

Gestalt Psychology and Organismic self-regulation

Gestalt formation and destruction is a primary characteristic of organismic functioning and also of the individual movement toward closure/satisfaction to return to a state of homeorhesis.¹ Gestalt therapy became a philosophy of life based on this holistic epistemology.

It was a gentleman by the name of Graf Christian von Ehrenfels who coined the term "Gestalt" to designate a psychical whole formed by the structuring of the perceptual field. It was his original belief that these structures were to be found in nature (i.e. that perception is essentially passive and reactive) and that breaking these structures down into derivative "parts" does not yield any worthwhile knowledge. For example, the perception of a large stone on a lawn was seen self-evidently as the figure (of the stone) against the background (of the lawn). His initial focus was to try to describe the laws by which these emergent "natural" structures were governed. This introduced a radical new anti-reductionist view that knowledge comes from an analysis of the interrelatedness of the elements that make up a whole object, and that one cannot understand something by examining its component parts.

This radical point of view became known as Gestalt psychology and was researched by Wolfgang Kohler, Kurt Koffka, Max Wertheimer and others. One of their more well-known projects was to describe the phi-phenomenon, the impression of movement that arises from a series of discrete images (like watching a movie). For Wertheimer, "gestalt" is perceptually primary, defining the parts it was composed from, rather than being a secondary quality that emerges from those parts. So we first experience the "whole" perceptual image, composed of its various "parts," prior to "re-cognizing" its component aspects. The fundamental principle of Gestalt perception is called the "law of pragnanz," or the "law of good gestalt" which states the principle that we tend to order our sensory experience in a manner that is regular, orderly, symmetric, and simple. As a result of the work of these Gestalt psychologists, perception of sensation was no longer viewed as submissive and reactive, but as proactive and intentional. The major shifts in Gestalt psychology that influenced Gestalt therapy are the acknowledgment that these psychical whole structures do not appear "out there" in nature but, rather, originate perceptually and also that the perception of the whole precedes its parts.

Kurt Lewin took this Gestalt model out of the laboratory and explored how human needs organize the perception of the field and action in the field (figure-and-ground). He found that it is through an active perceptual process that the need organizes forms (figures) out of the field (rather than some criterion of the field) and he called it the "life space." A student of Lewin's, Bluma Zeigarnik, discovered that people remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks. This "Zeigarnik effect" has been used to demonstrate the general presence of Gestalt phenomena: not just appearing as perceptual effects, but also present in cognition. Gestalt therapy later came to liberate this idea from the doldrums of Gestalt psychology as "unfinished business."

Kurt Goldstein was a neuropsychologist who created a holistic theory of the organism based on Gestalt psychology's descriptions of figure-ground perception which, in turn, profoundly influenced the development of Gestalt therapy theory. In essence, he expanded the academic Gestalt psychology of figure-ground perception to include Gestalt psychology principles in the study of the whole person (the whole person as "organism"). This model of the organism as the "ground" for the forming figure became known as "organismic theory." Jan Smuts, a South African politician and philosopher, took Goldstein's ideas one step further by regarding the organism as a self-regulating entity that "...contains its past and much of its future in its present." A starting point of Smuts' holism was the assumption that metabolism and assimilation are fundamental processes of all living things.

To summarize, Gestalt psychology was originally a straightforward approach to describing phenomena as they appear to the observer. Drawn from the writings of Brentano, Gestalt psychology explored the manifestation of phenomena as they appeared perceptually in sensory awareness. The extrapolations of Gestalt psychology into the areas of organismic self-regulation and holism expanded this initial focus and comprehensively extended the complexity of understanding the

relationship between figure and the ground. Even with these later elaborations of Lewin, Goldstein and Smuts, we may say that Gestalt therapy had its early origins in the phenomenological, relational and anti-reductionist makeup Gestalt psychology.

This is an introductory paper. Hopefully I have stirred your interest in this subject and you want to find out more. There are many places for the interested reader to go to find more information regarding this subject. One place to start is <http://www.gestalt.org/barlow.htm>

ⁱ Homeorhesis describes a trajectory of increasingly complex organismic functioning toward development and growth, rather than balance, equilibrium or homeostasis.