

## LA GESTALT—UN PRINCIPIO DINAMICO DE ACCION INTRODUCIDO POR MAX WERTHEIMER

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### RESUMEN

La Psicología de la Gestalt es una de las teorías psicológicas fundamentales del siglo XX - discutida con ambigüedad hasta ahora. Para una verdadera apreciación tenemos que referirnos a los escritos de los fundadores de la teoría de la Gestalt, Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler y Kurt Koffka. Mi contribución se basa en un texto raramente citado en el cual Wertheimer introduce un público lego a la Teoría de la Gestalt. A parte de una discusión específica traza un punto de vista completamente nuevo acerca de la Psicología general. «Gestalten» son agentes dinámicos, son «sujetos» reales de la conducta. Por otro lado las entidades tradicionales de una Psicología del sujeto - el "ego", el "self" o el "individuo" - resultan esquemas iritables que construyen un "operador" artificial en el centro de la experiencia humana. Así la introducción de Wertheimer - fresca y actual incluso hoy en día - recuerda algunas de las tradiciones convenientes en Psicología y postula una lógica "gestáltica" de la percepción, de la acción y más allá de la (auto)evidencia de la vida cotidiana.

### ABSTRACT

Gestalt Psychology is one of the fundamental theories of 20th century psychology - discussed ambiguously up to now. For an authentic estimation we must refer to the expressions of the founders of Gestalt Theory, Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka. My contribution bases on a rarely cited text by which Wertheimer introduces Gestalt Theory to a non-psychologist audience. Beyond any special discussion he outlines a completely new point of view on general psychology. "Gestalten" are dynamic agents, they are real "subjects" of behavior. Whereas the traditional entities of a subject-psychology - the "ego", the "self" or the "individual" - turn out to be irritable schemes setting up an artificial "operator" in the centre of human experience. Thus Wertheimer's introduction -

fresh and up-to-date even nowadays - remotes some of the convenient traditions in psychology and set forth a "Gestalt-logic" of perception, of action and beyond that of self-evidence in everyday's life.

In present-day culture the expression "Gestalt" is "en vogue". Its sound is holistic, promising, mysterious. Its prophecy is opposing everything isolated, technified, formalized. In psychology "Gestalt" is used in the sense of a special therapy. "Gestalt therapy" stands for a therapeutic treatment heading for self-experience and self-realisation. "Gestalt therapy is a philosophy looking for harmony, for correspondence with everything, with medicine, with the natural sciences, with the universe, with everything that is ... and which puts man - like any other existential philosophy - in the centre of his own self." (Perls 1987, 17f.; Transl. By H.F.)

Scientific psychology defines "*Gestalt*" in a totally different way. In textbooks on "*general psychology*" Gestalt is linked with the experimental research of perception (see e.g. Zimbardo 1967). When subjects are confronted with accumulations of spots or lines in a visual field they put them together according to certain invariable modes. These modes are called the laws of "*Gestalt*" - such as "*density*", "*closure*", "*permanent curve*" and "*common fate*".

Shouldn't we ask ourselves if this ambiguous use of "*Gestalt*" in psychology is simply coincidental? Or do the two different ways of understanding "*Gestalt*" have anything in common?

To get closer to an answer it is necessary to follow the use of "*Gestalt*" in the history of psychology. Doing so we come along with a psychological tradition Gestalt therapists as well as the analysts of perception refer to: the so called "*Berlin (and Frankfurt) school of Gestalt theory*". As I already justified in a more extential study with Wilhelm Salber (Fitzek & Salber 1996) an authentic estimation of "*Gestalt theorists*" is only possible by reading their works in the original. Indeed those texts are not only well readable, but also surprisingly up-to-date, even in the sense of a critical comment on present-day psychology.

In this context I would like to cite a text discussing the Gestalt concept in a whole - apart from any empirical research. Here we have the founder of Gestalt theory, Max Wertheimer, in front of the Kant-community, introducing the essentials of Gestalt psychology to a non-psychologist audience.

#### "WHAT IS GESTALT THEORY, WHAT IS ITS AIM?"

Gestalt theory grew right out of scientific work; it grew out of definite, urgent problems in psychology, anthropology, logic, epistemology. Concrete problems were its starting point, and the work converged more and more on one fundamental, central problem.

What was the basic situation? It was a situation that many students, many philosophers of our time alike encountered. It was a situation that the young person, indeed the youngest beginner, had to face again and again. The problem: we come from the full reality of living events to science, of which we seek clarification, deeper penetration into the core of what is happening; and then we often find, it is true, instruction, information and connections - yet at the end we feel poorer than before. Let us take psychology as an example. After a particularly vital inner experience we turn to our books and attempt to discover how psychology, how science has elucidated these matters. Now we read and read. Or we may ourselves carry out an investigation along the lines of the traditional methods, and we are left with the feeling of having gathered much and yet actually of having nothing. Somehow what we considered the most crucial, the most essential and the most vital has, through this process, been lost." (Wertheimer 1944, 81)

According to Wertheimer theoretical investigation is linked to the essentials of everyday life from the start. This relation is ideal when science maintains an exchange with the basic questions of life. But exactly at this point the Gestalt psychologists start their criticism, because scientific work seems to evade the "*full reality of live events*" and the "*crucial, the most essential and the most vital*" aspects of everyday life experience.

What could that mean for empirical psychological work and how can we estimate the investigations of the Gestalt psychologists in this context? As correctly cited in textbooks, we find the gestaltists doing their experimental work, dealing with perceptual phenomena in a visual field. What about the crucial questions of everyday life in that dim atmosphere of laboratory?

We have to face some historical details in order to get closer to the view of the Gestalt school. Almost incidentally meeting at the Frankfurt Academy of Commerce Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka began to examine each other with simple figural patterns under diverse temporal and spatial conditions. That was fifteen years before Wertheimer wrote his critical remarks on contemporary psychology. He still stood in the tradition of experimental psychology, but already looked for his own way of doing qualitative research. With the support of his scientific companions he found that spots and lines are visually organized and that this organization follows the above mentioned "*laws of Gestalt*" like proximity, similarity and pregnancy (Wertheimer 1923). Can we expect those rules organizing our everyday life in quite a similar manner?

In his lecture Wertheimer stresses the significance of the Gestalt laws as regards concrete and extended actions. If Gestalt set forth more than *«instructions and informations»*, if it wanted to correspond to vital experience, the Gestalt laws should reveal some general psychological orientation about mental processes. Due to a Gestalt psychologist's point of view the organizing principles of perception ought to be transferred to experience and behavior as a whole:

*"In the next step I assert: the conditions of the whole decisively determine what one sees or hears in one part of this whole. A human being faces a field, and what happens there is decisively dependent upon the tendency of that field to become fraught with meaning, homogeneous, to be dominated by an inner*

*necessity; this feature is one of the most enjoyable outcomes of our new approach. Frequently astonishingly strong means have to be applied to destroy or change the organization of a field which tends toward a good Gestalt.*

*From its whole-tendencies the field also derives its dynamics; and the dynamic which was formerly hardly present in psychology, has now pressed its way to the very fore.*" (Wertheimer 1944, 88f.)

Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka took from their experiments that the visual organization is determined by psychological field conditions - if we want to or not. According to the tendencies of fields we see or don't, we reach for things or let them unconsidered, we hold them apart or put them together (see e.g. Köhler's famous studies on anthropoids, Köhler 1963). In a psychological sense fields are no static and isolated patterns, but resultants of dynamic forces. Thus the "*laws of Gestalt*" can be seen as 'manufacturers' of reality: We round off, we put together, we shape and model, we make something well-fitting, we decide, hold on or cut off.

The fundamental experiments on perception tending for closure and continuation show that these tendencies cannot be put side by side. Psychological laws are not to be registered like paragraphs in a statute book. They interfere, they concur one with the other. Even the spots and lines of Wertheimer's first attempts get under the pressure of different expectations and modifications. That is exactly what Wertheimer pointed out in his first publication on the psychology of perception (Wertheimer 1912).

Where we come to decisive shapes, we will gain support and certainty. Only by grouping, putting together or apart we can cope with the conditions of reality, we can act and consult. On the other hand many hints for shaping or reshaping are literally "*overlooked*". Especially research studies on figure and ground (Rubin 1915) illustrate that the Gestalt process is full of tension and (Gestalt) qualities. It turns out as a highly instable and reversible construction when certain "*Gestalts*" are preferred and others excluded or pushed into the background.

Wertheimer pursued such dynamic relations in his analysis of „productive thinking“. In his famous studies on anthropoids Wolfgang Köhler focused this view on simply structured actions. Especially Kurt Lewin extended the Gestalt view on actions close to everyday life. Therefore Lewin called the actions «*Handlungsganzheiten*» (Lewin 1926). «*Ganzheiten*» tear us apart, they put us on a line - or in hole, they conduct our behavior and determine how we think and how we feel. They are responsible for the way we solve our problems, we behave in complex situations and we get along with our everyday lives. Wertheimer must have meant something like this when he stressed the connection of "*Gestalt psychology*" and the "*full reality of life events*".

But can we find in this short glance on Gestalt theory *anything like «man in a center of his own self»?* Opposed to the concept of an outstanding "Ego" Gestalt just seems to emphasize the dynamics of "*fields*", so that the vital feelings of self-awareness should be disappointed by a Gestalt view on action.

*"Here I am - the Ego - first a part of the field. I am not fundamentally an Ego standing in relief against other Egos, as has usually been maintained; no, the*

*genesis of an Ego is one of the strangest and most remarkable of phenomena, which, it would appear, is also controlled by whole-processes. As I have stated, I am part in this field. What happens then in this case? Will my behavior be, as a rule, determined by peacemeal experiences and the like? Experiments seem to show ever more clearly that this is not the case, but that here again laws determining the whole hold sway; and they are responsible for human beings reacting so frequently in a sensible, adequate way.*" (Wertheimer 1944, 90)

Being organized according to a Gestalt-logic the process of action and behavior let us doubt whether there is an autonomous psychological apparatus called "Ego" or "self". Rather do we find dynamic correspondences shaping the course of psychological events, the going on of thinking and willing, of lust and disgust.

In my opinion answers to such essential psychological problems should not merely be given theoretically. To understand the idea of "Gestalt psychology" concerning everyday life we had better face reality where we meet it and how it presents itself. If the "tendencies of Gestalt" organize psychological processes as a whole, we must be able to explain every event of action and behavior in terms of Gestalt. We ought to describe the reality of this lecture in quite a similar way like the organization of figures in a visual field. If you probably think that my talk gets off the line or misses the right course then you are already pursuing "Gestalt psychology". Perhaps judgment will be better and you say: He gets round to it or it all works out. Also in this case you are judging a bit like Gestalt psychologists. We can illustrate the effectiveness of Gestalt going on in every single act of behavior.

Gestalt psychology is principally not referring to persons. It does not ask for subjects as causes of action. It rather tries to reveal dynamic relations applying to all persons involved. Such an altered view - apart from the pre-scientific definition of man as a personal whole - regards us as participants of a current whole: the «*Handlungsganzheit*» of giving (and taking) lectures in the history of psychology.

With Wertheimer we can go even further. Then we see to which consequences a Gestalt theory of the everyday life could give rise, and understand why Wertheimer and his colleagues recoiled from this consequence. Depending on impersonal and situational conditions is no easy way of defining oneself. Only from time to time we admit that our life is so much determined by the particular design of our actions - like reading, watching films, doing work, participating in the events of everyday life. Doesn't it sound much better to feel like a self-confident "Ego" that organizes life here and now in his own way and by his own means? If the psychological sphere is defined in whole units such as Gestalts, why then should we give up the awareness of some inner entity ruling our lives as a center of actions?

Wertheimer and the Gestalt school have not further discussed the problems of an ego-perspective, thus taking the edge of a consequent Gestalt view. Gestalt psychology would keep on experimental work concerning the traditional areas of psychological research: of perception, of learning, of problem solving processes.

But in Wertheimer's early and almost forgotten lecture to non-psychologist philosophers there is some outlook on the implications of a Gestalt theory as regards those vital questions of psychological experience:

*"When people are together as when they are at work, then the most unnatural behavior, which only appears in late stages or abnormal cases, would be to behave as separate Egos. Under normal circumstances they work in common, each as meaningfully functional part of the whole. Consider South Sea Islanders working together, or children at play. An Ego standing vis a vis or in contrast to the others usually develops under very special circumstances. If for any outward or inner reasons a harmonious balance is not attainable between a person and the people with whom he lives, then definite disturbances of the equilibrium must appear and in extreme instances lead to precarious substitutes for the natural equilibrium which will transform the psychological structure of the person. This led to the hypothesis that a wide range of mental disease, for which no actual theory had previously been submitted, might be the consequence of such fundamental processes"* (Wertheimer 1944, 91f.).

When Wertheimer discusses the Gestalt dynamics of actions he argues about field conditions making people act and behave. It is the "equilibrium" of work or leisure worlds which organizes the course of events in work and play, in doing lectures and scientific work. For that it is not necessary to develop an "Ego" in order to do all that under personal control. On the contrary the appearance of an "ego" in connection with actions like working or playing often means a disturbance of the naturally running situation.

I'd like to illustrate that once more in our context: In a Gestalt view it definitely is not us sitting in this room. You and I would be totally different, if we arranged this meeting as a discussion. For us the experience of an "Ego" could rather be a serious interruption. It could even put the success of this event at risk. As regards me it would be unpleasant to develop an "Ego" which suddenly faces position in front of many others - according to Wertheimer's above mentioned notice on psychological disturbances that would correspond with phenomena like nervousness, stage fright or stuttering. As regards you the development of only some "Egos" among you - let us think here of verbal or physical expressions such as protest or enthusiasm - would make the lecture impossible. Perhaps everyone of us has once experienced what happens when only one "Ego" develops in a concert audience.

We obey the dynamics of current situations, their density, their closure, their permanent "lines" and "curves" far more than we can imagine. Being part of field the lecturer may represent reference, support, obstruction, resistance. Correspondingly the audience is transformed into the run of this lecture - more or less successfully. If we take up the thought of Gestalt psychology this is the way actions get along. In this sense Wertheimer, Köhler and Lewin point to a psychology of everyday life.

A Gestalt psychology for the use of everyday life, similar to the one I have shown in my example, is not a view easy to take. Gestalten are not those friendly guides to self-experience as Gestalt therapy makes us believe. They reject what

we try to make sure in a pre-scientific sense of psychology: an ultimate and permanent unity of experience, may it be called the "Ego", the "self" or the "individual". Yet Gestalt psychology does not give up any utopia of human life by this - quite the reverse. Especially the late works of the mentioned authors take up the Gestalt concept in this way. Basing on the logic of Gestalt they try to extend the way of psychological thinking in favor of a humane and reflected view on reality.

If we don't define us as so much independent and autonomous, but more integrated in non-personal Gestalts then we are partly relieved from the burden of a self-absorbed and self-determined view on life. By this we might gain a broader horizon of thinking and acting in a multi-dimensional reality. If the present-day culture could learn to be less ego-related, that could at last have an actual - «*Gestalt therapeutical*» - effect.

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