Gestalt Theory

BY MAX WERTHEIMER

FOREWORD BY KURT RIEZLER

In the following pages Social Research publishes a speech that Marx Wertheimer delivered at a meeting of the Kantgesellschaft in Berlin in 1924.¹ The spoken lecture was taken down in shorthand, as Wertheimer had no manuscript and only a few notes. The lecture so impressed his audience that he was urged to publish it, and to this he consented, making only minor changes. As Wertheimer's only programmatic statement on gestalt theory in general, this is a unique document. It throws light on the inner impulse and leading ideas in the research already done and still to be done in gestalt psychology. It shows the attitude, spirit, and passion of Max Wertheimer better than has been done in any other written word of his, and better than can be done in any article in his memroy.

A few words may help the reader to recognize the philosophical attitude of the speaker in his spoken word. Wertheimer was a musician and a logician and a scientist. But the "and" suggests an aggregate, and hence is wrong. As one he was the others, in a unique and intangible unity which was the inner form of the man and his thought, the touch of genius in him, and his simplicity.

The marvel of the perfect melody posed a problem to Wertheimer the logician. The melody cannot be explained by starting from elements and building up the form as a sum of relations between these elements. The single tone is what it is

¹ The translation, by N. Naïrn-Allison, is as close to the original as possible. An extensive excerpt is published in Willis D. Ellis, A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939).

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in the whole—as part, not as piece; and the whole breathes in every part. The melody is remembered, recognized; we can transpose a melody, change all its elements, even some relations between them, but we still recognize it. It is the inner form that leads our recognition. As logician Wertheimer saw the challenge of this logical problem reach into the center of the traditional logic of classes, and he started to doubt many an established claim.

Max Wertheimer felt uneasy about a certain human barrenness in the scientific psychology of his time. The questions are empty; the answers are dead. The conceptual scheme, the logical tools do not fit, and thus violence is done to many marvels. He looked at nature with a pure heart and a humble mind, aware of our conceptual clumsiness, hating any violence, ready to respect the phenomena, to listen patiently to what they can tell us if we ask the appropriate questions in an appropriate language. The scientist in him would not consent to explain away whatever does not fit a preconceived scheme. To him a confused answer given by nature meant a confused question put by man.

There are things, phenomena, a great many of them, where elements, the single factors that seem to be given, cannot be isolated, changes cannot be correlated—things that resist and resent being cut into pieces. Looking more closely and submissively, he asked: Maybe it isn’t even true that these single elements are given? Is this cutting into pieces the only method we have? No, it can’t be. There are other possibilities. He refused to sacrifice the living phenomena to arid cleverness. He was aware of what every mathematician is aware of: that mathematics has possibilities not yet exhausted or even explored, far beyond its present stage; and that therefore science is not entitled to tie the notion of scientific method to a preconceived scheme of order before consulting the subject matter. Reverence and deep respect for nature, a desire to let things be what they are, led him to mistrust the greater part of the psychology of his time. This mistrust led him to more and
more important discoveries, which in turn justified his mistrust. Thus the scientist in him put questions to the logician; the logician posed problems far beyond psychology proper.

He did not permit his belief in the gestalt to take the cheap way out of the romanticists who resort to the irrational. On the contrary, concrete research was his pride, and his modesty. Observing this or that concrete instance, experimenting, sharpening the conceptual tools of a logic in the making, unriddling the riddle of a particular case, accepting the concrete challenge, neither generalizing nor anticipating, never submitting to shallow matters of course—this, not metaphysical speculation, was his passion.

When we, the children of historical thinking, ask about his specific spiritual inheritance we should understand that such an historical question is alien to the man and his way. He did not think of history, nor care where he came from. He was not interested in his place in the history of thought. He followed no tradition, but heeded the call of his heart, the voice of the things. Yet if we insist upon asking the question, Wertheimer was, whether he knew it or not, cared for it or not, the heir of a great tradition which, as an attitude toward nature, may well outlive many current schools of thought and many arrogant anticipations of scientific results. It is the tradition of Spinoza and Goethe.

Nature is a unity, though not a uniformity—one in all her variegated phenomena. His lecture shows his reluctance to believe in or acknowledge beforehand any split between organic and inorganic nature, nature and man, body and soul, science and history. Our separations of fields, realms, sciences, and methods are preliminary; distinction, separation, classification do not solve the fundamental problem. What we are confronted with are different manifestations of a universal structure. Structural analogies lead more deeply into nature than do differences in material contents. Different aspects of nature in different realms of science may be but projections on different yet still preliminary conceptual planes. In the
words of Goethe, we can but explore the explorable and si-
ently revere the unexplorable.

Though Wertheimer never allowed this general idea of
ture to enter his concrete research as a presupposition, and
blind him to the phenomena, it never deserted him. It guided
him as a heuristic principle, and enabled him to see many
things that others could not see, and to open the eyes of friend
and pupil.

Address by Max Wertheimer

What is gestalt theory, what is its aim?

Gestalt theory grew right out of concrete scientific work; it
grew out of definite, urgent problems in psychology, an-
thropology, 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 eluci-
dated these matters. Now we read and read. Or we may
ourselves carry out an investigation along the lines of the