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Philosophy as therapy: Eugene Gendlin on transformative experience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Eugene Gendlin's contributions to philosophy and psychotherapeutic practice as interrelated instruments for existential transformation. It centres on Gendlin's concept of the *felt sense* — an embodied, pre-reflective source of meaning — and foregrounds the pivotal roles of authenticity and reinterpretation in processes of personal change. Drawing upon phenomenological influences (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) as well as existential and pragmatic traditions (Dewey, James), the article underscores Gendlin's endeavour to chart a "third way" beyond the polarities of modernism and postmodernism. Gendlin advances a dynamic, process-oriented conception of experience in which philosophical inquiry and therapeutic practice operate in reciprocal reinforcement. The article puts Gendlin's psychotherapeutic method of Focusing into dialogue with other therapeutic models, particularly Carl Rogers' client-centred approach, and elaborates the transformative perspective through the interpretive framework of the "transformative triad" comprising experience, narrative, and action. Reinterpretation, construed as a retrospective and retroactive re-engagement with lived experience, serves as a catalyst for profound existential change. Gendlin's philosophy thus emerges as a multidimensional praxis wherein conceptual reflection and embodied responsiveness converge to reconfigure fundamental modes of being-in-the-world.

KEYWORDS

Eugene Gendlin, philosophy as therapy, felt sense, Focusing method, experiential phenomenology, existential transformation, transformative experience, transformative triad, authenticity

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INTRODUCTION

Eugene Gendlin (1926–2017), an eminent American philosopher and psychotherapist, is widely recognised for his groundbreaking integration of philosophical reflection and therapeutic practice in the service of existential transformation. His collaboration with Carl Rogers in the Wisconsin Project (1958–1963) — which investigated the effects of client-centred therapy on individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia — was a defining moment in his career. This research highlighted the significance of the felt sense: a bodily felt, pre-verbal dimension of meaning that transcends established conceptual frameworks (Scharff, 2018). Although celebrated for his contributions to psychotherapy, Gendlin consistently described himself first and foremost as a philosopher. Over more than three decades at the University of Chicago, he developed and refined a distinctive body of thought centred on the interplay between experience and its articulation. At the core of this project lies his philosophy of the implicit, which demonstrates how meaning arises from the dynamic interaction of language, the body and lived experience. This framework challenges the traditional dichotomy between rationalism and empiricism, offering instead a process-oriented account of meaning-making (Gendlin, 1997a; Scharff, 2018).

This article examines Eugene Gendlin's contributions to philosophy and psychotherapy as interrelated frameworks of existential transformation. Drawing on the phenomenological insights of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, alongside the pragmatic traditions of Dewey and James, Gendlin positions philosophical reflection and therapeutic practice as mutually reinforcing modes of existential inquiry and personal change. His method of Focusing is situated within the broader constellation of psychotherapeutic approaches, particularly in dialogue with Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy, and is further elaborated through the "transformational triad" of experience, narrative and action. Within this framework, reinterpretation emerges as a retrospective and retroactive reassessment of lived experience, operating as a generative mechanism of existential transformation — a profound reconfiguration of one's relation to self, others and the world, and through which meaning, identity and orientation are reconstituted. By integrating conceptual innovation with embodied practice, Gendlin's philosophy provides a multidimensional and actionable model for reshaping the fundamental structures of being. It equips individuals with experiential tools for navigating complexity, cultivating transformative meanings — new and refigured senses of significance that emerge from reinterpreting lived experience — and fostering profound personal growth.

PHILOSOPHY AS THERAPY

Eugene Gendlin's work occupies a crucial, though frequently underappreciated, space at the intersection of contemporary philosophy and psychotherapy. As both a philosopher and psychotherapist, Gendlin offers an approach that resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of philosophical abstraction while simultaneously pioneering innovative therapeutic practices that emphasise the preconceptual and embodied aspects of human experience. Wittgenstein's celebrated diagnosis of the "diseases" of philosophy, rooted in how language "bewitches our intelligence" (Philosophical Investigations, §109; Wittgenstein, 1953), serves as a compelling illustration of Gendlin's broader philosophical approach. Like Wittgenstein, Gendlin critiques the limitations of abstract conceptualisation, yet he extends this critique into practice by developing methods that enable individuals to access and articulate the implicit and prereflective dimensions of their lived experience — domains often overlooked in traditional philosophical and psychological frameworks (Gendlin, 1978).

Central to Gendlin's philosophy is a dialogical engagement with Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian existentialism. Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), understood as a pre-theoretical horizon of meaning, underscores the richness and depth of experience that eludes reductive categorisation. Similarly, Heidegger's notion of *being-in-the-world* illuminates the situated and relational nature of human existence, embedded in specific temporal and contextual frameworks. While Gendlin draws extensively from these traditions, he diverges by emphasising the transformative potential of bodily processes. This perspective is crystallised in his concept of the *felt sense* — a bodily awareness that is not only deeply rooted in situational contexts but also generative of new meanings, enabling profound shifts in understanding and action (Schneider, 1997).

Wittgenstein's emphasis on the therapeutic dimensions of philosophy is reimagined in Gendlin's approach, which integrates reflective articulation with embodied praxis. Gendlin positions philosophy not merely as a critique of linguistic and conceptual entanglements but as a participatory process that reveals and transforms the implicit structures of lived experience. This framework situates Gendlin's contributions at the intersection of philosophical rigor and therapeutic practice, offering a model of inquiry that transcends disciplinary boundaries while remaining deeply grounded in the realities of human existence. Wittgenstein highlights the perplexing nature of philosophical confusions, as exemplified by his famous remark: "I cannot find my way about" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §115). His method of philosophical therapy aimed

to dissolve such confusions by returning language to its ordinary use, freeing thinkers from conceptual entanglements. However, Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy was primarily negative in orientation: focused on critique and deconstruction and offering little in terms of tools for positive transformation.

In this context, Gendlin introduces a creative and constructive dimension to therapeutic philosophy. He moves beyond simply resolving conceptual problems to actively engaging with the embodied processes of meaning-making. For Gendlin, experience is not merely an object of analysis but a dynamic and interactive process requiring both intellectual and embodied participation. His approach transcends the mere elimination of philosophical errors, instead providing actionable tools for transformation. This process, as Gendlin explains, facilitates the emergence of new possibilities for meaning and action through an integrative dialogue between language, the body and the world.

Eugene Gendlin's philosophical approach emerges at the crossroads of phenomenology, pragmatism and existentialism, culminating in a distinctive applied philosophy that unites theoretical reflection with practical therapeutic engagement. Gendlin exhibited an extraordinary capacity to synthesise the insights of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the pragmatist tradition — particularly the ideas of John Dewey. By doing so, he transcended the constraints of abstract theoretical analysis, shifting focus toward processes deeply rooted in embodied experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Gendlin & Kleinberg-Levin, 1997).

In his exploration of the phenomenology of experience, Gendlin gives central importance to the concept of the *felt sense*, which grants access to the pre-linguistic and often implicit dimensions of lived experience. Moving beyond purely theoretical analyses, he developed practical tools to support inner transformation, most notably the *Focusing* method. This approach facilitates the exploration of bodily sensations as sources of new meanings, enabling individuals to reinterpret their experiences and address internal conflicts. Gendlin underscores the transformative potential of applied philosophy in shaping innovative pathways for therapy and personal growth.

Within the framework of his experiential phenomenology, Gendlin emphasizes the necessity of a "new beginning" to confront the philosophical challenge of the interplay between lived experience and language: "To arrive at a solution and a successful phenomenological method, we must make a fundamental turn and a new beginning. Instead of standing only on statements, deploring that we can speak about experience only through them, we must look at the situation sideways — make a ninety-degree turn, so to speak. Let us stand to one side and look at both statements and experience as they

affect each other" (Gendlin, 2018: 54). This "ninety-degree turn" signals a decisive philosophical rupture — a radically new beginning that compels us to reconceive the very relation between language and lived experience. Rather than viewing them as separate or self-sufficient, Gendlin highlights their constitutive interdependence, marking this turn as the opening of a new horizon of inquiry in which philosophical reflection and therapeutic practice intertwine in analysing process — rather than remaining isolated elements. The motif of a "new beginning" has long carried weight in philosophy and beyond — from Plato's "second sailing" and Cartesian doubt to Husserl's phenomenological reduction — serving as a recurrent gesture of renewal and reorientation in the history of thought.

Gendlin criticizes traditional phenomenology and linguistic analyses for their tendency to impose rigid verbal frameworks on experience — which is inherently dynamic, pre-schematic and ever-evolving. Rejecting the static treatment of experience as a fixed object of analysis, Gendlin offers an approach that embraces its fluid and processual character. As he asserts: "Rather, we study both experience and statement as they occur in the process of affecting each other" (Gendlin, 2018: 54). He argues that the act of articulating experience not only reflects but also transforms what is expressed, creating space for both reflective and creative transformation.

From this perspective, experience and language are dynamically intertwined. Language does not merely record lived experience; it actively shapes and transforms it by infusing new layers of meaning. Through verbalization, meanings — understood here as embodied, pre-reflective senses that guide experience — are clarified and rendered intelligible, even as they are reconfigured. Verbalization is therefore not simply descriptive but constitutively creative, generating new structures of sense.

GENDLIN AND PHILOSOPHY

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology forms the foundation of Eugene Gendlin's philosophical project. At the heart of Husserl's work lies the imperative to "return to the things themselves" (*zu den Sachen selbst*), a call for rigorous attention to conscious experience as it gives itself, unencumbered by theoretical preconceptions or imposed structures (Husserl, 1982). Central to this method is the technique of phenomenological reduction, which suspends assumptions about the external world to reveal the intentionality of consciousness — the intrinsic directedness of all conscious acts towards objects or meanings.

Inspired by this foundational insight, Gendlin reinterprets and extends Husserl's early phenomenological project by introducing the concept of the *felt sense*. For Gendlin, the *felt sense* designates a pre-conceptual, bodily knowing that precedes and exceeds fully formed intentional acts (Gendlin, 1997a). While Husserl's phenomenology remains for Gendlin primarily descriptive and structurally oriented — centred on the noetic–noematic correlation, where the act of consciousness (*noesis*) is directed toward the intended meaning (*noema*) — Gendlin reconfigures this framework by locating meaning within a dynamic process of articulation and emergence.

The *felt sense* is not merely a correlate of intentionality; it represents a generative, implicit dimension of experience that resists capture by static description. It is the bodily "more" present in every lived situation — a surplus of meaning that has not yet taken linguistic or conceptual form.

Gendlin's departure from classical Husserlian phenomenology entails a shift from a descriptive to a process-oriented framework. He relocates the emphasis from what experience *is* to what experience *does* — how it transforms, reconfigures and opens new avenues for thought and action. At the centre of this shift is the *felt sense*, which provides the experiential grounding for a phenomenology that is both dynamically unfolding and directly applicable to psychotherapeutic practice. In therapeutic contexts, individuals engage with these pre-linguistic, bodily dimensions of experience to uncover new insights and transformative meanings (Gendlin, 2004a).

Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology serves as a significant source of inspiration for Eugene Gendlin's work. Heidegger shifts the focus from the analysis of consciousness to *being-in-the-world* (*Dasein*), characterised by temporality, care (*Sorge*) and the relational structures of being (*Mitsein*; Heidegger, 1962). Building on these concepts, Gendlin makes a unique contribution to philosophy and psychotherapy, particularly by introducing the bodily dimension of experience and its practical application in processes of change (Gendlin, 1997a). Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* — often translated as "attunement" or "situatedness" — is one of the three fundamental existential structures of human existence, alongside understanding (*Verstehen*) and discourse (*Rede*). It pertains to the way an individual experiences themselves and the world, situated within both emotional and relational contexts (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger emphasises that *Befindlichkeit* concerns pre-reflective feeling, integrating the "internal" and "external" aspects of human experience before they are conceptually divided. Gendlin expands upon this concept by introducing the notion of *bodily implying*, which refers to the dynamic, implicit bodily awareness of a situation as a whole. This *bodily implying* goes beyond purely mental

processes, accounting for our embeddedness in context (*situatedness*) and the experience of "living-in" relationships and situations. Unlike Heidegger, who does not emphasise the role of the body in his analyses, Gendlin highlights the body as a foundational carrier of experience (Gendlin, 1978–1979). While Heidegger primarily considers *Befindlichkeit* as an ontological aspect of being, Gendlin develops this concept towards a more practical (ontic) application, assigning it a pivotal role in processes of change and transformation. *Bodily implying* enables individuals not only to attune to their situations but also to generate new meanings through the process of *carrying forward*.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents a radical conception of the body as the fundamental locus of experience. For Merleau--Ponty, the body is not an object but a subject, a "body-subject" (*corps-sujet*), that engages with the world in a pre-reflective manner, inseparable from its lived situation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The body serves as the medium through which we relate to the world, enabling sensory and practical immersion in it. Merleau-Ponty also emphasises that language is a medium of embodied being--in-the-world, where the emotional sense (*sens émotionnel*) of words is inextricably tied to bodily presence and gestures that precede reflective interpretation. Language, in this view, is not merely an arbitrary system of symbols but a form of directly articulating experience through embodied interaction with the environment (Gendlin, 1997a: 287–288). Eugene Gendlin builds on these phenomenological insights into embodiment — particularly emphasising the concept of bodily subjectivity — to formulate his understanding of "implicit meaning" (*bodily implying*) which refers to the dynamic, embodied sensing of a situation as a whole. In Gendlin's approach, meaning exists implicitly before it becomes explicit and emerges at the intersection of the body, context and situation. This "lived experience" is neither confined within conceptual categories nor detached from its embodied context (Gendlin, 2004a). The *Focusing* process, developed by Gendlin (2004a), enables individuals to consciously engage with their inner, bodily knowledge, helping them uncover and develop hidden meanings. Here, attention to bodily experiencing plays a pivotal role, acting as a starting point for new insights and transformation (Gendlin, 1978). While Merleau-Ponty focuses on the notion of the "body as subject" (*le corps propre*) and explores language as a dynamic process of expression and transformation, Gendlin extends these ideas into therapeutic practice. *Focusing* is an introspective dialogue in which bodily experience guides the clarification of vague content through both language and the body. In this context, Gendlin underscores that *bodily implying* is more than mere perception

or emotion — it acts as an "inner compass", directing the process of further development and the integration of meanings (Gendlin, 1978).

Eugene Gendlin's philosophy exhibits deep connections with American pragmatism, particularly the works of William James and John Dewey. Pragmatism emphasises the process of inquiry and the practical consequences of thought, treating ideas as tools for action and problem-solving. Gendlin draws inspiration from this tradition, developing concepts rooted in embodied experience and its pivotal role in meaning-making processes. Gendlin (1997a) engages with Dewey's thought, highlighting the significance of experience and what Dewey describes as "suggestion" — a dynamic cognitive impulse that initiates tentative solutions in problematic situations, requiring further development and verification (Dewey, 1933). Gendlin extends this line of inquiry by focusing on the detailed mechanisms of the *felt sense* — a bodily, pre-reflective awareness that serves as the foundation for the emergence of meaning in everyday situations. For Gendlin, as for Dewey, the situation is dynamic and relational, involving subtle bodily sensations that guide the discovery of new ways to respond to challenges. Through the conscious exploration of bodily sensations, the *felt sense* opens a space for uncovering hidden meanings and generating new concepts, leading to profound transformations (Gendlin, 1997a).

William James, in his work, introduces the concept of the "stream of consciousness" — a dynamic and continuous process characterised by the fluid flow of thoughts and experiences and in which individual moments connect into an uninterrupted sequence (James, 1890). Within this stream, James identifies the "fringes of thought" — subtle, vague sensations that precede the full verbalisation and formulation of meaning. Eugene Gendlin builds on these insights, suggesting that the *felt sense* is analogous to James's "fringes of thought". It encompasses implicit, bodily sensations that underpin the process of meaning creation before it becomes explicit. The *felt sense* functions similarly to James's "feelings of tendency", revealing the potential of hidden meanings to direct both thought and action. James also explores the phenomenon of the "tip-of-the-tongue" (TOT) experience, where an individual feels the proximity of sought-after information without being able to verbalise it fully. This is accompanied by an intense feeling that the answer is almost within reach, near the "edge of consciousness". Gendlin draws on this dynamic in his concept of "carrying forward", where implicit meaning, rooted in the body, evolves toward explicit conclusions through the conscious exploration of bodily sensations (Gendlin, 1997a). A key distinction between James and Gendlin lies in their approaches: James focuses on the descriptive analysis of such

phenomena — providing theoretical foundations for their understanding — whereas Gendlin offers practical tools such as the *Focusing* method, enabling systematic exploration and utilisation of these processes to transform experience. Gendlin develops James's intuitions, giving them a practical dimension and demonstrating how hidden meanings, embedded in bodily awareness, can be uncovered and applied in daily life and therapeutic processes.

By explicitly engaging with the modernism/postmodernism debate, Gendlin seeks to define the specificity of his approach in relation to dominant intellectual paradigms. He emphasises that his philosophy represents a unique third way, offering an alternative to the dichotomy between modernist foundationalism and postmodern scepticism. Modernism, grounded in the assumption of stable, universal foundations of knowledge and rationality, seeks to subordinate experience to the rules of scientific logic and linguistic representations. Postmodernism, in response to these premises, rejects the possibility of objective knowledge, emphasising ambiguity, instability and relativism (Gendlin, 1997b). Structuralism, with its focus on stable linguistic frameworks, reduces the richness and dynamism of experience to rigid categories. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, does highlight the instability of structures and meanings, and yet often culminates in interpretative chaos, offering few tools for constructive change. Gendlin, however, proposes an alternative — a dynamic interaction between implicit (pre-linguistic) and explicit (verbal) meanings. His approach acknowledges the complexity of experience, enabling the development of meanings through the process of "carrying forward", rooted in bodily felt sense and serving as the foundation for creative articulation (Gendlin, 1997a). Unlike poststructuralist deconstruction, Gendlin demonstrates that language is not merely a tool for dismantling structures but an active process that co-creates new meanings. For Gendlin, language does not remain fixed at the level of aporia but operates creatively, offering the possibility of generating new pathways for understanding and action. In this sense, Gendlin's philosophy transcends deconstruction, combining stability with the potential for continuous transformation. Gendlin also engages with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, appreciating its significance in challenging traditional linguistic structures and liberating language from rigid frameworks (Gendlin & Kleinberg-Levin, 1997). At the same time, he notes that deconstruction remains on the level of interpretative ambiguity, whereas his own approach involves the creative exploration of implicit bodily processes that open new possibilities for action and meaning.

GENDLIN AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Gendlin (1978–1979) views philosophy and psychology as disciplines distinct in methodology but complementary in their exploration of human experience. Philosophy, by investigating the fundamental structures of being, provides ontological frameworks that help to understand the complexity of human existence. Psychology, on the other hand, focuses on specific ontic manifestations of these structures in everyday life, translating them into methods of exploration and transformation. An example of this synergy is Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit* and Gendlin's notion of the *felt sense*, concepts which together demonstrate how philosophy and psychology can collaborate in examining and transforming human experience. As Heidegger emphasizes, *Befindlichkeit* refers to the fundamental way a person finds themselves in the world. Mood is not merely an emotional state but an existential mode of immersion in reality, revealing how one is situated within a specific context. Moods such as anxiety or joy are not simply internal reactions but ways in which the world discloses itself through an individual's existential embeddedness in surrounding relationships and events (Heidegger, 1962). Psychology, by translating philosophical structures into practical tools, becomes a field of exploration and action. For instance, the experience of emptiness, which in philosophy signifies an existential dimension of being, can be explored in psychology through the *felt sense*.

Heidegger interprets emptiness as a moment in which a person confronts the abyss of their freedom and the absence of pre-given structures of meaning. Psychology, in turn, enables the individual to uncover the implicit meanings within this experience, thereby opening new possibilities for action and growth (Gendlin, 1978–1979). In this way, Gendlin's integration of philosophical insight with psychological practice underscores the mutual enrichment of the two disciplines in their shared aim of deepening and transforming our understanding of human existence. For Gendlin, however, any genuine therapeutic approach must also acknowledge what can be described as self-ambiguity (see Dings, 2020) (a condition akin to Heidegger's *Zweideutigkeit* or Merleau-Ponty's notion of the opacity of the lived body) — the fact that we never fully coincide with ourselves. Parts of our experience may feel both ours and not ours, clear yet elusive. Psychotherapy, when attentive to this inherent ambiguity, helps people stay with these unclear edges of their experiencing so that fresh meanings can emerge and carry life forward.

Gendlin emphasised the pivotal role of the therapist as a co-creator of a space where the client can explore and develop previously unacknowledged dimensions of their life. In his view, therapy goes far beyond symptom

reduction — it becomes a dynamic process of generating new meanings deeply rooted in the client's embodied experience. This approach not only addresses specific problems but also fosters authentic growth through the discovery and transformation of hidden aspects of life.

Gendlin's introduction of the Focusing method marked a significant innovation, blending process philosophy with therapeutic practice. Focusing highlights the creative nature of therapy, where uncovering implicit meanings is not merely about reconstructing the past but about opening pathways to new modes of action and self-experience. This process, dynamic and grounded in the bodily felt sense, allows clients to generate meanings that lead to profound and enduring changes in their lives. In simple Gendlinian terms, therapy works by remaining with these unclear edges of experiencing, because it is precisely there that fresh meanings can emerge.

The inspiration of Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy was crucial to the development of Eugene Gendlin's approach, yet he also significantly expanded upon that basis. Rogers emphasised the importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard and authenticity as fundamental elements fostering therapeutic change (Rogers, 1957). Building on this model, Gendlin directed attention to the client's bodily experience, which became a central focus in the process of discovering and generating meaning. His work not only enriched Rogers' approach but also opened new pathways for engaging with the implicit dimensions of experience.[1] While Rogers acknowledged the importance of intuitive experiences ("gut-level experiences"), Gendlin criticised introspective methods that were limited to emotional reflection.

The examples frequently cited by Eugene Gendlin illustrate the core principles of his method, in which bodily sensations (*felt sense*) play a central role in the therapeutic process. One commonly discussed scenario involves a client experiencing a vague discomfort related to decision-making. During the session, the therapist encourages the client to focus on their bodily sensations, leading to the identification of a "lump in the throat" that arises in response to a specific topic. Instead of interpreting this sensation, the therapist invites the client to stay with the experience, allowing its (new) meaning to emerge. After further reflection, the client realises that the "lump" symbolises a fear of being rejected by their family if they pursue their desired career path. This insight enables the client to explore how to balance their own needs with familial expectations.

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[1] Under Gendlin's influence, Rogers moved toward recognizing the therapeutic process as deeply interactive and rooted in the bodily felt sense of the client.

Another example relates to a client struggling with chronic feelings of guilt. The client reports a "weight in the chest", which — through the *Focusing* method — is revealed to be associated with a conflict with a family member. The process uncovers deeply rooted emotions and unmet needs that had previously been unacknowledged. This realisation allows the client to gradually work through the conflict, resulting in emotional relief and greater openness to solutions. Gendlin (1978) also describes a case of an individual experiencing a vague sense of "lack" during a discussion about their life. In this instance, pausing and directing attention to bodily sensations allows the client to uncover hidden content linked to unmet needs. The outcome is a deeper self-understanding and the initiation of transformational change.

These examples show how Gendlin's method transcends traditional introspective techniques, offering a tool for accessing meanings embedded in bodily experience. *Focusing* proves to be a unique therapeutic approach that combines the exploration of implicit content with its transformation, opening new pathways for personal growth (Gendlin, 1997a; Earle, 1997). While Rogers, in his later work, emphasised the importance of the experiencing process, he did not develop a structured method for exploring and articulating implicit feelings. Gendlin filled this gap by combining philosophical insights with practical techniques that enable clients to access hidden dimensions of their experiences (Levin, 1994). Unlike Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy, which focuses on empathetic listening and fostering conditions of acceptance, Gendlin's approach emphasises bodily sensations (*felt sense*) as the key to uncovering new meanings (Purton, 2017). In contrast to Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy, which employs techniques such as experimentation and role-playing to evoke emotions, Gendlin's method centres on a subtle, internal process of exploring sensations rooted in the body. Moreover, compared with Irvin D. Yalom's existential therapy, which examines the client's relationships with others and their responsibility for their own life, Gendlin's approach avoids direct confrontations with overarching existential questions. Instead, it focuses on finely attuning to bodily cues and uncovering implicit meanings.

THE NARRATIVE TRIAD AND AUTHENTICITY IN EUGENE GENDLIN'S APPROACH

Eugene Gendlin describes change as a dynamic and evolving process in which bodily experience and the creation of new meanings play a central role. This process can be understood through the framework of a transformational triad

(Kapusta, 2025a), which brings together phenomenological, existential and hermeneutic perspectives. The triad consists of three interdependent elements — experience, narrative and action — which together form the basis of personal transformation. The notions of retrospection and retroactivity enrich this framework by showing how the past can be reinterpreted in light of the present, and they underscore that any process of therapeutic and existential change must take them into account. At the same time, they highlight the uncertainty and fragmented character of identity, which resists being reduced to a single coherent story. These perspectives also draw attention to the structural ambiguity and openness of experience which, as a spontaneous source of meaning, can never be fully captured within a closed narrative form (cf. Tengelyi, 2004; Merleau-Ponty, 1968). This ambiguity is not merely a limitation but a driving force in existential and therapeutic processes, as it keeps experience open to reinterpretation and renewal, enabling deeper transformation.

At the heart of this dynamic process in Gendlin's view is the concept of the *felt sense*, referring to the implicit, bodily sense of a situation. Inspired by the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, the *felt sense* provides access to hidden, embodied knowledge and serves as a starting point for the emergence of new meanings in the proc ess of transformation. Gendlin perceives experience itself as a dynamic process rooted in bodily feeling, transcending static and conceptual frameworks. Experiencing (as *experiencing* rather than *experience*) is interactive, embedded in life situations and encompasses pre-reflective sensations, integrating them with contexts to enable continuous growth and the creation of new meanings. As Gendlin observes: "no exhaustive examination of experience [...] is possible, since it is never completely in view, never only an object presented in front of us, never totally present to us. Experience is always also dispersed in our situations; we are in it, and there is always more of it in us (with, under, and behind us, and out there)" (Gendlin, 1997a: 4). According to Gendlin, experience is fundamentally inexhaustible — it always contains "more" than what can be grasped at any given moment. It is not fully accessible for analysis or conceptualisation because it exceeds our current cognitive capacities. This "more" signifies hidden meanings, a dynamic potential, a surpassing of awareness, relationality — and an openness to growth.

According to Gendlin, language is not confined to representing reality but actively participates in the process of meaning-making by bringing implicit content to the explicit level through the process of "carrying forward". Narrative plays a central role in this process, enabling the exploration and articulation of implicit meanings contained within the *felt sense*. It is not merely a description of events but a dynamic process of uncovering and developing

meanings that foster deeper understanding and the transformation of experience. Through verbalisation, narrative allows the integration of dispersed aspects of lived experience into a coherent structure of meaning. It also acts as a bridge between bodily sensations and action, facilitating cognitive and emotional change. In line with Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, narrative enables the reinterpretation of the past in light of the present, transforming one's self-perception and opening up new possibilities for action. In Gendlin's approach, narrative is an open-ended process that evolves and adapts according to context, integrating hidden aspects of experience with explicit expressions. This supports the creation of a dynamically evolving and authentic self-image, harmoniously connecting experiencing, thinking and acting. In the psychotherapeutic process, narrative is therefore not merely about "telling stories", but about discovering and developing deeper meanings through engagement with bodily sensations.

Action emerges as a pivotal and autonomous element in the phenomenon of transformation. Central to Gendlin's (2004b) philosophy is the process of "carrying forward", which originates in a bodily "knowing" that precedes verbal articulation, conceptual understanding and decision making. As Gendlin asserts, "the body knows" what is needed before it can be fully expressed. This form of intuitive knowing is not confined to private subjectivity but is inherently relational, interacting with environmental and cultural contexts. For Gendlin, action is not merely an extension of intention or narrative; it is a dialogical, contextually embedded process that arises as the body's response to the concrete demands of a situation. In line with the pragmatist tradition, he introduces the notion of "situated action", stressing that action is never detached from reality but is a continuous negotiation with it. As such, action integrates bodily sensations, narrative meanings and environmental responsiveness, often encompassing even impulsive or non-deliberate gestures. It thereby functions both as a medium and a consequence of transformation, opening space for new meanings and deeper self-understanding. This perspective reframes action as a creative event that co-emerges with changes in felt experience. It highlights the mutual dependence of internal transformation and external enactment, positioning action at the intersection of bodily responsiveness and existential reorientation. Gendlin's conception of action is thus processual, embodied and inherently dialogical — with an acute sensitivity to the cultural and situational textures in which it unfolds.

The creator of Focusing's approach, with its more optimistic and therapeutic orientation, becomes particularly clear when contrasted with the more dramatic, ruptural perspective. By contrast, the phenomenological approach

centred on pre-reflective embodied affectivity and the implicit body (as developed in the work of Thomas Fuchs and László Tengelyi) emphasizes the openness and unpredictability of action as an existential event. While Gendlin focuses on the responsive unfolding of bodily knowing within situational contexts, the phenomenological (ruptural) approach situates action within the narrative indeterminacy and affective latency of lived experience, highlighting its "ruptural", emergent character (Fuchs, 2018; Tengelyi, 2004). Both perspectives converge in viewing action as a site of transformation, but they differ in emphasis: Gendlin foregrounds continuity and integration while the implicit body approach underscores rupture and the generation of novel significance.

Gendlin's model — in contrast to more existentially unpredictable approaches that focus on the implicit body or phenomenological unconscious (Fuchs, 2012; Kozyreva, 2018) — emphasizes the creative and affirmative potential of human change. It emphasizes the capacity of transformation to open new pathways in an individual's life. The creator of Focusing conceives transformation as a spiral process rooted in what he terms "crossing" (Gendlin, 1997b: 23) — a dynamic interplay of experience, narrative and action — here conceptualized as a "transformational triad". Each lived experience shapes and inflects the evolving personal narrative, which in turn informs subsequent action. This sequence generates new meanings and opens possibilities for the future. The process of crossing enables the creative integration of these dimensions, fostering existential growth and the emergence of new life trajectories. This model foregrounds transformation as a continuous, embodied unfolding.

In Gendlin's conception, transformation becomes truly intelligible and effective only when it is understood as arising through the processes of reinterpretation and reconfiguration of lived experience. This process deepens self-awareness, generates new meanings and integrates emotional and bodily dimensions in ways that open the individual to authentic change (Kapusta, 2025b). Central to this dynamic are "retrospection" and "retroactivity", concepts that are particularly useful for describing the therapeutic and existential process of change (Horváth, 2024). Retrospection consists in reinterpreting past events from the standpoint of the present, allowing fresh meanings to emerge from embodied memory, with the *felt sense* serving as a vital bridge between past and present (Fuchs, 2012; Gendlin, 2018). Retroactivity, by contrast, refers to the power of the present to reshape the past through the reinterpretation of memory, mediated by the bodily dimension of experience (Fuchs, 2012; Schoeller, 2023). In therapeutic contexts, this may manifest as a vague bodily sensation of emptiness or tension that becomes the entry point for reframing traumatic experiences. Such moments expose the raw, unfinished edges

of existence, where past and present collide, and it is precisely in this collision that the possibility of genuine transformation is born.

CONCLUSIONS

Eugene Gendlin conceives of philosophy as a tool that supports therapeutic practice, not only shaping how we experience and structure our lives but also opening a space for existential transformation. At the heart of his conception lies the felt sense — the bodily, pre-reflective dimension of experience that transcends the limits of purely verbal analysis, enabling a more holistic and intuitive form of self-understanding. Philosophy here becomes a dialogical space where theoretical reflection intersects with the reinterpretation of lived experience, yielding a deeper sense of authenticity and fulfilment.

In Gendlin's approach, philosophy and psychology are mutually complementary, forming a coherent framework for the exploration of human experience. Philosophy offers tools for analysing the fundamental structures of experiencing and being, while psychology translates these insights into concrete therapeutic practices. This integration enables individuals to confront existential challenges, including self-ambiguity, and supports the development of coherent yet evolving self-narratives. Grounding philosophy in lived experience ensures that it remains attuned to the concrete, dynamic and often ambiguous aspects of human life — thereby making it particularly valuable in times of existential crisis.

The relational dimension of philosophy-as-therapy is also crucial to its effectiveness. Although the method of Focusing centres on internal sensations, it is not confined to an intrapsychic process. The therapeutic relationship becomes a space where meanings can be reinterpreted, new possibilities for action discovered, and established narrative structures transformed. This intersubjective dimension enables profound personal transformation and, potentially, broader social change.

While Gendlin, like Carl Rogers, draws on the humanistic tradition, his conception of human nature is marked by greater critical nuance and a stronger grounding in the concreteness of experience. Rogers developed his approach on the basis of an anthropological optimism, assuming that individuals possess an inherent capacity for growth and self-actualisation, provided the right conditions are present. Gendlin, by contrast, advances a more nuanced and process-oriented view of human potential. For him, this potential does not stem from any universal presumption of innate human goodness, but rather

emerges from the dynamic interplay between bodily sensing (the felt sense) and the surrounding environment — a more nuanced perspective that we have sought to confront with ruptural approaches to transformation.

Accordingly, Gendlin critiques both the simplifications of classical humanism and the nihilistic tendencies of postmodernism, proposing instead a more refined perspective of human existence as an unfolding process embedded in relational and ecological contexts. His perspective emphasizes the reciprocal interplay between internal experience and external reality, positioning both philosophy and therapy as tools for navigating the complexity of life and fostering meaningful, embodied transformation.[2]

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