

Filling In the Blanks

David Kolb, Bates College

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Eugene Gendlin claims that he wants "to think with more than conceptual structures, forms, distinctions, with more than cut and presented things" (WCS 29).¹ He wants situations in their concreteness to be something we can think with, not just analyze conceptually. He wants to show that "conceptual patterns are doubtful and always exceeded, but the excess seems unable to think itself. It seems to become patterns when we try to think it. This has been *the* problem of twentieth century philosophy" (WCS 29). As a result he has "long been concerned with what is not formed although always in some form" (TAD 1).

In this essay I would like to explore some of the issues surrounding the relation of the unformed and the formed. Gendlin says that "we get beyond the forms by thinking *precisely in* them" (TAD 1). The two emphasized words have to be considered separately as well as together. In many essays Gendlin's main concern is with the "precisely": can something that is not fully formed and definite still direct us as we carry forward language and action? My discussion begins with that issue; I suggest ways that Gendlin's proposal connects with and differs from some current ideas in epistemology and the philosophy of language. Then my discussion moves to the "in": what sense can we make of the formed being unformed? Finally I suggest that Gendlin's program runs into some difficulties in this connection.

As always, Gendlin is concerned with the sources of change and growth in meaning. He offers the following example:

"Consider the silence of a poet with an unfinished poem: The already written lines want something more, but what? The poet may be only stuck and confused, no mysterious call for thought at all. Just trying this line and that; many lines come. Some seem good. The poet listens carefully into each, rejects, and reads the written lines again--and again. The poet re-reads the written lines. The poem goes on there, where the lines end. Suddenly, or perhaps all along, the poet hears (senses, knows, reads) what these already written lines need, want, demand, imply..... Now the poet's hand rotates in the air. The gesture says *that*. Now the lines that come try to say, but do not say--*that*. The blank

¹ Gendlin's writings are cited using the following abbreviations:

TAD: "Thinking After Distinctions," unpublished essay.

ECM: *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective* (Macmillan, Free Press, 1962).

TBP: "Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language, and Situations," in B. Den Ouden and M. Moen, eds., *The Presence of Feeling in Thought* (Peter Lang, 1992).

WCS: "Words Can Say How They Work," Proceedings of the Heidegger Conference, 1992, 29-35.

TPD: "Two Phenomenologists Do Not Disagree," in R. Bruzina and B. Wilshire, eds., *Phenomenology: Dialogues and Bridges* (Albany: SUNY, 1982), 321-335.

NLM: "Nonlogical Moves and Nature Metaphors," *Analecta Husserliana*, vol. XIX (1985) 383-400.

still hangs there, still implying something *more precise*. This blank seems to lack words, but no. The blank is very verbal: It knows the language well enough to understand--and reject--all the lines that come. The blank is not a bit pre-verbal; it knows what must be said, and that the lines which came don't say that. The blank is vague, but it is also more precise than what was ever said before--in the history of the world. But in another way, of course the blank is said--by the lines leading up to it. The poet can have (get, feel, keep) this blank only by re-reading and listening to the written lines--over and over. They say what is further to be said."²

Eventually the poet finds the words; a line occurs and is accepted as saying what was to be said. Neither the previous lines nor felt blank meaning alone have directed the poet, but some situation in which the previous lines and the blank interact and inform each other.

How does the blank contribute to this process? Does the poet turn a mental eye to consult some fully definite felt meaning and then read off the new line (or perhaps the criteria for a new line)? No, Gendlin's story is not a tale of inner foundations. Whatever felt or bodily experience the poet is working with, it has no straightforward propositional content, or else producing the new line would be a simple matter of transcription.³

Inner experience has not had great philosophical success in this century. Bergson's appeal to lived time was put aside. Husserl's foundational inner science has been seriously challenged by Heidegger and Derrida. Empiricism's simple appeal to basic experienced data ran into difficulties. The logical positivists and their successors tried innumerable ways of connecting beliefs with immediate inner evidence. No way worked, and the enterprise has been crippled by attacks from Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine and Davidson, among others. The enterprise was doomed, it seems, because if the inner experience was to provide epistemological evidence for a belief the immediacy of the experience could not be maintained. Roughly speaking, if the inner experience had propositional content it was not immediate experience in the sense required, and if it did not have such content it could not be so directly related to the beliefs it was supposed to found.

Donald Davidson has argued that while it is obvious that experience is in some sense a source of belief, that does not mean that there is some special kind of inner non-propositional evidence.⁴ He claims that "evidence" is a logical relation by which one proposition supports another; the only thing that can

² The quotation is from TAD 2. However, the sixth, seventh, and twelfth sentences were added from the largely identical description of the case in WCS 31.

³ "When the right phrases come, they don't copy the blank" (WCS 33). This denial that the poet has in experience some latent but definite propositional content waiting to be expressed moves Gendlin's appeals to felt experience and thick situations out of the direct line of fire from Sellars's attack on the myth of the given and Wittgensteinian worries about private language. But, as I suggest later, he may not be totally out of range.

⁴ "There is, then, very good reason to conclude that there is no clear meaning to the idea of comparing our beliefs with reality or confronting our hypotheses with observation. This is not, of course, to deny that there is an ordinary sense in which we perform experiments and note the results, or discover in our everyday pursuits that some of our beliefs are true and others false. What should be denied is that these mundane events are to be analyzed as involving evidence which is not propositional in character--evidence which is not some sort of belief." (Donald Davidson, "Empirical Content," in *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Ernest LePore [London: Blackwell, 1986], 324.)

provide evidence for a proposition is another proposition. Experience is not evidence in that sense. Its relation to our beliefs is causal (rather than intentional or logical or epistemological). Experience causes us to have propositional beliefs. Beliefs are connected in logical and evidential ways to one another, and the whole net of beliefs is connected causally to the world. The two kinds of relation are distinct.

The poet's new line, however, seems to stand in neither logical nor causal relation to the situational felt meaning that Gendlin describes. If anything, the relation is more causal than evidential, but neither of Davidson's relations quite fit the example. But then why should they? Gendlin's is not really an example of an experience relating to a belief. For one thing, the felt meaning involved is not a separate experience from the overall attempt to write the poem. The case is not parallel to watching the result of a laboratory experiment or looking into a room to check one's beliefs about its contents.

On the other hand, if we look back at Gendlin's first book (ECM) we do see him putting forward his theory of felt meaning as an alternative to the attempts by the logical positivists and others to explain the role of experience in the workings of language. So we cannot so easily dismiss as irrelevant to Gendlin's program the conclusions reached by thinkers like Sellars, Quine, and Davidson, who helped dismantle positivism.

The experience that Gendlin discusses is not so much evidence for beliefs as a guide for actions. Unlike the positivists Gendlin has never sought an epistemological foundation for beliefs. He has been concerned about the source of creativity and innovation that allow us to move forward in language, art, and behavior, and he has a special interest in controversies about method in psychology and psychotherapy. He is concerned with showing how there can be change that comes from other sources than the relation of concepts to one another. These are areas where Davidson's discussion of causal relations are relevant, especially as they have been picked up and extended by Richard Rorty.⁵

However, before we could deal with those larger issues, we need to get clearer on what Gendlin is proposing. This present essay makes some steps in that direction. First I explore a bit further the implications of the idea that felt meaning does not have propositional content, then I look at some ways of conceiving the interpenetration of form and unformed that Gendlin speaks of, and I close by pointing out some difficulties.

The poet in Gendlin's example cannot be described as simply reading off meaning from an inner experience that can be consulted as something complete and meaningful on its own. This example and others, as well as Gendlin's extended descriptions of psychotherapeutic process, all show that his felt meaning is something to be consulted as complete and definite on its own.

One way of putting this point would be to say that Gendlin rejects a lingering Cartesianism that still infects most anti-Cartesians. Even the enemies of Descartes still tend to envision inner experience as something that parades before a mental eye, with the items on parade each fully definite with its own content. When today's anti-Cartesians discuss intentional content they usually demand that we choose either some kind of self-luminous inner episodes of belief and desire each with its inherent propositional

⁵ See, for instance, the essays collected in Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

content, or a third-person attribution of beliefs and desires to entities whose public behavior warrants such an interpretation. Unchallenged in that dichotomy is the demand that intentionality be located in a set of beliefs and desires with propositional intentional content.

Gendlin's examples challenge that presupposition. There is no clear intentional content to the poet's felt meaning, yet it functions meaningfully within an intentional process as some sort of criterion and source of content. Experience, Gendlin is suggesting, cannot be adequately described as a sequence of perceptual episodes, beliefs, and desires each fully formed with its own content. The situation exceeds these forms. This idea fits neither the standard appeal to inner experience nor Davidson's causal model.

Part of the problem is our tendency to analyze consciousness as the occurrence of felt qualities (colors, pains, sounds) plus intentional episodes (meanings, concepts, beliefs). The traditional division of body and soul thus persists, now as brute facts vs. meaning facts (or causal relations vs. logical relations).⁶

Gendlin's felt meaning is not in itself a separate experience. The poet does not really have an independent inner experience to consult. Gendlin has never said that the felt meaning he investigates could be separated from symbols and propositions: "experience, observation, and living are always already significant, always signifier-and-signified. There are no mere givens and no pure reports. Let us reject the assumption that there is somewhere, underneath or behind, a given to which signs 'approximate' or which they merely 'represent.' Language and thought carry forward what they signify, they can never be merely about" (NLM 389).

In his early work Gendlin's position on this was already complex and nuanced. He says there that without connection and specification by symbols felt meaning is "incomplete" and "not really a meaning" (ECM 28). Felt meanings can be the source for "countless possible meanings" (208), depending on the symbols used to distinguish and schematize aspects of the experience. There are no "units" of felt meaning (29, 41), and felt meaning can be variously individuated (98); it is in itself "nonnumerical" (151-3) and only after felt meaning has been differentiated by means of symbols can we make direct references to it (109, 218).

Nonetheless, for Gendlin the felt meaning has a certain kind of independence. This is shown by the situation's ability to guide new formulations.

"Any slot enables more moves than those consistent with the theory that helped to lead you there" (TAD 13). "The independence of the experienceable aspect [the felt meaning of a situation] is

⁶ This tendency has been reinforced by the current scientific hope of finding physical brain states that will "be" the occurrence of a color, or the perception of a square, or the belief that the square is red. For this research program it is very helpful if each intentional item be distinct and carry its own functional role. However, such an atomized analysis of the intentional sphere is unnecessary even for strict physicalists. If one gives up Cartesian dualism, it is not necessary to adopt a strict token identity theory that demands that to each described mental (intentional, experienced, conscious) item there should correspond one item in physical theory. Token identity theories seemed necessary when the goal was ultimately to reduce intentional descriptions to physical ones. After Quine it became clearer that a physicalist could admit that the two kinds of descriptions individuated their objects in different ways. If one then gives up token identity, the field is open to holistic descriptions such as Davidson's, and to descriptions such as Gendlin's for which experience is more complex than a holistic set of beliefs and desires.

at any rate possible only after it has been lifted out by some formulation....The aspect demonstrates its independence to this degree, from its initial formulation which gave birth to it: it can function in other formulations, and it can also give rise to sub-aspects which the initial formulation could not have led to....It is in the power of the movement of steps from one experience-formulation pair to another, that the independence respect of an aspect lies" (TPD 328f).

So the felt meaning is neither a given inner meaning-fact, nor a Davidsonian causal antecedent. Yet there is some intentional "shape" to the blank that the poet experiences. This raises the question just how Gendlin envisages the interpenetration of felt meaning of the situation with the symbolic, propositional meaning of the previous lines.

There are two stories at the extremes of what could be said about the example. According to the first of those stories the already written lines of the poem set up a structure that has only one inevitable continuation. When the poet perceives that structure, the next line is defined. Gendlin, however, insists that an examination of the experience of creating shows that the new line was not latent in that way. The new line is "an implicit which is not merely a hidden explicit...not...something hidden but fully formed." That the new line was in some sense "determined does not say [that it] can be derived. If the poem's next line were determined in that sense, the poet could figure it out logically. Finishing a poem would be easy" (TAD 9f).

The second story speaks from the opposite extreme. According to this story the previous lines leave open an indeterminate space that imposes no restrictions at all on a new line. Gendlin denies this. "If the next line were indeterminate, most any line could fit in. That way, too, poems would be easy to finish" (TAD 10)

Both of the extreme stories take the previous lines of the poem as in a sense complete. If the lines left the field wide open, that would be because on their own they made something sufficiently whole in itself that it did not demand any particular further completion. Whatever comes would be to some degree an external addition (though it might create a new whole when it joined with the previous lines). On the other hand, if the previous lines demanded one and only one continuation, that would be because they had already set up some complete form that was present so that its demands could be followed. In both cases there would be a structure or order that was complete and present.

Gendlin denies that there is such a complete structure: "the implicit functions more intricately than patterns do" (WCS 32). Yet it functions: "when the words at last do come, they work in some way in and from that erstwhile blank" (TAD 11). We might read this as suggesting that the line between the formed and the unformed to come should be drawn between the old lines and the space for the new. I will argue, however, that Gendlin should be read as suggesting that the previous lines as well as the blank are not totally sharp and formed.

Just what kind of middle ground is Gendlin seeking between the two extreme views? We can approach this by looking at some other stories that try to occupy that middle ground. The first is a pragmatic story involving levels of generality. According to this story, the poem's previous lines get interpreted as setting up expectations and defining possibilities on a general level (the product will be a

poem, an elegy, in modern diction, expressing sorrow rather than irony, etc.). Those generalizations shape the blank and suggest particular continuations. The poet chooses those that best fulfill the general plan. Thus the formed and unformed aspects of the poem are sorted out by assigning them to different levels. The universal description is definite but the particular description (of both old and new lines) is still undetermined.

The pragmatic story has a complication. For it may be that the poet finds a line that upsets the generalization characterizing the previous lines. This may recast the poem (the diction begins to change, or irony enters in). These changes lead to new projections of the whole, new particularizations, still further generalizations, and so on. The process is complex but no more so than the familiar process of having one's expectations about a text altered by one's reading of the text, or having one's theory changed by the empirical investigations that were meant to confirm it. Of course the case of the poet is not completely parallel to that of the empirical observer, but the idea of guidance from heuristic generalizations seems to be transferable.

Straightforward as this pragmatic story may be, something is still lacking in terms of Gendlin's example. For one thing, it reduces the felt meaning Gendlin discusses to an artifact of the process of generalization. The formed and unformed aspects of the experience have been transformed into a relation of universal and particular. What is unformed is the possibility of different particularizations, but each generalization and each particularization is fully formed in its own right. There is nothing left with the curious double quality Gendlin describes. His thinking with the situation as a formed/unformed whole that can be carried forward has been turned into a process of theorizing about data.

We can see another problem if we consider the pragmatic story in the light of a more drastic Darwinian account. In the Darwinian story the earlier lines of the poem stand as they do, and new lines are generated by some random or in any case non-rational process (perhaps Davidson's causal relation?). When that happens, some innovations "catch" and some don't. There is no explanation for the new line's success except this: it recreates the whole that it makes with the older lines in ways that are useful for some purpose (for perception, for expression, for coping, or whatever the purpose of the poem is, and that purpose can change). Various generalizations and narrations about the new whole are then tried and discarded until one is accepted as justifying the lines that work. The generalizations come later; they don't guide either the generation or the acceptance of the successful line. This story is not too far from what Richard Rorty says about the function of creativity and metaphor.⁷

Again there can be a cycle: the previous lines, the generation of alternative continuations, the survival of one of the continuations, the new whole, the retrospective justification, then new innovations, and so on. This story is Darwinian because it separates the generation of alternative continuations from the test for survival. Unlike the pragmatist story, which still gave the generalizations a guiding role, the Darwinian story separates the contexts of discovery, acceptance, and justification.

This Darwinian story fails in two ways as an account of Gendlin's example. It makes the previous lines something complete, which Gendlin denies. And it makes the generation and the acceptance of the

⁷ Rorty discusses these issues in the book mentioned earlier, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

new line into two separate processes neither of which have intentional guidance. But what Gendlin is trying to understand is the guidance exercised by the combination of the previous lines, the "blank" they create, and the felt meaning that is a part of both. The fourth story defines away the question that interests Gendlin.

In comparison with the Darwinian, the pragmatist story allows for guidance in the generation and acceptance of alternatives. But when we note how it differs from the Darwinian story, it becomes more obvious how it also differs from Gendlin's example. In the pragmatist story the previous lines become passive data for the activity of generalization and particularization. The question about how the previous lines interact with the blank becomes a question about the activities of the poet as creator. Activity and passivity are distributed in traditional ways.⁸

How can we talk about form and the unformed coexisting? We have tentatively rejected the idea that what is unformed simply a further particularization of a generality, or of the activity of the creating subject. Perhaps we should say that the words and lines are formed, complete in themselves--there they are lying on the page--but what is unformed is the potential whole to be made out of these already formed parts. But this still avoids the odd status of the blank. What kind of possibility or potentiality could be present, coexisting with form and expressing itself across time but without being reduced to a simple temporal assemblage?

Others have explored this area before. In the ninth book of his *Metaphysics* Aristotle attacks the views of a group of philosophers from nearby Megara who deny that beings have potentialities. They accept Parmenides's arguments against any reference to non-being: whatever is, is totally what it is in the present. The Megarians conclude from this that all descriptions should be in terms of purely actual and sharply present entities, and therefore they demand that a being be described only in terms of what it actually is at this moment. Reference to past or potential future states is not allowed. If John is standing, we should say he is standing, but not that he has a power or potential to sit. The puppy at your feet is only what it is now.

Aristotle has little difficulty showing that ordinary language is shot through with references to past and future, and that without being able to talk about potential actions and states we could not say even the things the Megarians are willing to allow. But the dream that the Megarians represent has not died. Would it not be wonderful if knowledge and language could be anchored in some entities that were fully definite, just were what they presented themselves to be, and were available for this anchoring function?

⁸ This does not mean that the pragmatist story is committed to "the assumption that order can only be something imposed on experience" (TBP 24). The pragmatist story allows that successful innovations put us in touch with real patterns in nature. If one accepts any of several modern theories of metaphor, including Davidson's or Ricoeur's, this is true of the poem as well. The pragmatist story does, however, accept the assumption Gendlin criticizes "that forms, distinctions, rules, and concepts are the only possible kind of order--so that there is nothing else, no 'other', and hence no possible interplay between the forms and something more" (TBP 24). It is not correct, however, to say as Gendlin does that according to such theories "nothing but disorder talks back!"

We recognize here one version of what Heidegger identifies as the metaphysical drive to total presence, in this case emphasizing not the presence of the grounding entity but its nature as fully packed into its limits, with no inconvenient extensions. In modern philosophy mental objects such as sense data or meanings have often been offered as the grounding entities.

One threat to this neat picture is the temporal reference that seems intrinsic across experience. The obvious defense against such a threat is to invoke the idea of a temporal assemblage. Time is taken to include a series of momentary experiences which remain self-contained but also enter into relations with other momentary experiences. These relations could be inferential or causal, or they could be part-whole relations whereby the individual slices, each complete in itself, make up a cross-time whole which is a new object. In any case the cross-time relations would not really affect the formed being of the individual slices. The individual experiences or temporal parts remain self-contained wholes on their own level.

Gendlin's poem example questions this account, as would Aristotle. For Aristotle the individual temporal stages of a being are what they are, even on the "basic" instantaneous level--which is not basic--because of their insertion in the teleological process that leads to a goal, a final state or activity. The puppy is and acts as he does now because he is on the way to living a grown-up dog's life. Without that informing teleology the matter of which the puppy is made would not take on the form and activities it does. Similarly the lines of the unfinished poem are not self-contained; they would not be what they are if they were not produced within a teleological process that aims to make a poem.

But poems are not organisms. Unlike a puppy, a poem is not a self-developing instance of a natural kind. Natural substances, for Aristotle, develop to manifest a form of activity shared by members of the species. Poems do not have such a form.

Besides the kind of potentiality that defines the puppy, there is another kind of potentiality in Aristotle, a kind that would be possessed, for example, by a heap of lumber. The boards could be made into a house, or a table, or a bridge, or a toy, and so on. Matter has the potential to be shaped into many different substances.

A poem does not have this kind of relatively indefinite potentiality. As a sequence of words the poem can indeed be used for many things (wallpaper decoration, handwriting practice, a key to a cipher, and so on). But as a poem it is already within a type, though not a natural kind.

For Aristotle the potentiality possessed by a poem is that of an artifact with a purpose. In his *Poetics* he describes the functions of art works and how to build them to perform these functions. If one is building a boat there are constraints on how one can continue and still have the resulting artifact fulfill its intended purpose. If one is building a poem there are constraints as well. The functions the poem will fulfill exercise constraints on diction, subject matter, and other dimensions. These help constrain the kind of line that would be an appropriate completion to a poem, though there is still room for the individual talent of the poet, just as there is room for the individual style of the boat maker.

Unfortunately for this theory, poetic practice has widened immensely since Aristotle's time. While it is true that a poem belongs to a kind more particular than "marks on a page" or "words in sequence," our theories and practices of art have made the function and form of poems more and more open. Today the poem could be finished in a great many ways, with few or no constraints of the sort Aristotle would recognize. Suppose we added to the previous lines a line in a violently different diction. No surprise; this happens all the time. Suppose we added something we would not recognize as "a line of poetry," perhaps a quotation from the telephone directory, or half a paragraph from a VCR instruction manual. Or we might append a recorded speech by FDR, or a picture of a bathtub. Even in these cases the poem could still be a poem, given our practices of collage and irony, and our hermeneutical expectations about making and encountering art (and anti-art art) today. Perhaps in Aristotelian terms our notions of art have moved away from the category of artifacts towards that of actions.

This means that the possibilities "in" the previous lines are not those of an Aristotelian substance or functional artifact. The teleologies involved are not constant enough for that. Though it remains true that there are teleologies involved at all times, they are continually being revised and in a very fluid social context. There is no steady form, no repeatable eidos, so we have left the Greek scene.

Yet the fundamental point Aristotle made against the Megarians remains. If it is meaningful at all, the poem is not composed of entities that are complete in themselves at each stage. All the parts of the poem are both actual and potential (formed and unformed) at the same time. The previous lines and the blank are both formed and unformed. This unformed is more than the alternative usability of something already definite (like Aristotle's lumber), and it cannot be attributed to the activity of a supervising subject; it is part of what it means to be the lines and the blank.

So how do the formed and unformed interpenetrate in the experience of a meaningful situation? It seems to me that Gendlin is on the right track when he seeks to talk about a situational thickness that is more than the result of a complex form (though surely the forms involved are complex). He is right to point to an excess beyond conceptual patterns, to deny the adequacy of an analysis of the content of experience as a set of beliefs and desires, and to insist that our use of language is not simply governed by rules but pervaded by innovation and metaphorical creation that alters meaning as we carry it forward.

There are several ways a discussion might move to try to clarify this unformed quality. One traditional route would lead to the question of determinative and reflective judgment in Kant's third critique. The most important current route would lead to Heidegger, for whom time is not a series of complete self-contained nows and experience is neither the taking up of passive temporal data nor the linking of fully actual items into sequences.⁹

⁹ Gendlin links his discussions to Heidegger's notions of *Befindlichkeit* and *Wohnen* (WCS 2). The case of the poet raises the Heideggerian question of thrown project, where the relation of project and facticity is not the relation of eye to object.

An extreme route would generalize Gendlin's descriptions and come up with an ontology (perhaps related to Whitehead) which downplays the ultimacy of definite form.¹⁰

But we cannot now follow any of these routes, because we must examine some problems with Gendlin's formulations. I think that these problems arise because Gendlin has defined his own position in opposition to an inadequate theory of meaning, of which, oddly enough, there are too many traces in Gendlin's own theory.

Gendlin's 1962 book (ECM) was written against (among others) the logical empiricists, who tended to think of the structure of language in terms of formal systems of logical implications. These logical moves were given meaning through their being tied to sensory experiences by some sort of awareness of the content of experience that could be immediately put into propositional form. Gendlin certainly does not agree with this; his felt meaning has a complex two-way relation with propositions and symbols. Nevertheless there are traces of the logical empiricist picture in his early book. He talks of felt meaning (such as the poet feels) as something we "have" (ECM 13) as an "inward datum" (15) that is then "represented" (27) by concepts although it is had "in itself" in feeling (27) and can be an object of "direct reference" (passim, esp. 91-2, 109, 218). The "intellect" can be in "direct contact" (220) with these felt meanings. Later on Gendlin would stop talking about inward data and representation (compare the passage cited earlier: "there are no mere givens and no pure reports").

However, Gendlin continues to talk after the manner of the logical empiricists when he speaks of "concepts" and "logical relations" as systems of inference moves. For instance, attacking that idea, he says, "Rendering in clean conceptual constructs that make logical steps is not word-use" (NLM 392). This implies that "conceptual constructs" consist of "logical steps." The conceptual system is conceived as a series of rule governed moves rather than also incorporating the net of structural contrasts studied by structuralists and attacked/embraced by the post-structuralists.

Why should this be a problem? We can get a hint of the difficulty by recalling Gendlin's claim, cited earlier, that without connection and specification by symbols felt meaning is "incomplete" and "not really a meaning." Felt meanings can be the source for "countless possible meanings," but just which meaning becomes salient depends on the particular symbols used to isolate and schematize aspects of the experience. Now, for there to be a choice among symbols or propositions there have to be many of them, standing in contrasts to one another. So symbols have to have some prior definiteness and independence in order to be able to specify different aspects of felt meaning (and also in order for symbol use to be carried forward or changed). Were there the wrong kind of indeterminacy in the symbols, the felt meaning would be not be specified the way Gendlin wants it to be.

Gendlin has an argument in ECM that even symbol-to-symbol connections are mediated by felt meaning and not just logical relations. "The felt meaning functions...to select the further symbols that explicate [the meaning of a proposition or word]. Without bringing home to oneself the felt meaning of a

¹⁰ In this case, the example of the poet would touch on the difficult problem of subjective aim in Whitehead's ontology.

term, such as democracy, one cannot define. The verbal sound alone could not lead directly to other verbal sounds that define 'democracy'" (ECM 107). This claim is misleading. Of course the verbal sound qua sound would not lead to other sounds, but to speak of it as "verbal sound" is already to find it within a series of contrasts, and to speak of it as a "word" finds more, and to speak of it as the word "democracy" is to indicate its place in a series of contrasts and inferences observable in language and behavior. These contrasts and connections do link this sound to other sounds without reference to felt meanings. Symbols have contrasts and connections that establish their definiteness and their individuality independent of their relation to felt meaning. Otherwise they could not function as Gendlin wants them to do.

For Gendlin a meaningful situation involves a complex interpenetration of some particular symbols and a felt meaning. But if the way signifiers get their individuality depends on contrasts with other absent signifiers, and if there is any under-determination in those relations with the other absent signifiers, then an indeterminacy is introduced that is not the same as the unformed Gendlin has spoken about.

We could ask, what is the shape of the slot the poet experiences? Does it have a single shape if the propositional meaning of the previous lines is constituted by relation with absent others? If meaning comes by contrasts with absent possibilities, and there are many such sets of contrasts possible, then the previous lines can be different signifiers in different systems of relations. They can be individuated in various ways, projected to describe the context differently, and the context(s) can have different continuations. The tentative shapes the contrasts suggest will radiate in too many directions. Which context, which system, which slot is the actual one? This line of argument is familiar in different ways from the writings of Quine and Davidson, and of Derrida.

In ordinary cases we invoke settled practices that fix actual interpretations: we do stop at red lights and we know how to continue laundry lists. But there is no settled form of life to tell us how to go on with the poem.¹¹

Part of Gendlin's answer to this objection might be to deny the kind of total indeterminacy that he attributes to Derrida. But he misreads Derrida. For instance, Gendlin says, "The said is not formed forms we must cross out, to return to openness or indeterminacy. The said is that more precise saying which is indeterminate in form, and more determined more precisely than form-determinations" (TAD 11). "For Derrida a word can only mean distinctions. Since anything is thus denied-and-affirmed, Derrida ends in 'undecidability,' limbo" (NLM 385). "Derrida thinks that word-use is governed only by distinctions (schemes, kinds, logical constructs)...He remains in the old tradition for which concepts are the only order. He rightly denies that events (including linguistic ones) instance the concepts, but he says this denial leaves only disorder, decentering, limbo. So after all, the concepts are the only order" (NLM 387f).

However, Derrida denies that he ever sponsored total indeterminacy (see, for example, *Limited Inc.*, 115f). Furthermore, while Derrida would challenge the definiteness of the poet's current lines and the

¹¹ Putting the matter this way recalls Wittgenstein's discussions about continuing a series of numbers, but what he has to say about that problem does not help Gendlin's poet since in contemporary poetry there is no settled practice that will help the poet know that a "correct" line has been found.

blank, he also speaks about an "event" or "gift" that would be prior to the interaction Gendlin discusses. Derrida's ideas about the gift (a descendant of Heidegger's *Ereignis*) imply that to arrive at the situation the poet faces there must already have been an event that set up a regime of meaning. That event cannot itself be an interaction of symbolic and felt meaning; the event makes such interaction possible. The event sets up an order by which we can see anything at all, including possibilities. Some deconstructionists describe that event as a repressive selection among systems of signification. But the event cannot be a selection or powerful choice exercised on an array of possibilities. The act of setting up the economy is not a cutting of a form out of an indefinite soup (which would, after all, be another definite kind of object; an indefinite flow is an object, not a pre-object.) Pre-object, there is only the general economy of difference or Heidegger's forest darkness.

There is a tension between the almost transcendental priority of the Heideggerian-Derridian event and the pragmatic story mentioned earlier, where what sets the terms for current interpretation is the result of earlier interpretations. Does the kind of activity described in the pragmatic story presuppose a Derridian-Heideggerian event of this prior kind, or is the event only the result of an earlier stage of pragmatic interaction? This question opens into the debate about transcendental vs. genetic explanation. It might be helpful to relate Gendlin's ideas more precisely to that debate.

In any case a more contrastive theory of meaning does not require total indeterminacy in order to cause Gendlin problems. If any degree of contrast or (even regional) holism is involved in the individuation and meaning of propositions and symbols, then the tight interpenetration Gendlin wants between symbols and felt meaning is opened up toward other absent symbols and feelings in a way that confuses both sides in Gendlin's story.

There may be another problem. What if the felt meaning itself ("on its own" to whatever degree it is such) also depended on contrast, in this case with other possible but absent bodily meanings? If it does not so depend, then Gendlin may have to deal with the problems that plagued the logical empiricists and led eventually to Davidson's causal theory. If felt meaning does depend in some way on contrast and differences, then there is another dimension of indetermination different from the unformed richness Gendlin wants.

Gendlin does say that felt meaning is not purely personal. "The seemingly wordless 'sense' of which (and from which) Proust writes is not at all *preverbal*. All of language is implicit in it, and the situations, living arrangements, the political and historical world in which language is used; that is why his words can come from it. But that is not easy" (NLM 396). But as far as I can tell Gendlin does not want these systems and forms of life to involve the felt meaning in constitutive relations of contrast with

absent but possible other felt meanings.¹² But this seems to make the living arrangements and political and historical situations into something like causes which leave imprints on the bodily meaning.

I wonder then if it would not be helpful for Gendlin to distinguish the unformed he wants to talk about from the indeterminacy or underdetermination talked about by Davidson and Derrida. I think that for this purpose he needs to speak more about propositional or symbolic meaning, and about the possible constitution of meanings through contrast with absent feelings and signifiers.

One place where such discussion might find a base in Gendlin's text is his remark that "Meaning is experiencing qua instance of itself" (ECM 202). This could lead to a discussion of "seeing as" or even "being as," and the ways that instances are and are not constituted by contrast with absent others.¹³ This might lead us into the thickness of experience and let us carry forward Gendlin's own theories.

¹² About constitutive relations of contrast, Gendlin has said, "I do deny the assumption that anything is a comparedness (samenesses, differences, distinctions). I think that assumption is Idealism--everything is only for (and the passive result of) someone's comparing" (from a letter). This objection contains another remnant of the logical empiricism that Gendlin attacked: the idea that there are only two alternatives, intrinsic meaningfulness or subjectively imposed similarities and differences. To treat this objection fairly would require another long paper discussing the status of relations and the way contrasts and traces of the absent can be active because of the operation of systems that are without conscious intentional control, as well as being implicit in forms of life that have no self-conscious author.

¹³ I suspect that Gendlin might find unexpected support in Derrida's attempts to show that while concepts and propositions get their individuality and meaning through systems of contrasts, they always exceed such systems even on the level of syntax and signifiers. This is not the same as what Gendlin has to say about the way situations exceed conceptual definition, but the Derrida might help Gendlin loosen up the overly tight view of the conceptual and logical connections he contrasts with his own proposals.