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## Senses of focusing

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## BOOK REVIEW

***Senses of focusing***, Vols 1 and 2, edited by Nikolaos Kypriotakis and Judy Moore, Athens, Eurasia, 2021, Vol 1: 568 pp., £34.07, ISBN: 978-618-5439-1; Vol 2: 562 pp., £34.07, ISBN: 978-618-5439-50-7

### Introduction

This stimulating and extensive collection of essays from Focusing practitioners and theorists around the world is the most comprehensive compendium to date of a ‘sister approach’ to the PCA and one that is at the forefront of experiential and humanistic investigations and methodologies. It features both new developments as well as direct quotes from his founder, Gene Gendlin.

### Self and society

*Focusing* shares with psychoanalysis the ambiguous accomplishment of having gifted the world with a new term: the *felt sense*, as ubiquitous in therapy culture and beyond as that other popular term, the *unconscious*. The ambiguity of the achievement consists in the fact that (as with the unconscious) its ‘truer’ or ‘deeper’ meaning, or multiplicity of meanings, is seldom grasped if not altogether misapplied, as several contributors to these work are keen to emphasize. Among the synonyms of felt sense, Purton (2021, Vol. 1, p. 192) lists *hunch, intuition, intimation, glimmering, inkling*. We may be undecided on which way to vote in an upcoming political election, Purton writes. Should we support Mr X? Even though we agree on his policies and on what he stands for, we nevertheless feel unsure. We ‘Focus’ (with a capital F) and then realize we don’t really *like* him. At this point, the decision of the prospective focuser remains open, which is a good thing: it is only by examining and even temporarily *disavowing* a tightly held principle, Merleau-Ponty would say, that we may gain greater clarity about our assumptions and perhaps find a fresh kernel of truth in them. Nonetheless, the implication of applying the felt sense to the political domain is problematic. It reminds me of Lucy Van Pelt, the character in Charles M. Schulz’s comic strip *Peanuts*, who would say: ‘How can I be wrong if I am so sincere?’ Focusing is big on interiority – a debatable domain in itself – but paper thin on the political. This is in itself a disservice to the very notion of the subject, unless one seriously believes in the existence of a subject endowed with a virgin ‘inner world’, immune from the realities of history and class – a pre-Hegelian subject whose task then becomes the cultivation of its own beautiful soul impervious to the joys and conflicts of encounter with the other, with the collective, and well, with reality itself.

The word ‘political’ is mentioned 67 times in these 1100 plus pages, 22 times alone in a chapter which presents a defensive critique of identity politics (Madison and Spinelli, 2021, Vol. 1, pp. 297–316), redolent of the Habermasian idealization of the former bourgeois public sphere as a forum of rational discussion and debate devoid of asymmetry.

At other times the ‘political’ appears as an add-on, a generality listed alongside the social, psychological, environmental, gesturing toward a worthy aspiration which, however, fails to materialize. One potential way around this problem is offered, unassumingly, convincingly, by

Salvador Moreno-López (Vol. 2, p. 183), with a simple nod to everyday life and his own elaboration of *'sentipensares'* which help *situate* the seemingly inbuilt solipsism of the approach.

It is good to know that 'there is a growing movement in the Focusing world for more engagement with the public sphere and socio-political issues' (Zarogiannis, 2021, Vol. 1, p. 100) and that doubts are raised as to whether Focusing itself may become 'an object, a brand, a commodity' or even contribute to the creation of an 'industry of experience/ings' (Zarogiannis, p. 100). It is encouraging to read: 'What if Focusing (just as any such method) is not only a solution . . . but also part of the problem which it intends to fix?' (Zarogiannis, 2021, p. 80).

These are key questions. It would have been good to read more on this. When one considers how the far-right is winning elections in many parts of the world on draconian platforms based on emotions of the most reactive, defensive, and fear-driven kind, the lack of political analysis – or at least a more concrete contextual reference to the realities of oppression and injustice – from an approach that more than others has perfected the art of inward attunement is conspicuous.

### The fetishism of interiority

Could it be that these ambivalences do not constitute an aberration from the allegedly purer and more pristine perspective of the origins but were present from the start? In her lucid and comprehensive Introduction to the first volume, Judy Moore reflects on Gendlin's take on Merleau-Ponty, in particular, *The Structure of Behavior*. It is important to remember that this was Merleau-Ponty's first book, published in 1942, where he investigates the relation of consciousness to nature and presents a critique of 'scientific' psychology challenging the dualistic opposition between the 'mental' and the 'physiological', and that his position will be greatly refined three years later with *Phenomenology of Perception*. Moore quotes Gendlin who, reflecting on Merleau-Ponty, gives a 'summary' of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology which presents 'considerable resonances with his own position' (Moore, 2021, Vol. 1, p. 60). As Gendlin sees it, Merleau-Ponty 'broke with the abstract dialectical schematism, Marxism, and pessimism of Sartre, and developed an existentialism more applicable to psychology and other sciences, with a far greater emphasis on the concrete, the lived, the felt, and the ongoing' (cited in Moore, 2021, Vol. 1, pp. 60–61). I do not dispute that this may accurately sum up *Gendlin's* perspective, but it misrepresents Merleau-Ponty while in the same breath dismissing Sartre a little too hastily.

Zarogiannis' first chapter in volume 1 does a remarkable job of pre-emptying and diverting, as an antenna with lightning, the more recognizable criticisms Focusing is susceptible to, the more obvious being that it is inextricably *mired in the prejudice of the inner life*, a.k.a. subjectivism, or 'the fetishism of interiority' (Sartre, 1968, p. 61). This excessive preoccupation with interiority which Focusing shares with most approaches to psychology and psychotherapy is inevitable when one considers that an important source of Gendlin's philosophy is Dilthey, whose self-bound 'epistemological principles' and 'principles of action' – themselves instituted the foundation, by and large, of Husserl's phenomenological project. For Dilthey, what is 'there for us' can only connect with consciousness through the 'inner apprehension of psychic events and activities'. These constitute 'a special realm of experiences which has its independent origin and its own material in inner experience, and which is, accordingly, the subject matter of a special science of experience' (Dilthey, 1989, p. 60). Closely relying on Kant, Dilthey sees this special realm of inner experience not only separate from external, perceptible objects but as the very 'condition of possibility of objects of experience' (Dilthey, 1989, p. 61). This 'run-of-the-mill psychology' – the basis of most contemporary psychotherapy – 'works with concepts such

as “objective type” or “subjective type” or similar categories ... without touching on the driving force, the problematic, dark foundation’ (Adorno, 2018, p. 213).

## Focusing and spirituality

Contributions by Leijssen (2021, Vol. 2, chapter 1) and Campbell (2021, Vol. 2, chapter 2) in particular present notions as fantastical as that of the formative tendency postulated by Rogers – ‘an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness’ (Rogers, 1980, p. 133). As a poetic image this may be interesting. But its factual, uncritical faith in teleology and theodicy make it sound like wishful thinking on steroids (Bazzano, 2019). Similar notions are constructed by Leijssen. While asserting how Gendlin ‘breaks with a constrictive *psychological* framework in which the *mind* has the upper hand [paving] the way to the body’ (p. 80), she also champions Gendlin for having established ‘a connection with life-forward energy [incorporating] an expanded consciousness, thereby acknowledging that *transpersonal* sources – the Bigger System – contribute to human development and wellbeing’ (p. 81). *Life-forward energy*, *Bigger System* are two examples of this triumph of wishful thinking. The leap from the body to consciousness (and *expanded* consciousness at that) reinforces rather than resolve the Cartesian split, painting an aura of cryptic transpersonal spirituality to gloss over the flimsiness of the postulation.

Campbell enlists Maslow to the spiritualist cause – a psychologist thoroughly debunked by decades of critical thinking for his appropriation, distortion and decontextualization of First Nation’s Blackfoot *situated* and *community-based* (rather than individualistic) model of ‘self-actualization’ (e.g. Brown, 2016). Campbell presents what he defines as an ‘intriguing triune potpourri of *Corporate Personality*, *Hologram*, and *Organism-Environment*’, appealing to ‘serious seekers’ (Vol. 2, p. 97) and building on the legacy of de Chardin, famous for his ‘fuzzy concepts and obfuscating metaphors’ (Medawar, 1961) and arbitrarily mixing theodicy and evolutionism. This is a sort of *acquisitive* Christianity/spirituality which inflates the ‘evolved’ humans as the kings and queens of the earth household (*oikos* from which ‘ecology’ derives) to the detriment of all other species. It is the antithesis of those forms of spirituality (within Christianity too) where the emphasis is on the emptying out of a boisterous, self-aggrandizing ‘spiritual’ subject through the weaving of passionate geometries and dark nights of the soul – think of Pascal, of Kierkegaard, of Bataille. Within this other frame, ‘interiority’ is a place of surrender, of relinquishment rather than acquisition – spiritual or otherwise. The forgotten meaning of *absolute* is freed, unshackled. From what? From the trapping of subjectivity and interiority. And what about absolute knowledge? Is that punditry? No, it manifests (one interpretation of Hegel suggests) through the experience of Christ on the cross – abandonment, ultimate hopelessness, the *lama sabachtani* as the last words in the unfolding of history.

A more engaging comparative study between Gendlin and ‘spirituality’ comes from Tadayuki Murasato who in his chapter embarks on the admirable task of seeking parallels between Dōgen Zenji’s Genjo Koan and Gendlin’s notion of implicitly body knowing, which rather vaguely reminds me of what Dōgen in the second fascicle of his Shōbōgenzō (*Bendōwa*, or ‘negotiating the way’) calls imperceptible mutual aid, emphasizing the *communal* nature of the practice leading to *dōji jōdō*, i.e. simultaneous attainment of the way. Murasato makes interesting links between Gendlin and Nishitani via Francisco Varela, touching upon the notion/experience of groundlessness, including a very enlightening passage by Varela and his colleagues (2021, vol. 1, p. 242, emphasis added):

There is a profound discovery of groundlessness in our culture, in science, in the humanities, in society, and in the uncertainties of people's daily lives. [...] We feel, therefore, that the solution for the sense of nihilistic alienation . . . is *not to try to find a new ground*; it is to find a disciplined and genuine means to pursue groundlessness, *to go further into groundlessness*.

I suspect that going further into groundlessness would constitute, if explored thoroughly, a shrewd response to the essentialism of the subject and the essentialism of all those multi-colored spiritualist and existentialist shadows of God often making their appearance in these two volumes.

Varela developed neuro-phenomenology, and one of its central methods of investigation (namely, combining first-person report with third-person description) is a valuable attempt to surpass the alleged objectivity of mainstream science *as well as* the inveterate subjectivism of mere first-person accounts. Varela is mentioned elsewhere in the book and certainly there is something to be gained from a more in depth-study of the ground-breaking work of the Chilean scientist and meditator. As with Merleau-Pontian thought, it may provide us with a map out of our subjectivistic impasse.

It would have been good to read a more in-depth articulation of groundlessness in relation to Gendlin's implicit body knowing. An interesting set of questions, not explored in the chapter, pertains the relation of the allegedly primal natural world and the more 'artificial' cultural world and whether the idea of the natural world may also be, especially after the work of Bruno Latour and others, a cultural construct. This investigation, as a few others present in the two volumes, is work in progress. Varela's legacy, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, affect theory: they could all provide further articulations for an approach and a method outside the self-boundedness of the subject.

## Conclusion

Seasoned practitioners and trainees alike from most therapeutic orientations will benefit from a close reading of these two remarkable volumes, even when only selecting chapters close to their field of investigation. They will benefit all the more if they do so with an attentive, critical stance: perhaps by sensing and appreciating hypotheses and findings articulated in the work, while also becoming aware of what the limitations are and how they can be overcome.

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