

Senses of Focusing, Vol 1 & 2

Nikolaos Kypriotakis & Judy Moore (eds). 2021. Athens: Eurasia.

Phantasmagorias of the Interior

Once upon a time (in the early to mid-Fifties), Gene Gendlin planted a tree. The tree grew and branched out to the far reaches of the earth; its roots went deep into the soil. Various gardeners across the globe continue to tend to it. Some focus on the flowers, weaving garlands; some create various types of grafting, outsourcing from electively selected branches of philosophy, or from compacted and disparate syntheses of Eastern practices and worldviews. Some wield a sturdy branch to chase fanciful opponents and defend a space of imagined unfettered dialogue. Others worship the tree, and to the predictable objection that no deity inhabits it they respond by disarmingly upholding the sacredness of the ordinary: for instance, the unassuming person of Gendlin himself, his genuine humility and informal demeanour, as well as the relative straightforwardness of the methodology. By a sheer act of will, others still extend that precious Kohinoor formed in the Gendlinian system: the hunch, the feel, the sense, the felt sense—all the way from the subject to the far reaches of the cosmos, or from the self to a ‘no-self’. Some compute the precious but fleeting insight into quantified solidity. Some repeat the magic phrase “Where in the body do you feel that?”, hoping it will generate, if not an answer, at least the hint of a trail in the forest dark. Others still forfeit the body altogether, plucking instead diagrams from a Jungian ether or else applying Wittgensteinian hyper-logic.

Thankfully, His Master’s Voice still speaks through that dusty gramophone: the two volumes present us with frequent extracts from Gendlin’s impromptu talks and his numerous publications, leaving it to the reader to do the work of further elucidation and interpretation.

Respect is due to the Southern (Greek) elaborations of Gendlin’s creation, reviving an age-old question: what if psychology were to put aside its Northern roots and travel South? The Greek interventions in these two volumes carry some of the glimmer one craves from perspectives unshackled by the puritan imperatives of self-improvement afflicting the Northern hemisphere. Respect is due to contributions of theorists/practitioners from China and Japan, liberally ad-libbing from Taoism and Zen in the attempt to enrich and problematise Focusing itself. Respect is due to the editors and every contributor to this work whose 1,100 pages makes an extensive review impossible – which is how I voice my apology for the wholly inadequate set of responses that follow.

The Southern (Greek) taste and texture bring irony, erudition, poetic flight, critical analysis. And although these voices (Zarogiannis, Kypriotakis, and to some degree Voulgaraki) eventually drown (how could they not?)

in the louder clang of positivist agendas so pervasive in contemporary psychology and inevitably encircling Focusers from all corners, they nevertheless leave a shimmer on the surface of the water, a transient joy to behold in this autumn light at dusk as I sit here typing these words.

Unlike Wittgenstein, that “unusual philosopher”, Purton writes (Vol. 1: 188), indifferent to the crafting of a philosophical system, Gendlin was keen to create one, with the inevitable drawbacks (and paybacks) systematisation brings in its wake. Purton’s perspective, inspired by Wittgenstein and notably echoed by Luczaj in the same volume, confidently suggests a conceptualisation of the felt sense that is image-led and not obligatorily emerging from ‘within’ the body. This is closer to Jung (whom Purton quotes approvingly and for whom psyche ‘speaks’ through images) than Wittgenstein, whose undeniable talent is limited to the vagaries and complexities of language. Language is an important aspect of Focusing, an avowedly experiential method and approach to life and its vicissitudes. Gendlin sought from the start to link phenomenology to cognitive expression. Despite the romantic leanings shared with all other humanistic approaches, and which favour the allegedly unfettered domain of ‘experience’ over cognition, there is in Focusing equal regard (in principle) for both domains. This is the tantalising promise of this experiential method (style, philosophy...) reminiscent of a parallel mode of inquiry found in affect theory (Bazzano, 2023). Whether that promise is fulfilled, in the same way as it is in my view accomplished in the latter, remains an open question.

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 works are keen to emphasise. Among the synonyms of felt sense, Purton lists hunch, intuition, intimation, glimmering, inkling (Vol. 1: 192). 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 realise 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 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 sixty-seven times in these 1,100-plus pages, twenty-two times alone in a chapter which presents a defensive critique of identity politics (Madison & Spinelli, Vol. 1: 297-316), redolent of the Habermasian idealisation 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 towards a worthy aspiration which, however, fails to materialise. One way around this problem is offered, unassumingly, convincingly, by Salvador Moreno-López, with a simple nod to everyday life and his own elaboration of ‘*sentipensares*’ (Vol. 2: 183) 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, Vol. 1: 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” (ibid: 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?” (ibid: 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.

Could it be that these ambivalences do not constitute an aberration from the allegedly purer and more pristine perspective of the origins but were there 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 Behaviour*. 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’. His position would 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, Vol. 1: 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, Vol. 1: 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. An avowedly left-wing Catholic who abandoned the Church for its shameful complicity with Hitler, Merleau-Ponty was one of those thinkers who helped formulate humanist Marxism in Europe. While the late Husserl was key to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, from the early Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Merleau-Ponty learned the importance of history and contingency in human affairs. Equally, the hermeneutics of suspicion of Marx and Freud constituted a foundational philosophical grounding for its forays into science and psychology. For Merleau-Ponty, as for Sartre and de Beauvoir, human experience is situated. It is never merely ‘inner’. There is no cult of interiority in Merleau-Ponty, something which cannot be said in relation to either Gendlin or Focusing. As for the hasty dismissal of Sartre, this may reflect the ‘American’ attitude to existential phenomenology which, having gained traction over many decades, is still thriving today and likes to imagine Sartre as a nihilist and a pessimist. Sartre a pessimist? It has become fashionable for psychologists of all persuasions to write off Sartrean thought, but it is hard to think of another philosopher who championed with equal vigour and commitment the validity of the human project and the emancipation of the wretched of the Earth.

When performing one of the main tasks implicit in the work of those of us involved in the “psych-complex” (Zarogiannis, Vol. 1: 79), that is, investigating the ‘personal’ sphere, the latter cannot be too rigidly demarcated lest we fall into the trap of glorifying the illusion of the bourgeois private individual, born, according to Walter Benjamin, sometime between 1830 and 1848 and characterised by blindness to their (our) own history as an unoriginal creature, a product of economic and political dynamics for which they (we) have very little inclination to question and confront. “The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions”, Benjamin remarked, describing how private property replicated the possession of one’s subjectivity. “From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private man, represents the universe” (cited by Emre, 2022).

Zarogiannis’ first chapter in Volume 1 does the remarkable job of preempting and diverting, as an antenna with lightning, the more recognisable 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: 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: 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” (ibid: 61). This “run-of-the-mill psychology” as Adorno (2018: 213) called it – 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”.

Contemporary approaches to psychotherapy often cluster around guru-like figures whose unwillingness to take on the holy mantle makes them even more like sages, and in her Foreword to the first volume Catherine Torpey confirms this outline. Her first meeting in a Meditation Hall in New York confounds all her expectations: instead of a “dashing narcissist”, Gendlin shuffles in, “dressed not for success but for comfort”. It takes Torpey, executive director of the International Focusing Institute, “about three minutes to fall in love” (Foreword, Vol. 1: 33). There is nothing wrong with this inevitable transferential process of admiration, absorption and eventual inspiration to expand and build on the legacy. This works a treat when expressed through the arts; Section 3 in Volume 2 is dedicated to links between Focusing and acting (Seibel, Chapter 10); writing (Aspin, Chapter 11); music (White, Chapter 12); as well as poetry and mysticism (Moore, Chapter 12). It works not because the aesthetic domain is pure or free of the encroachment of alienation and commodification – far from it – but because it is less prone to the compulsion of metaphysics. The latter brings in its wake an arbitrary voluntarism that propels individual processes into the cosmos, weaving new concepts which may be read either as a genre in itself, closely allied to science-fiction.

Contributions by Leijssen (Vol. 2, Chapter 1) and Campbell (Vol. 2, Chapter 2) in particular present notions as fantastical as that of the formative tendency postulated by Rogers (1980: 133), “an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness”. 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” (p80), 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” (p81). 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 resolves the Cartesian split, painting an aura of cryptic transpersonal spirituality to gloss over the flimsiness of the postulation. What is consciousness anyway? Does it float above ‘matter’? Can it exist apart from phenomena? Or is it indivisibly linked to phenomena in the same way, as Nagarjuna would say, as a child is born from father and mother? Campbell enlists Maslow to the spiritualist cause, a psychologist thoroughly debunked by decades of critical thinking for his appropriation, distortion and decontextualisation of First Nation’s Blackfoot situated and community-based (rather than individualistic) model of ‘self-actualisation’ (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: 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-aggrandising ‘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 intricate and thoroughly 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*, a classic of Zen Buddhist literature, 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, emphasising the communal nature of the practice leading to *dōji jōdō*, that is, 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:

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.

(Vol. 1: 242)

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 multicoloured spiritualist and existentialist shadows of God 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. Murasato introduces the reader to the holistic notion(s) of body-environment found in Gendlin's *A Process Model: env #1, #2, and #3*, attempting an interesting comparison with Dōgen's thought, especially Genjo Koan, the most well-known among the fascicles assembled in the philosophical masterpiece *Shōbōgenzō*. Briefly stated: env #1 is the “spectator's environment” (Murasato, Vol 1: 239-254), the very word ‘environment’ suggesting that which surrounds the sovereign subject, the human who moves back and forth between plundering it and admiring it during photo shoots he then posts on social media. Env #2 is the “reflexively identical environment” (ibid), this body at one with the external world; env #3 is more markedly “home-made”, a sort of add-on to the existential given of the world, and mostly to do with the ‘artificial’ environment created by humans. 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 itself 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.

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Young Children’s Existential Encounters

Zoi Simopoulou. 2019. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Neither the title of this book nor this review can do justice to its scope and importance. Instead, I will draw out some of its main points.

The book is in three parts. Part 1 is an introduction to infant observation and a review of the literature. Part 2 is a detailed phenomenological analysis of the author’s encounters with five different children, and Part 3 is an examination of how an integration of psychoanalytic and existential sensibilities can provide a fertile ground for a way forward.

Overall, the book is a review of the way young children have been viewed by both existentialism and by psychoanalysis. When I say viewed, I mean