Retro Review Classics

Review by **Jenny Dawson**

The Spell of the Sensuous : Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World

By: David Abram, Vintage, New York, 1997
ISBN: 978-0679776390

I first read this book over 15 years ago. It brought existential phenomenology alive for me and made the connections with the other two principles of Gestalt Therapy theory very clear.[1] I was literally spell bound by it. However, recently I was unable to reconnect with the book until I took it with me to Cornwall: as my senses connected directly with the wildness of the earth and sea, I was reminded experientially about the message of this book.

David Abram has a background as a cultural ecologist and philosopher, and learnt about shamanism by living with many indigenous peoples of the world. He knows about 'the malleability of perception' (p. 5), and worked with R.D. Laing, the counter-cultural Scottish psychiatrist, exploring how to use sleight-of-hand magic to communicate with distressed individuals. He describes this, his first book, as philosophy on the way to ecology. In it he draws particularly on the insights of the French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, including the work of Husserl, and Heidegger as forerunners to Merleau-Ponty's work .

After an introduction to the philosophers' ideas there are three chapters on the impact of language. Abram claims that this helped to develop a sense of superiority amongst humans, who came to see themselves as separate and above other animate beings. He describes several indigenous races and emphasizes how their communications are deeply embedded and connected to the earth and all beings in it. The penultimate chapter reminds us about air, qualities of presence and ways of being present. The final chapter is called 'Turning inside out' and suggests ways in which we might reawaken our sensual participation with animate and inanimate beings.

Abram's exploration of phenomenology emphasizes our animalistic qualities, 'the everyday world in which we hunger and make love' (p. 32). I was reminded of Roberts' (1999) opinion that our inherited psychological language 'does not breathe and so does not inspire – it is bloodless, fleshless'. Abram considers that Merleau-Ponty took Husserl's experiential approach to phenomenology further with the introduction of the idea of reciprocity – 'an ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it' (p. 52). Abram compares this to sleight-of-hand magic that depends on active participation and our tendency to fill in the gaps, as demonstrated in many of the classic Gestalt Psychology experiments.

Abram reminds us that the world we live in is 'a living field, an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphosis – the world and I reciprocate each other' (p. 33). He states categorically that if we do not repress our direct sensory experience, all phenomena will be seen as active because to the sensing body no thing presents itself as utterly passive or inert: 'Only by affirming the animatedness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world' (p. 56).

One chapter of Abram's book is entitled 'The flesh of language', in which he describes gestures as the 'bodying forth of emotion into the world' (p. 74). This will be familiar territory for Gestalt therapists and anyone working with embodiment and the inherent truthfulness of gestures. Kepner (2003) and Fleming Crocker (2009) emphasize the importance of exploring with their clients the meaning of gestures in the context of the interactive whole of each person's existence.

Merleau-Ponty was struck by the gestural significance of spoken sounds: 'language is a sensuous bodily activity born of carnal reciprocity and participation' (p. 74). Abram asserts that the fullness of this embodied process is inhibited when we resort to conventional ready-made speech forms that require no deep connection. However, Merleau-Ponty's view is that we can never totally separate the conventional aspects of language from the sensorial direct affective meaning. For instance, Abram references the philosopher Peter Hadreas, who has found that in 15 European and Asian languages the words for 'sea'

depend on continuant consonants which do not involve a stoppage of air flow, whereas words for earth or ground depend on plosive consonants that involve a momentary stoppage of air flow and a subsequent slightly explosive release (note 7, p. 279).

Merleau-Ponty was interested in the relation between the formal structure of language and the expressive act of speaking. This work was cut short by his sudden death. Abram considers that the most important chapter of Merleau-Ponty's last unfinished work is 'The intertwining – the Chiasm' (chiasm = criss cross), in which he shows how sense modalities are continually coupling and collaborating, enabling the chiasm between the body and the earth – 'the senses interact in perception as the two eyes collaborate in vision' (p. 128).

Abram notices a similarity between Merleau-Ponty's discernment about the deeply participatory relation of all things to the earth and the animalistic awareness of indigenous oral people. However, not everyone has endorsed Abram's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. For instance, Bannon (2011) suggests that Abram is attempting a 'creative reading' of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to support his own of animism, claiming that the latter rejected animism and that Abram's views can be seen as anthropomorphic or biomorphic projections.

Abram reminds us that alphabetic reading was thought to be a form of magic by indigenous people. The language of indigenous people is expressed not as an exclusive property of human kind but as a property of the sensuous life world. Interestingly he points out that the word 'spell' has a double meaning: both the order of letters in a word and a form of magic. He suggests that as soon as utterances were recorded in writing, they acquired permanence and autonomy – the literate self cannot help but feel its own transcendence and timelessness relative to the fleeting world of corporeal existence. He notes that the Cartesian perspective contributed to the belief that humans are unique and above the rest of the animate world, and he considers that this view has been used to justify the increasing manipulation and exploitation of non-human nature.

In the chapter 'The living present', Abram writes about his experience of living with indigenous oral people for whom time and space have never been separated. He asserts that the tradition of phenomenology has sought to recover this integration but has not been entirely successful in doing so. The journey to integrate mind and body so as to regain a full-blooded awareness of the present is a path beset with many pitfalls as outlined by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951/1973) for early Gestalt Therapy students, and more latterly by Almaas (1996) for those seeking integrated spiritual and psychological growth.

Apparently Merleau-Ponty left a question for us to puzzle over in a note found after his death – 'where within the visible landscape can we locate past and future – where is their *place* in the sensuous world?' (p. 207). Heidegger wrote of three temporal dimensions, including the present, that he described as – 'behind the present *now* is a deeper sense of present as presence' (p. 222). Abram expresses this as 'hidden in the thickness of the present' (p. 122). He offers a meditation practice which supports staying in the present and integrating more of the past and future into the present moment. I have used this practice myself and introduced it to my students on Gestalt training courses, with positive effects.

The relationship between this practice, Merleau-Ponty's thinking, and Gestalt awareness exercises is very clear and pertinent. Whereas some Gestalt practitioners draw primarily on Husserl's ideas, for instance Fleming Crocker (2009), Kennedy (2003) argues that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides a sounder philosophical underpinning to methodology than does Husserl's. Staemmler (2011) also draws on Merleau-Ponty's work in suggesting that there is no absolute Now, and that 'the body has its history and horizons'.

Abram considers other unknowns and unseens – for instance, the aspects of our body that we can't see, such as the back and inside. He links this to the unseen absence under the ground. He describes this process very actively as 'The beyond – the horizon by withholding its presence holds open the perceived landscape whilst the under-the-ground by refusing its presence supports the perceived landscape' (p. 214). The reciprocity and asymmetry between both resembles the reciprocity and contrast between the future and past which may be as much spatial as temporal, for instance the tree trunk's past is inside.

Most indigenous cultures are very aware of this interdependence, and some ancient Emergence stories have the same word for 'long ago' and 'the future'. In her retelling of the Navaho Emergence Myth, Moon (1972) recounts how the Navaho stories showed a deep appreciation of psychological development, and the importance of not rejecting aspects of ourselves and our connections with the earth:

In our journey from level to level of our own nature we often

> have to confront the disturbing fact that what we thought lay behind us still walks beside us patiently. And in our dismay we fail to recognise the growth it has undergone, the new clothes it wears. (p. 84)

Abram suggests that 'As long as we structure our lives according to assumed parameters of a static space and rectilinear time we will be able to overlook our thorough dependence on the earth' (p. 217).

Abram reminds us that air is utterly invisible. Pause for a moment and ask yourself, are you breathing the air or is it breathing you? He suggests that the air is the soul of the visible landscape. The Navaho believe that we are nourished by air, and our actions and thoughts affect the air. The Greek word 'psyche' means not merely the soul or wind, but breath or gust of wind. However, Abram warns that 'Lacking all sacredness, stripped of all spiritual significance, the air is little more than a conveniently forgotten dump site for a host of gaseous effluents and industrial pollutants' (p. 258).

At the beginning of the final chapter Abram quotes a Rilke poem in which the poet desires not to be cut off from nature. I am surprised that he does not elucidate on the importance of literature in reminding us about our deep connections with nature. Indeed, he may have underplayed the role of language generally in communicating about these mysterious underlying experiences of being human and a part of a wider whole. Paradoxically, one of the great strengths of the book is Abram's own eloquent writing as in the preface:

> As we return to our senses we discover them to be simply our part of a vast interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies – supported not just by ourselves but by icy streams tumbling down granite steps, by owl wings and lichen and by the unseen imperturbable wind. (p. 65)

During my visit to Cornwall, my hosts showed me a photograph of a bottle encrusted with barnacles with a message visible inside it. On breaking open the bottle they discovered that the message was from Nova Scotia and included an email address of the sender with whom my hosts had been corresponding for several years. I marvelled at the magic of a glass bottle being carried safely to shore without being smashed to smithereens on the rocks. I also delighted in the way such a primitive mode of communication had led to the blossoming of that most modern form of technologically assisted contact – an email friendship.

Abram suggests that we are unable to discern how far our perceptions and thoughts are being shifted by our sensory involvement in electronic technology since we are a part of that which we would investigate – the shapes of our consciousness are shifting in tandem with the technologies that engage our senses.

He emphasizes that he is not advocating a renouncement of technologies, but suggests that we renew our acquaintance with the sensuous world in which these techniques and technologies are rooted. This message is even more urgent today with the perpetual increase both in the complexity of technology and the ease with which virtual connections are made.

Since writing his first book, Abram formed the Alliance for Wild Ethics, and has continued to comment passionately on the consequences of our lack of reciprocity with the earth. In a lecture in 20102 he asserted that:

> Nothing will fill us – open up our hearts/senses to this extreme environmental crisis – the planet is shivering into a bone wrenching fever as the climate is heating up – this is a perceptual crisis born of sensory blindness – the world is beginning to choke.

He attributes this blindness partly to our fear of mortality and our vulnerability to each other or, as he describes it, to the gaze of another, and suggests in words that will be familiar to therapists that 'if we don't grieve the losses we won't feel the joy'. And in his most recently published book, Abram (2011) urges us to 're-story the earth'. His hope is that we may be inspired to renew our sensuous bearings: to begin to recall and re-establish the rootedness of our human awareness in the larger ecology of which we are a part.

For anyone who is interested in the relevance of phenomenology and eco psychology to their work and life, *The Spell of the Sensuous* will still be very significant.

Jenny Dawson, MSc., C.Q.S.W., Dip. G.P.T.I., has over 20 years' experience as a Gestalt psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer. Now in semi-retirement, she enjoys creative writing for performance. Email address: jeniandaw6@gmail.com

Notes

1. The other two are *Dialogue and Field Theory*. See G.M. Yontef, *Awareness, Dialogue* and *Process: Essays on Gestalt Therapy*, Gouldsboro, ME: Gestalt Journal Press, 1993, p. 203.
2. As part of SEEDing CHANGE lecture given in Stockholm 'Mindfulness in Nature'; accessible at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed44p94_BOk (not available at 6 March 2014).

References

Abram, D. (2011) *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, New York: Vintage Books

Almaas, A.H. (1996) *The Point of Existence: Transformations of Narcissism in Self-Realisation*, Boston, Mass.: Shambhala

Bannon, B.E. (2011) 'Flesh and nature: understanding Merleau-Ponty's relational ontology', *Research in Phenomenology*, 41: 327–57; accessible at www.academia.edu/859005/Flesh_and_Nature_Understanding_Merleau-Pontys_Relational_Ontology

Fleming Crocker, S. (2009) 'Phenomenology in Husserl and Gestalt Therapy', *British Gestalt Journal* (BGJ), 18 (1): 18–28

Kennedy, D. (2003) 'The phenomenal field: the homeground of gestalt therapy', *British Gestalt Journal*, 12 (2): 76–87

Kepner, J. (2003) 'The embodied field', *British Gestalt Journal*, 12 (1): 6–14

Moon, S. (1972) *A Magic Dwells: Poetic and Psychological Study of the Navaho Emergence Myth*, London: Rider and Company

Perls, F.,Hefferline, R. and Goodman,P. (1973) *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, Harmondsworth: Pelican (orig, 1951)

Roberts, A. (1999) 'Digging up the bodies' – opinion, *British Gestalt Journal*, 8 (2)

Staemmler, F. (2011) 'Now is not what it used to be', *British Gestalt Journal*, 20 (2)

Review by **Jay Beichman**

The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct

By: Thomas S. Szasz, Harper & Row, New York, 1961

ISBN: 978-00617712224 (for 50th Anniversary Edition with a new preface and two additional essays)

The 1961 book *The Myth of Mental Illness* (hereafter *TMOMI*) followed on from an essay of the same title in the February 1960 issue of *The American Psychologist* (Szasz, 1960). The opening line of the latter was, 'My aim in this essay is to raise the question "Is there such a thing as mental illness?" and to argue that there is not' (ibid., p. 113). This question, and his arguments against the concept of 'mental illness', as anything but a metaphor, forms the basis of this classic book which, despite opposition and dismissal, has never lost influence. This influence can most recently be seen, acknowledged or not, in the British Psychological Society's Division of Clinical Psychology's call for a less biomedical view of mental difficulties (DCP/BPS, 2013).

In the Preface to the latest 2010 edition of *TMOMI*, Szasz concedes that 'the question "What is mental illness?" has been 'answered [and] "dismissed"... by the holders of political power' (Szasz, 2010: x). This is how it felt in 2010, and it is why I was so glad when this debate resurfaced in the mainstream media in May 2013. And we have yet to see whether the latter will become a flash in the pan or something more enduring. But in 2010 it seemed that the constant repetition of the belief that 'mental illness is a disease like any other' had turned a 'false belief into a "lying fact"' (ibid.: x). Szasz quotes Bill Clinton, Tipper Gore and Joseph Biden, who all proselytize a 'mental illness' model: 'Mental illness can be accurately diagnosed, successfully treated, just as physical illness' (Clinton); 'One of the most widely believed and most damaging myths is that mental illness is not a physical disease. Nothing could be further from the truth' (Gore); 'Addiction is a neurobiological disease – not a lifestyle choice – and it's about time we started treating it as such....' (Biden); and a 1999 'White House Fact Sheet on Myths and Facts About Mental Illness' asserted that 'research in the last decade *proves* that mental illnesses are

diagnosable disorders of the brain' (ibid.: xi, my italics).

So with an overwhelming consensus throughout society that there is such a thing as mental illness, why is Szasz so insistent that 'there is not'? It is because his 'definition of illness' is 'a pathological alteration of cells, tissues, and organs' (ibid.: xii) and nothing but that. If you can show that any of these alterations has occurred in the brain, then Szasz asserts that you have found a 'brain disease' but not a mental illness. This tight definition of 'illness' means that the concept of 'mental illness' can only have validity as a metaphor.

Szasz's strict definition of illness is where I believe his argument has some vulnerability. The idea of the 'bodymind' holds up the possibility that 'dis-ease' can exist on both the physical and mental planes of human experience. Indeed, to attempt to separate the body from the mind in a dualistic manner is perhaps an error and does not support a holistic approach to human experience. Szasz, in response to a question I asked about this in 2010, said that he did not actually believe in the mind, only the body. In a sense one could see this as holistic but one could equally see this as reductionistic, depending on how one defines and perceives the nature of 'mind'. At this point the argument goes far beyond the pros and cons of medical models and so forth and into philosophy. And to be fair, this response was in a seminar, and Szasz was renowned for contradictory positions over the course of his long life. For instance, he is not sympathetic to the premature claims that the brain *is* the mind, made by some scientists (ibid.: 294).

So what are clinicians diagnosing, if they are not diagnosing illnesses? For Szasz, and those who support his position, clinicians can only be diagnosing *behaviours*. Behaviours are only behaviours, and over time these behaviours have been allowed to leap into an 'illness' category. The problem lies in the fact that these diagnoses are '*judgments of some persons about the (bad) behaviors of other persons*' (ibid.: xiv, original italics). The consequences of this are widespread 'misdiagnosis', an 'ever-expanding list of "mental disorders"' (ibid.), not to mention the implications of the diagnoses in the first place. Diagnoses, in their ambition to be 'objective', leave the 'subjective' (the person actually suffering the problems) in second place.

One major misconception about Szasz is that he was an 'anti-psychiatrist'. He was as critical of anti-psychiatry as he was of psychiatry and, indeed, wrote a book called *Antipsychiatry: Quackery Squared* (Szasz, 2009). He felt he 'was smeared as an antipsychiatrist' (Szasz, 2010: xxviii). Szasz perceived anti-psychiatry as just another brand of psychiatry. He believed his writings transcended the implied dialectic of psychiatry/anti-psychiatry into more fundamental concerns with 'conceptual analysis, social-political criticism, civil liberties, and common sense' (Szasz, 2010: xxix).

If Szasz wants to rid psychiatry of conceptualizing 'problems in living' (ibid.: 35) or 'difficulties in living' (Sullivan, 1947: 228, in Szasz, 2010: 222) as illnesses, how does he suggest reconceptualizing these problems? Szasz suggests that a better way is to think in terms of 'interventions and processes' (ibid.: 2). This is in opposition to the more common idea of conceptualizing 'entities or substantives – such as illness, neurosis, psychosis' (ibid.). In this way, Szasz hopes to '[lay] the foundations for a process theory of personal conduct' (ibid.).

The disadvantage to professionals in this approach is that what they do is more akin to the art of conversation than the science of medicine. In our culture this approach to the 'ill' is not as highly valued. Szasz suggests that there is a difference between 'what psychotherapists and psychoanalysts *do* and what they *say they do*' (ibid.: 4). Szasz says what they do is 'communicate with other persons... by means of language, nonverbal signs and rules' (ibid.). In other words they have conversations with people. This is all Szasz would claim for his own practice of psychotherapy. Yet what therapists claim they do (and remember Szasz is writing in the early 1960s, when mainstream therapy was mostly psychoanalytic) is offer '"treatments" [and] "diagnoses"' and 'all this is fakery and pretense whose purpose is to "medicalize" certain aspects of the study and control of human 'behaviour' (ibid.).

TMOMI seems to anticipate Transactional Analysis (TA) (Eric Berne's first book on the subject was published the same year as TMOMI) when Szasz writes:

> I shall view psychiatry as a theoretical science, as consisting of the study of personal conduct. Its concerns are therefore to describe, clarify, and explain the kinds of games people play with each other and with themselves; how they learned these games; why they like to play them; what circumstances favor their continuing to play old games or learning new ones; and so forth. (ibid.: 8)

These games, for Szasz, inhabit a moral dimension, and therefore a medical approach to these issues is a philosophical and practical mismatch.

In *TMOMI* Szasz uses 'hysteria' as a central example of how what he views as game-playing has been misconceived as mental illness. This particular behaviour – and historical views of it – supports his argument very well. It is perhaps more difficult to accept depression, anxiety or psychosis as a 'game'. Indeed, the notion that persons are always responsible for their behaviour is perhaps just as misconceived an idea as the one that they are suffering from an illness. I would suggest this notion suggests that Szasz is also missing something

fundamental about the involuntary nature of the experience of people in these types of mental states.

However, the central argument about whether or not mental conditions can or should be seen as diseases/illnesses remains. Szasz makes the point that in physical medicine diseases are 'discovered', whereas in psychiatry they are 'invented' (ibid.: 12). This practice leads Szasz to the conclusion that the 'enterprise of inventing mental diseases... *must* eventuate in the conclusion that any phenomenon studied by the observer may be defined as a disease' (ibid.: 13). The ever-expanding *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (or DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) seems to support Szasz's view. The DSM-5, in particular, finally came up against a severe backlash from the British Psychological Society (BPS), and other professional groups and individuals, when it was published last year.

TMOMI challenges views that have become almost monological in their dominance of professional and lay discourses about mental suffering. The willingness of celebrities like Ruby Wax and Stephen Fry, and charities who purportedly support people with 'mental health problems', to endorse the medical model of 'problems in living' shows how far it is being pushed as the 'common-sense' view. When the pressure to conceptualize these sufferings as illnesses comes from the sufferers themselves, it is not surprising that concerned professionals want to become 'medical practitioners' (Szasz, 2010: 249). The 'market', as it were, demands it. However, we have a right and a responsibility to criticize what is being sold, and the claims that are made for it.

Szasz suggests that exploration and understanding of the games we play that do not work, and moving on to ones that do, is the best hope for 'mental health'. These choices need to take into account not just the individual but 'those with whom he interacts' (ibid.: 259). The implicit model is voluntary and process-focused, concerned with the concrete experiences of individuals, versus a coercive model concerned with identifying or 'inventing' static diagnoses for 'treatment'. *TMOMI* was a call for a de-medicalized approach to problems in living that over 50 years later remains a key text for anyone wanting to challenge mainstream medicalized views about 'mental illness'.

Jay Beichman MA (Couns) MBACP (SnrAccred) is a therapist/teacher/researcher currently researching a Ph.D. study at the University of Brighton in how dialogical positioning and narrative processes manifest in therapy. For many years Jay worked as a mental health project worker as well as training and then practising as a therapist. He has also, for better and/or worse, experienced being a 'service user'. He works as an integrative therapist with a pluralistic outlook in private practice and also for EAPs. He also promotes and delivers courses and workshops on subjects such as the dialogical self, voice dialogue, confidence, assertiveness and narrative. jay.beichman@gmail.com; www.counsellinginbrighton.co.uk

References

American Psychiatric Association (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*, Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing

Division of Clinical Psychology/The British Psychological Society (2013) 'DCP Position Statement on Classification', at: http://dcp.bps.org.uk/dcp/the_dcp/news/dcp-position-statement-on-classification.cfm (accessed 22 July 2013)

Sullivan, H.S. (1947) *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry: The First William Alanson White Memorial Lecture*, Washington, D.C.: William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation

Szasz, T. (1960) 'The myth of mental illness', *American Psychologist*, 15: 113–18

Szasz, T. (2009) *Antipsychiatry: Quackery Squared*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press

Szasz, T. (2010) *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, New York: Harper Perennial