

On Gestalt Qualities (1932)*

The starting point of the theory of Gestalt qualities was the attempt to answer a question: what is melody? The most obvious answer: the sum of the individual tones which make up the melody. But opposed to this is the fact that the same melody may be made up of quite different groups of tones, as happens when the same melody is transposed into different keys. If the melody were nothing other than the sum of the tones, then we would have to have here different melodies, since different groups of tones are involved. Ernst Mach, who was struck by this fact, drew from it the conclusion that the essence of melody must reside in a sum of special sensations which accompany the tones as aural sensations. But he did not know how to specify these special sensations, and in fact we are able to discover nothing of them in inner perception.

The decisive step in the founding of the theory of Gestalt qualities was now the assertion on my part, that if the memory images of successive tones are present as a simultaneous consciousness-complex, then a presentation of a new category can arise in consciousness, a unitary presentation, which is connected in a peculiar manner with the presentations of the relevant complex of tones. The presentation of this whole belongs to a new category for which the name 'founded content' came into use. Not all founded contents are intuitive in nature and related to the presentation of a melody. There are also non-intuitive founded contents, as for example relations. What is essential to the relation between the founded content and its fundament is the one-sided

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determination [*Bedingtheit*] of the former by the latter. Every founded content necessarily requires a fundament. A given complex of fundamental presentations is able to support only a quite specific founded content. But not every fundament must as it were be crowned and held together by a founded content. At least, that was my view when I formed the concept of Gestalt quality. Others held a different view, that the Gestalt quality is necessarily given along with the fundament, and that the effort which we contribute – for instance in apprehending a melody – is not located in the production of the founded content, but merely in the noticing of it. Meinong and his pupil Benussi adhered to the first view, while the second will be represented by Wertheimer and Köhler.

Gestalt qualities may be divided into apprehension [*Auffassung*] of processes and apprehension of momentary states. I have distinguished these groups as temporal and non-temporal Gestalt qualities. Examples of processes are melody and motion; of momentary states, harmony, and what in everyday life is called spatial shape [*Raumgestalt*]. But there is melody and even harmony not only in the aural sphere; there are also, for example, colour-melodies and colour-harmonies. Indeed, in the realm of all sense-qualities it must be possible to find analogues of melody and harmony. Yet the field of Gestalten extends far more widely than is apparent from these examples. In the first place there is Gestalt not only in the realm of sound, but also in that of the resonance-sensations which, in contrast to musical tones and sounds, we call 'noises'. Language is composed of such noises, even if, in the individual vowels, tones are distinguishable as elements. Every word of a language is a Gestalt quality. One can form some idea of the extent of Gestalt qualities in psychical life from the fact that the so-called laws of association operate much more frequently in relation to Gestalten than in relation to elements. Thus, for instance, with the image of an individual person which is (certainly physically and in all probability psychically) a Gestalt quality, there are associated numerous images of other persons according to the law of similarity, while with the presentation of a simple element, for example of a sound or colour, there is not at all associated the presentation of other elements. Our memory for simple elements in the realm of tones, so-called absolute pitch, is incomparably less developed than the memory for melodies and harmonies. The so-called mnemonic aids, too, are based on Gestalt qualities. Their essence consists in this, that a Gestalt quality is found which for some reason or other is easily

imprinted on the memory and whose parts stand in a certain stereotypical relation to the objects of presentation to be retained in memory.

Consider for example the often cited phrase, easily accepted by the ear: 'Kilometertal, Euer Urpokal', where the first two syllables are readily associated with the name Klio, and every following syllable is identical with the first syllable of the name of one of the nine muses.

Belief in Gestalt qualities also forms the basis of my *Kosmogonie*. In order to understand the point of view of the latter, it is necessary to distinguish higher and lower Gestalten from each other.

Every determinate body has some kind of Gestalt. He who compares the Gestalt of a clod of earth or of a heap of stones with the Gestalten of say a swallow will however at once have to admit that the tulip, or the swallow, has realized the particular genus *Gestalt* to a greater degree than have the clod or the heap. In like manner, all visible objects have some kind of colour. Still, every unprejudiced person will agree that a brilliant red is colour to a greater degree than, say, grey. But in order to characterize this *being colour to a greater degree* [*M ehr-F arbensein*], there is nothing to which we can point except the visual impression; being of higher as opposed to lower Gestalt, however, can be determined very well by distinguishing marks. Higher Gestalten are those in which the product of the unity of the whole and the multiplicity of the parts is greater. To give the simplest possible examples: if in regular polygons all possible diagonals are drawn, Gestalten of approximately similar unity are produced. If we begin with the square and advance to the pentagon, we obtain figures which qualify as higher and lower Gestalten in proportion to the number of their parts. If however we begin for instance with an irregular polygon, e.g. an octagon, and construct a series of polygons which approximate more and more closely to a regular octagon, the Gestalten of these polygons with their diagonals will become higher, the closer the irregular ones approach to the regular.