The Significance of "Gestalt"

Psychology

WOLFGANG KÖHLER, in *Gestalt Psychology* (Liveright):

"Simple," "complicated," "regular," "harmonious," are words which *may* have a meaning when applied to a local or punctiform experience, though in most cases they refer to products of organization. But when we call something "symmetrical" this something is certainly a segregated whole. Similarly, "slender," "round," "angular," "clumsy," "graceful" are specific properties of definite wholes. And from these there is only one step to the more particular "form-qualities" given in the characteristic aspect of a circle, a triangle, a pear, an oak-tree, and so forth, all of them existing exclusively in their corresponding wholes. In German the word "gestalt" may be used as a synonym for "form," or perhaps "shape." So von Ehrenfels, taking the case of specific shape as the most important and evident among his qualities, applied the name of "gestaltqualitäten" to all of them. Therefore, it will be clear that not only the different forms or shapes of objects and figures are included, but also qualities like "regular." Furthermore, we have seen that there are temporal *gestaltqualitäten* as well as spatial ones, since the definition applies to the specific properties of a melody, to its "major" or "minor" character, for instance, in the same way it does to the "angularity" of a figure. Finally, seen movement as a whole may have a *gestaltqualität* which is temporal and spatial at the same time. This is the case in the aspect of a definite form of dancing and in the characteristic movements of animals, such as "jumping" or "creeping."

At this point a general remark about terminology may be useful. For von Ehrenfels the new characteristic properties themselves were objects of outstanding importance; he was more interested in them than in those segregated parts of the field which exhibit the best examples of *gestaltqualitäten* as their properties. In the German language, however—at lease since the time of Goethe, and especially in his own papers on natural science—the noun "gestalt" has two meanings: besides the connotation of "shape" or "form" as a *property* of things, it has the meaning of a concrete individual and characteristic entity, existing as something detached and *having* a shape or form as one of its attributes. Following this tradition, in *gestalt theorie* the word "gestalt" means any segregated whole, and the consideration of *gestaltqualitäten* has become a more special side of the *gestaltproblem,* the prevailing idea being that the same general type of dynamical process which leads to the formation and segregation of extended wholes will also explain their specific properties. Here the main stress is laid upon a characteristic type of process. This, indeed, is the most general concept of *gestalttheorie*: wherever a process dynamically distributes and regulates itself, determined by the actual situation in a whole field, this process is said to follow principles of *gestalttheorie.* In all cases of this type the process will have some characteristic which exists in an extended area only, so that a consideration of local points or local factors as such will not give us full insight into the nature of the process. From this viewpoint, even the segregation of circumscribed wholes becomes one more or less particular, though highly important, case among the various possibilities which are included in the most general idea of self-distribution and self-regulation, and in consequence the concept of *gestalt* may be applied far beyond the limits of sensory fields. According to the most general definition of *gestalt,* the processes of learning, of reproduction, of striving, of emotional attitude, of thinking, acting, and so forth, may be included as subject matter of *gestalttheorie* insofar as they do not consist of independent elements, but are determined in a situation as a whole. Quite apart from psychology the same will be true of ontogenetic development, and other biological events, wherever they show the definite marks of self-distribution and self-regulation. And this extension of the term does not mean vagueness, as many seem to believe. If prior to detailed investigation the general use of concepts belonging to machine and mosaic theory has prevailed for such a long time and so widely, it cannot be forbidden to discuss the opposite principle of dynamical order and regulation, which certainly is less known among psychologists though equally well established by physical theory. By no means do we believe, however, that any problem is really solved by the application of the general principle *as such.* On the contrary, when the principle seems to apply the concrete task of research is just beginning because we want to know the manner in which each special kind of process regulates itself under the conditions of each particular case.

If in the treatment even of sensory fields the real solution remains a task for the future, at least the first step may be made at once. Here, as everywhere, it will consist in the recognition of the reality and the concreteness of the problem. No one fails to see that there is a problem in visual depth as a property determined by conditions on the two retinæ, or—more generally—by stimulation on a two-dimensional surface. To see the real problem in the case of "form," as a property of segregated wholes, seems to be much more difficult. The reason is the same as in the case of segregated wholes themselves. When we consider retinal stimulation, for instance, our thinking operates with ready-made wholes which already have definite forms as we know them from perception. So we say innocently that "the form" of our pencil or of a circle is projected upon the retina. These words contain the experience-error. There is no factor in retinal stimulation which might pick out of the geometrical distribution of *all* local stimuli that circumscribed whole which will appear in the form of our pencil or of a circle, only after such a segregated whole has become a functional reality. On the retina we have the indifferent mosaic of millions of local stimuli, and nothing else. By arbitrary geometrical thinking, we may select and combine certain retinal spots; thus we may imaginatively impose all possible forms upon the retina, including, if we like, those of the pencil and of the circle. We must not forget, however, that this is mere play when compared with retinal reality and that the form of these objects is at this moment not more really there physiologically than that of an angel or of an Arabic letter.

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About 100,000 tons of rubbish have been cleared out of a quarry in Egypt in the search for statues of the Queen Hatshepsut that were dumped into the quarry when the queen died.