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The Sabotaging of Introjects

Some thoughts about processing introjects in Gestalt therapy in a changing culture

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Summary

The article presents a clarification of the significance of the concepts of introjection and introject in *Gestalt therapy* and some suggestions as to how they can be processed in therapy. The author presents the thesis that the "royal road" to processing the natural but unconscious sabotage of introjections is to *support them therapeutically*. Finally, I present an analysis of "political correctness" that differentiates between neurotic *introjects* and the healthy *internalizations* necessary for civilization

Keywords: introjection, introject, internalization, values.

1. The difference between introjection and assimilation

Introjection and *projection* are the two interruptions of the contact process that the founders of Gestalt therapy adopted from Freudian psychoanalysis, in which they were originally trained, and integrated into the theoretical framework of their new form of psychotherapy. In my opinion they had good reasons for this decision and it has proved useful in therapeutic practice.

Since in the Gestalt approach neurotic contact interruptions are always seen as processes that occur at the contact boundary, Gestalt therapists initially focused on the *process* of introjection, i.e. on how introjects arise, and less on their outcome. The basic idea is that the human organism, which is always embedded in its environment and dependent on exchange with that environment, has to take into itself material objects (e.g. food) and symbolic objects (e.g. language) if it wants to survive. If this process of incorporation is to lead to an enrichment and strengthening of the psychophysical organism, that is, if it is to be assimilated, it must involve the destruction of the gestalt of the object encountered. In other words, the food must be chewed and the non-material aspects of the environment need to be broken down and critically analyzed. Only with the aid of these aggressive functions - this is the hypothesis - can the input from the environment be assimilated, i.e., culminate in a nourishing adjustment to the physical and mental digestive abilities of the person.

Joseph Zinker puts it more precisely, adding that "someone who blocks between awareness and mobilising energy suffers introjection and has swallowed other people's attitudes as to what is right and what is wrong, and that he is therefore unable to find his own energy" (1977, p.98).

However, the way F. Perls made "oral aggression" central to his theory has led to an over-emphasis on the paradigmatic significance of the process of eating by him. As a result, he and his trainees often had to distinguish between healthy and neurotic introjection. One consequence of this was that, before the development of Gestalt education, analyses of the development of non-material introjects paid too little attention to the role of the aggressive functions in learning. In my view it makes more sense to use the clinical

concepts of *introjection* and *introject* to refer exclusively to neurotic phenomena, and I will do so in this article. Thus seen, processes of learning and food ingestion that can be assimilated by humans.

Another unfortunate consequence of this unclear use of terms consists in calling people who tend to introject neurotically "introjectors", as, for example, the Polsters did throughout their influential book on Gestalt therapy (POLSTER & POLSTER, 1987). This suggests that we have gone back to talking about personality characteristics again, rather than about a process that takes place at the contact boundary.

2. Causes and effects of changes in the process of introjection today

But of course disturbances, introjections, that is, do occur, and their immediate cause is always to be sought in a weakness in the aggressive ego functions currently available to the self. In babies, who do not yet have teeth or critical faculties, such weaknesses are a normal developmental phenomenon, whereas when they occur in adults, some explanation is needed.

Of course, adults, too, simply experience differences in *how they feel from day to day*. This can happen, for instance, when their attention is impaired as a result of tiredness or illness or internal or external distractions, or due to their only listening half-heartedly, multi-tasking or gulping food down hurriedly. All these things make us more willing to take into ourselves things that we have only half understood, fragments of perceptions, things that we have only half-chewed. We are then unable to assimilate them and they burden our organisms, often even acting as a permanent hindrance. The current state of society promotes this erosion of our positive aggressive forces; it also constitutes a drain on the energy balance in the human psychophysical organism, as in the economy. In the world of work it is caused by the pressure of turbo-capitalism, the exploitation of part-time and contract workers and the threatening prospects for many people of sliding into poverty in old age. Together the *media* and the advertising industry intensify the wear and tear, with a flood of seductive and addictive images and language that tends to obscure the information that consumers need, rather than rendering it clearer. The more a person's capacity to process the stimuli that assail them from outside in an active and participative way, i.e. their capacity for what Gestalt therapy calls *creative* adjustment, dwindles, the more the person will tend to *introject fragments of a complex reality* that they can no longer piece together to form a gestalt.

This widespread fatigue then results in a spreading general confusion, which can lead us to devalue what is factual, even the truth of facts in general. This simply adds to the confusion, until finally it can only find an outlet in excesses of rage and hate and the crazy conspiracy theories we find in the new media on the internet. Today in this new field of introjects we are more likely to find confusing, disconnected fragments of information and opinions than the rules, dictates and taboos which were the typical contents of people's introjections in Perls' and Goodman's time.

In our *educational institutions* there have long been examination requirements that the students experience as senseless, often quite rightly so. This so-called "subject matter" is then crammed as efficiently as possible just before the examination, only to be rapidly forgotten again afterwards. This is a kind of institutionalized learning bulimia. At least the rapid forgetting ensures that the organism does not continue to be burdened by useless knowledge, and what the students have absorbed all too rapidly and against their will is precipitated into true introjects. But this process also undermines and diminishes the strength needed to form new gestalts of creative learning, instead of reinforcing them, thus wasting the energy of the aggressive functions of the self. The reason for such senseless requirements lies in the fact that the bodies of knowledge to be learned are constantly becoming more and more complex, thus placing demands on the educational institutions that they cannot hope to meet. Any possible consensus that may be reached on what kind

of education is really useful and necessary rapidly becomes obsolete. On the one hand the quantity of available information is constantly increasing due to computerized research, and on the other the conflicting interests of the economy and industry and also of culture and politics prove to be irreconcilable. This leads to a strange mixture of permanent revision/constant change and time and money saving measures which constantly exhaust both the students and their teachers.

Today there is a different kind of risk of introjection that arises from changes in the cultural beliefs of our society. This applies in particular to the *relationship between the sexes*. The changes that have taken place in the status of women are probably the greatest cultural transformation that western societies have undergone in the last half-century - a relatively short period of time. It is not yet possible to fully predict what consequences this will have. Here again we find an ambivalent situation arising as the principles that have traditionally determined the role of women and men in society dissolve. At least the younger generation of women have now said goodbye to the old guiding principles that they have internalized - woman as the caring handmaid in the household and family - but must now contend with the irreconcilable aspects of realizing all their liberated wishes. Men, in contrast, are torn between the loss or fragmentation of the old role models which mainly had to do with the fact that they are on average physically stronger than women and therefore have a greater capacity to fight. These advantages have now been rendered more or less obsolete by machines, but still haunt them in the form of eroded introjects. They are experimenting with new roles as fathers and lovers on equal terms, in which they still lack confidence. And as if these difficulties were not already energy- and libido-sapping enough, the recognition of same-sex desire and the existence of many people with biologically or psychologically unclear gender affiliation adds to the confusion.

In addition to these "modern" forms of introjection we still of course have its classical "objects", i.e. values and rules of conduct, prohibitions and taboos that can still become introjects today, although here there have also been changes, as we shall see. In our Western society there are also multi-cultural forms of introjection, including the "old-fashioned" introjects which are generally rooted in religion or the family. These often have an influence on political controversies on an unconscious level and their effects are especially destructive when they are still firmly established in institutions, as is the case with the oath of celibacy, without which it is hard to understand the appallingly high level of child abuse among the Roman Catholic clergy. Therapists faced with a God introject have a particularly difficult task. Any therapist who has worked with priests or pastors will confirm that. Refugees from uneducated Islamic backgrounds could present us with similar difficulties in future because these backgrounds have not reached the level of internal secularization of the faith (disappearance of belief in the devil, fear of purgatory and worldly conceptions of paradise) that has been attained in the European West.

We tend to have less difficulty with introjects that arise in a person's family of origin, since in these cases the parental introjects are often already weakened due to the disappearing support of an extended family, personalized images of the parents as adversaries, rising rates of divorce and separation, and personal emancipation processes among young people. Such processes are often promoted by experiences with other cultures. In such cases the introjects are not so firmly entrenched. It is easier to mobilize doubt and therapeutic interventions are more likely to be successful if the patient's positive aggressive functions are strengthened.

3. Different types of introjects

For our therapeutic handling of introjects it is thus important to recognize which societal milieus generally promote the tendency to introject and also what type of introject we are concerned with.

The most easily recognizable introjects are those that lead people to be obsessional about

complying with certain *rules of conduct*, which can easily lead to neurotic obsessive-compulsive processes. However, a certain degree of obsessive behavior is in fact socially desirable in many spheres of society where control, monitoring and precision play an important role. Of course we all want to have security when it comes to money matters and in road traffic, most of us also in cross-border traffic and "traffic" with our sexual partners¹. People who guard arms depots or places where toxic materials are stored and also scientists doing research, for example, need to be extremely reliable and meticulous. Wherever modern technology is involved, the magnitude of the predictable consequences of negligent actions and even that of their unpredictable consequences is potentially highly dangerous, and we must therefore ask ourselves whether it might not in fact make it easier for the people entrusted with such tasks if they have internalized these control virtues to a certain extent.

However, that is only the case if they are able to limit the use of these behaviors to the execution of the tasks for which they are useful and necessary. People who bring their professional roles home with them and play the teacher, policeman or bureaucrat at home, too, will damage their families and will themselves suffer from their inability to be flexible. Perls saw this type of introject as the main problem affecting society in his time. He felt that people suppressed their own aggressive forces too much and tended to adjust to prescribed societal roles too fast and without sufficient discrimination/too indiscriminately. In other words, he believed that they were not flexible in how they managed behaviors imposed on them by society in a flexible way. He was in fact describing *German* society in the nineteen fifties, in what was later referred to as the "Adenauer era". It is precisely the ability to adjust *creatively* to other tasks and spheres of self-realization - on one's own initiative and not under pressure from society to be more productive - that therapy must promote and strengthen, where this era still survives.

This is possibly most evident when we are dealing with introjects that patients still decide to retain or would decide to retain after having given them due sober, rational consideration, that is, even after becoming aware of them, because they are "good" or "make sense". For example, someone who has introjected the idea that it is always good to live "healthily" either from their parents or, more often, later on from living in milieus that promote a certain identity and have become important to the person, can, controlled by this introject, wear themselves out shopping in organic food shops and going to fitness centers. Their lives then paradoxically become *unhealthy* again precisely because of this behavior, as if their own bodies do not know best what they need and what does them good. However, this bodily knowledge needs to be brought to light by means of a high level of awareness - and this is the task of Gestalt therapy in such cases.

Or, to give an example from my own circle of friends, when someone introjects the conviction that we absolutely must reduce our carbon footprint in order to slow climate change and that this is the ultimate moral imperative, then their whole lifestyle takes on a highly fundamentalist tone. Introjects throttle the vitality of their own lives and also sour those of their friends and relatives with constant moral condemnations. In this case a long yearned-for love relationship, which initially went very well, broke up because the person calculated the ecological costs of every loving action on the part of his partner, thus rendering it impossible for the two of them to enjoy going on trips together. In this case this was not a "good" introject (there is no such thing, anyway) exercising its control, but an attitude that destroyed all vitality. It did nothing to prevent climate change and turned happiness in life into sadness. Gestalt therapy always focuses on increasing the aliveness of experiences. It does this by strengthening the awareness, which intensifies the experience, not necessarily to the detriment of the environment. (Cf. Dreitzel, H.P. 2018, 131-139)

1 Transl. note: the literal translation of the German word for sexual intercourse is "sexual traffic".

Apart from new, fragmentary, part-introjects, the most difficult introjects are the deep-rooted ones that exert an insidious "foreign" control over one's whole life and are like the life scripts described in transactional analysis. This may begin harmlessly enough in our family lives: As Joseph C. Zinker (1994, 121) put it, so-called 'agreements' among family members are at best weak and lack vitality, with the result that the behaviors that arise from them are hardly appreciated. When the couple or the family finally get to the restaurant it turns out that one of them actually isn't hungry, another doesn't like the kitchen and a third one would prefer to go to the movies. At best the meal that they had expected to enjoy together turns out to be boring for all concerned and in the worst case scenario it develops into a disaster. We can assume that such a family will tend to repeat such a pattern again and again when it comes to making decisions or planning activities. The problem is not *what* they do, but the dysfunctionality of the process. One or other of them forces their idea or their solution on the others and the others swallow it whole. It requires much less energy to introject than it would take to ask questions and argue. It costs time and energy to get into a discussion and make an effort to find a solution that fits everybody. Introjecting allows us to avoid using a lot of energy by contenting ourselves with arbitrary agreements. The family is in agreement that things will not be chewed and makes no investment in convincing everyone.

Thus, the noxious effect can take its course gradually and almost unnoticed, only to reveal its pernicious consequences later on. The subsequent generations of such families then introject a whole lifestyle which is marked by a chronic tendency to choose again and again the apparently easier option of introjecting, without resistance, goals, action strategies, values and rules that have been passed down to them and become rigidified in rules that seem to be set in stone and to which they adhere simply by virtue of habit. As a result the potential of creative adjustment, the power of aggressively getting to grips with what our environments have to offer us is rarely exploited to the full and wastes away due to lack of practice and experience.

Children, teenagers and unemployed young people are by nature in a weaker position vis à vis their parents from the start because they do not have the power and authority or the energy and money to make decisions independently and then actually to put them into action. In this situation they are, of course, particularly prone to developing introjects that are then often a hindrance to them for the rest of their lives.

Let us take a modern example which one of my supervisees presented: a woman whose father left her mother and disappeared without trace because her mother had forced him to accept her wish to have a child against his will. At this point their daughter was no more than a year old. From then on she grew up with her mother in a purely female environment of aunts and girlfriends in which hostility towards men was the rule. She has now been living with a man for 25 years with whom she has two children, but whom she does not want to marry because she considers herself to be "incapable of committing to a relationship" and because she is not able to have satisfying sexual relations with him. Since she is afraid of completely subordinating herself to him she cannot let go and allows their marital sex life gradually to become nonexistent. Her frustrated husband reacts with withdrawal and a gradually deepening depression, which prevents him from leaving her or finding other alternatives. It is easy to imagine how this woman's lack of a father and the negative image of men that she has introjected have developed into a destructive life script which also causes unhappiness to her husband.

Numerous other similar imbroglios can be found in the life histories of both women and men. But it is not simply a question of gender roles. In my therapeutic work I have found that behind the most important neurotic processes with which people interrupt or undermine their healthy, lively contact processes *again and again* there is usually a deeply rooted *basic introject* that creeps up on them from behind and takes complete control of

how they lead their lives (Dreitzel, H. P. , 2014, 115, and Dreitzel, H. P., 2004, Charts 9 – 16))

These basic introjects are:

- * *Nobody is really interested in what I think and feel.*
(Schizoid process)
- * *Whatever I experience, do or express, it makes no difference.*
(Depressive process)
- * *There is a right way of doing everything, a correct procedure.*
(Obsessive-compulsive process)

- * *I will only be heard if I get dramatic. My questions will not be answered.*
(Hysterical process)
- * *Every conflict I get involved in will lead to my being abandoned.*
(Neurotic anxiety process)
- * *If I am afraid or show fear I will lose love and attention*
(Psychopathic process)
- * *Letting go means losing control and that results in loss of love.*
(Narcissistic process)
- * *I can't stand life without my "drug" or my habit.*
(Addictive process)

Such introjects are usually largely unconscious, but can be brought into awareness relatively easily because the patients are familiar with the behaviors to which they lead. In therapy they need to be explicitly named and linked to the beliefs that mask or that are expressed in them. This leads to an increase in awareness, but does not go as far as dissolving the introjects! On the contrary, two more things are necessary in the practice of Gestalt therapy.

1. We need to go back to the patients' early experiences in order to help them see two things. First, they need to be aware that they have developed such beliefs as creative adjustments to real and fundamental experiences, and they have not a few of these beliefs. Second, it is helpful for them to understand that they subsequently introjected the beliefs because they proved to be an effective means of orientation that was important for survival in situations of relative powerlessness and helplessness.
2. Now as adults, patients need to mobilize their retroflected energy and use it to examine and analyze these beliefs and above all to have *new* and more lively experiences.

Of course, this also applies to work on any introject, but when we are working with life scripts in therapy we need to persevere with a lot of patience and persistence.

We also need to take into account that it is precisely these deeply rooted introjects that are often *projected*, usually onto all or "most" people. For example, *most people aren't interested in their fellow human beings. Or those at the top do what they want in any case! Or if you don't keep cool you're lost.* In such cases in therapy the best strategy is to work on reviving the perceptual senses. For instance,

Patient: Nobody is interested in me!

Therapist: But I am interested in you,

Patient: You look tired. I think I'm boring you.

Therapist: Please look at me. Look more closely! What do you see?

Patient: You're looking at me.

Therapist: What are you seeing, how do you experience my eyes?

Patient: You look a bit tired.

Therapist: Yes, it's been a long day. And what else do you see in my eyes?

Patient: Your eyes look attentive, sort of interested.

Therapist: Yes, I think you are interesting.

Patient: But only as a case!

Therapist: Nobody is just a case. Each of us is a human being with a history and many experiences.

Patient: What do you mean?

Therapist: Would you like to tell me how you get the idea that nobody is interested in you? Tell me your story!

And so on.

So to begin with, what is helpful in therapeutic work with introjects depends on the type of introject we are dealing with.

We have seen

1. that in response to the constantly increasing complexity of our lifeworlds there has recently been a widespread tendency, promoted by the new media, to introject odd pieces of information, images, half-truths and delusional conspiracy theories, and also the prejudices associated with them;
2. that working groups, families and couples in which there is an avoidance of conflict and a tendency towards confluence, are especially likely to introject unsatisfactory rules, agreements or solutions to problems; this is often attributable to the milieu;
3. that there are rules of conduct that are desired by society and that this may even be of help to the people who have to ensure that they are adhered to internalize them, but that this can easily result in the development of introjects if they cannot muster enough role flexibility to let go of the need to exert control in other areas of life;
4. and that there are deeply rooted introjects that influence a person's whole life and even ones that shape people's lives in a decisive way and work like life scripts. Because each of these four types of introject requires a different therapeutic approach, it is useful to get an idea, if possible at the beginning of a therapy, of what kind of introjects our patients are mainly going to confront us with.

4. Beginning work on introjects by supporting self-sabotage

Introjects threaten our vitality. The experiences that gave rise to these beliefs do not match our real experiences in the present, despite the fact that real experiences in the present can be clouded by the projection of introjects, leading to a tendency to experience the whole world as hostile. But even in such cases the introjects cannot keep up their control on behavior - simply because life is too unpredictable, too chaotic, too lively and also too seductive. Today life is also too fast and too complex to be governed by rigid rules and values or to be simplifiable by dogmatic belief systems. Because that is so, most of us tend to sabotage our own introjects from time to time when it seems to be convenient. When the outside control seems to have lapsed or when our self-control is diminished, for example due to some strong desire or transient positive aggressive energy that has been liberated in a therapy session we will - usually hesitantly or secretly - violate our own rules and overstep our own boundaries.

If as therapists we have learned to watch for it we can see this happening in therapy sessions. Typically, when an internalized rule is violated we will glimpse a fleeting smile betraying suppressed glee as the chronically suppressed vitality breaks through. If we invite our patients to criticize us and give them permission to become aware, together with us, of the other side of their (hopefully) otherwise positive experiences with us, and to put them into words without fear of retaliation, they will suddenly experience a feeling of liberation, which they will inevitably express mimetically. We must look - and listen -

closely, because they will rapidly suppress this new vitality once more. It often reveals itself in the hint of a shy, fleeting smile that evaporates again as fast as it has appeared or the voice becomes slightly higher and trembles, or the person unconsciously makes a reinforcing gesture of the hand.

After I had observed such responses several times I began to address them and continue working with them. We can begin by drawing patients' attention to them: "*I saw a hint of a smile on your face when you said that (criticism) to me. Did you notice it? Criticize me again and notice exactly what it feels like!*" In the next step you can make a game out of it, one that everybody has played as a child, the "cuckoo game" that every mother plays with her baby: Therapist: *Oh - there it was again, your little smile! Did you notice it? Pay attention to what you're experiencing now* - and then you can repeat it, laughing, every time you see the smile again. It can, of course, take hours or sometimes even weeks for it to appear again, because that's how it works in life. But we must always remain attentive, since these small signs of vitality that emerge when we sabotage our own introjects are fleeting and shy, like birds we when we try to watch them.

The next step is, therefore, when patients *tell* us about how they live their lives with their introjects from day to day, to watch for the points at which they repeatedly sabotage them. And where we think we have detected such sabotaging as they tell us their stories, it will be helpful to *ask* about them, since transgressing introjects experienced as social norms lead to *neurotic guilt feelings* or *feelings of embarrassment* and these violations have occurred unconsciously, "inadvertently". That is, they result in emotional states that people do not like to admit they have experienced and which they would like to repress or pass over as fast as possible. This was a finding of a study I conducted using interactional analysis (Dreitzel 1983).

This discomfiture is in a sense society avenging itself for the violation of its internalized rules. The emergence of feelings of guilt and embarrassment at such points is in fact symptomatic of the *presence* of introjects that the therapist has often not previously noticed! We should therefore recognize these feelings as neurotic and distinguish them from the *genuine* guilt feelings that arise when we fail to respect values that govern our coexistence as human beings, be it due to negligence or deliberate action. We should also differentiate them from the genuine feelings of shame that can be experienced when someone violates norms of civilization that have been established with great effort over the course of history. It is also worth making the effort to clarify these differences in therapy because when people punish themselves with neurotic feelings of guilt and embarrassment this sustains the effect of the introjects. When patients feel encouraged by their therapist's unexpectedly positive response to their sabotaging an introject and risk doing the appropriate experiments in the safe setting of therapy, this can help them to gradually loosen the hold that their introjects have on them. At the same time it sets free the aggressive energy that they need to continue working through and to choose between what they need and what they must reject of what they find in the environment. So in my view supporting patients' spontaneous self-sabotage of their introjects is the "royal road" to successful therapeutic work on introjects. When a therapist supports such sabotaging s/he is entering into an alliance with the patient, and in fact with life itself. It's hard to imagine a better form of support.

5. Difficulties that may arise when we support self-sabotage of introjects

However, there are also problems with this approach. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is associated with deciding where the sabotaging of the introject exceeds the limits of civilized behavior and when the support needs to stop. Like all attempts to become emancipated, sabotaging one's introjects can also push the limits of acceptability and cause harm that destroys not only the introject, but also what is nutritious and valuable in the environment.

For example, a patient persistently arrives late for his session. He always has excuses as to why he hasn't managed to be punctual this time, which he delivers with evident verve. I suspect that he is sabotaging a punctuality introject and ask him about symptoms pointing in this direction in his family of origin. Together we identify some. He increasingly begins to experience his lack of punctuality as a form of self-sabotage, which is, however, associated with a pleasure that he does not dare to permit himself. I try to support his apologetic stories and he starts to enjoy telling them to me more and more. I allow him plenty of time to tell his stories, but never extend the session time, instead helping him to realize that he herself engineers things so that he arrives late. One day he arrives, late as usual, in a state of excitement, and says, "*This time there really wasn't anything I could do about it!*" - HP: *What happened?* -Patient: *I was driving behind a car.* HP: *Where?* Patient: *At a crossroads, and then all of a sudden he stopped!* - HP: *Aha, were there traffic lights?* Patient: *Yes, there were.* HP: *And what did they show?* Patient: *It was green!* HP: *It was?* Patient *Well, after it had happened it was suddenly red."*

At this point I felt that we had reached the limit and that it was time to work more on the patient's own responsibility. After this accident he almost always arrived punctually for his session.

In the early days of Gestalt therapy, under the influence exerted by the encounter group movement (which was not really compatible, with Gestalt therapy) and also that of the bioenergetic approach which had developed out of Wilhelm Reich's school of therapy and was widespread, many Gestalt therapists strongly emphasized the cathartic effects of aggression exercises in which people beat cushions and mattresses and made a lot of noise. I remember a fellow trainee who was told to beat a large foam rubber mattress and who then, in a very long "Gestalt work", proceeded to transform the mattress into a pile of tiny shreds, howling with anger - which doubtlessly required a substantial amount of energy. But did this experience lead to a lasting revival of chronically retroflected aggressive energies in the long term and thus cure his tendency to introject? In this training group, which took place at the beginning of the nineteen seventies, one of the members of the group arrived one day and reported, beaming, that while visiting his parents he had, in an act of liberation, smashed up all the chairs in their kitchen on which he had had to sit at mealtimes as a child and be a good boy. I don't think that was the point of catharsis. Of course such an experience can free up one's energy - it bolsters one's self-confidence. However, in groups it often also encourages voyeurism, vicariously experiencing the acting out of the person who carries out such actions. The other participants therefore feel prompted to cheer them on or criticize them in the feedback round. In any event, when we support people in sabotaging their introjects it is always important also to promote awareness of both the potential value of the environment and the need to exercise moderation with respect to their own needs.

6. How can we distinguish sabotage of introjects from rebellion?

When adolescents rebel against parental dictates and prohibitions this is a normal sign that they are beginning to detach themselves from the family, even if this may sometimes take on dramatic forms and recklessness is often involved. Particularly when their children are still adolescents, the parents are then often faced with the difficult task of supporting this striving for autonomy or at least accepting it, with a shrug of the shoulders, while at the same time protecting them from behaving dangerously or making irrational decisions. However, it is not always clear what can be assessed as an experimenting with social roles and lifeworlds, which is important, and what must be considered dangerous - from the parents' perspective. This will certainly not be clear from the outside perspective of the peers, for whom the parental values and convictions often seem like introjects and senseless restrictions. A lot depends on the prevailing cultural norms. If they change, the representatives of the outside perspective can also rapidly begin to look foolish. For

example, today parents who refuse to allow their daughters to go to college because "girls belong in the home" and are soon going to get married and have children anyway, are probably considered old-fashioned in most areas of Western society. To support such children when they rebel against such parental opposition, i.e. the pressure of their parents' introjects, can be an important task for teachers. Here sabotaging the parental introjects, which may already have been internalized by the children, is defined as legitimate resistance because the cultural norms have changed. However, because we are living in a culture that is highly differentiated and also rapidly changing and developing, it is becoming harder and harder to assess whether a behavior is a legitimate rebellion that merits support or whether it violates important values. In order to be able to make such a decision a therapist (and not only the therapist) must have attained a certain level of self-knowledge. For instance, when parents limit the amount of television their children are allowed to watch or the amount of time they may play with their digital toys the matter is not so clear. Where is the limit? Where is the dividing line between preventing digital dementia and stopping a child from learning how to cope with the rapid developments in digitalization?

In such situations the therapist's attitude, and also his experience, are decisive. Take, for instance, parents' not unjustified fear that their children could slide into addiction, or at least abuse, of alcohol or marijuana. It is crucial here to talk about the positive and negative aspects of the experience, to allow our own views to be challenged and to be willing to talk openly about our own experiences and, above all, about our fears.

There is also another complication that deserves mention. Sometimes highly resilient people with strong vitality manage, while they are still children or adolescents, to escape the influence of parental introjects by rebelling, and succeed in taking their lives into their own hands. The problem that can occur here is that they often have a tendency to cling resolutely to the values that they have developed for themselves or discovered, as if these were still threatened long after they have reached adulthood. They may then often be prone to reacting allergically when their hard-won autonomy seems to be threatened, for instance, in their relationships with their partners. Or, even worse, their constant inner struggle to overcome their parental introjects can lead them to follow a "life program" in which the parents retain their power precisely because the daughter or son feels compelled always to do the opposite of what their parents would do. If and for as long as this inner split is maintained, the child may lead a chaotic life with strong fluctuations that result from inner borderline experiencing. This often leads to what from the outside looks like an impressive, but reckless and dangerous lifestyle that the person is proud of. But their almost compulsively over-sensitive reactions to all threats to their own values is an indication that these values can in fact, like the introjects, act similarly to a force that is exerted on them from the outside.

The most difficult thing is to judge whether something should be seen as a liberating rebellion or as a destructive, constricting source of new introjects, as in the case of religious conversions. (I will leave aside the very delicate question as to when, where and to what extent a *political* rebellion, e.g. a resistance movement that uses violent means, can or must be considered legitimate.) This assessment has always been contaminated by the typical cases where the majority religions coincide with the power interests of a priesthood or secular rulers who have always, from the inquisition to modern sect investigators², known how to create their own jurisdictions. How, for instance, can and should parents, teachers and peers react when adolescents want to convert to Islam, thus exposing themselves to the danger of indoctrination by militant Islamists? The young people believe that they will find meaning in life in the new religion, or at least stability and a clear value orientation in a world that they evidently find hopelessly confusing. What is

2 Transl. note: In Germany sect investigators or commissioners for sects ("Sektenbeauftragte") are church officials charged with investigating cults, sects and worldviews.

most important is apparently to start by mustering a real understanding for the fact that young people can experience our culture, which is in fact extremely complex and sometimes without doubt disturbing, as confusing and disorienting. It cannot be a question of hastily offering them some kind of identity that currently happens to appeal to us or with which we are familiar. Here again, what is helpful is an authentic dialogue, in which we admit to our own experiences of disorientation and above all to our own fears. That's one thing. The other is to support these young people to have other experiences of a different kind, as far as possible through carefully selected trips to and experiences in countries with different cultures, for example, in Latin America, which are also associated with meaningful group activities, for instance, that have to do with the environment. Nothing promotes maturity and growth more than personal experiences of foreign cultures, including activities that are felt to be meaningful. The parents of such children urgently need the support of public institutions in finding such opportunities.

7. Are we currently experiencing a decline in values?

Is this tendency to be attracted to new, seemingly safer value worlds and possibilities for identification that promise to provide a clearer orientation really so difficult to understand? Do our European/western societies not rest on a value structure that is centuries- if not millennia-old, and ultimately unshakeable? Or, if this structure is shaken today, can it not be re-stabilized by reverting to the old order? Such diagnoses and appeals, which we are hearing with tedious frequency from conservatives and especially from ecclesiastical circles, articulate an unease that is not so difficult to understand, but generally remain on an abstract level. They do not usually specify which value orientations are really missing today, because most of the contemporary values of our society belong to a whole arsenal of emancipatory values, i.e. values that are about freeing up space for ourselves. In fact, following the impetus provided by the cultural revolutions of the nineteen sixties and seventies, since the nineties we have been witnessing a surprising propagation and legal institution of emancipatory values that has brought us, for example, recognition of homosexual relationships, a new sensitivity for the sexual abuse of children, a prohibition of the use of violence by parents and schools in child-raising, laws against sexual violence in marriages, and last, but not least, condemnation of sexual exploitation and blackmail in the exercise of male power. And these are perhaps only the most important achievements of a new ethics. We could also add the re-evaluation of our natural environment that has been underway for some time now and, more recently, a re-evaluation of the value of our data. The significance this development has for the welfare of our society rapidly becomes clear when we cast an informed glance at societies which operate on the basis of different basic values - which unfortunately currently also include a few European ones as well as Trumpism in the States - or even at our own experiences of living in such societies. There is nonetheless a widespread feeling that something has been lost - and this feeling is shared by widely varying groups with viewpoints that run counter to the general consensus. We don't have to go as far as considering conversion to Islam; there are a broad range of more or less radical right-wing groups that claim to offer clear orientation and firmly rooted values. Perhaps the desire for greater orientation and safe values is not quite so difficult to understand as it would seem to the liberal spirit. If we ask ourselves which values could have got lost - what it actually is that is lacking in our society - we are, of course, unlikely to see the answer as lying precisely in fundamentalisms whose use of totalitarian force stands in contradiction to all liberal values. But neither will we find them in those values that the institutions of liberal democracy and the rule of law represent and guarantee. That this is so is because on the one hand we have come to take them so much for granted (even the radical right-wingers rely on there being a liberal administration of justice), while on the other they are experienced as being too abstract and too complex for it to be possible to develop Juergen Habermas's 'constitutional patriotism' as a *feeling*.

No, it's other virtues and values that have disappeared: **courtesy** as the conventionally accepted mode of interacting among people even when we are not acquainted with them, **respect**, both for the growing numbers of old people whose experience of life in general and in their professions have been devalued by the technological developments, and for nature, which through climate change is bringing us back to traditional mores, and for life itself, which we are destroying everywhere as the speed with which whole species are dying out rises daily, the **use of tact** in social intercourse, the only way we can guarantee genuine protection of the private and intimate spheres; recently also the **art of diplomacy**, which has in the past proved to be indispensable and remains so, not only for weighing up and balancing interests, but also for avoiding war and violent conflict; **leisure** as a value has all but disappeared - with rampant capitalism time is money and profit the ultimate value; this has also led to a decline in **solidarity** which, as a basic value of society, has been so badly compromised by the uncurbed increase in inequality in the distribution of the total social income that the rule "*Property entails obligations*" laid down in the German constitution is now only a meaningless formula - insofar as it was ever meant seriously by the fathers of the constitution. Morally speaking, the shortage of nurses in Germany and other European countries is the darkest chapter of this trend. The virtues of **punctuality**, **tidiness** and **cleanliness** are being eroded. *Punctuality*, for which Germans used to be so highly praised and which they also used to consider so important, now seems to be rather the exception than the rule, at least for the German rail company. Evidently public order is considered to be less important than taking care of the infra structure if it is not directly associated with safety issues, otherwise the departments responsible for public order (which includes all sectors of the public administration as well as the police and customs officials) would not be so notoriously under-staffed. And today *cleanliness* relates mainly to the quality of our air. No need to waste any words describing how this has been willfully and criminally neglected. **Facts** seem to be losing their meaning because we are seeing more and more blatant lying in public discourse. As a result there is no longer any point in seeking to establish or discussing the **truth** as a benchmark for all scientific knowledge. Another aspect of this is also the devaluation of **criticism**, which is nowadays rapidly negatively defined as polemics. Instead we now have mere ranting and insulting remarks. In the arts **beauty** has long been under suspicion of being kitsch and is considered to be inauthentic, while on the other hand the ugliness of our cities and other residential areas is glaring and depressing, not just because of the ubiquitous advertising and notwithstanding all the restoration of the historical old towns.

So yes, we *are* witnessing a decline in the validity of many virtues and values. And aside from the increase in purely mafia-like behavior in industry and sport, what we are generally concerned with is more a loss or erosion of the achievements of civilization, which affects us all. As we know, these values must go without saying, that is, they have to have been internalized well if they are to function properly. We need to be well-bred, as people used to say. And these values must be supported by feelings of shame as the immediate punishment for violating them, even if we ourselves were not responsible for the violations. That's how civilization works.

And what about the introjects, the neurotic inhibitions that suppress our vitality, whose sabotage we should support in therapy? Let us take another look at our contemporary culture through the lens of a phenomenon that is highly characteristic of it!

8. Political correctness

Political correctness was once an achievement of the Left Liberals in the USA. It was intended to protect disadvantaged minorities, initially through quota policies and other affirmative actions (or "positive discrimination") and then by means of non-discriminating linguistic strategies.

In connection with the civil rights movement in the nineteen sixties President Kennedy

proposed legislation to support women and ethnic minorities in the domains of the labor market, access to higher education and voting rights, which finally came into force in 1964. Following the conservative turn in the USA this policy was eroded by several decisions of the Supreme Court passed between 2004 and 2006, finally de facto abolishing the law altogether. In Germany the "*Allgemeine Gleichstellungsgesetz*" (AGG; *Eng.* General Equity Law) has been in force since 2006. It developed out of ideas that had been published previously in an article entitled "*Ausländer und Deutsche*" (*Eng.* Foreigners and Germans) published in 1981 and re-edited by Liselotte Funcke (1997, pp. 78–97), who was a member of the German Free Democratic party and the German parliament (*Bundestag*), also the first female Commissioner for Foreigners. The preface to this article contains a surprising sentence, surprising because it would no longer be conceivable today: "However, in order to ensure equal opportunities for foreigners we need to do more for the foreigners than for the Germans for at least two generations" (*author's translation*). After the equal opportunities policy, which is still watched over by the Federal Constitutional Court, came the renaming: "Miss" as a form of address for unmarried women disappeared some time ago. The negroes first became "black people" and then "African Americans", and Indians became "Indian Americans". Similarly, more caution came to be exercised with regard to all words or terms that could be seen as discriminating towards any group, for example, "cripples" became first "disabled persons" and later "handicapped persons" and then "people with disabilities", and words used to refer to mentally ill persons changed from "insane" to "mentally ill" and finally to "mentally handicapped" and in the UK now "people with mental health problems". (In Berlin in the nineteen seventies there was a group of physically disabled people who called themselves the "Krüppelinitiative" (*Eng.* "Cripples' Initiative"). They became militant to reverse the taboo.

Many of these linguistic strategies have also been adopted in Europe. In the USA the minorities in question often very cleverly capitalized on the protection of minorities, which have now become standardized, and also increasingly internalized them. Especially in the elite universities of the US verbal violations of these new social rules have been assessed as *faux pas* and led at least to embarrassment in the transgressors, all the more as a culture of public apologies has arisen that is sometimes even reminiscent of the excesses of the Japanese shame culture. Now the traditional names of numerous university buildings in the States have been changed under pressure from students because they served as memorials to colonialist or racist donors or benefactors of these educational institutions, which were typically private, capitalist undertakings. (In the case of Thomas Jefferson, one of the authors of the famous Declaration of Human Rights of 1776 - and a well-known slave owner, that is of course rather difficult.)

In the last few years, however, this initially progressive movement at American universities has become hysterical. This development can be understood as a scurrilous offshoot of the women's movement and may perhaps also be due to the fact that women are not only not a minority, but have also recently come to play a greater role in the labor force and to be in the majority in most disciplines in educational institutions. This is evident in the increasing numbers of complaints about problems they saw with the way course content was represented, especially in the literary sciences and history, where the teaching material contained references to rape or other crimes of violence. The students are demanding that the lecturers give them advance warning, including a recommendation not to read books at all or to skip certain text passages that are to be indicated by the professor beforehand. Does this remind anyone of the burning of books in other, not too distant times - or is that too far-fetched an association? That such a demand meets with resistance in a discipline whose curriculum includes Shakespeare, Poe and Dostoevsky is not surprising. However, at Princeton and a few other elite universities some of the teaching staff have been fired or have left voluntarily. For the white proletariat in the USA

the fact that such sensitivities are cultivated mainly by children of the rich upper classes at elite colleges and universities is, of course, not only reason to deride them, but also serves to reinforce their own latent racist resentments.

In Germany the highest point of this development to date has been reactions to a poem in Spanish by a German poet written on the facade of a university of applied science for social work in Berlin - an institution that was once also renowned abroad and known for its progressiveness. The poem was removed because a few female students had felt that that it was an affront to their female dignity to have to see it every day. The poem had been written on the wall because the poet had previously won a prize for his lyrics from this very university.

The poem in question was:

| | |
|--|--|
| avenidas | Avenues |
| avenidas y flores | Avenues and flowers |
| flores | Flowers |
| flores y mujeres | Flowers and women |
| avenidas | Avenues |
| avenidas y mujeres | Avenues and women |
| Avenidas y flores y mujeres y un admirador | Avenues and flowers and women and an admirer |

Avenidas y flores y mujeres y un admirador

After prolonged debates, the Academic Senate of the university decided to have the poem removed from the facade. Must all poems in which women are admired by men and compared to flowers now be expunged from German literature? What had the women who complained in fact introjected? I find myself at a loss to explain this.

At all events, in this case an emancipatory development definitively got out of hand. What was originally intended to protect minorities has now become an expression of the oversensitive narcissism of immature women. And where the devil has a hand in things, the right wing are also never far away. Political correctness has long since become the enemy of those among the right-wing populists who like to provoke by breaking what they feel are the taboos of Political Correctness in order to give the people in the street whom they call "our people" a voice, i.e. to stir them up. Alexander Gauland's³ remark "Hitler and the Nazis are just bird shit seen against the whole of Germany's more than a 1000 years old history" was only the latest insult to the hundred million victims for which that regime was responsible.

Here again something has got out of control. The breaking of taboos, which has long been celebrated as a value *sui generis* in other contexts of our culture, i.e. the arts, the theater and movies, is now everywhere being rendered socially acceptable by the populist movements. Both the voters who elected them and those they have elected are rebelling against the limits that political correctness is trying to enforce in our culture with increasing hysteria, which they experience as shackles and censorship. In so doing they are ruining this culture in a different way. The gradually increasing legitimization of violations of taboos through repeated use is not a liberating sabotage of introjects, but a relapse into barbarism. No civilization can do without internalization - this has been demonstrated by the great sociologist Norbert Elias in his famous studies of the process of civilization. However, we must differentiate between internalized rules of civilized behavior as a precondition also of a democratic society and introjects and introjections. The

3 Alexander Gauland is the co-leader of the right-wing German political party "Alternative for Germany" (AfD)

distinguishing characteristic is the reaction of the psychological organism and the social environment to their violation. Transgressing internalized civilization values and rules of conduct leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment - if they are among the norms of societal behavior that are felt to be self-evident, that is. In contrast, violating introjected values and rules results in a secret pleasure and a bad conscience that has no lasting effect.

9. Barriers against hate, anger and violence

The question that remains unanswered is how it could happen that in some parts of the population (and by no means only those who are uneducated like Donald Trump, since Herr Gauland is well aware of what he is saying) the shame thresholds that protect the level of civilization of a society could drop so far that today any politician or anyone else who is active in the public arena must expect to be confronted with sudden "shitstorms" or a flood of hate mails. While the statistics show that the number of violent crimes at least in Germany is steadily falling, the number of acts of violence committed by the right-wing has continued to rise and is higher than the number of attacks by Islamists that receive far greater media attention.

Doubtless the anonymity of the internet is one reason why the pent-up anger is expressed in such an uncontrolled way. It makes it impossible to determine who was the source of such outbursts and thus fosters a generalized lack of responsibility. Moreover, psychologically it would appear to be clear that such outbursts usually result from *pent-up feelings*, i.e. that in this way, at least, they are in fact related to the sabotage of introjects. However, the reasons for this partial deterioration of civilization are likely to be more deep-seated and for reasons of space we must refrain from further speculation.

Can Gestalt therapy help to avert and reverse this decline? I believe it can.

First, I suggest we think back to the differentiation between the sabotage of neurotic introjects, which we should promote, and the loss of healthy internalized civilizatory values and etiquette. Psychotherapists need to be aware of this difference as they work, and orient their interventions accordingly.

The civilization of human beings, the taming of their drives, the control of their hostility has always been, and still remains, a task for child-raising and education. Psychotherapy is something different: its aims are to heal and alleviate, release vitality and raise awareness. And yet it also has an educational aspect, since it too aspires to help discover potentials, support development, work on sharpening the senses and awaken innate compassion - or at least, Gestalt therapy does. In this sense it is also a laboratory for promoting civilization and should therefore, committed as it may be to supporting the sabotage of introjects, take care to avoid instrumentalizing poorly internalized civilizatory values in its awareness experiments. On the contrary, the focus must remain on the "healthy introjection" that I have been referring to as "*internalization*" to distinguish it from neurotic introjects, i.e. the positive aggressive functions of the self - weighing up, differentiating, critically examining, assuming a standpoint, being willing to process conflicts, saying no, all these things need to be supported and are genuine tasks of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy also has another objective: constantly to work on sharpening our sensory perception and our feelings. The success of a process of "revivification" of our culture (and nothing less must now be our goal) will completely depend on whether we manage to become more familiar with our feelings and to cultivate the art of expressing them better! A strong voice and good articulation are more effective than shouting; a clearly stated "no" is more effective than violence, laughter or a genuinely friendly smile more disarming than ill-humored compromises, quiet tones often more touching than stentorian speech. Buddhism recommends that we detach the feeling of anger from its object - concentrate completely on the feeling, observe it without suppressing it - and do not forget the reason and "justification" for our anger! While that is a good example of a meaningful Gestalt

experiment, it needs to be practiced frequently before it begins to have a sustained effect. However, the most important thing is to discover the covert sabotages of introjects! It could help to go on a voyage of discovery of our own introjects and to be mindful of when the next secret joy lights up in us as we violate them. Gestalt therapy's contribution to the civilizing of our culture is potentially no smaller than its contribution to promoting the emancipation processes of individuals. We must start by becoming aware that we can make this our *task*. So: let us make the effort, it's worth it!

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