

SOME ASPECTS OF  
WERTHEIMER'S APPROACH TO PERSONALITY<sup>1</sup>

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A quarter of a century ago, Koffka referred to psychology as "a science which for such a long time has done all it could to disparage the idea of an ego" (1, p. 331). He noted that many psychology textbooks of that day gave one to understand "that psychology has nothing to do with the ego or the self, that the self has to disappear from psychology as completely as the soul. . . . Too much philosophical speculation has clustered around the self-concept to make it acceptable to scientific-minded psychologists" (1, p. 319).

Today various ego-oriented terms are acceptable to many psychologists and are generally not regarded as mystical or non-amenable to scientific investigation. The Gestalt psychologists have probably contributed to this change by attempting to deal with these concepts even when they were in disrepute, and by recognizing the far-reaching importance of ego considerations for the whole body of psychology. Despite their agreement on the need for such concepts, Gestalt psychologists do not agree on a common terminology with which to refer to them.

Let us, for example, compare the views of Koffka and Koehler. Koffka (1) distinguishes between ego and self, designating the self as the core (p. 342) or the central nucleus (p. 409) of the ego, or as the permanent sub-system of the ego whose tensions are much greater than those of its other sub-systems (p. 342). "When we speak of personality we think as a rule of the ego within its culture, i.e., determined by its social framework" (p. 676). The relative amount of space Koffka devotes to these concepts is seen in the fact that ego occupies 18 lines of print in the index, self only two lines, and personality only one line.

Koehler (2, 3), on the other hand, writes about the self but does not even include the terms ego and personality in the index. Koehler's concept of self is somewhat similar to Koffka's concept of ego, but differs in certain respects. Koehler's self refers to the phenomenal realm (2, pp. 66-69) whereas Koffka's ego may or may not refer to the phenomenal realm. Koffka conceives of the ego as part of the psychophysical field which transcends or properly includes the behavioral field and, presumably, the phenomenal field. He considers that the ego survives as part of the psychophysical field even when it is not represented in consciousness and even when consciousness itself disappears—concluding that the ego which "exists in our behavioral world, this phenomenal, or conscious, ego is not the whole ego" (1, p. 330). Koffka does not equate behavioral and phenomenal: "The behavior aspect transcends the phenomenal, the conscious, the latter being always but a small fragment of a much larger field event" (1, p. 331).

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Moreover, Koffka implies that thoughts are usually localized in the ego (1, pp. 327-329) whereas Koehler warns against the dangers of viewing thoughts or thought-objects as part of the self. He notes that to do so is to leave strictly phenomenological grounds, and to invite "a most unfortunate vagueness in the use of the term self" (2, p. 90). In fact, Koehler (2, p. 90n) recognizes that his terminology here differs from that of Koffka.

In view of these and other differences, it would be foolhardy to presume to speak for all Gestalt psychologists. This paper will focus on the formulations by Max Wertheimer, founder of the Gestalt movement, whose views on the ego or self are not well known, since he published less than the other major Gestalt psychologists on these concepts. But he did discuss them in lectures which I was privileged to attend (1936-1943).

#### CRITIQUE OF THE ASSUMPTION OF SELF-CENTEREDNESS

In these lectures, Wertheimer gave examples of behavior which seemed to be determined chiefly by the ego. But he also gave other examples, from everyday life as well as from the laboratory, of behavior which seemed to be determined chiefly by non-ego factors. In particular, he gave illustrations—which included his unpublished experiments on perception of the horizontal and vertical—of situations wherein perception of space and of movement seemed to be determined mainly by forces external to the ego. For example, spectators at a billiard game moved their heads in accordance with the billiard ball's movements; a subject, standing in a room whose walls were rotating, fell when the movement stopped; a subject who became used to viewing a scene in a mirror which was tilted at a 45 degree angle, tilted his head when the mirror was uprighted while he was looking in it.

From such examples, Wertheimer concluded that a person sometimes perceives and acts as if his ego were not at the center or origin of the system of spatial coordinates.

Koffka seemingly offers a different view when he writes that the ego "serves as the origin of the system of spatial coordinates" and is functionally different from all other objects "inasmuch as it (the ego) determines fundamental space aspects" (1, p. 322). Nonetheless, he recognized that the importance of the ego in the field varies. Koehler also, states that the self does not always play the dominant role in the phenomenal field, and that other objects may be much more active and important (2, p. 86). Vectors with a demand character do not issue only from the self: "Who has given the self a monopoly for demands?" (2, p. 91).

While Wertheimer recognized that a person may behave as if his ego were the main determinant, and that this may be characteristic of

some people, he stressed that this was not true of all people. In fact, he noted that when egocentrism or self-centering is extreme, it may be symptomatic of a psychopathological state, citing Schulte's description (8) of a paranoid individual as illustrating a field dominated by an ego. In presenting a girl's description of her office, which was blind to its structure and "centered everything about her ego" (11, p. 137), Wertheimer stated: "Self-centering is not at all the general, the natural attitude, as some influential views of our time would have us believe" (11, p. 138). Wertheimer was concerned that there were psychologists who assumed that the person, or the ego, or the self is necessarily the source of direction of human perception and behavior.

Such an assumption is still prevalent today. Since psychological theories do not only interpret, but may also shape human behavior, I wonder to what extent this assumption of self-centeredness may itself be contributing to self-centeredness.

In any event, the assumption of ego-determination should be put to experimental test. It seems in order, to re-issue Wertheimer's challenge to his students to devise and discover conditions under which an individual does or does not behave as if his ego were the central determinant of behavior. Also, conditions should be varied for a particular individual in attempts to maximize or minimize the importance of his ego as a determinant of his behavior. Research is furthermore needed to develop methods of tracing the locus of the ego in the field, both under experimental conditions and as an individual participates in his daily activities. Finally, the boundary of the ego should be experimentally determined, the conditions discovered under which the boundary contracts or expands (cf. 1, pp. 320-322), and the contraction of the boundary maximized or minimized, or the "area" within the boundary extremized.

#### PERSONALITY STRUCTURE AND FIELD

Hints for learning more about the ego or the self are implicit in a lecture Wertheimer gave on the nature of the soul. Instead of rejecting this concept because of its theological connections, psychologists should study in which life situations the word "soul" is used, and how it is used, e.g., "his soul isn't in his work;" "he did it with all his soul;" "only a soulless person could do that;" "he acts like a lost soul." Such studies may point to factors which seem to foster or to destroy the soul.

For similar reasons I suggest that psychologists can profitably study actual life situations in which people use the terms ego, self, and personality. This approach has been utilized to study of meaning of *creative* and *non-creative* (6).

Wertheimer considered abstractions, one by one, that have been utilized in describing the soul—such as immortal, immaterial, spirit-

ual, rational, etc. Each of these abstractions is usually opposed in dichotomous fashion to a quality supposedly not characteristic of the soul, e. g., immaterial versus material. Apropos of immaterial he asked, "Does the soul of a person refer to a ghost?" Apropos of rational he asked, if a computer or robot could be developed which would be rational in its performance, would people consider that it had a soul?

He concluded that what is ordinarily meant by soul cannot be understood in terms of the list of abstractions or attributes or qualities taken in isolation. We might be dealing here with a structure of some kind and should be concerned with structural properties. But a structural property or Gestalt quality is not simply another property attribute, or element to be added to the list of abstractions.

To illustrate how a structure might be studied, Wertheimer used examples from music and mathematics. A melody, for example, is governed by a principle. He then introduced the concept of a core or radix in personality, akin to a system of principles which govern it. To illustrate such principles he turned to experiments on expressive behavior and on forming impressions of personality.

Wertheimer did not assume that every person has one core or radix or that everything one does necessarily reflects his radix. Nor did he deny that there may be people who seem to be but an and-summation of roles. But such people, he stressed, should not be used to establish the generality of the assumption that personality is always an and-summation.<sup>2</sup>

Wertheimer also pointed out that even if an individual has a well-structured personality, we cannot understand the structure by focusing solely on it in isolation from the field in which it is functioning. A Gestalt may well extend beyond itself so that understanding of the Gestalt may require study of its surroundings and of its transactions with its environment.

#### FORMATION OF IMPRESSION OF PERSONALITY

Let us turn now to the question: What determines the formation of impression of personality? Some clues as to the complexity of the answer may be

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<sup>2</sup>The assumption of and-summation rejects from the outset the existence of structure and of personalities which are in the nature of Gestalten, and makes no provision for dealing with such cases. On the other hand, an assumption which is concerned with structure but at the same time recognizes degree of structurization is capable of encompassing not only cases which are in the nature of Gestalten, but also cases in which structurization is small, or approaches zero or and-summation.

found in a lecture wherein Wertheimer dealt with warmth perception. He first delineated experimental and theoretical difficulties which arise when one attempts to explain warmth perception solely in terms of happenings in specific end organs. Why does perception of warmth differ when one touches a piece of iron, a piece of wool, and a piece of wood that have been exposed on a cold day so that they are all of the same temperature? He proposed that warmth perception is a dynamic event which depends not only on the temperature of the external object but also on the flow of heat between the hand and the object. But even the concept of flow of heat is inadequate to explain a feeling of chilliness after one has come in out of the cold and has been before the fire for some time, or why one may still feel hot after the window in an overheated room has been open for some time.

The idea was then developed that warmth perception depends on the relation of the flow of heat to the heat level in the body. This led to discussion of factors which influence this relationship and the heat level. It was found that account had to be taken not only of physiological factors but also of so-called personality factors (e.g., attitudes, sets, moods, expectations, experiences), and not only of the physical conductivity of the medium but also of social factors in the environment.

In short, the determinants of warmth perception are complex and inter-related. Although Wertheimer did not make this point explicit, it seems clear to me that warmth perception is not a function of a finite number of independent variables but is more akin to a function of functions, or a process of processes.

Similarly the perception of persons and the formation of impressions of personalities are also dependent on complexes which are in the nature of functions of functions, or functionals. The functional concept in social perception was discussed in an earlier paper (4).

Note that Wertheimer did not try to explain warmth perception by just saying that it is a Gestalt or structured or organized or that the laws of perceptual organization (9) hold for it. He held that the particular principles of organization had to be demonstrated in each case.

#### UNIQUENESS OF THE PARTICULAR CASE

In a lecture on the nature of "doing" or action, Wertheimer pointed out that there is a tendency to account for an act of human behavior in terms of motives, purposes, elicited responses, etc., and to subsume behavior under a related theory. Thereby the problem is shifted from that of understanding a particular act to one of conceptualization. In this shift the particular act of behavior, and its place and function in the concrete situation, may be lost. In the same vein he urged that we do not lose sight of the richness and uniqueness of a particular case of any phenomenon under study—be it a person, object, or event.

One might say that Wertheimer advocated a pure case approach, that he was phenomenon-centered in his orientation, or that he was a phenomenologist or a realist. But to put him in a philosophical corner,

he would claim, was quite beside the point. His dictum was: Let's get down to the study of actual cases. Let the phenomenon speak for itself to suggest methods and concepts that are adequate to its nature. He was wary of obscuring the uniqueness of a particular case by subsuming it, from the start, under a generalization or a theory or a set of terminology—even if it be Gestalt-flavored terminology. An appeal to Gestalt terminology, no matter how sincerely voiced, should not be substituted for demonstrating just what it means in a concrete situation.

I wonder therefore if Wertheimer would be satisfied with the current tendency to use Gestalt terminology in discussions of the ego, self, and personality. He would, I believe, want to know whether this represents only a change in terminology, or an actual shift to Gestalt principles. He noted that it is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature or inner structure of Gestalten (“bestimmt von inneren Strukturgesetzen dieses seines Ganzen,” 10, p. 43). He was not content to label them as Gestalten, adding: “Gestalt theory has to do with concrete research; it is not only an *outcome* but a device; not only a theory *about* results but a means toward further discovery” (10, p. 44).

Granted that the ego, self, and personality are Gestalten, there is still need for more concrete research and further discoveries before we can determine the unique natures or structures of these wholes. The terms Gestalt or *whole* should not be treated, if you will forgive the pun, as a *hole* in which to bury a problem, but as a recognition that a problem has been raised. What kind of a whole is a particular case? What are its principles of organization?

#### UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

Allow me to give a few examples of problems which still await solution, through Gestalt theory.

It was over 35 years ago that Wertheimer said: “The genesis of an ego offers one of the most fascinating problems, the solution of which seems to lie in Gestalt principles” (10, p. 50).

It was 25 years ago that Koffka wrote: “Is personality a Gestalt, and if so, what kind of a Gestalt is it? These are concrete questions which can be investigated by scientific methods” (1, p. 677). But the insufficiency of experimental evidence, coupled with the difficulty and importance of the problem, led Koffka to conclude that “it seems wiser to bide our time” (1, p. 679).

It seems we are still biding our time. During this 25-year period there have been more experiments which conclude that personality is structured. But, although such demonstrations and conclusions are important, we must go further and seek to analyze the kind of structure that personality, or at least a particular personality, has. Similar problems exist for the ego. Nor do we yet know the nature of the self, considered in the phenomenal realm, or the nature of the cortical correlates of the self (2, p. 354).

A step in the right direction would involve intensive study of a particular individual and of the transformations in his behavior and environment throughout the course of his daily activities as well as under variations in experimental conditions. We also must know more about the appraisal others make of this person's behavior and personality, as variations are introduced with regard to appraisers, their relationship to the individual under study, the kind of information they receive about him, the order in which they receive the information, and the settings in which observations and appraisals occur.

In short, I am advocating a phenomenon-centered variational approach to the study of a person (cf. 4, 5, 7). The mental hospital, with its relatively greater accessibility to observation and experimentation, may be the place to begin such research.

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