



## Much in a Little: Reflections on the Gift of a Sea-Shell

by Dr Rex Van Vuuren

*"It is thus the essence of the thing and of the world to present themselves as 'open', to send us beyond their predetermined manifestations, to promise us always 'something else to see'. This is what is sometimes expressed by saying that the thing and the world are mysterious. They are indeed, when we do not limit ourselves to their objective aspect, but put them back into the setting of subjectivity." (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 333)*

*"Anytime there is openness to otherness, from the pre-reflective body-subject to highly reflective consciousness, you can speak of psyche." (Giorgi in Aanstoos, 1996, p. 9.)*

### Purpose and method

The purpose of this essay is to amplify a current debate insisting that as psychologists we should bring ontological concerns to the fore so that, hopefully, we can become clearer about the nature of psychological phenomena. In this essay I add my voice to this debate. I take up and apply some of the ontological, epistemological and methodological principles involved in this debate by demonstrating some of the notions from the broad movement which, albeit as a minority voice, defines psychology as a human science.

What we take people to be is a legitimate psychological question which informs our knowledge claims and methodologies. Knowing our ways of being-in-the-world and their relation to our ways or modes of knowing is not only a legitimate but also a necessary psychological concern and enterprise. In a recent interview, Amedeo Giorgi a leading figure in

phenomenological psychology noted that getting to this relation requires distinguishing between psychological and non-psychological phenomena because "there is always a physical infrastructure for psyche". We need to discern what "*psyche* contributes over *bios*" (Giorgi in Aanstoos, 1996, p. 8). One principle derived from this perspective is the notion that the human psyche correlates with a "world" which is more than "sheer life" or a location in space.

When you say "psyche" you are always implying "world". So its (psyche's) worldness is intrinsic. It is not a cause-effect relationship, like that between a thing and what is outside the thing. It is an intentional relationship between consciousness and the object that presents itself to consciousness. In that way, the psyche is always enclosed within subject-world relationships (Giorgi in Aanstoos, 1996, p. 9).

The following presentation, situated in the context of a psychotherapeutic relationship,

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derives from and is embedded in phenomenology, hermeneutics as well as the notion that the structure of a narrative, the stories of our lives, is characteristic of our attempts to integrate, unify and give an account of the meaning of our experience. This form of interpretation follows the tradition of, amongst others, Marcel's (1948) "ontological mystery", and stressing participation in re-living intensely lived experiences in reflective examination. Also, Sartre's (1969) phenomenological ontology, van den Berg's (1972) categorical phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology. It also relates to authors such as Schrag's (1980) clarification of interpretive understanding and more recently Sugarman's (1995 and 1996) approach to ontological questions in psychology through which one attempts to trace out the conditions of our human subjectivity.

The contribution made here will not present a hierarchically ordered set of propositions, nor will it follow in linear fashion a chain of causal links. In place of links that are connected in an if-then sequence, the presentation of points to which the reader is led will usually be sensed as marks and signs to be followed. If the reader is willing to look in the same direction, the following description will appear as an attempt to illuminate related ideas making the reality which these ideas are supposed to reflect understandable. In this sense an appeal is made to the intuitions and sensibilities we have about our own existence which assumes that any attempt to make life meaningful is part of the ontology of human existence.

### **Gathering sea-shells**

It was the second morning after they had arrived from Gauteng for a two-week holiday at the coast north-east of Cape Town. With a slight breeze behind her she started walking along the beach. She hardly noticed the low tide reaching its ebbing, widening the sandy beaches and exposing clusters of rocks in which pools form with every low tide. For an inland visitor the

rockpools have a natural attraction because of the novelty of discovering and observing the nurseries of a wide variety of colourful small sea animals, fish and plants.

In a crouched position she surveys all the forms, colours and movements in the pool. She spots a colourful round pebble and puts her hand into the clear water. Once outside, she rolls the pebble between her fingers, and looking at its structure and colour decides to keep it and so puts it in the pocket of her dress. Her hand goes into the water once again and she carefully pulls a snail with its shell from a rock. She feels how it tries to keep its hold on the rock before giving way to her pull. With her fingers she moves the shell from side to side feeling and seeing the hardness of the spiral formation of the shell which is emphasised by the coloured lines spiralling upward toward the apex of the shell. Then she turns the shell upside down where, at an aperture, she can see the snail's flesh withdrawn into the shell to its maximum for safety. After a few moments she returns the snail to the water and watches as it sinks to the bottom of the pool.

After spending some time at the pool she continues her walk along the beach. Close to the water she notices the snails she has often seen on her previous visits: as the water rolls onto the sand it brings with it snails which, as hastily as snails can, start tunnelling into the sand as the water retreats. Further on along the beach a variety of empty shells lying on drier sand catch her eye. She bends forward and starts examining them one by one, picking them up, wiping off some sand, turning them around in her fingers and, for whatever appealing reasons, collects a few shells by putting them in the pocket of her dress with the pebble.

A week or so after her vacation at the sea she arrives for her appointed psychotherapy session. After sharing a few impressions of her vacation she announces that she has a gift to give me. She pulls out a small box from her bag and gives it to

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me. Carefully I open the box to find a few sea-shells inside.

Over the past few months I have come to know the patient. "I have thought much about what we spoke about in the weeks before I went on holiday", she says after I have been given a few moments to take out the shells and look at them. "It was a strange experience to find myself at times talking to you as if you were present", she continues. As I listen to her while moving a shell between my fingers I start enquiring about the significance of the gift. I also notice how my own thoughts and feelings move imaginatively over different affective, interpersonal and spiritual landscapes. Listening receptively I move the shells over and through my fingers while alternately looking at her, then at the shell.

I thank her for the gift and slowly, between us and later, after reflecting on this episode, some of the meaning possibilities emerge.

#### **First and second thoughts: first attempts to understand**

Over a few years and on more than one occasion similar scenes have taken place between a psychotherapy patient and myself. I now have a small collection of shells. Neither the patients nor I are by any means conchologists nor do we have such aspirations! I cannot identify the species, nor do I know the scientific names of the different types of sea-shells.<sup>i</sup> A scientific description of the world of molluscs is an impressive demonstration of the richness of the natural order that in itself is visually so appealing and overwhelming that we would not notice the first movements of psyche. But we need to execute several moves in order to move beyond the biology and geometry of molluscs to questions which pertain to the nature and meaning of human existence, specifically the questions of human possibility as reflected through the shell. Let me clarify these moves.

I remain puzzled by the nature and significance of sea-shells. By this puzzlement I do not mean the psychodynamic meaning of receiving and accepting or not accepting the sea-shells as gifts or the question of how to formulate a psychodynamic interpretation of the meaning of shells.<sup>ii</sup>

Through imaginative thinking I have become more aware that shells are "sublime subjects of contemplation" for the mind and through the work of the Gaston Bachelard (1964, p. 105), I have come to appreciate that shells, specifically sea-shells, "stand out from the usual disorder that characterises most perceptible things. They are privileged forms that are more intelligible for the eye, even though more mysterious for the mind" or psyche.

Here, as has often been claimed by phenomenologists (i.e. Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, van den Berg), two forms of perception should be distinguished. The second form of perception entails unemotional, scientific observation and classification of the many species of sea-shells. Beyond the biology of the formation of shells and the life of molluscs our observations will lead to the realisation that molluscs construct their shells according to the laws of a transcendental geometry, a logarithmic spiral known as the "Golden Mean or Ratio" and also as the "Fibonacci Sequence". This Golden Mean or Fibonacci Sequence is a proportional system discovered in nature such as in the spiral of a nautilus shell, the pattern of seeds on a sunflower head, the growth of scales on a pine cone, the breeding patterns of rabbits, the ratio of males to females in honey bee hives, and the arrangement of leaves on a plant system. In its simplest form the sequence consists of points on a curve which can be derived at by adding the values of the previous two points: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144 and so forth. According to Helen Gardner (1955, p. 8), the sequence or ratio "is easily derived at by geometrical means and such proportions have an aesthetic appeal".

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Yet, even the excitement of the aesthetic order of things made visible through the Golden Mean, which the Greek philosophers thought was the geometric-mathematical key to the universe, does not fulfil the Husserlian reminder to "return to the things themselves". This conviction implies that the meaning of human existence is properly given from one source only: the concrete, taken-for-granted everyday lifeworld. The task at hand is to uncover meaning as it appears directly in human experience or consciousness.

In the first or primary form of perception "we see things within their context and in connection with ourselves: a unity that can be broken only to the detriment of the parts. It is a significant unity. We might say that we see the significance things have for us. If we don't see the significance we don't see anything at all," writes van den Berg (1972, pp. 37-38). Van den Berg (1972) summarises the primary form of perception as follows:

The relationship between man and world is so close that it is erroneous to separate them in a psychological or psychiatric examination. If they are separated, the patient ceases to be this particular patient and his world ceases to be his world. Our world is not primarily a conglomeration of objects that can be described scientifically. Our world is our home, a realisation of subjectivity. If we want to understand man's existence, we must listen to the language of objects (p. 39).

This "mystery for the mind" (Bachelard), our primal or "first thoughts" (van den Berg), which seem to hold the promise of "something else to see" (Merleau-Ponty) needs our constant attention as psychologists and psychotherapists. Our "second thoughts" arrest our flight toward imaginative thinking by the geometrical reality of the original and numerous forms of shells. As a phenomenologist Van den Berg (1972, p. 39) reminds us that "a 'second thought' disturbs the verity of this reality." In his view this 'second thought' has "considerably hampered the

development of psychology." These "first thoughts" are concerned above all with establishing the way in which the shelled snail, is an objective symbol of being and of the relation of human reality to this being (here, "shelled" should be taken up, not in the sense of a snail whose shell has been removed but as being provided with a shell). I would like to use the shell as a point of focus but then a focus beyond its predetermined manifestation, not limiting myself to its objective aspects, but putting it back into the "setting of subjectivity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 333).

We could distinguish between inhabited and empty shells but for the moment both appear and reveal themselves as full and dense in meaning, manifesting on the one hand the world and on the other *an outline or profile of ourselves*.

#### **The sea-shell as a symbol**

A next move toward this profile of ourselves involves the clarification of the notion of symbol. A perusal of de Vries's (1981) Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery clearly shows the associations, connections, analogies, signs and signals in a variety of contexts to which shells lend themselves. European cultures traditionally relate shells to the virgin birth (of Mary and also Venus) and spiritual rebirth in the form of baptismal fonts. Shells are associated with Aphrodite and birth as symbol of the vulva; it represents the Female Principle. Shells are connected with water as a symbol of fertility and with sea deities and are symbols of prosperity in the form of one generation rising out of the death of another or as a symbol of immortality in the form of shells as grave-gifts. Shells have been taken up in the emblems of St James and St Michael and on the badge of Parnell of Ireland. This proliferation of shells as symbols reveals the depth of shells as symbols that function differently in different contexts. From the above we can deduce "grades of comprehension" in which shells function as symbols (Wheelwright, 1968, Metaphor and Reality). One "grade of

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comprehension" implies that the uses of shells as symbols includes symbols of ancestral and traditional vitality or have a "cultural range" which emerges, submerges and emerges again and again over time, images that permeate an entire culture or community or people. In such context shells as symbols speak of and to a social tradition. Clearly, quite a number of associations to which shells lend themselves would not be directly relevant to the client/patient nor to me, precisely because these traditional uses of shells are no longer relevant or have become submerged and/or because another cultural range is at work, reflecting how our times and culture have changed.

Another grade of comprehension, following Wheelwright, relates to shells as symbols of an archetype. Archetypal symbols are symbols that have an identical meaning for a large part of humankind. In this respect, the shells represent our collective experience of the female principle, anima, which with women's issues at the forefront of many debates and changes in society has emerged as a pivotal force in the state of our souls. This theme would require its own further explication.

An attempt to understand my puzzlement at the meaning of the sea-shells is not provided, in the end, by Wheelwright's clarifying concepts. Although the shared cultural and historical uses and meanings of the shell as a symbol are important and valuable, these cultural uses and meanings have changed or become submerged. Citizens of a changing world order in a "New South Africa" at the end of this millennium would probably find it very difficult to relate their own experiences to the above-mentioned uses and meanings of shells.<sup>iii</sup> Also, discovering the significance of the shells requires a different turn and a more focussed view because of the interpersonal and psychotherapeutic context from which I am writing. Greater clarification might be acquired if, after following the client to speak for herself, we might achieve greater clarity

about the nine characteristics of symbols (Murray, 1986, Chap. 5).

### **The client's reflections**

Much later the client wrote a short essay in which she relates the following:

When I gave the sea-shells to my therapist during a session I wanted, with the gift, to say I had thought about him and I also wanted to share something of my sea experience with him. Later on I realised that the shells had more significance than I had originally thought. Why the shells and not sea sand, smoothed stones or pieces of wood washed out by the sea?

I thought the key to this secret would be found in the context of the ocean itself. The great whole of sea, sand, sun, clouds and waves was too overwhelming. I shifted my focus to smaller detail. With that focus I realised that the shells were residues or remains washed out by the sea. The longer I scratched amongst the spewed-out refuse of the sea, the more I became aware of the small shells. I was moved by the fact that the small shells remained whole as they washed out. They look so incredibly delicate and fragile, even if it was them rather than much larger shells that washed out. I am such a small shell. Delicate and fragile yet endowed with an inner strength that survived and defied the sea storms of life. The uniqueness of each shell touched me. There are so many shells in the ocean but not one like me. Later I thought of it this way: for a very long time in my life I felt extremely vulnerable and fragile, even very self-conscious about my "fragile shell status". I deferred and recoiled from the demands of life by withdrawing into my shell. My fear of "breaking" and being hurt consumed my courage to risk. No wonder I was so depressed and anxious in my small "caged-in" shelled existence. In therapy I began to reveal myself. I began emerging out of my shell and slowly learnt to live beyond the narrow boundaries of my shell.<sup>iv</sup>

This passage clearly discloses the move from the perception of the shells to a revelation of an understanding of her struggles and the meaning

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of her humanity. It also clarifies van den Berg's (1972, p. 38) notion that "whatever we see, hear, taste and smell concerns foremost, directly and purely, ourselves." When the client writes "I am such a small shell" she takes up the shells and completes them as symbol of her individual self. It speaks to her embodied self. The shell animates the values in her life and adumbrates the unique way of existing of the client. The shell allows scenes, places and times to rise up before her. "The significance of a thing inhabits that thing as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind appearances" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 319). A slow and unhurried imaginative consideration of the shell allows the client to move toward a realisation and unification of the self, body and soul, in ways that no therapist could possibly emulate.

#### **Murray's characteristics of a symbol**

1. The shell as a symbol is horizontally expansive and vertically rooted. An attempt to explicate the significance of shells shows the truth of the statement that "the symbol is much in a little, *Multum in Parvo*", the title of Murray's (1986) chapter on symbols. In my search and analysis, which I present here, I have found much more where I expected to find very little. One may argue that a shell is a shell, but when it becomes a symbol it takes on a horizontal expanse and a vertical depth that one cannot anticipate. As the meanings become clear, the first meaning supports the second as well as the third and fourth and so on. Because of the endlessness of the widening circle of meanings, I will settle for a less than exhaustive understanding of this horizontal expanse and vertical depth.

As the first thoughts about shells are more clearly perceived and understood, they take on a depth that alludes to other things. In his reflections on the psychological world Romanyshyn (1982, p.38ff) has argued convincingly that the meanings of things are not possible to unearth because verticality or depth contribute to the

"profound meaning of a thing". The second paragraph written by the client leaves us with a sense of the imaginative generosity of the shells, which digs deep into the person. It is rooted so deeply in the person that it becomes identified with her self. The affective dimensions inherent in the formation and consequently the forms of shells allow us to claim that shells are "the embodiment of typical psychological experiences emerging from stone" (Romanyshyn, 1982, p. 44).

2. Shells have a synchronous and a diachronous significance. In the symbol, the patient who gathers and keeps the shell anchors herself in the current scheme of the things of her life as they are being lived. Through the symbolisation of the shell she becomes part of that which is currently transpiring in her life-world. In this way the symbol links her own world synchronously to her contemporaries' common world. The power of the synchronic effect of the symbol of the shell allows the shell collector to become identified in an experiential way and, within limits, with the present and with her present life projects, which among other things, concern her struggle to accept her individuality in the light of being one among many: "The uniqueness of each shell touched me. There are so many shells in the ocean but not one like me". The shell, using Murray's (1986, p. 134) explanation, "is a vehicle of unification that is very real in life and made available through imaginative participation, both in its logos (meaning) and bios (affective, incarnational) reverberations".

Her initial attempt at sense-making was "too overwhelming" and no way towards understanding was accessible until she "shifted" her "focus" to the shell. Diachronically, the shell as symbol opens up a way into, links and transports her personal history into the history of humankind.

3. At heart, the shell as a symbol is substantive. The client's description of her understanding of her experience shows how the shells encompass that which is of value, even if they come and go and are of passing or fundamental interest to her. This characteristic holds that shells as symbols are substantive just as the values for which they speak are substantive. The client values safety and security and could not gather the courage to risk for fear of "breaking". In psychotherapy the sharing of each with the other through dialogue makes the pre-reflectively lived values, reflectively clear. The process of her understanding develops as an "interpretive understanding", substantiating her values, within the precategorical meaning-formation of her originary experience of the world (Schrag 1980, p. 97).

4. Shells, as symbols are metaphorical in origin. Murray argues that the heart of a symbol is substantive and the origin is metaphorical. He says: "All symbols are metaphors at origin but every metaphor could hardly be termed a symbol" (p. 143). The difference seems to be found in the proposition that symbols begin with a metaphor but are more stable and permanent than metaphors. A symbol therefore is a "ganglion of metaphors around which families of metaphors cluster".

5. Shells as symbols operate centripetally. In spite of the above statement, under one, that a symbol is characterised by a horizontal expanse implying that the meanings attached to a symbol may increase and reach out to other meanings, such meanings tend to gather around a primary symbol. These meanings are drawn into a larger whole. Metaphors, Murray argues, are primarily centrifugal, going beyond the primary, literal meaning, charting a new course, suggesting a new redescription of reality. On the other hand, the shell as symbol inclines toward the centre and draws together. The cultural historical ways in which shells have been associated with humans and the variety of meanings bestowed on shells

reveals the biological and geometric make-up and apparel of shells a wide ranging and moving affective and symbolic power.

6. The wide variety of uses and values attributed to shells renders the shell as symbol of sacredness, which is not hard to grasp and accept. Despite the great variety in pattern, size, and weight, all seashells are made by the animals that live inside them, and all grow steadily "outwards". The whorl-shaped structures formed by molluscs represent some of the most remarkable designs to be found anywhere in the natural world. This structure contributes not only to the variety of practical uses of shells as currency, amulets and decoration, but the beautiful forms of seashells have also influenced and inspired countless artists and architects throughout the centuries, as evident, for example, in the Rococo decoration of arched recesses. The shell more specifically is a symbol of immortality, renewal and resurrection. Baltrusaitis (cited in Bachelard, 1969, p. 116) recalls that "as late as the Carolingian epoch, burial grounds often contained snail shells - an allegory of a grave in which man will awaken". Bachelard (1969, p. 116) mentions that a "wealth of documentation could be assembled on the subject of 'resurrection shells'". Later on (p. 117) he mentions the amazement of an archaeologist who discovered in a grave "a coffin that contained nearly three hundred snail shells placed about the skeleton from feet to waistline".

7. Picking up, looking at and reflecting about the shell and the giving of the shell by the client is an interpersonal event and creation. She wrote: "When I gave the sea shells to my therapist during a session I wanted, with the gift, to say I had thought about him and I also wanted to share something of my sea experience with him." This is followed by a description of her retreating to the solitude of a shell-fortress, withdrawing into her shell for shelter, protection, cover and refuge, revealing a world of sadness and loneliness. On the other hand she does not only go in but comes

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out with fear but also curiosity, slowly emerging. The shell opens up both the client and myself to ourselves, to our common world, which we share with others.

8. The shell as symbol is self-revelatory. It introduces us to our personal history and our dreams. The short essay of the patient and my reflections disclose some, albeit a limited, understanding of her concept of what it means to be a human and what our ideas of human existence are all about, our own mystery, our own struggles and the uniqueness and commonality of our own humanity.

9. The shell as symbol gives rise to reflection. The shell provokes us to think about the human situation. It calls for thought and is something to think about. We are pressed to go beyond mere interpretation and to set forth larger themes about life and human existence than the symbol itself - a reflection of some sorts. This is Murray's (1986, p. 148) paraphrasing of Ricoeur's statement, expressed in his work *The Symbolism of Evil* (1961/1967, p. 348) that "The symbol gives rise to thought". This laboured thought aims at a deeper understanding of our lives, of how we are involved in the "human enterprise". The passage from the client in conjunction with my own contribution gathers up, retrieves and reassembles, and bears witness to the effort to exist.

Another example of how the different shapes of shells speak to the life of an individual is given in Anne Morrow Lindbergh's (1955) small book *Gift from the Sea*. Well received after publication, the author asked herself:

... how to remain whole in the midst of the distractions of life; how to remain balanced, no matter what centrifugal forces tend to pull one off centre; how to remain strong, no matter what shocks come in at the periphery and tend to crack the hub of the wheel.

What is the answer? There is no easy answer, no complete answer. I have only clues, shells from the sea (p. 29).

Lindbergh continues to follow her clues and, through her reflections on her channelled whelk, moon shell, double-sunrise shell, oyster shell and argonauta shell, profiles her concerns about shelter, solitude, on being a woman and changing relationships. For us, a generation or two later, Lindbergh's formulations might be judged as too sentimental. Still, we can discern how her imaginative meditations anchor her in the current scheme of the things of her life as they are being lived. The shells encompass that which is of value and as symbols they are self-revelatory of her personal history and dreams. The shells as symbols give rise to reflection. The shells provoke her "to think" about her situation. They call for thought and are something to think about. About the argonauta she writes: "Lovely shell, lovely image - I am tempted to play with it in my mind." She continues: "But with this rare and delicate vessel, we have left the well-tracked beaches of proven facts and experiences. We are adventuring in the chartless seas of imagination" (p. 93).

If the client's words are taken with Lindbergh's imaginative meditations, we can implicitly discern the expansive, temporally synchronising, substantive, intersubjective and reflective characteristics of shells.

Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 319) would say that the shell is "inseparable from the person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity". By holding a channelled whelk in her hand Lindbergh asks herself "What is the shape of my life?" and then continues to answer the question. The lore and language of shells disclose the perception of the shell as a communication or a communion inspiring us to move to new horizons of space and time invested with our humanity.

Thus the shell is correlative of our bodies and to our existence of which our bodies are merely the "stabilised structure". The significance of the shell is constituted "in the hold which my body takes upon it; it is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body, and if we try and describe the real as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it overlaid with anthropological predicates" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 320).

### **Appropriating the world symbolically**

We have already moved toward finding or discovering the "anthropological predicates" and the ontological human activities captured in the shell. If we do not limit ourselves to the objective (biological and geometrical) aspects of shells, but put them back into the setting of subjectivity, by appropriating the shell we then appropriate a world symbolically.

The material qualities of the shell reveal a way of being, and presents being in a certain way. By thinking divergently we discern a slow continuous form-giving life, substantively contained by the shell, a "stone from which the principles of life come" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 109), life's ability to constitute form and solidify form, living to build, a life endowing itself with a form, contained by and inhabiting the form. Bachelard (1969, pp. 132-133) reminds us that the shell-house is a primal image whenever we seek shelter, protection, or a hiding place. The shell is self-evidently a shelter, and yet it is impossible to say what in it signifies shelter. It is a "primal image" because shelter, protection and covering is in the shell.

We discern a creature that comes out of a shell but does not come out entirely, revealing a dialectically moving spiral of going in and coming out (Bachelard, 1969, p. 108). Rough on the outside and soft on the inside, it must move out in order to move forward yet it remains stuck to or part of the shell-house. To come alive

requires the dynamic in the dialectics of what is hidden and what is manifest. The hidden manifests itself as the snail emerges indolently, with slow forward movements, and "slides along" or sucks onto a rock to holds onto it in order not to lose its grip. "A creature that hides and withdraws into its shell, is preparing a way out" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 111). This creature is not cruel and is non-combative; and its movements are not vigorous but it can change its dimensions as it emerges or as it recoils. When frightened it reacts quickly with a recoiling withdrawal. The force of the fright or defensive reaction is always the same.

We are amazed to discover that this house grows in proportion to the growth of the body that inhabits it. The harmonious proportionality of this form-giving life, this "house that grows with its inmate is one of the marvels of the universe" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 118).

Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 326) we can claim that the shell is taken up by us internally, reconstituted and experienced by us in so far as it is bound with a world. Listen to the client's description once again:

For a very long time in my life I felt extremely vulnerable and fragile even very self-conscious about my "fragile shell status". I deferred and recoiled from the demands of life by withdrawing into my shell. My fear of 'breaking' and being hurt consumed my courage to risk. No wonder I was so depressed and anxious in my small "caged-in" shelled existence. In therapy I began to reveal myself. I began emerging out of my shell and slowly learnt to live beyond the narrow boundaries of my shell.

The shell is symbolic of an expanding and contracting hidden life encrusted in and contained by stone for shelter and protection, a solidifying form growing in proportion to its body, coming out of its shell yet never coming out entirely, slow to emerge and indolently manifesting itself with curiosity and fear from a

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noticeable threshold, an universal embodied shell-oriented life, the shut-in life of a repressed being. A good part of our lives is spent, on different levels, at different times and in different contexts in contracting and expanding ourselves, concealing and revealing ourselves, constantly changing proportions as we emerge or withdraw in our world-making. We must understand the snail-shell as we understand a kind of behaviour, not through any intellectual operation of subsumption, but by taking up an (our own) account of the mode of existence which the observable signs adumbrate before us.

The explication presented thus far confirms the notion of symbol of the snail-shell as made up of "ganglions" of metaphors around which families of metaphors cluster". As one meaning leads to and supports another, a web of inexhaustible meaning possibilities reflecting our humanity on different levels, in different contexts and through a variety of actions becomes visible. So far I have made extensive use of a wide range of values and images attributed to the shell as symbol. It is not my intention to list or even order and classify these metaphors and their families. But possibilities do come to mind that I can only mention in passing.

The forward movements of the snail as a "sliding along" is in contrast to "taking root" and "getting a grip" and creates a myriad of nuances of the sense of texture and surface through touch which seem worthwhile to ponder. Likewise, the trail left behind as a measure of my forward movement on life's path, at the same time separating myself from my works, "leaving behind", two movements in one, also requires an explication. Many images are associated with "emerging" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 109). The dark space inside the shell has its own positive and negative contents, different from emerging into light. Combinations of visual and auditory qualities such as darkness and silence can lead to an explication of psychological phenomena such as the anxiety of not being heard and the degree

to which anxiety is exaggerated with the onset of darkness. Also, the sonority of empty shells reminds us of the phenomenon of echoes. An echo, says Geertsema (1993, p 102) "is the opposite, or the absence, of a contradiction. While the principle of difference is inherent in contradiction - contradictions as dissent - echo is unquestioning repetition" and not a speaking against. Contradiction generates meaning and echo disperses if not degenerates meaning. In his comments on the different Greek legends relating to echoes Geertsema (1993:103) notices that "there is an interesting duality inherent in Echo as the one who is incapable of difference and yet forever is the reminder of difference in her repetition of the same." The drama of life can play itself out in the deadly silence or the incomplete echoes of the soul.

Emerging from darkness to light has the meaning of the vital category of "giving form". When we say: "my plans and thoughts have taken form" it means that in the light, not in the darkness of a withdrawn, recoiled posture, my plans and thoughts have become more clear, more precise and adequate enough to be expressed outside and realised. It is not thoughts which take on the form of the body or the body which adapts to thoughts, but both are subjected to the same principle, become clear and bright simultaneously, take shape and constitute the world of agency. With my thoughts, wishes and plans I take shape and place myself in the world in a way that fits with the principle now ruling (Minkowski, 1967, p. 105).

**The shell as correlative of our bodies and lives**  
Collecting shells on the beach, preserving them as a collection or as a gift, with whatever actions follow, requires that my body forms itself according to these tasks. For example the client crouched while surveying the shells on the sand, as if her body was assuming the rounded form of a shell. Her movements are slow, expressing great care in handling the small, delicate objects: the posture of shell collecting. When I was given

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the shells as gifts I also handled the shells with care, making sure not to damage the objects.

Following Shapiro (1984, pp. 23-25) one could define "posture" generically as a "feature of experiencing". A posture is the particular relation of a person to the objects of his experience or situations. The term posture refers to the way I hold myself, the way I am being at any intended object. Posture is "ensconced or radically embedded in the world." Posture is only knowable "in action". An active posture is the way we approach things; the posture we more or less freely assume or we engage ourselves with in a paradigm or system that already includes me.

To illustrate most broadly what is intended by posture, Shapiro asks us to consider the following possibilities:

I can relate to the world as a thing to be known or to be mastered, as a thing in which to lose or to find myself, to join or to distance, to help or to violate, to take as it is or to impose upon. For these global postures motivation and purpose are salient. While for all a self is implicated, for some more than for others, an "I" is directly served (p. 25).

Here we encounter that a key to the understanding of the symbol of the shell is the lived body, not language. As one pole or moment in the constitution of phenomena, the body is a ground of meaning. Meaning arises through the body as we live it, not that body according to natural science, the physiologist's body, but the lived body. Bodily participation in the world issues in and is itself an embodiment of that world. The lived body is the "bearer" of meaning.

Posture requires modes of experience that can embody knowledge of the world, and that can carry meaning bodily. Of course, among such bodily modes are touching or feeling and grasping. Both of these are ways of exploring the

world that immediately, as part of their respective forms of action, can both know and carry knowledge. When I touch or feel an object, as one moment of that experience I am touched. The touching of the object immediately impresses me in a certain way; I can carry that impress. In the most poignant instance, we say, "I am touched." When I grasp an object, I must "accommodate" my hand to that object's shape, to use Piaget's term. Crouching at the shells and having grasped a shell, my body, my hand, itself becomes an imitation of that object, or of an aspect of it such as its shape or size. I can show you a version of the object in its absence. I "retain the knowledge in the body and hand" (Shapiro, 1984, p.25).

### **Proportionality**

However, we have not exhausted the meaning of 'the thing' by defining it as the correlative of our body and our life. It is not only the form of the shells which attract our attention but rather the process of formation. It is not only their formation but also their proportionality, which is part of the mystery of shells. The geometry of the Golden Ratio or Mean is a proportional system. Proportion is the organisation of the component parts, for example the relationship of fingers to the hand, the hand to the arm and arms to torso. When we say a person's body is "well-proportioned" it refers to a relationship of harmony and unity. The question we need to address here is not measurable, mathematical proportions but the "proportions" of the relation between world, self and body.

When we say: "my plans and thoughts have taken form" it means in the light, not in the darkness of a withdrawn, recoiled posture. My plans and thoughts have become clearer, more precise and adequate enough to be taken up and expressed in the light, outside. Minkowski (1967, p. 105) reminds us that it is not thoughts which take on the form of the body or the body which adapts to thoughts, but both are subjected to the same principle and become clear and bright

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simultaneously, taking shape and constituting a world of agency. With my thoughts, wishes and plans I take shape or take on form and place myself in the world in a way that fits with the principle now ruling.

When psychologists make a psychological evaluation of people, specifically the evaluation of psychological disturbances, they attempt to assess the "ruling principles" which include among other things, the degree of harmony between the polarities of tendencies such as love and hate, passivity and activity, dependence and independence, to rule and serve, pride and humility, envy and gratitude, letting go and holding on, open and closed and the mode of defence or protest against unwelcome influences from the inside or outside. These tendencies, strivings, drives or intentions are related to proportionality.

Throughout the history of psychology the concept of proportionality emerges and then submerges. The explication of psychological proportionality begins with Kretschmer (1961) who describes the relationship of elation - depression as an expression of verticality and the relationship of excitability - dullness as horizontality. The axes of verticality and horizontality suggest the movement of one's life in some direction. But it was Binswanger (in Needleman, 1963) who introduced the concept of "anthropological proportion" and "disproportion" in his short essay entitled "Verstiegenheit", translated as "Extravagance". In a translator's note Needleman (1963) acknowledged the inadequate translation of the German *verstiegen*.

The verb, *sich versteigen*, means to climb too high so as not to be able to return, to lose one's self among precipitous mountain peaks, to fly high, to go too far, etc. As an adjective, it is, therefore, inaccurately rendered by such words as "extravagant", "eccentric", "queer", "odd" or "high-flown", none of which convey the sense

of one's climbing into a *cul-de-sac* (p. 342).

Binswanger begins his essay by stating that:

Human existence projects itself in breadth, and in height; it not only *strides* forth, but also *mounts* upward. In both respects, therefore, it is possible for human existence to go *too* far, to become Extravagant (p. 342).

He continues to explicate Extravagance as "rooted in a certain disharmony in the relation between rising upward and striding forth", showing that Extravagance is a "failure" of the relationship between height and breadth, a form of "anthropological disproportion." Various authors such as Bachelard (1943); Minkowski (1936); Straus (1930) and Szilasi (1948) have dealt with the use of height and breadth in an anthropological sense as a fundamental structure of self-realisation. More recently Jager (1971) and Blankenburg (1982) took it up again. Blankenburg suggests (mental) health is a matter of proportionality. The *lines* of human existence unfold from the two axes of height and breadth. Height refers to upward and downward movement or striving as in "achieving success" and "reaching for the stars" and downward refers to regressive trends. Forward and backward refers to for example, on the one hand, "striving to get on" and "forging ahead" and on the other hand "un(der)developed" and "retarded". From these notions of the structure of the modes of our self-realisation Blankenburg (1982, p.41) describes proportion as a concept of *self-unfolding* or in existential terms, the unfolding or expansion of Dasein. The impairment of this self-unfolding from these two axes receives priority with Blankenburg. The proportional and disproportional relations between should (compulsion), must (duty), can (ability), dare (permission) and will (volition) which in everyday language is invariably described as "too much", "too little", "too full", "too empty", "too anxious", "too busy", "too heavy", "too light", "too angry", "too quiet" etc. reveals a confusing complexity of proportions (p. 45).

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In his attempt to clarify this complexity Blankenburg (1982, pp. 41-44) differentiates between descriptive, dynamic and normative terms as the means we have of comprehending proportionality and disproportionality. Dynamic terms revolve around a dialectical relationship of the harmony or disharmony of opposites, ruled by the "law of polarity", for example "bringing up or lifting up from the depths" or "bringing down from the heights". In this sense Binswanger's description of Extravagance as a failure of Dasein means a one-sided, exaggerated or "unbalanced" relationship of man to himself and the world. From a normative-axiological perspective we could ask about the differences of proportion in different cultures, different social strata, different professions, differences in gender, different phases of life for the same individual.

How do we determine the right relation of man to himself and the world? Which norms do we apply? Although these questions remain unanswered, Blankenburg (1982, p. 47) suggests the "heart" as the seat and measure of anthropological proportions, but at the same time, he warns that good proportions are not an ultimate standard. (Mental) health is a matter of proportionality and therefore a "blessing" but not necessarily the "greatest of all blessings" (p. 46).

In the light of our original, demanding, attempt at seeing the shell in connection with our general humanity and then relating it to ourselves in the context of psychotherapy, which includes personality psychology as well as psychopathology, I would like to suggest that the symbol of the shell is a "form of behaviour [which] outlines a certain manner of treating the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 319). The shell reveals a contour of being, a multifaceted outline of being which has a place amongst other possibilities.

In the case of the client, the search for an answer to our question of what kind of outline of

ourselves and what manner of treating the world is captured by the sea-shell, I would like to suggest one possibility: *the symbol of the sea-shell echoes a repression of being with a vertical and lateral compensation, it illustrates the psychology of the mundanely unhappy soul, the lived life of a suffering soul, a humbled, humiliated posture, meek and not esteemed, slow to emerge and inclined to withdraw quickly.*

Following from this suggestion it should be clear that the vocabulary of motivation or purpose of the symbol of the shell is determined primarily by shelter and protection from threat, unhappiness and humiliation. The attempts to compensate vertically and laterally for the repression of being are based, I would claim, on the organising principle of proportionality.

#### **Back to the things themselves: the life world**

No matter how peculiar or disparate human experience may appear, phenomenology is a way of taking experience seriously. I began this essay with my idiosyncratic experience of receiving a sea-shell as a gift. This was the starting point. I attempted to move beyond the expression of mere opinion and the voice of my thoughts and inquired into the way the meaning of the gift of the sea-shell is not merely a "construction", but a way in which the sea-shell as a "physical infrastructure for psyche", the world, "in-itself" gives itself to and is taken up by us. The gift of the sea-shell extends beyond my own personal and professional past and future horizons. It tells how we constitute a world and how we structure relations of human existence. It illuminates our experience. Using my and the client's experience as a leading clue, some features of the lifeworld, of what *psyche* contributes over *bios*, how *psyche* constitutes the intercorporeal, intersubjective, interspatial, intertemporal, and intercultural dimensions of experience, could be explicated.

Husserl's motto, "back to the things themselves" has been called phenomenology's "shibboleth" (Steinbock, 1997, p. 127). This is a call not only

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to primary authors or the texts themselves, but charges us with the task to undertake a critical explication of the things themselves as they are given to us. Any search for the foundation of a human phenomenon will reveal a bond or, as Steinbock (1997) phrased it, an "ontological lifelne" with the multiplicity of the lifeworld.

#### About the Author

In 1999 Professor Rex van Vuuren left the University of Pretoria after spending 26 years in the Department of Psychology to take up the position of Academic Dean at St Augustine College, a new private higher education institution in South Africa. St Augustine College currently offers only post graduate programmes.

Over his extended academic career Professor van Vuuren has published widely and has presented papers at both national and especially

international conferences as well as having organized the 14<sup>th</sup> International Human Science Research Conference which was held in MidRand in 1995.

His professional and academic interests are to be found in the areas of personality psychology, psychotherapy and qualitative research methods as well as in multidisciplinary dialogues between a wide range of disciplines. Among these disciplinary dialogues are architecture and psychology, education and psychology, philosophy and psychology and, finally, theology and psychology. Professor van Vuuren's interests are grounded in existential-phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches.

Rex is registered with the Professional Board in South Africa as both a Clinical Psychologist and a Research Psychologist.

<sup>i</sup> I did not know that Molluscs belong to a large group of animals having no backbone, with soft bodies not composed of segments, and usually covered with a hard shell. Slugs, on the other hand, are small, slow moving, slimy animals like snails, without a shell or with a very small shell. The World Book Dictionary (1990) emphasises that "a study of the embryonic development of the slug reveals that a shell is formed in the embryo just as it is in the snail, but fails to continue its development to a functional size". As long ago as 1966, in a statement still valid today, Stella Turk said:

It is usually estimated that there are between 80 000 and 110 000 species of molluscs in the world. This does not include extinct species, and the number is constantly increased as new species are described. Julia Rogers writes that between 1758 and 1800, 2 000 shells were named, but in the century and a half since then 100 000 more have been added to the list! There are just under 800 species of molluscs found in the land, sea and freshwaters of British Isles. That the hobby of shell collecting is inexhaustible may be seen from the fact that the greatest collection in the World in the United States National Museum, Washington, contains about 36 000, under half the total (p. 24).

<sup>ii</sup> There is a large body of perspectives on the meaning of gifts in psychotherapy. Here I would like to refer to Sartre's evocative but limited view. Sartre (1969, p. 594) in discussing what it means "to appropriate" through possession in relation to doing and having observes:

Thus generosity is above all a destructive function. The craze for giving which sometimes seizes certain people is first and foremost a craze to destroy; it is equivalent to an attitude of madness, a "love" which accompanies the shattering objects. But the craze to destroy, which is at the bottom of generosity, is nothing else than a craze to possess. All which I abandon, all which I give, I enjoy in a higher manner through the fact that I give it away; giving is a keen, brief enjoyment, almost sexual. To give is to enjoy possessively the object which one gives; it is a destructive-appropriative contact. But at the same time the gift casts a spell over the recipient; it obliges him to recreate, to maintain in being by a continuous creation this bit of myself which I no

longer want, which I have just possessed up to its annihilation, and which finally remains only as an image. To give is to enslave.

iii A quick but incomplete perusal of African literature did not reveal any other uses for shells or any symbolic value of sea-shells. A respected and known South African sangoma, Credo Mutwa, recently published a book on animal tales and fables from Africa. In this book, Isilwane, large sea animals feature. Shelled animals such as the giant sea turtle and the crab are given the last place in the book.

iv Permission to use this extract was acquired from the client.