

CARRYING FOCUSING FORWARD AND BOTTOM UP

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To Gene, in deep appreciation of his teachings and writings, answering his invitation “please give me trouble like in the old times.”

This is a personal and philosophical assessment of Focusing, followed over time in three stages of its development. In the first stage ('60s–'70s) Gendlin shapes the theoretical model, as presented in “A Theory of Personality Change” (1964). In the second stage ('80s–present) great care is given to the construction and refinement of the teaching method. I argue that in order to develop Focusing further in the current third stage, one needs to strengthen the empirical basis and scientific methods of research, detaching theory and teaching method. Moreover, two (false) assumptions of the first and second stage have to become part of an explicit statement of the vision (and consequent mission of the organization). Furthermore, the empirical content of the teaching method has to emerge through an open attitude to experimentally test out and then eventually discard, several hypotheses of the research.

FIRST STAGE: THE THEORETICAL MODE

In his work “A Theory of Personality Change” (hereafter TPC) Gendlin sets forth a new model or “theory” for accounting for *how* people in psychotherapy change, an explanation that the leading theorists of the time had not successfully formulated. His model consists of 26 definitions and 27 footnotes and chiefly offers a theoretical justification for a simple fact: people in psychotherapy do change!

To me, as a philosopher and reader of Aristotle, the constructive part of TPC, containing the kernel of Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit appears to be a wonderful 20th century extension of Aristotle’s views about change in nature to *human situations and processes*. In Aristotle’s and Gendlin’s philosophy “change” is caused by the passage of something from (implicit) potency to (explicit) act. In addition to that, after having read TPC over and over again (as part of my study program to become a Focusing Trainer with Nicoletta Corsetti in Italy), I have come to the conclusion that a better title for TPC would be “A Theory of Making Progress in Life,” or indeed, “A Theory of Letting Life Go On” because the term “personality” becomes very unclear when human beings are conceived as “processes in interaction with the environment,” as Gendlin has expressed it. Moreover, the term “change” opens the question of whether a model for the “coming into being/awareness of something” can function also as a model for a stable change in behavior, a question that is not sufficiently addressed in TPC.

I must also add that, in my opinion, the philosophy in TPC complicates an argument that is better appreciated in its simplest form. In this form, Gendlin’s theory consists of two universal statements, that I will name here as First and Second Law of Experiencing, i.e.:

(EXP LAW1) **By referring directly to experiencing one becomes aware of new meanings.**

(EXP LAW2) **Everyone can always refer directly to experiencing.**

These two statements together logically imply the conclusion that “**Everyone can become aware of new meanings.**” Were they both true, we would then be justified in holding that the people that change (make progress) in psychotherapy do so **because** they become aware of new meanings, relevant to the solution of their problems. Were they both true, Gendlin would have laid down a simple and elegant theoretical model to explain how people go from not being aware of their problems to being aware, and thus capable of changing them, at least in line of principle.

However, because most of what Gendlin says in TPC is a very philosophical and complex reasoning that aims at establishing LAW1 in all its splendor, the reader of TPC is likely to overlook the fact that the universality of LAW2 is a lot more questionable than the plausibility of LAW1. LAW2 is stated quickly in just in two lines, nested inside the definition of the Direct Referent:

This is, of course, a commonplace that can be readily checked by anyone. At any moment he wishes one can refer directly to an inwardly felt datum (...)
One can always refer directly to experiencing. [my emphasis] (1964, p.10).

There is little doubt that by “one” Gendlin means “anyone” or “everyone” rather than “someone.” However, insofar as some but not all the clients who undertake psychotherapy do experience change, the desired conclusion would follow logically from LAW1 and LAW2 even if LAW2 were to be “downgraded” to affirm “some (and only some) people can refer directly to experiencing.” In fact, one may argue (and Gendlin does so, reporting the views of psychotherapists of “whatever orientation”) that people who experience change at the end of a period of time in psychotherapy are exactly those who, at the beginning of it, are able to refer to their feelings and not merely intellectualize, and it is this ability to refer to feelings that is the one *attitude* that carries the promise — *possibility* — of personality change (1964, p.8). I shall go back to a thorough examination of the deceptively simple LAW2 in the next section. Here, suffice it to say, what would suffer most from a downgrading of LAW2 to a particular statement is the applicability of the model to other areas other than psychotherapy, the goal being a further development of the theory of human experiencing in general, as presented in *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, published two years before.

TPC also comes with an additional critical part in which Gendlin takes issue with the “repression paradigm” and the “content paradigm.” In my opinion, the success of these propositions is very dubious. However, I will explicate Gendlin’s battle against these two paradigms because his battle implicitly contains a model for spreading Focusing outward. According to Gendlin, the repression paradigm is self-contradictory because the awareness of the client is involved in two opposite activities: covering up and then uncovering the difficult material. However, this view of what is involved in repression falls short of giving justice to Anna Freud’s (inherited also by Carl Rogers) notion of “defensive mechanisms,” a construct elaborated just for explaining why the patients are not aware of having repressed anything.

Moreover, Gendlin himself does not tell us what difference, if any, there is between people who are “blocked” *because of the unconscious work of defensive mechanisms* and people who are blocked *because of lack of responsiveness to their implicit meanings*. Isn’t the lack of response a form of defense? Isn’t “denial” the process (mechanism) that blocks responsiveness? What operational definitions or empirical findings may justify a difference between the two constructs? Gendlin does not answer these questions in TPC or — as far as I know — in later writings. This is why the task of showing that the philosophy of the implicit has more empirical content than Freudian theories is a task that still lies ahead of us.

As far as the second battle regarding the content paradigm is concerned (the view that personality is made up of contents rather than processes), the target is elusively stated. In fact, psychoanalysis with its emphasis on *processes* like dreams and free associations does not seem a reasonable target of Gendlin’s criticism. One real reason for Gendlin’s criticism of the theory of personality as contents may have to do with the history of philosophy a lot more than with the history of psychology.

1953 was the year that saw the publication of Wittgenstein’s very influential *Philosophical Investigations*, a book that dissolves *meaning* into the nuances of the ways words are used by speakers. More than 2,000 years after Plato and about 70 years after Frege’s *Sense and Denotation*, philosophers have come a long way to get rid of meanings as unnecessary, metaphysical entities.

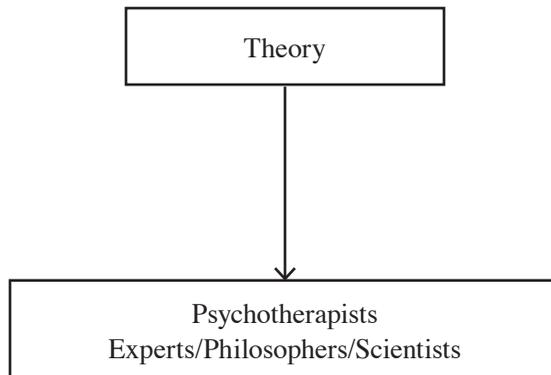
Gendlin’s opposite view, that meanings are “real” and the real power of life, might have led some to label him a “Platonist,” except for the fact that Gendlin distanced his view from Plato’s fixed, stable world of idealized realities. This distancing is accomplished by holding that the emerging of meanings is a concrete process, that is, a bodily felt one, and, indeed, that the concrete emerging of new meanings is all that one needs to explain change.

However, the battle against the above-mentioned paradigms — weak as it is in terms of addressing in depth the open issues in the realm of psychotherapy — becomes much stronger if it is regarded as a strategic move aimed at diffusing the new model. In fact, the criticism of the repression paradigm at the very beginning of TLC makes the new, philosophical model readable by — and palatable to — psychotherapists and counselors sympathetic to Carl Roger’s empiricist paradigms of research and unsympathetic with Freud’s postulating the existence of non-observable entities such as repression and the unconscious.

Likewise, the criticism of the view of personality in term of contents may have been meant to reassure the fellow philosophers. In fact, processes — unlike contents — play a central role in several philosophical views prominent in the ’60s, such as those of Wittgenstein and behaviorism. In fact, Gendlin speaks the language of a behaviorist when he promises further scientific research, as in the following passage.

*Throughout, the new concepts and words defined here are intended to lead to the new and more effective operational variables (...). The operational variables (and there will be many specific ones) which a theoretical concept aids us to isolate and define **are indices of behavior and exactly repeatable procedures** whereby these can be reliably **measured** [my emphasis]. (1964, p. 35).*

Thus, at this stage of development, the model for expanding the reach of Focusing exhibits the following pattern:

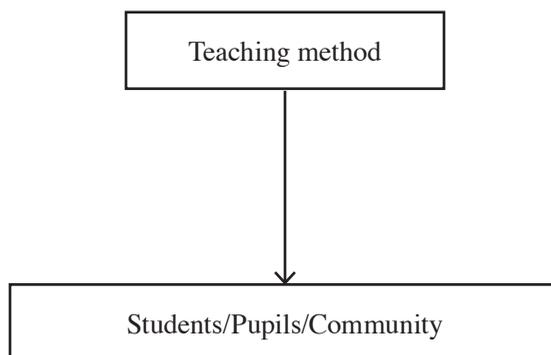


SECOND STAGE: THE TEACHING METHOD

Among the 26 definitions in TPC, definitions 8-11 contain the first sketch of Focusing, which Gendlin defined as the process that ensues when an individual attends to the direct referent, or “felt meaning” (1964, p. 13). By the time *Focusing* was published in 1978, the model had become a method that could be taught “to anyone, in schools, in groups, in parishes and in community centers (2001, p.21).”

The teaching protocol is composed of a sequence of six steps and comes with a full range of suggestions for moving from one step to the other; additional instructions are provided should difficulties and objections arise. Within a few years, the protocols were adapted to experiential psychotherapy and to explorations of creative thinking with “Thinking at the Edge” (TAE) and the Philosophy of the Implicit.

In the '80s and '90s and up to now Focusing has been spread mainly through processes that exhibit the following “up down” pattern:



There is no doubt that this second pattern of diffusion has been successful; as a method of personal growth, the teaching of Focusing — as we all know — has an international reputation and followers in more than 50 countries. However, if we take a look at the original program of TPC as stated in the last citation, we must also admit that it has remained in the so-called ‘backyard’, and I contend that Focusing may have been even more successful had more attention been given to the strengthening of its empirical content.

I believe that there have been two parallel processes that have worked against a more effective diffusion of Focusing if it were supported by scientific research with its operational variables. The first is the growing distance between scientific research itself and Gendlin’s philosophical theories. After TPC, and after *Focusing*, Gendlin’s theories more and more take a metaphysical turn wherein he tries to *deduce* human experience as arising from one previous stage of development in nature. For example, *A Process Model* (1997) postulates the existence of an initial *One* where body and environment are not yet distinguished and from where everything else originates.

We have seen that in 1964, with TPC, Gendlin had promised “reliably measured” indices of behavior. In 1992 with the article, “The Primacy of the Body, not the Primacy of Perception” (PBNPP), he shows his dissatisfaction with approaches that “torture nature,” a dissatisfaction which extended to all “the scientific construction of the universe.” In this construction, nature consists of objects presented or perceived “before someone,” so that “we humans cannot find ourselves within the scientific picture, since it consists of presenteds” (1992, p.1).

I will not argue here against this reasoning, limiting myself to notice that the distinction between subject and object — object of Gendlin’s criticism in PBNPP — is necessary not only for (Western) science but for Focusing itself. In fact, in Focusing, a human being (a subject) takes her own meaningful sensations as object of attention, in no way differing — at least in this initial step — from a scientist who brings her attention to some other phenomenon in nature.

A second process that may have hindered a wider dissemination of Focusing is the interference between the claims of the theory and the teaching method. In a scientific framework, a teaching method should constitute the testing ground for the theory rather than be a confirmation that the claims of the theory hold in every instance.

In the previous paragraph we have seen that the *theory* of Focusing rests on EXP LAW2:

Everyone can always refer directly to experiencing.

EXP LAW2 spelled out means: **Everyone can at any given moment bring her attention to feeling.**

The teaching of Focusing on the other hand rests on a similar but different premise that is even more basic in its content:

(EXP LAW3) **Everyone can at any given moment feel something.**

While my analysis of the previous paragraph leads me to think that LAW2 is false because there are people that at some moments cannot pay attention to anything, the teaching of Focusing brings on to the foreground the dramatic case of people falsifying LAW3, because they report no sensation. I take Gendlin's own answer to this evident counter instance to the theory as an example of interference. In fact, in the manual *Focusing* (Italian translation, p. 106) he goes on to declare that "the absence of sensations is still a sensation," making clear that neither the model nor the teaching method can acknowledge the existence of "numb" people. All that it can be acknowledged is the existence of people who report (wrongly) to be numb.

In a recent phone course with Ann Weiser Cornell and Gene Gendlin, I have heard Gene give a most interesting suggestion to continue a Focusing session with someone who reports no sensation. He would ask, "It is a comfortable nothing or an uncomfortable one *that you are feeling?*" I have not tried this suggestion yet and will certainly try it. The point I want to make, however, is that in scientific thought we have to learn from the negative cases, that is, the cases that falsify the theory. In order to establish a deeper understanding of those people who report no sensation in a first Focusing session, we may want to ask them to fill out a questionnaire that allows us to, for example, to study statistically the correlation between traumatic events in their life and their lack of sensation. Those findings may lead to additional hypotheses to be tested for the optimal way to teach Focusing to this population.

In general, the Focusing community has to dismiss the assumption that a researcher has to systematically search for the cases that verify a method and exclude experiential (and experimental) conditions that falsify it. In scientific research, a good theory is one that survives several attempts to falsify it, not one that tells us the ideal conditions where it holds in its entirety. We need to apply the teachings of Karl Popper and consider that the goodness of a scientific theory lies in its capacity of being falsifiable by experience rather than verified by it.

THIRD STAGE: VISION, MISSION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

The recent resignation of Eugene Gendlin from the Executive Board of The Focusing Institute of New York both signals and furthers the process of change inside the Focusing Institute. In my opinion, the Institute's efforts to build a grass root organization that promotes the legacy of Gendlin's thought can have success only if it includes efforts to rethink the relationship between theory, method and the empirical basis, between concepts and observations, between vision and mission of the organization.

At this stage an explicit statement of the vision and very ambitious mission of TFI assumes a central role. In the vision of its founder, Focusing constitutes not only a method of personal growth but an evolutionary step in the development of humanity.

I have built a theory with concepts of a new kind that have both logical and experiential connections. With those concepts I am able to build a new

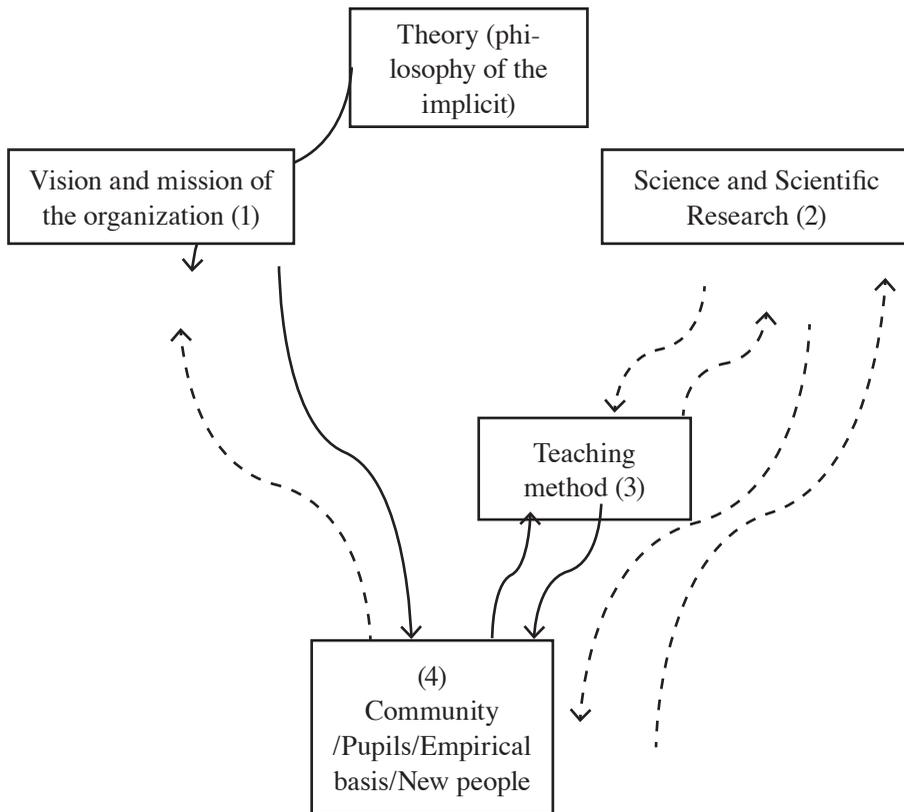
understanding of the physical body as continuous with, and capable of, animal behavior, then of language, and at last of focusing (1996, p. 30).

If we take the above to be a statement of the vision and consequent mission of the organization, it follows that in our vision there is a world where people will universally Focus just as they universally speak. This is a world where the (false) assumption of the theoretical model, EXP LAW2, and the (false) assumption of the teaching method, EXP LAW3, *are true*. In the world that lies *ahead of us*, the two following laws hold:

(Visionary LAW1) **Everyone can at any given moment pay attention to feeling.**

(Visionary LAW2) **Everyone can at any given moment have some sensation (or even “any sensation” because with Focusing we can sense “infinite” possibilities).**

The mission that lies ahead of us is then so huge and magnificent that it can not possibly even start without a new model for spreading Focusing. Such a model must be very flexible and quite complex. The model must be in agreement with science, starting with scientific hypotheses on how a genetic mutation spreads out in a population, beginning from a small group of mutants to finally reaching everyone. In the current stage of development one might envision the practitioners of Focusing as a small group of genetic mutants, not very different from our ancestors with a detached hyoid bone that enabled them to start to speak. Spreading Focusing over a population in this third stage then means being able to demonstrate (through scientific research) that people who practice Focusing are more fit to live happier and more productive lives than people who do not. Only by *demonstrating this ideal/concept* we will be able to reach those who already live well — but could live even better! — if they practiced Focusing. Only by *demonstrating this philosophy* can we reach those who are greatly suffering, including those who, in order not to suffer, have shut themselves in a sense-deprived world. Here, we should be able to prove that Focusing can mitigate suffering and can open sense channels. That is, we need to go to our “negative cases,” for example, people who might have grown up in an environment of poor parenting. There and then, we should test the ability of Focusing to work as a (re)parenting environment. Third, we should test the effectiveness of Focusing to raise self-efficacy in at-risk situations because “self-efficacy” is one of the theoretical constructs that do not belong to Focusing (yet) but one which allows for very simple, experiential measurements based on self-evaluation. In the illustrated model below of spreading Focusing outward, I have used stroked lines to designate influences and relations between different aspects of Focusing that have not been yet widely practiced. On the other hand, I have used continuous lines to designate directions of influence with ongoing and seeded practice.



The most noticeable feature — a novelty perhaps for the community of Focusers — is the absence of any line of influence between the theoretical model and the teaching method, meaning that the teaching method has evolved and is well developed, and should now be set free from the theoretical model — and be more in dialogue with scientific research. One very good reason to free the teaching method from the influences of the theoretical model is that Focusing itself becomes an impossibility if we want to be faithful to an approach where the subject (the Self) cannot have objects of *perception*. Approaches to Focusing in terms of a “Self in presence” are distant from the Philosophy of the Implicit because every act of presence of the Self implies the existence of “presenceds.” To show the above, i.e. to show that not even Gendlin himself as a teacher of Focusing can avoid reference to perception and its objects, I now put forward an operational definition of “felt sense (of a problem)” from the manual *Focusing* and the *Six Steps* on the web site, that could be Gendlin’s own:

*Sit down in a comfortable place and make sure that you have at least 10 minutes time; Close your eyes; Choose a problem in your life and bring your **attention** to it as a whole; Bring your attention to the **center part of the body** or to where you usually **feel** problems; Wait for at least one minute for a **vague feeling** to appear there (in the center part of your body). This vague feeling is “felt sense.”*

I call this definition “operational” because everyone who understands the instructions can repeat the operations involved in order to find her own felt sense, even if one may wonder whether the term “operational definition” is appropriate for situations where some of the operations are not observable by others — but, of course, so are the mental, mathematical operations of the physicist. The importance of such definitions in the context of teaching is to make clear what terms one assumes to be understood by the students. These terms are here marked **in bold**. The occurrence of the key term **attention** tells us that the teaching of Focusing cannot avoid reference to a faculty that is usually considered a higher faculty of human beings and *one that is strictly correlated to perception*. Thus the teaching of Focusing — contrary to the Philosophy of the Implicit — shares with other disciplines in contemporary psychology, an interest in the study of **attention**, in the study of **recollection**, and in the study of **intentionality**, three theoretical constructs implied in “making a pause” and deliberately paying attention to a problem emerging from the past.

About these three theoretical constructs the Philosophy of the Implicit has nothing to say. In order to see this omission, I would point to Gendlin’s definition of Direct Referent in TPC: *Experiencing, in the mode of being referred to in this way, I term the “direct referent”* (1964, p. 10), thus offering us a circular definition of his main construct, i.e. one where the term to be defined (*Direct Referent*) occurs among the terms that constitute the definition (“being referred to in this way” which simply means “being referred to directly”). The philosopher Gendlin stumbles on a difficulty that the teacher Gendlin would avoid by simply saying: *I term the “direct referent” experiencing when we pay attention to it*.

Coming now to the second important feature of the third model — the lines of influence between scientific research and teaching method, I offer here a short description of an experiment that I have proposed as an activity for the Open Space in the 2014 Weeklong. It consists of making a comparison between two different ways of Focusing. One is the traditional approach, where a problem from the past is addressed through a recollection and with intentionality. In the second method, the Focusers start by choosing a real, concrete object. The purpose of the experiment is to test out whether the second method leads to addressing a problem and whether Focusing is facilitated by the lack of intentionality in the second method. In the experiment, I use a Likert scale to measure intensity and pleasure in the feelings emerged during the two processes. In my vision, such experiments — conducted on a large scale by universities and TFI together — may bring us to simpler, more effective ways to teach Focusing.

Let me close by saying that “carrying Focusing forward and bottom up” can be done only by an empowered Focusing community that finds experiments and scientific research desirable and appropriate.

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