faculty of a consultant training programme at a Gestalt centre on Cape Cod (he agreed to my using this when I taped it on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 2004).

For example we had a discussion about how we could talk about a particular issue in the group, and I noticed that you were guiding us into – you were working with us - *in a way that mirrored what we were talking about trying to achieve*: talking the talk and walking the walk. Rob you just did it! (Private conversation, 17/08/04)

An orientation towards an approach that could be characterised as selfless service has its good sides. A process consultant could do a lot worse. But it also appears to me that there is a risk that I might become dependent on others for life energy: that I might disappear as Bridget reported. I think here of Parlett’s phrase: “on being present in your own life” (2001: 43). Am I present in my own life? The question takes me back to the feedback from B – to being selfless. Am I being too selfless? But I have also been reported as being the opposite – self-indulgent. How might I be both?

Something like movements of selflessness and selfishness seems to me to be behind C’s challenge: “where in your life?”<sup>28</sup> She provides a series of questions, which are really directed towards purpose. In a different form these questions seem to strike at the same issues that lie at the heart of my overall doctoral journey. What is my purpose? Where is my energy? Relating this directly to the PhD I think I might also see a type of accentuated responsiveness as supporting a research style that is focused mainly on emergence. This does not strike me as necessarily being a bad thing. I’m adapting myself to the situation and developing

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<sup>28</sup> Ideas – what practical outcomes? For what end? Your learning? What do differently? Making a difference with your clients? To what end? Where in your life? (Body and Process, January 2005)

an approach to a new situation that draws on skills that I have. But I still have to answer the question, concerning whether this helps me to achieve my purpose, in engaging with new sources of excitement and energy at this stage in my life.

My inquiry seems to be opening into my personal world in a deeper and troubling way. Am I blocking my energy through being selfless – disappearing. Does this relate to the opposite - being self-centred? What do I stand for? Where am I in this? I notice a dull ache behind my eyes, and a feeling of dissatisfaction. I had imagined some kind of full stop for this chapter after the adumbration of the chart, but now something else is opening. What is it?

At this point I was uncertain what to do next. I felt a bit burdened by the chart and the abstract commentary: I was conscious of the dull ache behind my eyes. I left my study and went into the kitchen with its large window overlooking the garden. Following a dim intuition<sup>29</sup> that I should try to do something simpler, and more physical, with the ideas I had been working with I took hold of an A4 sheet of paper, and began to play. I cut off a number of  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch strips from the long side, and began to use the paper to create a recursive connection between the different elements of Exhibit 4.2. I drew the elements on a strip of paper and then looped the paper back to connect the ends. After a number of experiments I simplified the presentation down as follows.

On one side of one of the strips I drew two thick red parallel lines, running the length of the strip, and on the other two black lines. Then I divided each side into equal halves. On the red side I wrote “Embodied Self. ....” and then in the adjacent red half I wrote, “...in a Situation”. On the black side I wrote “Other....” on the reverse of the “Embodied Self”, and “in a Situation” in the adjacent black space.

Embodied Self.....	in a Situation
Other.....	in a Situation

Then I gave the paper a twist and joined together the two ends to make a mobius strip. I held the object up in front of my eyes, turning it around, and noticing the way each sector flowed into the next. The red side of the paper joined with the black side at the point where “Other” flowed into the “Situation” of the “Embodied self”, whilst on the other side of the strip the transition from red to black occurred where “Embodied self” flowed into the “Situation” of the “Other”. This was simpler than my chart, but also seemed to approximate better the

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<sup>29</sup> This really is about as much as I can say. I cannot trace back any deliberate thinking here. I just wanted to play with my hands and see if some object held in those hands would change things at all.

dynamic and complex involvements of life. My self was presented as the other side of 'other' (where 'other' could include myself as an object body). Having them this close – as sides of each other - seemed to represent the phenomenological insight that it is difficult to disentangle self from other. Also "I" flowed into my situation on one side, and into the situation of the "Other" as well. Then the whole strip sat there in a shared world.

I looked at the mobius strip on my kitchen table, sitting there shining in its own space. It was in the world with me, now quite separate but created by me. It was part of me and not so. The twist in the strip confused "inner" and "outer" and seemed to better represent the profundity of surfaces than my chart. I also felt myself encouraged to trace sequences around the figure in a never ending recursion: Embodied self....in a Situation.....Other.....in it's Situation....Embodied Self. I returned to my study and draped the small object over the head of my table lamp where it sat quite contentedly.

I felt better but still had an aching head. I looked down at the expectant Feste. "Perhaps you're right", I said "let's go for a walk". He responds with enthusiasm so we get ourselves ready and head for the river path.

*Postscript on ideas in Chapter Four*

Finally, as I look back on this chapter I ask, have I not been moved by ideas during the doctoral journey? Is this not an argument in favour of the primacy of the imaginative conceptual world? Yes, I reply, I have been very supported and moved by ideas on the whole of the journey, especially those from phenomenology, as I have shown in my writing. However, I believe that I have also shown that the ideas that I have engaged with have arisen in a context, and that it is the ideas in context that have proved to be particularly compelling. For example, I have described how I was moved to engage with the ideas of Merleau-Ponty through a sense of dim familiarity, which arose partly from my Gestalt heritage, and from other existential features; for example Merleau-Ponty provided an explanation for my experience of engulfment by a world of feeling. He steadied me in the face of my daughter's illness by enabling me to dare to see that even this terrible revelation is a treasured gift. In the light of this part of the journey I can see that there is indeed a circularity to the relationship between existence and concept, but I can also believe that it is not a symmetrical relationship; that existence comes first as an ambiguous felt ground for my conceptualisation of being in the world. Into this ground the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists *leak*. It seems to me like an infiltration; like *preparation for thinking and acting* differently. I seem to take on the feel of the thinking man as if I was donning his clothes, and trying out his way of being. Through this slow leakage there is a change in practice, but it lags behind; in this way the changes to my ground both lead, in the sense of opening out possibility, and also consolidate, in the sense of filling in to support new configurations of meaningful practice.