

**"From ontic phenomena to the true nature of things - a challenge for psychotherapy"**

("Von ontischen Phänomenen zur wahren Natur der Dinge - eine Herausforderung für die Psychotherapie.")

By definition, every therapist strives to heal.  
But which ailments is a person to be healed of and how is this to happen?

Let's take the example of a psychotherapist. There is a vast variety of schools of psychotherapy and myriad methods promising healing and all of them with the same goal: to free human beings from suffering.  
But, which way truly meets this goal?

Before human beings can be freed from suffering, we first need to recognize the causes of suffering. Only then can we show how to free oneself of it, just as a physician discovers a disease through observation, who explores its causes and, building on them, sets up an appropriate healing plan. This knowledge of the causes of suffering was the enlightenment imparted on Siddharta Gautama under the famous mango tree 2500 years ago.

It is essential to consider first the own basis of understanding and the own ideological thinking before turning to the practice of "healing", since this kind of thinking will influence the process of healing. If we perceive the human being as an independent object, observable and separate from the environment, or if we split him - as is typical in the school of medicine - into a body and soul or mind, then the result will also be a splitted one. It is not useful to talk about holistic medicine while still transferring one's own unconsidered, unreflected and adopted inner thinking patterns onto others. As Ado Huygens explained in Prague in 2006, - *it is not possible to be a therapist without philosophical awareness.*

Parmenides already said: *"To Recognize (perceive, notice, realise) and to Be is the same"*  
- and how and what I recognize, perceive and see is shown in my being and thus in my actions.

*Therefore, I would like to take a brief look at the basics of healing and the philosophical background of the therapist, before I explain the consequences and ways for therapeutic action.*

The therapist should behave along the lines of "anticipatory concern for others" =vorausspringende Fürsorge (Heidegger). Binswanger used the metaphor of the therapist with the patient as a mountain guide who knows the way, or is at least familiar with the weather conditions and the nature of the rocks for securing.  
For, how is a patient to grow if his therapist as well does not recognize phenomena any better than he does?

*The prerequisite for eliminating suffering is recognizing the true nature of phenomena.*

But, how we can attain knowledge of the true nature of phenomena?

To reflect on the nature of phenomena, I will lean on Eastern thinking before I breach the gap to therapeutic application and in doing so, I will base my approach on the views of the Mahayana.

People suffer from manifold things.

They suffer from their unique way of existence and from physical diseases. They are unhappy about the loss of loved ones or setbacks in their material foundations. They suffer when they do not obtain what they are striving for, they suffer when they get aware that everything is transient, they are afraid of old age and death, and they try to hold on and resist change. Yet, simply realising that absolutely *everything* is subject to change, and seriously reflecting on this fact would be a first step in letting go in order to reduce suffering.

Already 2000 years ago, the Roman poet Catull reminded himself to end his suffering when his lover left him, with the words:

*"miser Catulle desinas ineptire et quod vides perisse, perditum ducas."*

("Poor Catull, stop moaning and that which you see is lost, let it be lost.")

And this sentence is valid even now.

Why do we find it so hard to let go of something that we can't keep anyway? The reason lies in our not considering the true nature of things and of ourselves.

Heidegger distinguishes between *Being* and *Entity*. Being, indescribable and unconceivable, is the foundation of why things and phenomena can exist in the first place. Everything of which we can say, "it is", "it exists", is an Entity, including human beings. Basically, Being does not exist in this meaning but "needs" the Entity in order to manifest itself. We perceive Entities in the form of appearances, so called "ontic phenomena". And from this point on, the ontic nature of things is generally misconceived. We attribute independence, absoluteness and changelessness to things. None of this holds true for phenomena.

A phenomenon is first and foremost simply what the name implies: an appearance, and appearances can be deceptive. Nobody who knows the truth would consider the shadows of the jugs on the walls in Plato's allegory of the cave to be the jugs themselves. Everything that appears, appears to somebody and the kind of perception determines what exactly is seen. If there is no one to perceive something, nothing will appear. For us human beings, what exactly is perceived is determined by our degree of openness to what shows itself. And our degree of openness is essentially co-influenced by how attuned (=gestimmt) we are.

But what exactly do we perceive when we perceive a table, for example?

A table, an ontic phenomenon, can be made in different ways, it can be made of metal, wood, stone or glass, it can be small or large with one, three or four legs, etc. We recognize it based on its "nature" as a table, because we have learned to give name for things in connection with various factors and conditions.

But the "nature" of a table, its "table-ness" - basically that which is the basis of the ontic phenomenon - was and is not given in advance. Before there were people, there were no tables or anything made by humans, whoms "nature" could have been the basis of the ontic phenomenon like the Being is the basis of the Entity. Thus, a nomad who has always lived in the desert cannot "recognize" a sailboat as such when he sees one for the first time because he is not able to categorise this phenomenon, this appearance.

Things themselves are like this for several "reasons" - as Aristoteles called it:

because of the *causa materialis* - the material they are made of,

because of the *causa formalis* - their form they have,

because of the *causa finalis* - the purpose they serve, and

because of the *causa efficiens* - by whom or what they were made.

By no means do they exist in and of themselves or have they come into being independently of a precedent condition. We are mistaken about the true nature of phenomena. The way we perceive appearances and how they actually exist are two different things. There are no "objects" independent of us.

(Geshe Yeshe Tobden, p. 97)

Basically, there are no "objects" at all. Objects only exist in a world perceived in a dual way where a subject would also have to exist. Strictly speaking, we can only talk about someone who can see and to whom something can show itself and by this something being seen, it **IS**.

This means: the seeing person, the act of perception and what is seen are inseparable.

All entities, everything we perceive, including ourselves, are composed and thus did not come into being of themselves. This means that they have no "existence of their own" but always refer to an antecedent link and are therefore subject to change. And everything composed is also affected when one or more of its components are changed and changes, too.

If we decompose a table into its individual parts, we no longer find the table, neither in the leg nor in the top. Another phenomenon is presented to us, the table is gone, and it has been transformed into something different. No matter whether it is physical bodies, mental attitudes, situations, or seemingly durable matter like mountains - everything changes - in different periods of time, but nevertheless unavoidably. The only durable thing is change itself. Every change is a passing from a current state and a coming into being of something new.

We suffer because we do not want to accept this kind of view and the related changeability of everything also concerning us. As long as the exchange of individual cells, like during a wound healing in our body, is affected or something positive lies ahead, most people have little difficulty accepting life as change. However, if the change is of a greater magnitude or if it concerns something with which we identify or if a loved one dies, then an unproblematic acceptance of the inevitable change is over and done with.

Just as phenomena (since they are Entities) did not come into being independently of precedent conditions, neither did humans (since they are also Entities). If my father had not met my mother, I wouldn't be here... - and so on back to the beginnings of time.

But this also means that human beings do not have an unchangeable, absolute and independent "I". It is just as difficult to find the "I" in a part of me as to find the table in one of its components. Moreover, body and mind are permanently subject to visible change, from birth until death; not even memories, the most personal part of a human being, are spared, as they are differently assessed, felt or seen in retrospect or depending on the situation. Nevertheless, we cling to our "I" and "me" and "my", and this leads to further unpleasant consequences - suffering, desire for more, clinging and disappointment.

Only things that have come into being independently of themselves would be without beginning or end and would therefore not be subject to any change. But everything ontic, all entities, - in short, all phenomena - never are not subject to any change.

But when we encounter things in our everyday life, we perceive them as if they truly existed independently of everything else. Strictly speaking, there are no objects independent of us. However they are the result of self-made assignments and projections. In "reality", they do not have an inherent existence.

This is their real way of being.

Therefore, the reasons why people suffer and make life more difficult for themselves are the result of a delusion about the true nature of phenomena and themselves. It is this ignorance and thoughtlessness that lead to further consequences.

1. If one does not recognize the changeability of all things, one misconceives
2. that everything has come into being in dependence and that therefore
3. from each precedent cause follows another. Nothing remains without effect.

This non-consideration of the connections leads to erroneous conceptions of the "reality" of phenomena, and about the "I" in demarcation of the other. The self-heightening of the different "I"s leads to rivalry, a need for power, and a striving for possessions with all the negative effects. But as

we have already seen, we too, are nothing but a phenomenon that has come into being in dependence.

The more real, absolute and unchangeable something is considered to be, the more we want to cling to it, the more desirable it seems and the worse it is if it is taken away from us. All fears and suffering have their origin in our state of mind, which, fortunately can be changed. If our mind were absolute - existing of itself - then no change or development would be possible. It is comforting to know that nothing is unchangeably laid down, not even the bad.

This means that the therapist, who desires to heal, takes all of this into consideration when he begins healing. Because to recognize and to be is the same thing. From the "right" finding - as described before - results a different kind of thinking from which results a different kind of talking and acting, a different kind of life, a different kind of attention towards things and oneself, and these things will then actually be different. Thus, finding the true nature of ontic phenomena leads to reduced suffering.

To attain a new state of mind requires changing one's mind and exercise. Here, the therapist should metaphorically become a mountain guide and a fellow hiker, and show the patient ways to a changed state of mind. One way travels over the traditional and tested techniques of Eastern philosophy.

Gathering concentration for the mind to come to peace and to tune in to empty wakefulness is part of the Buddhist tradition.

Since the term "*mind*" is not a term used in a uniform way, we must first define what it means in this context.

The same holds true for the even more confusing term of "*consciousness*".

I will not dwell on the origin of the mind and the philosophical debates about it. And I do not equate "mind" with "soul" either. Strictly speaking, there is no mind as a "thing"; rather it implies activities carried out by humans mentally, from calculating to imagining lying in a flowering garden. The mind encompasses what is commonly described as the intellect, thinking, rationality or reason. In the Buddhist tradition, the mind is simply the sixth of all our senses, after seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, and is another possibility of perceiving and recognizing.

While we walk through the world and do various things, all sorts of thoughts come incessantly to our mind, which are not necessarily related to this activity: as we drive our car, we think about what we need to do at the office; as we listen to a lecture, we think about yesterday evening; as we talk to another person, we think about the shoes he is wearing... Our mind permanently roams here and there like a moody child and is hard to be put at peace, hard to focus on one single matter. This means that we're permanently distracted, partly observing only half of the things we encounter and thus not always reacting appropriately. Furthermore, we also constantly

rate what we perceive at the moment. After all, we do not have time to contemplate phenomena, for example what we encounter, in peace and tranquillity. We immediately have a preconceived opinion and act accordingly.

Since we constantly wander along various tracks, we often overlook what is happening at the physical level alongside our thoughts. We overlook tense body postures, tiredness, and hunger and then wonder why we have headaches or back pain, and why we are not able to fall asleep at night, why we "can't stop thinking". Our mind is restless; it "wanders" about. The origin of all our fears and suffering is in our restless mind.

All of a sudden we become "aware" that we feel bad, that we are in pain and that we suffer. Awareness here is to be understood as a "*phenomenal consciousness*". But what does this mean?

We cannot avoid taking a brief look at the various *conceptions of consciousness* since the different uses of this term often express different philosophies. Like the natural sciences, philosophy has been dealing with the term of consciousness for millennia without really being able to provide a uniform definition.

The philosopher Thomas Metzinger even goes as far as to explain:

*"The problem of consciousness today - maybe together with the question about the creation of our universe - is the outer limit of the striving for knowledge."* (Thomas Metzinger, Introduction: Das Problem des Bewusstseins. From "Bewusstsein - Beiträge aus der Gegenwartsphilosophie." mentis, Paderborn 1995)

Consciousness is often used as a synonym for the mind or soul. However, I do not consider this helpful as confusion only grows if we try to explain an already inconceivable term with other unclear definitions. I won't go into the religious, spiritual or mystical aspects of the term, or into the intellectual approach that everything is simply made of either matter or consciousness or whether either one has resulted from the other. Nor will I discuss the distinction between men and animals and to what degree even these have consciousness.

Let's just take it from the expression "being conscious". This means a waking-conscious state or a dream state or a hypnotic meditative or other state. If we are not in one of these states, we are "unconscious". We do not "know" ourselves or anything.

In the so-called "*phenomenal*" consciousness, stimuli from the environment are not simply grasped, but "experienced", for example by being happy, perceiving something or suffering from pain.

Apart from this, one can also think about these things, plan something, or remember or expect something; in this case, we talk about "*mental*" consciousness.

If a living being is also aware of these mental states and the fact that it has such a consciousness, we speak of a "*consciousness of the self*" - self-consciousness as an awareness of oneself as an individual.

We speak of an "*individuality consciousness*" if someone is conscious of himself and also of his uniqueness as a living being and by perceiving other living beings as being "different".

We should think about *states of consciousness* rather than about *THE* consciousness. States of consciousness are the ontic area and are therefore easier to describe. The definition of a specific state of consciousness is determined primarily by the evaluation of a person's personal experience. What is very important for the state of consciousness is how a person is attuned, one's feelings and emotions, because the feeling of ease or unease and the respective coenaesthesia co-determine actions and rate the perceived phenomena.

By "*everyday consciousness*", we understand the three states of *waking consciousness, sleep consciousness and dream consciousness*. The term "*changed or extended consciousness*" requires that we define a "normal state". We look at the waking-conscious experience of man as such. Here, we need to consider that in other times and in other cultures, the "normal state" is perceived and distinguished differently. The current state of consciousness has a multi-layered relationship with perception. What is perceived is organised and interpreted differently depending on the state. Impressions are given certain significance depending on the state of wakefulness and reason.

Based on the previously described everyday consciousness, various methods or techniques can effect change. On the physical level, for example through endogenic substances and through brain damage, and also by the consumption of drugs, psychotropics, deprivation of stimuli, fastening, etc. On a psychological level, emotional crises, psychological diseases as well through meditation, contemplation and exercises of awareness can also bring about change.

Let's return to the title of this lecture: "*From ontic phenomena to the true nature of things - a challenge for psychotherapy*".

What is the use of this philosophical debate for therapy? How can we translate the previously mentioned view on phenomena into therapy? What is the benefit for the patient of knowing the true nature of phenomena?

In a nutshell: it is the basis to be able to understand, to see.

The therapist dealing with a suffering person should first and foremost deal with the causes and the origins of suffering as previously described. This includes recognizing phenomena, that is, recognizing all entities in their true nature, in that they have not come into being of themselves but are always dependent on a precedent state.

They only seem independent because we have learnt to see them this way. Certain forms come "*ready-to-hand*" = *zu-handen* - they are not only simply "*present-at-hand*" = *vor-handen* (present at our hands = vor unseren Händen) - and lead, for

example, with certain features in accordance with others to the finding: " This is a table."

Thus, they have no absolute or true existence of their own and are subject to change like everything else. They are neither good or bad, or wrong or right - these are all valuations that we subsequently attach to them. In other words: we delude ourselves if we look at them as an absolute given.

Phenomena have nothing ontological; they are always ontic. If we look at them as real and true, we end up wanting to either possess, hold or get rid of them; at any rate, it leads to hardship and suffering.

This matter cannot be reflected on thoroughly enough. It takes time and peace and an environment that allows both. The therapy room lends itself particularly well because of its quietness, its attentive listening and having things shown to one. The mind, which tends to jump here and there, as we have seen, should be instructed to focus on one thing. This includes training perception.

Many things should not be perceived at once, rather just one thing at a time, and in depth. This is a true challenge nowadays, when "multitasking" is genuinely praised as a virtue. If something is contemplated in depth, the attention is *now* directed to *one* thing. This is supposed to happen without valuation.

This can be a thought, a picture, a part of the body or breathing - it doesn't matter what. The change in experiencing - in consciousness - is immediately noticeable. Everything "else" loses significance. Through directed attention, one is much more aware of what and how one is doing right now.

At first, it is difficult for everyone to build up concentration and maintain it.

The therapist who has recognized and experienced this himself, and who remains a searcher, assists the patient in the special form of being-with ( = Mit-sein)

Awareness leads to an attitude and experience, which more or less helps to overcome our clinging to a world that has been mis-conveyed by the mind and the senses.

Once the mind finds peace, serenity occurs, a letting be of what is showing itself without judgment and valuation.

Serenity requires awareness, and the ability to perceive what is "outside" and "inside".

By also turning explicitly to the own history, to the own ideas and unfulfilled desires, all that which is rejected and dreaded will be included into the entirety of all phenomena under the premise that in directed attention, one does not judge but simply contemplates. Only if the perceived can be accepted in its "being that way" (= So-heit) , can it also be integrated into the own life. This procedure is by no means targeted, the focus is on the current Being, on actual perceiving, thinking, and feeling.

Since everything is subject to constant change, it only makes sense to attentively turn to *what is now*. The insight and finding of the conditionality and relation of phenomena only supports this.

And discovering that even one's own "I" is subject to the same conditionality puts into perspective our baleful striving for more and more, which only causes further suffering.

Serenity in thinking also includes serenity in acting: the *Wu-Wei* of Tao. Since every action creates an effect, we should think well about which intentions underlie an action. We only have intentions because we think that, as "I", we are the rulers of all things and that we could affect that which we want to. The phenomena themselves show us that this is not the case.

We can't bend everything to our will - because then the same will happen to us as happened to the Boy and the Rose - as is so nicely expressed in the poem:

*"... and the red rose fought and pricked,  
though he cried and sighed in vain, he had to let it  
happen... "*

The seemingly paradox of "*acting through non-acting*" - the *Wei-Wu-Wei* - corresponds to the true nature of phenomena and helps to reduce suffering.

After having repeatedly reflected together on the conditionality, changeability and misconception of what is, a patient told me:

*"I think I have now understood what all this is good for. Yesterday, on a sunny, warm day, I was lying in the garden watching my cats that were just there, sometimes playing, sometimes not, sometimes attentively watching a butterfly, sometimes just lying there and blinking. They were living fully in this moment. Then, another moment came, and they were fully into that moment. So I also tried to just be there and simply look - and all of a sudden I noticed how much more colourful everything was, how many impressions there were, how much more abundance if one simply lets it be without thinking 'I should really be trimming the hedges'. And this abundance really fills the space in our waking hours and everything becomes more colourful than before. Moreover, I was lying completely relaxed in my sun chair and nothing was hurting and I was truly happy although really, nothing at all had happened."*

He added another remarkable metaphor: "*You know, there would be plenty of examples of such moments in everyday life. If you take them all together, you end up with a whole lot. If you perceive it only once, it gets lost again quickly, as if you had a crumb in your pocket, you could lose it quite easily but if you have a whole lot, that adds up to quite a weight and you automatically change because of it.*"

I could not have said it better.

So, the topic of this conference "*What could unfold phenomenology in the field of psychotherapy*" receives a deeper meaning than what phenomenology usually has with the otherwise applied interpretation of phenomena, as dreams and psychosomatic symptoms. It takes interpretation of these ontic phenomena in therapy to establish a basis for their more in-depth contemplation. In this way, the patient learns that

although phenomena show something and are of significance in his life, they are not absolute and unchangeable, just as he is not.

If he does not desperately cling to everything in narcissist over-estimation, this wonderful world will give him the abundance it has to offer.

I wish to end with a sentence of Nagarjuna:

*He who believes in the Non-being, goes the bad way  
He who believes in the Being, goes the good way  
He who does not cling to either of them because he recognises  
how things really are, will reach salvation.*

*Prof.Dr.V.M. Gamper, Sept. 2009*