

Wittgenstein and Gestalt Psychology: A Reappraisal

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In this paper I consider Ludwig Wittgenstein's relation to the school of Gestalt psychology. Rather than focussing on Wittgenstein's well-documented engagement with the work of Wolfgang Köhler, I step back to examine how the Gestalt school's work on perception related to their overarching theory of cognition, and how that in turn relates to Wittgenstein's understanding of the nature of thought, perception, and experience. I suggest that, when viewed through this wider lens, both the affinities and the differences between Wittgenstein's approach and that of the Gestalt school come into clearer focus.

Although best known for experimental research in visual perception and on the principles of perceptual organisation, the members of the Gestalt school intended these insights to form only one part of a unified theory of (individual and social) cognition, action, and the will. They also made contributions to zoology, social psychology, and aesthetics. The Gestalt psychologists were motivated not only by disinterested scientific interest but also by ethical and political conviction, believing that the articulation of suitable methods for understanding human mindedness would help foster both positive individual growth and liberatory social structures.

In this paper I place Wittgenstein in conversation with the Gestalt school by focussing on a key term of Gestalt psychology, namely *field theory*. I compare their deployment of this concept to Wittgenstein's discussions of the visual field on the one hand, and of forms of life on the other. For the Gestalt psychologists the field was understood as a phenomenon which has determinate structure but no essential parts. With this physical analogy they hoped to take psychology into the status of a mature science by adapting metaphors and methods from the cutting edge of physics at the time. However, although helpful for moving psychological research away from elemental and sensationalist presuppositions, the attempt to find generic principles underlying the generation and formation of experience retained an essentialist presupposition which Wittgenstein, in his later work, subjected to thoroughgoing critique. Through examining this controversy we can better appreciate Wittgenstein's relation to both the Gestalt school in particular and to non-reductive positivistic approaches in psychology and social science in general.