Holism from Gestalt Psychology to Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Intersubjectivity

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Declaration

I, Nadja Gabriela Plein confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

In the chapter "Others and the Human World" in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the problem of other minds is only a problem for *intellectualism.* If everything in the world as I live and perceive it is constituted by my mind, then I cannot conceive of other minds: something alien in the sphere of my experience – something I did not constitute – is inconceivable (PP, 365/407). Solipsism, on this view, is insurmountable, according to Merleau-Ponty. Instead, he posits a primordial sociality based on a common corporeality.

However, whereas the first approach faces the problem of solipsism, in the second approach there is a danger of both ego and alter-ego vanishing into a sphere of common generality. Indeed, Levinas famously argues that the *other subject* is lost in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of anonymity (Levinas, 1990a, 57).

I argue that *difference* – both ego and alter-ego – are accounted for in Merleau-Ponty's theory. I argue that his theory of intersubjectivity is profoundly informed by Gestalt theoretical principles and, moreover, that it is *these principles* that allow us to see how Merleau-Ponty's theory supports difference. In contrast to existing literature – which has so far overlooked this vital aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought – I argue that we need to gain a firm grounding in the relevant aspects of Gestalt Theory, and Merleau-Ponty's critique and further development of Gestalt principles, before we can tackle his theory of intersubjectivity.

With this background in Gestalt Theory in place, I argue that the other arises as an immediate whole, that is a *Gestalt* (which Merleau-Ponty will call a *behaviour*), appearing as a *figure* against a shared *ground* of sociality, thus assuring *both* the primordial intersubjectivity *and* individuality.

Impact Statement

This thesis presents a new interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity that takes into account his engagement with Gestalt Theory. It further provides a thorough examination of the relevant aspects and Gestalt Theory and Merleau-Ponty's engagement with this school of thought.

Although, it is well-known that Merleau-Ponty was significantly influenced by Gestalt psychology, his engagement with this school of thought is woefully underexamined in the secondary literature. Most monographs on Merleau-Ponty treat Gestalt theory parenthetically and where it is discussed it is mostly restricted to the *Structure of Behavior* (1942) – his most explicit engagement with Gestalt Theory – and the initial work on behaviour and perception in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). No-one, to date, has examined the impact his engagement with Gestalt Theory has had on his more traditionally philosophical work dealing with topics such as intersubjectivity, temporality and freedom, that constitute the final chapters of the *Phenomenology*.

This thesis thus aims to fill a gap in the literature and retrieve this vital aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought. It moreover opens up possibilities for further research into how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is informed by Gestalt Theory and related holist thought.

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Abbreviations

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

SB   *The Structure of Behavior*

PP   *Phenomenology of Perception*

PW   *The Prose of the World*

VI   *The Visible and the Invisible*

TD   *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*

PR   *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*

Edmund Husserl

LI 2   *Logical Investigations* Volume 2

Ideas I   *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*

CM   *Cartesian Meditations*

Crisis   *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie*

Jean-Paul Sartre

BN   *Being and Nothingness*

Introduction

A holist approach to intersubjectivity

In the chapter "Others and the Human World" in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the problem of other minds – that is the problem whether or not the bodies I see moving around me are occupied by other minds – is only a problem for *intellectualism.*[1] If everything in the world as I live and perceive it is constituted by my mind, then I cannot conceive of other minds: something alien in the sphere of experience – something I did not constitute – is inconceivable (PP, 365/407). Solipsism, on this view, is insurmountable, according to Merleau-Ponty. Instead, he posits a primordial sociality based on an anonymous, shared corporeality.[2]

However, whereas the first approach faces the problem of solipsism, the second approach is in danger of losing both ego and alter-ego in a sphere of common generality. Indeed, Levinas famously argues that the *other subject* is lost in Merleau-Ponty's "antihumanist . . . tendency to refer the human to an ontology of anonymous being" and that the other is reduced to *the same* (Levinas, 1990a, 57). Dastur, in agreement, writes that "[i]f the other is always the symbol of others in general, it means that the encounter of this particular other

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[1] *Intellectualism*, for Merleau-Ponty, is an idealism that espouses a notion of meaningless, atomic matter that is *formed* in and for the mind; *Empiricism*, for Merleau-Ponty, stands for a reductive naturalism. Further details will follow in the text. Throughout the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty tells us that both *intellectualism* and *empiricism* fail to account for our experience. In the chapter on intersubjectivity intellectualism is his main target.

[2] Merleau-Ponty is not the only philosopher to think of sociality as primary. For instance, Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler also posit notions of primary intersubjectivity, cf. Heidegger, [1927]; Scheler, [1913/1916].

cannot really be explained" and we risk denying "all real difference between the other and me" (Dastur, 2008, 41).

I will argue that *difference*, both as ego and alter-ego, are accounted for in Merleau-Ponty's theory. I will argue that his theory of intersubjectivity is profoundly informed by Gestalt theoretical principles and, moreover, that it is *these principles* that allow us to see how Merleau-Ponty's theory supports difference. I will argue that the other arises as an immediate whole, that is a *Gestalt* (which he will call a *behaviour*), appearing as a *figure* against a shared *ground* of sociality, thus assuring *both* the primordial intersubjectivity *and* individuality.

Although, it is well-known that Merleau-Ponty was significantly influenced by Gestalt Psychology, his engagement with this school of thought is woefully underexamined in the secondary literature.[3] Most monographs on Merleau-Ponty treat Gestalt Theory parenthetically and where it is discussed it is mostly restricted to the *Structure of Behaviour* (1942) – his most explicit engagement with Gestalt Theory – and sometimes the initial work on behaviour and perception in the *Phenomenology*. No-one, to date, has examined the impact his engagement with Gestalt Theory has had on his more traditionally philosophical

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[3] Only brief discussions of Gestalt Theory are to be found, for instance, in (Morris, 2012), (Barbaras, 2004), (Madison,1981), (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011), (Carman, 2020), (Matthews, 2002), (Hass, 2008) and (Priest, 1998). Toadvine devotes a chapter to Gestalt Theory but fails to recognise the important differences between the Gestalt Theorists and Goldstein (Toadvine, 2009). The best discussions, to date, are to be found in Dillon, who also devotes a chapter to Gestalt Theory, (Dillon, 1997), Heinämaa's paper "Phenomenological Responses to Gestalt Psychology (Heinämaa, 2009) and Embree's classic paper "Merleau-Ponty's Examination of Gestalt Psychology" (Embree, 1980). However, all three neglect the hugely important influence of Goldstein on Merleau-Ponty. Gestalt Theory is briefly mentioned in the discussions on intersubjectivity in: (Barbaras, 2004, 34) and (Embree, 1980, 96, 98) without, however, engaging in a deeper examination.

work dealing with topics such as intersubjectivity, temporality and freedom, that constitute the final chapters of the *Phenomenology*.

I suggest that the notions of the body and perception that Merleau-Ponty establishes in dialogue with Gestalt Theory in the *Structure* and the early chapters of the *Phenomenology* ought to be read not as *separate from* but as a *preparation for* the more philosophical work. And, although my focus in this thesis remains on the *Structure* and the *Phenomenology*, I hold that the same is true for his later philosophical work.

I thus argue that we need to gain a firm grounding in the relevant aspects of Gestalt Theory as well as his critique and further development of Gestalt theoretical principles before we can tackle Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity and solve the question if Merleau-Ponty can account for difference. This is therefore my approach for this thesis: I begin with a thorough and in-depth examination of Gestalt Theory, followed by Merleau-Ponty's engagement with it, in order to establish the ground from which we can understand his radical and highly creative approach to intersubjectivity.

Therefore, my aim is not only to provide a new interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity but also to firmly position it in the context of a holist school of thought beginning with Gestalt Theory. I am thus working towards retrieving, for Merleau-Ponty scholarship, this vital aspect of his thought. I aim to show that Merleau-Ponty's engagement

with Gestalt Theory and related holist thought is not just of historical interest but has a profound impact on how we are to understand his philosophy.[4]

Thesis layout

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to a thorough exposition of Gestalt Theory and related thinkers Kurt Goldstein and Jakob von Uexküll. Particular weight is given to those aspects especially important to Merleau-Ponty in this context, namely the implications of Gestalt Theory for the organism and the ontology of the Gestalt. In this chapter I also discuss Merleau-Ponty's initial aim to find a way to combine Gestalt Theory and Husserlian phenomenology and a brief interlude discussion of Gurwitsch who shared some of Merleau-Ponty's aims. In the second chapter I discuss Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Gestalt Theory and his development of some of its principles. In the final chapter I provide an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity that shows how said theory is vitally supported by Gestalt theoretical principles Merleau-Ponty further developed.

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[4] Merleau-Ponty was, of course, also influenced by other schools of thought, most notably Husserlian phenomenology. But, although I will discuss Husserl, for the purposes of this thesis my main emphasis will be on Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Gestalt Theory.

Chapter 1 – Gestalt Theory, Jakob von Uexküll, Kurt Goldstein and the Organism's Relation to its Milieu

The Gestalt theorists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll and the neurologist Kurt Goldstein were amongst many early 20th century thinkers who rebelled against the linear, mechanist views that dominated 19th century thinking in the sciences and instead aimed to posit a *holist*, structuralist alternative. What emerges is not only a radical rethinking of perception but of the very nature of our being in the world. Their revolutionary ideas are not without problems, however, and we will see that Merleau-Ponty aims to tackle some of them in his own early work.

1-1 Merleau-Ponty's aim to combine Gestalt Theory with Husserlian Phenomenology

Before we get to Gestalt Theory, however, let us take a brief look at Merleau-Ponty's initial interest in Gestalt Theory, drawing on two short proposals he wrote in 1933 as applications for funding (TD, 74-84). From these we know that his aim from early on was to find a way to combine Gestalt theoretical results with Husserlian Phenomenology.

The Berlin School of Gestalt Theory and Edmund Husserl, in fact, share a common historical source: both share roots in Franz Brentano's philosophy. Husserl studied with Brentano as did Carl Stumpf who would become the teacher of the Gestalt theorists Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka. As Heinämaa points out, both movements emerge, "by affirmation and critique, from the new "descriptive psychology" that Brentano introduced and developed" (Heinämaa, 2009, 268-269). Importantly, Brentano theorised about the existence of wholes that are not composed from a "multiplicity of parts", a notion that remained absolutely central in both schools (cited in: Heinämaa, 2009, 271). And, in many important respects the two movements remained in dialogue. The Gestalt Theorists drew from Husserl's work (see, for instance, Köhler's borrowing of Husserlian terminology below). Furthermore, numerous papers published in Husserl's *Jahrbuch* are of importance to and in communication with psychology – such as Linke's "Phänomenologie und Experiment in der Frage der Bewegungsauffassung" (*Phenomenology and Experiment in the Question of the Understanding of Movement*) (1916) which, indeed, refers to Wertheimer's seminal discussion on the *phi* phenomenon (Wertheimer, 1912).[5]

However, the two movements became divergent, even antithetical. On the one hand we have Gestalt Psychology with its commitment to practical experimentation as a necessary foundation for theory. And on the other hand there is the rejection by Husserl and his followers of *psychologism* and *naturalism* – Gestalt Theory is explicitly rejected by Husserl in his introduction to the English translation of *Ideas I* (Ideas I, 24). Most importantly, Husserl saw it as a mistake to draw on experimental results. For Husserl "all real, mundane

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[5] The *phi* phenomenon refers to the movement we perceive between two stationary images, for instance between two points at different locations seen with a stroboscope.

objectivity, including human beings and animal, including the "soul"" is constituted by the mind – we will return to this notion later. Therefore, trying to solve problems on the "naïve-objective ground and in the method of objective sciences" is nonsensical (Crises, §58, my translation).

In the same year as he wrote his two proposals, Merleau-Ponty also met Aron Gurwitsch. Both philosophers, felt, in spite of Husserl's rejection of Gestalt Theory, that it would be fruitful to bring the two traditions together.[6] As Dillon writes:

> Merleau-Ponty and . . . Aron Gurwitsch . . . were the first to realize that the antagonism between the two approaches was hindering both, and generating problems that could be resolved by bringing them together. (Dillon, 1997, 58)[7]

For Merleau-Ponty, as we will see, "bringing them together" will not comprise a joining of transcendental phenomenology with experimental psychology, but rather a *critique of both through both*: In the Gestalt theoretical notion of the *form*, the *Gestalt*, Merleau-Ponty initially finds the means for a critique of Neo-Kantianism and Husserl's intellectualist approach. Later, we will see that the *Gestalt* will be turned in on itself and used to critique its own naturalism (TD, 74).[8]

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[6] As Morris points out, Merleau-Ponty was evidently already familiar with Gestalt Theory prior to having met Gurwitsch. He may have initially learnt about Gestalt Theory through the books of Paul Guillaume (Morris, 2012, 21) – contra commentators who suggest Gurwitsch introduced Merleau-Ponty to Gestalt theory.

[7] The two philosophers' projects were parallel but divergent and as a consequence there are deep-rooted differences. Unfortunately, a deeper engagement with Gurwitsch's thought is outside of the scope of this thesis. Although, I will briefly return to him at the end of this chapter.

[8] In the *Structure* and elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty translates the German term *Gestalt* into the French *forme* (form), possibly following Paul Guillaume's translation in his *la psychologie de la forme* (*SB*) (Guillaume, 1937). Fisher's translation of the *Structure* uses the English term *form* as a translation for *forme*. I sometimes maintain this translation in order to keep consistency with Merleau-Ponty's terminology. I hope that it will be clear from

Let us now turn to Gestalt Theory and gain an understanding of what it is that Merleau-Ponty will respond to.

1-2 The Beginnings of Gestalt Theory

Perception as Mechanism

Late 19th century psychology sought to find scientific legitimacy by appropriating findings from the natural sciences for the domain of perception. As Gurwitsch writes: "Psychology relies and bases itself upon the results of physics so that it finally appears as an extension of physics" (Gurwitsch, 1966a, 4). Hermann von Helmholtz, for instance, makes it clear that his scientific language (following Isaac Newton) depends on a view of the physical world that is explicable entirely via mechanical means.

Helmholtz writes:

> If we think of the universe as consisting of elements with inalterable qualities, the only possible changes in such a system are spatial ones, that is, movement. Moreover, the external relations by means of which forces effect changes can only be spatial, and thus the forces acting can only be motive forces, which in their action depend only on spatial relation. To speak more precisely: natural phenomena should

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the context if an occurrence of "form" refers to Gestalt or the "form" opposite matter. Although Merleau-Ponty most often uses *form* for Gestalt, he also uses *structure*, *system*, and *order*, (mostly) interchangeably.

be traced back to the movements of material objects which possess inalterable motive forces that are dependent only on spatial relations. (Helmholtz, [1847], 5)

Helmholtz aims to use this manner of thinking to explain perception. Thus he explains that the fovea, the pit of the retina, is the most important part for vision as this is the place where light is received unimpeded by other less transparent parts of the retina. There "[w]e may assume that a single nervous fibril runs from each of these cones through the trunk of the optic nerve to the brain, without touching its neighbors, and there produces its special impression, so that the excitation of each individual cone produces a distinct and separate effect upon the sense" (Helmholtz, [1868], 153). He further likens the visual perceptual apparatus to the mechanics of the camera obscura, thereby reinforcing that the perceptual function is to be understood as an entirely mechanical process (Helmholtz, [1868], 154).

On this atomic view individual stimuli act on the sensory organs and produce particular excitations in the form of sensory data. *These sensations are considered the most elementary facts of perception.* The hypothesis underlying this theory is that there is conformity between stimuli and sensations, that is, if the same stimulus is repeated in the same manner, the same sensation will be caused each time – this is later known as the *constancy hypothesis* in the literature of Gestalt Theory. The atom as the locus of mediation between world and perception is thus the foundation of the constancy hypothesis.

Importantly, Helmholtz held that this mechanical process of vision did not produce an exact copy of the perceived object in the world but rather sensations are to be understood as "signs" of the world (Ash, 1998, 53). Lenoir writes: "Helmholtz, therefore, considered the

eye as a kind of measuring device with the function of producing a usable map of the external world. Representations are purely symbolic representations, which are constructed by us, in order to make optimal use of the different data provided by the sensory inputs" (Lenoir, 1995, 219, my translation). He upholds, thus, a notion of atomic matter that is secondarily organised by a higher mental functions. Helmholtz's theory, then, on one hand, is an empirical account of the human's interaction with the world, and on the other, Kantian. This dualistic manner of thought dominated 19th and early 20th century psychology.

The beginnings of Gestalt Theory

When the psychologist Christian von Ehrenfels first started discussing Gestalt qualities in his seminal paper "Über Gestaltqualitäten" (*On Gestalt Qualities*) (1890) – the founding document for Gestalt Theory – the constancy hypothesis was not challenged. The sensory apparatus is said to function much as described by Helmholtz, but above that function we also perceive a Gestalt quality which is said to be a "*quasi-sensory impression which does not arise from any stimulus*" (Gurwitsch, 1966a, 7).

Ehrenfels' example for a Gestalt quality was the melody. If we have a melody of twelve notes and we give one note each to twelve people and the whole melody to one individual person, the one person gains something that the individual twelve people added together miss out on. In other words: the melody as one *whole* is more than the mere sum of its parts, it has Gestalt quality (Ehrenfels, 1980, 252).

These Gestalt qualities, although not caused by stimuli, nevertheless depend on the presence of the sensory impressions in consciousness which act as a *Grundlage* (*substratum*) for the Gestalt quality. Within consciousness then, we find a sum of sensations, the co-existence of which give rise to Gestalt qualities (Ehrenfels, 1890, 255). The constancy hypothesis, thus, continues to function underneath the experience of Gestalten, according to this view.

Wertheimer, Koffka and Köhler, the founders of the Berlin School of Gestalt Theory, on the other hand, question – and aim to reject – both the constancy hypothesis with its assumption that the sensation is the smallest unit of perception, and the dualistic approach. Instead they posit a notion of Gestalten that appear immediately as wholes within experience. Before we aim to understand what that might mean, let us first see what the dualism they reject comes down to.

Matter and Form

An *atomistic* view such as that of Helmholtz that holds that the sensation is the smallest unit of perception, necessarily holds that matter is devoid of meaning. Therefore the disparate atomic units of perception cannot be intrinsically related. The adherents of an atomic view, therefore, are faced with the same problem that Descartes and, later, Hume occupied: "the problem of explaining the principles of association", as Dillon writes (Dillon, 1997, 64-65). In other words, they need to explain how it is that these atoms can be combined into meaningful wholes.

Dillon continues:

> If perceptual atomism is to adhere consistently to its definition of atoms as absolutely simple, it must account for the synthesis of atoms by appeal to a supervenient principle of organization. The necessary rules of inference Descartes regarded as based on the natural light of reason, Hume's principles of association, Kant's categories, and Husserl's noemata all serve the same function: they are laws of synthesis designed to explain how the materially based atoms of sensation are organized and take on the forms of perceptual experience. (Dillon, 1997, 65)

Of course, if organisation is attributed entirely to a higher mental activity, then, experience can no longer serve as the foundation of any knowledge. Hence Husserl's rejection of experimental psychology.

The Gestalt theorists, however, argue that this approach fails to explain our experience. They argue that perceptual experience is intrinsically meaningful, that what appears to us are *immediate wholes.* So, instead of the sensation being the smallest unit of cognition, Wertheimer, in the early 1910s starts to develop a new epistemology that claims that instead *structured wholes – Gestalten – are the smallest units of mental life*.

Merleau-Ponty writes in his proposals:

> A doctrine inspired by critical philosophy treats perception as an intellectual operation through which non-extended data ("sensations") are related and explained

in such fashion as to finally constitute an objective universe. . . . Now, experimental

investigations carried out in Germany by Gestalt theorists seem to show on the

contrary that perception is not an intellectual operation. The "form," on this view,

would be present in sense-knowledge itself, and the incoherent "sensations" of

traditional psychology would be a gratuitous hypothesis. (TD, 74)

The Gestalt is a *spontaneous organization* of the sensory field which has supposed

"elements" dependent on "wholes" which are themselves articulated within more

extensive wholes. This organization is not like a form imposing itself upon a

heterogeneous matter; there is no matter without form; there are only organizations,

more or less stable, more or less articulated. (TD, 77, my emphasis)

Here we see a primordial level of meaning already at work as a "spontaneous organisation"

– sometimes called an *autochthonous* organisation – at the most fundamental level of

perception.

In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty will further clarify that this immediate whole, this

autochthonous organisation that provides the most basic unit of experience is the

figure/ground structure:

a figure against a background is the most basic sensible given we can have . . . this is

the very definition of the perceptual phenomenon, or that without which a

phenomenon cannot be called perception. The perceptual "something" is always in

the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a "field." A truly homogeneous

area, offering *nothing to perceive*, cannot be given to *any perception*. (PP, 4/26)

Merleau-Ponty concludes that "[p]ure impression [an atomic sensation] is thus not merely

undiscoverable, but imperceptible, and therefore is inconceivable as a moment of

perception" (PP, 4/26). And, later in the text: "[w]e say *a priori* that no sensation is punctual

[atomic] and that all sensoriality presupposes a certain field, and thus coexistences" (PP,

230/266).

However, I am jumping ahead. Before we get to Merleau-Ponty's version of the

autochthonous organisation let us return to the original Gestalt psychology and see how its

theorists conceived of the notion of *immediate wholes*.

1-3 Wertheimer's Gestalt Laws

Wertheimer laid out the foundations of Gestalt Theory in two important papers

"Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt" (*Investigations for Gestalt Theory*) I and II,

published in 1922 and 1923, respectively.

Wertheimer begins the first paper with a rejection of the traditional notion of meaningless

matter that is secondarily organised by a higher psychical function and states that

Gestalt Theory aims to replace this approach with one where the psychical appears as autochthonous organisations, as immediate *wholes*.

Wertheimer writes:

> *The given is in itself, to various degrees "gestaltet": given are more or less structured, more or less determined wholes and whole-processes, with often very concrete whole-qualities, with inner laws, characteristic whole-tendencies, with whole-conditions for its parts.* (Wertheimer, 1922, 52, my translation).

It is the whole, then, that determines the meaning of the part and not an *addition* of parts that determine a whole. Specific conditions of the whole "demand" particular parts out of an "inner necessity". We can no longer think of "pieces" as the "prius" but instead we have to think of them as "parts" that are conditioned by the whole, their relationship has been functionally entirely transformed (Wertheimer, 1922, 53).

Later we will see that both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty use this kind of understanding of a whole when they describe how "spirit" or consciousness cannot be considered in isolation of the body as if both were separate *pieces* that have been *added* together.

Gestalt Laws

Wertheimer identifies several Gestalt laws, for instance the *Factor of Proximity*:

In Fig. 1, we privilege a grouping of the two dots that are closer together over a grouping over the gap, that is – if we alphabetise the dots – we privilege ab, cd, ef, etc., over a, bc, de, etc. The second grouping can be achieved but it only arises with "difficulty, artificially and is more labile" (Wertheimer, 1923, 308, my translation).

• •   • •   • •   • •   • •   • •   • •

Fig. 1 (Wertheimer, 1923, 304)

Another law is called the *Factor of Similarity*, which states that if there are several stimuli effective at the same time then there is – *ceteris paribus* – "a tendency to the form in which the same appear grouped together" (Wertheimer, 1923, 309, my translation).

○ ○ • • ○ ○ • • ○ ○ • • ○ ○ • • ○ ○ • •

Fig. 2 (Wertheimer, 1923, 308)

In Fig. 2 we privilege a grouping of ab, dc, ef, etc., rather than a, bc, de, etc.

When two such factors come together, they can either strengthen or weaken a tendency. This is called the *Factor of Cohesion* (*Prägnanz*). A change in a given grouping can therefore either be *according to* the structure or *against* it and this will influence the strength of a tendency (Wertheimer, 1923, 315). A form can be "better" or "worse" depending on its level

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of cohesion. A "good" Gestalt, therefore, depends on its *Prägnanz*. The notion of the good

Gestalt is very important and one we will return to repeatedly.

Another important law that we will return to is the Factor of Closure (*Geschlossenheit*): If

there is a, b, c, d and ab, cd provide two closed forms and ac, bd provide two open forms,

our tendency is for ab, cd (see Fig. 3).
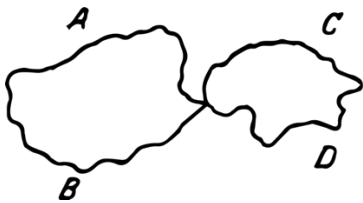
Fig. 3 (Wertheimer, 1923, 326)

The factor of closure also, often, demonstrates a tendency for "good form" (*Tendenz zur*

guten Ganzgestalt).
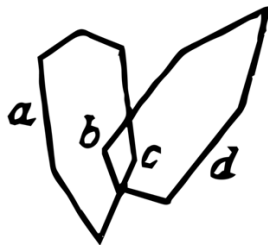
Fig. 4 (Wertheimer, 1923, 326).

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In Fig. 4 we privilege the two closed "good" forms ac, bd over the three "senseless" figures of ab, bc, cd (Wertheimer, 1923, 326).

Whence the privilege?

Although Wertheimer rejects that privilege is created through experience, but instead arises autochthonously, he does admit that habit and experience are sometimes contributing factors to our perception of groupings. He calls this the *Factor of Habit.*

Fig. 5 (Wertheimer, 1923, 331)

Wertheimer points out that a student of Greek will see Fig. 5 as a duo of sigma, gamma and a student of Latin will see it as a decorated uppercase V (Wertheimer, 1923, 331).

We can see readily in this example that experience makes a vital contribution to the perception of this figure. Why would experience not underlie all the other examples as well and thus act as a psychical organising principle?

We might point out, for instance, that many of Wertheimer's examples are visually very familiar. Are they simply privileged because of their familiarity? Wertheimer argues that the proponents of the experience thesis would need to be able to show that there is *not* an

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inherent structure already at play that experience only reinforces. That is, it would need to show that the groupings that appear are really entirely contingent and only gain their cohesion through experience (Wertheimer, 1923, 333). Wertheimer, argues that the traditional psychologists have no way of showing that there is an initial stage where we perceive unconnected sensations that are then secondarily connected through association.

Wertheimer presents the example of the right angle: is not the child already familiar with numerous examples of right angles? Windows, chairs, tables, room corners all present them readily. However, the child is equally familiar with various other angles from nature such as tree branches, for instance. But more importantly, it is clear that these angles are only very rarely actually presented as right angles to perception (Wertheimer, 1923, 333). It is therefore difficult to support a view that suggest experience underlies all or most privileged perception.

Furthermore, it is clear that lawful tendencies override experience. Nobody reads Fig. 6 as four Ms and four Ws but rather as a kind of decorative border, even though these letters are very familiar from experience. The tendencies for "good" form and continuity (which states that we privilege continuity over discontinuity) override experience.

Fig. 6 (Wertheimer, 1923, 334)

Fig. 7 (Wertheimer, 1923, 335)

In Fig. 7, on the other hand, we do see the Ws and Ms because they make the better form.

However, even if we agree with Wertheimer that the Gestalt laws override experience, it still leaves the question *why we perceive according to Gestalt laws in the first place*. In other words, why is there an autochthonous organisation? Wertheimer asserts in a few places that these laws are *objective* – are they thus "in" the object? This cannot be right, as we can see in Wertheimer's own studies on motion where the tendency for "good" Gestalt overrides what is objectively given (Wertheimer, 1912, 161-265). It is the *law itself* that is somehow objective and does not depend on my subjective contribution. Wertheimer is, of course, trying to stress that the autochthonous organisation is *not* a mental organisation principle. And it is clear that the subject plays a role: the *phi* phenomenon clearly would not exist without the subject that perceives it. The appearance of Gestalten, therefore, has to somehow arise out of a *relation between the subject and the object*. Wertheimer's insistence that these laws are objective and *not subjective* is therefore not entirely satisfactory and we are still left wondering *whence of the privilege*. We will see that both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty critique Gestalt Theory on this point.

Helmholtz's theory of perception, is, of course, backed up by a corresponding theory of the physiology that makes it possible, as we have seen. Wertheimer recognised that this new psychology would require a new way of thinking about physiology. At the end of his influential study of the *phi* phenomenon "Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung" (*Experimental Studies on the Perception of Movement*) (1912), Wertheimer provides a sketch for a physiological foundation that could hypothetically support his phenomenological findings. He speculates that the perception of wholes requires some form of whole-process in the sensory organ. He imagines that there would be a *whole-process* brain function *parallel* to the psychological function of the phenomenology of our perception of the *whole* (Wertheimer, 1912, 252). He is clear that these are only initial speculations and ideas for future research. Indeed, so far he has nothing to back them up. This changes when Köhler introduces his revolutionary theory of *physical Gestalten*.

1-4 Köhler's Physical Gestalten

Köhler, like Wertheimer, rejects the Ehrenfelsian notion that Gestalten are something that arises from a *sui generis* power of the mind over and above a mechanical body.
In his influential work *Die physischen Gestalten* (*Physical Gestalten*) (1920), he aims to show that there exist physical Gestalten in the world and that we thus have grounds for

hypothesising that certain physiological functions may also be Gestalten or Gestalt-processes.

Ehrenfels criteria

In order to determine if there are physical Gestalten we need to establish what kind of a thing a Gestalt is, in other words, what criteria does something need to fulfil in order to be a Gestalt. Köhler begins with pointing to what he calls the "Ehrenfels criteria": *suprasummativity* (*Übersummativität*) and *transposability*.

Suprasummativity means that the Gestalt is more than the sum of the parts, a notion that goes back to Ehrenfels' work on melodies.[9] However, Köhler, argues that this criterion, stated like this, asks too little and fails to encompass the radicality of the proposal. It is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition. We have already come across a stronger notion of the whole where its relation to its parts has been functionally transformed in Wertheimer's work.

Transposability holds that the Gestalt can be transposed. Köhler suggests that in a melody the givens (the absolute notes of the melody) can be transposed into another key without changing the essence of the melody. We can see readily that transposability is very limited. If you ask a soprano to sing the same melody, first in a key at the lower end of her vocal range, and then in a key at her upper end, this will significantly impact the aesthetic character of the composition and hence we cannot truly say the melody maintains its "essence".[10]

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[9] See (Ehrenfels, 1890)

[10] The harmonic content (the over- and undertones) of any naturally produced sound will change with register (how high or how low you play it) and thus the sound quality of the melody will always be altered in transposition, often very significantly so. The only way you could get a perfect transposition is if you restrict yourself to artificially produced sine-tones that do not have over- and undertones.

Indeed, Köhler suggests that whereas the first criterion asks too little, this criterion asks too much. Not only has transposability limits, certain groupings that have clear Gestalt qualities may not be transposable at all. Nevertheless, if something is transposable, as is the case (with qualifications) for melodies, then we can clearly see that the essence of the grouping is not the sum of its parts but something beyond that. Köhler therefore states that transposability is a *sufficient* but not *necessary* condition.

"Summative"

With these initial conditions in place, Köhler turns to things in the world. In order to underscore the correct whole to part relationship of Gestalten, Köhler first discusses what it is not, namely the "summative" approach:

> Three stones, of which one is in Australia, the second in Africa, and the third in the United States, of which each piece can be removed, shifted, returned to its original place, without the other two being influenced by this. . . (Köhler, 1920, 47, my translation).

Köhler agrees that there are many examples of purely summative wholes in physics where the alteration of a part has little or no impact on the other parts. However, if the whole is a Gestalt, *altering a part affects the whole*.

Electro-static charge as a physical Gestalt

Köhler points to the electro-static charge as a particularly good example of a physical Gestalt. He writes:

If an electric charge is applied to the conductor in any arbitrary distribution, then, from the moment the conductor is left to itself, a spontaneous redistribution follows to an equilibrious distribution with such enormous speed, that it is generally impossible to observe and study the process of distribution. (Köhler, 1920, 55, my translation)

If the conductor remains well-insulated and is left undisturbed, then the charge will remain in a static equilibrium. In a spherical conductor the charge is the same density in all point of the surface. In an ellipsoidal conductor the density of the charge is greater in the points of more curvature and less in the points of less curvature. The distribution of the charge constitutes its own structure. Note that this is a kind of autochthonous organisation.

If we try to change the charge at only one point on the surface of the conductor, that is increase, decrease or shift it, we find that this is impossible. Any modification results in an immediate redistribution to re-establish the overall equilibrium. For the same reason it is also impossible to assemble an electro-static charge piecemeal from individual points. It therefore cannot be a summative grouping. Köhler writes: "The structure [of the electro-static charge] is a physical form [*Gebilde*], which only exists for the surface of the conductor as a whole, and therefore is itself only physically capable of existing over the whole surface" (Köhler, 1920, 57, my translation).

The electro-static charge is a physical Gestalt, a *strong Gestalt*, the "parts" of which cannot be conceived of in separation from the whole. He borrows Husserl's terminology when he suggests that that the term "part" in strong Gestalten could still be misleading and instead

suggests the expression "*moment of the structure at one point*" (Köhler, 1920, 60, my translation).[11]

These charges fulfil the Ehrenfels criteria, they are *suprasummative*, in Köhler and Wertheimer's strong sense, as well as *transposable* (the charge can be transferred from one conductor to another) and are therefore physical Gestalten.

Physiological Gestalten and Isomorphism

Having made a compelling case that there exist physical Gestalten in the world, Köhler moves on to the question of how we might re-think the organism in terms of Gestalten.

Köhler's hypothesis is that if the physiology of perception is to consist of Gestalten then it must be the case that there is an "*objective similarity between Gestalt characteristics of the psycho-physical events and those of the phenomenal field,* not only generally in that both are Gestalten but *in the specific Gestalt characteristics of each individual case*" (Köhler, 1920, 193, my translation). In other words, like Wertheimer, Köhler suggests that there has to be a *parallelism* between the psychical perception and the physiological function that facilitates it. Köhler calls this "psychological isomorphism" (Köhler, 1920, 193).

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[11] Husserl, in *Logical Investigations Volume 2*, differentiates between a part as a piece and a part as a moment: "*Each part that is independent relatively to a whole W we call a Piece (Portion), each part that is non-independent relatively to W we call a Moment (an abstract part) of this same whole W*" (LI 2, 29). However, as Ash points out, unlike Husserl, Köhler "was referring to real physical processes, not to subjective "moments of intuition"" (Ash, 1998, 174). Merleau-Ponty often uses the term 'moment' to mean a "part" of a strong whole.

Physical figure/ground

Köhler explains that we can detect a *figure/ground* distinction within the physical process, which he describes as functioning like electrical currents in physics. His example is the perception of a sphere against a homogenic background: the sphere is reflected by a "figure" area on the retina which constitutes the "much more lively state", and the homogenic background by a calmer "ground" area (Köhler, 1920, 207, my translation).

He writes:

> If one gives an explanation in such a simple case, then one must apply it everywhere: *always, the "structured"* [*gestaltet*] *(in the strong sense), firm or "as figure" appearing area needs to be seen as that area of the current in which the whole-shift of the optical event appears as strongly concentrated whereas in the area of the "ground" the current is much more spread out*. (Köhler, 1920, 207, my translation)

We might imagine something like an electrostatic conductor that changes its shape and thus the areas of higher density and the areas of lower density change according to the shape of the conductor. Here, the "charge" in the retina changes depending what is perceived.

These "strong" physiological Gestalten are secondarily connected to other physiological Gestalten thus making greater "weak" Gestalten in the organism. We will return to this point later.

Ash explains that "most writers who asserted a qualitative difference between the physical and the psychical realms argued that even the most exact knowledge of the brain would tell us nothing about conscious experience" (Ash, 1998, 177). Köhler, on the other hand, asserts that "A brain observation is in principle conceivable, which would recognize in Gestalt, and thus in the most essential characteristics, something physical similar to that which the subject phenomenally experienced" (cited in: Ash, 1998, 177). According to Köhler, then, a sufficiently advanced brain science should be able to detect something of what is perceived psychically from analysing brain activity.

However, as Ash points out, Köhler does not hold that these brain processes actually have to *look* exactly like the perceived objects (Ash, 1998, 179).

> Instead, [Köhler] suggested that the psychophysical correlates of circles for example, would also be symmetrical, but not necessarily circular. He spoke here, as Wertheimer had before him, of "functional," as opposed to "geometrical" similarity". (Ash, 1998, 179)[12]

As a result, Köhler not only develops a hypothesis of physiological Gestalten to support the psychical perception of wholes but he uses the physiological Gestalten to *explain* the psychological ones. His answer to our earlier question of where do the psychological Gestalten come from, therefore, is: *from the organism*. This reduction of the human function

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[12] (Köhler, 1920, 210)

of perception to physicalism, as we will see, is unsatisfactory to both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty, who critique Köhler on this point.

1-5 The Reflex

Köhler's notion of physical Gestalten engendered further research into how one might understand behaviour in terms of Gestalten. The reflex is of special importance because traditional theory – such as we see it in Charles Scott Sherrington's work and that of the Behaviorists – considered it a basic building block from which more complex behaviour is constructed. As Goldstein writes: "*the life of the whole organism is thought to be built up from these part-achievements* " (Goldstein, [1934], 58, my translation).[13] Gestalt theorists, as we have seen, reject an additive approach both for the psychology of perception and the physiology that supports it. It comes as no surprise, then, that they critique traditional reflex theory and aim to find another hypothesis to replace it. We will see different solutions from Koffka, Goldstein and, later, Merleau-Ponty but where they all agree is in the *rejection* of classical reflex theory.

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[13] Note that Goldstein did not consider himself a Gestalt psychologist. I draw on both Koffka and Goldstein here as they coincide in their rejection of traditional reflex theory.

We will see that Köhler's theory, although providing an important starting point, will eventually run into problems and this will in turn raise questions if his notion of physiological Gestalten is at all feasible.

Classical Reflex Theory

Goldstein, in *Der Aufbau des Organismus* (*The Structure of the Organism*) (1934), explains that according to traditional reflex theory we are dealing with an organism that consists of "a sum of isolable apparatuses of constant construction" and specific constant changes that can be brought about through occurrences from outside the organism (stimuli) with "constant reactions to these occurrences" (Goldstein, [1934], 57, my translation).

Traditional reflex theory is thus in line with the constancy hypothesis we discussed earlier and like any atomic theory the question then is how the parts connect to become a whole:

Koffka, in his *Die Grundlagen der psychischen Entwicklung* (*The Foundations of Psychical Development*) (1921) recounts that we learnt from traditional reflex theory to differentiate between two types of nerves: sensible and motor nerves. The "constant reactions" in response to outside occurrences, then, constitute "more or less complicated neuron-chain" (Koffka, 1921, 49, my translation). Such a chain always begins with a sensible neuron that receives the occurrence and ends with a motor neuron that responds. These chains are known as *reflex arcs*. Like Helmholtz's theory earlier, these physiological functions are thus presented as additive, mechanical apparatuses.[14]

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[14] John Dewey already critiqued the reflex arc as early as 1896 in his paper "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (Dewey, 1896).

In order to understand these "part-processes" as precisely as possible, researchers who hold such a view set experiments that carefully isolate particular processes.[15] Sherrington, for instance, set up various experiments to study a dog's scratch reflex (Sherrington [1906]). Goldstein admits that if such an approach were correct, it would certainly be an ideal as it offers a considerable methodological clarity (Goldstein, [1934], 58). However, these part processes cannot add up to provide us with an adequate image of living behaviour. As Carman writes, "[j]ust as it is unclear what role (if any) pure sensation plays in ordinary perception, so too it is unclear what role (if any) pure reflexes play in normal behaviour" (Carman, 2020, 84).

Moreover, it is not at all easy to find constant responses to constant stimuli (Goldstein, [1934], 58). To be fair, the classical reflex theorists do not hold that there is *one* particular point as a constant place on the organism for triggering a reflex. Sherrington, for instance, speaks of a "receptive field" instead (cf. Sherrington, [1906], 126). But even this field cannot be considered as constant. Sherrington himself points out, for instance, that the scratch reflex of the dog can vary considerably from day to day and may be upset, for example, by "local fatigue" (Sherrington, [1906], 128): Not only is the organism not always equally receptive, but even minute changes in the stimulus can be detrimental to whether a reflex appears or not. Thus, so Goldstein, Sherrington's own experiments point beyond his theory and are inadequately explained by it (Goldstein, [1934], 58).

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[15] We can see that, to some extent, the Gestalt theorists still set experiments that isolate particular processes (for instance reducing the visual field to encompass only specific given light points as we saw in Wertheimer's *phi* studies above) and indeed, both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty critique them on this point.

Goldstein approves of Sherrington's move to differentiate between "harmful" and "harmless" stimuli but thinks that Sherrington was wrong to explain this differentiation via *nocireceptors* (usually known as pain stimulus detectors) that are said to trigger different responses. Human beings often continue on through pain with a task if there is a strong enough reason to do so and no reflex to stop kicks in (Goldstein, [1934], 60). Indeed, a desperate animal will also push through pain to free itself. It seems, therefore, that *local*, *atomic* examination is insufficient to explain behaviour and a more *global*, *holist* solution is called for.

Before we get to Goldstein's positive view, let us see how Koffka deals with the reflex, as well as instincts.

Koffka's Gestalt approach to the reflex

Koffka, also, concludes that one cannot adequately explain reflex behaviour based on the additive approach of neural connections. Instead, he suggests that Köhler's work on physical Gestalten together with Wertheimer's Gestalt theory offers a viable alternative (Koffka, 1921, 57).

He thus presents the following hypothesis:

> [T]he *specific form of the seen* regulates the movement of its own accord. From this follows, optical sensory and motor [functions] are not to be seen as two independent apparatuses but build, for many achievements, *one whole organ*, a physical system. The individual parts of the organ are able to influence each other, what happens in

one place of the organ is not independent of, and not without influence on, what

occurs in a different place of the organ. (Koffka, 1921, 57, my translation)

"Our optical organ, sensory plus motor, is therefore a self-regulatory organ, occurrences in

the sensory part change their own conditions through influence from the motor part"

(Koffka, 1921, 58, my translation). The physiology of perception is thus to be understood as a

self-organisatory system on par with Köhler's notion of the physical Gestalt, a kind of

autochthonous organisation. Disappointingly, Koffka refrains from explaining the physiology

more precisely. Koffka suggests that the most important conclusion is that the cooperation

between the motor and receptor nerves is possible without mechanical connections.

However, without a clear physiological theory it is difficult to see how this argument is

supported.

At this point, Koffka's suggestions are, at best, provisional. Indeed, he admits that "the

meaning of this" will only become clear in later chapters (Koffka, 1921, 57, my translation).

And, as we will see, Koffka's thought on instincts and more complex behaviours provides a

better insight into how we might think of human behaviour in holist terms. However, the

lack of a more thoroughly thought-through physiological theory here will remain a problem

and disguise a conflict with Köhler's theory, as we will see.

1-6 Instincts and higher functions

Koffka's main targets in his discussion on the instincts are Edward Thorndike, John Watson and Herbert Spencer and the theory of the instinct as reflex-chains.[16] According to this theory an instinct is a series of reflex arches that are connected additively to make up the more complex behaviour.

Koffka writes:

> [when we observe a] typical instinct behaviour, as they occur in the natural life of the animal, the impression is not of a mere sum of pieces, which, in themselves, have nothing to do with each other; such instinct behaviour demonstrates rather a *holistic process* . . . It does not look like a multitude of individual movements, but like an internally structured *behaviour-whole*, to whose characteristics the ending as well as the beginning belong. (Koffka, 1921, 70, my translation)

Koffka explains that "[e]ach part in this behaviour appears determined not by its position with regards to the previous one but in relation to *all* others, especially to the last, to the one that leads to success" (Koffka, 1921, 70, my translation). For instance, when a bird builds a nest, we do not observe one action triggering another but each action seems directed towards a particular success (Koffka, 1921, 70). This goal-directed aspect of an instinct has the characteristic of something that calls for "closure" [*Abgeschlossenheit*] – remember

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[16] Cf. Thorndike, 1898; Watson, 1914.

Wertheimer's principle of closure. However, here it is not a visual figure that privileges a closure but a *living situation* that calls for a solution.

This element of closure that Koffka observes in instinctual behaviour can also be applied to reflexes, he argues. He writes:

> We reverse matters, no longer is the reflex-mechanism the foundational fact, but the property of closure that belongs to instinctual behaviours. We therefore do not want to, as Spencer and his followers did, declare instincts as reflexes but the other way around, reflexes as instincts. (Koffka, 1921, 76-77, my translation)

The reflex, then, is no longer a mechanical or even chemical reaction to a stimulus but a living response towards a situation that calls for some form of closure. Koffka, in fact, has moved beyond Köhler with this observation. This reflex is not merely a physical Gestalt like the electrostatic charge but it is *meaningful* in its goal-directedness.

However, Koffka seems to suggest that he is still very much in line with Köhler. To his own question of how are we to understand this apparatus, and a rejection of both mechanical and vitalist approaches he again draws on Köhler (Koffka, 1921, 73).[17]

Koffka explains that "[t]he beginning of an action and its successful end are for us no longer purely externally chained" instead they are internally moments of one whole that is directed

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[17] A vitalist view would explain the instinct in relation to a vital force or soul. Unfortunately the constraints of this thesis do not allow an in-depth discussion of the important and interesting relations and conflicts between Gestalt theory and vitalist views.

to one outcome, based on physical grounds (Koffka, 1921, 77-78, my translation). "*The physical, however, is not mechanical*, as Köhler has shown" (Koffka, 1921, 78, my translation). An understanding of the nervous system in terms of physical Gestalten is thus offered as an alternative to both mechanical and vitalist views.

A physical Gestalt would explain that moments are internally related and not externally chained pieces. We can see this clearly in the case of an electrostatic charge. However, in this meaningful movement, this a goal-directed instinct, where does the Gestalt get its meaning, its *goal* from? This is a question both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty will ask, as we will see.

Interestingly, we find this same conflict already in Köhler's own work. His research with chimpanzees considers behaviour meaningful wholes but his notion of physiological Gestalten thinks of these wholes as self-contained physical equilibria.[18] How these equilibria can be infused with meaning is neither questioned nor answered.

Learning as insight

Not only is there a living relationship between the organism and her environment in Koffka's description, but, moreover, there is the possibility of *new* meaning arising.

In Köhler's famous experiments with chimpanzees, he would place fruits in a difficult to reach location and then observe the animal as it attempts to gain its prize. He reports that

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[18] For Köhler's work with chimpanzees see Köhler, [1921].

one can distinguish sharply between successes that occur by chance and "genuine solutions" (Köhler, [1921], 189). In a "genuine solution" one can observe the chimpanzees first carefully "looking around", performing "something very like an inventory of the situation. And this survey then gives rise to the behaviour required for the solution" (Köhler, [1921], 190). At which point the animal, suddenly, and in a "smooth and unchecked movement" takes the action required to release the fruit (Köhler, [1921], 189). Köhler describes this as an *insight*.[19]

The two crucial points to note are: the *transformation of the perceptual field* at the moment of the originary action and the principle of *closure* that "demands" this transformation. Koffka explains that at the moment of insight the perceptual field, that is the entire perceptual material the animal faces, undergoes "a *transformation*, often in a flash and utterly insistently" (Koffka, 1921, 127, my translation). For instance, the long stick that previously had a character of "indifferent" or "to be bitten" is transformed to "thing for getting the fruit". The whole field undergoes a "new structurisation", where "each thing has its place dependent on the structure of the whole. . ." (Koffka, 1921, 144-146, my translation).[20]

The situation where the fruit is still unreachable, the solution not yet found, is an as yet unfinished whole. But with the solution the situation becomes "closable", "the lacuna can be

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[19] The term 'insight' in the context of animal experiments was controversial. See Ash,1998, 157; Koffka, 1921, 146.

[20] Koffka was likely influenced by Wertheimer's "Über Schlussprozesse im produktiven Denken" ("*Syllogism and Productive Thinking*"). In this work Wertheimer discusses the possibility of the syllogism providing *new* knowledge. He concludes that what is requires is that a particular characteristic is "*re*-formed, *re*-grasped, *re*-centred in a specific way" (Wertheimer, [1925], 280-281).

filled and the "missing" fruit can be taken", closure (*Geschlossenheit*) has been achieved

(Koffka, 1921, 146, my translation).

Thus Köhler's observations and Koffka's discussion demonstrate a *vital*, *meaningful* relationship between the organism and her field; furthermore, there is a possibility for *new meaning* to arise if required for closure. Again, one asks how Köhler's physical Gestalten could achieve such a thing? Köhler would point out, of course, that the physical Gestalten are isomorphically parallel to the psychological Gestalten. We have seen, however, that psychological Gestalten are explained *by* physical Gestalten and thus to all purposes *reduced* to physical Gestalten. The physiological Gestalt functions like a Gestalt in physics, a self-contained, self-organised structure, how could such a structure hold meaning? We are thus back to the question we already asked of Wertheimer: *whence does the Gestalt appear*? We understand that the Gestalt is an autochthonous organisation – but why *this* Gestalt and not another?

Categories of Perception

Koffka was aware of this question:

> [t]he thing with its characteristics, events of cause and effect, are not, as Hume
> wanted it, mere connections of individual sensations cut off from our psychology.
> Rather it is a matter of the creation of particular types of structures, and the
> question, which we cannot yet answer with any certainty is *why and when these
> structures appear*. (Koffka, 1921, 213, my emphasis, my translation)

Koffka is clearly rejecting Hume's atomism. One might thus assume that his position is an opposite, neo-Kantian one, however, his relationship with Kantianism is ambivalent. He critiques Stern's neo-Kantian approach that subdivides development into "substance stage", "action stage", and "relation and properties stage".

Stern writes:

> At the beginning thinking is in the "substance stage": out of the chaos of unreflected experience first the substantial, individual persons and things, is distinguished as a thought-content. Next follows an "action stage": actions to do with these persons and things becomes isolated and draw a special attention to them. Only as a third stage does the child develop the ability isolate properties of those things and people as well as their changing relationships: "relation and properties stage". (Stern cited in Koffka, 1921, 213, my translation)

Koffka's initial objection is regarding the "chaos of unreflected experience": insofar as this is understood as a mosaic of (atomic) sense impressions, it is to be rejected on Gestalt theoretical grounds. He thus also disagrees that "substance" could be the first category. He draws on Stern's own observations that the child's first words – for instance "Mama" – are not really to be understood as individual words but as sentence substitutes – such as "Mama, come here" (Koffka, 1921, 214, my translation). Sentences – that is whole-structures – are prior to individual words. Moreover, these initial sentence substitutes seem to privilege calls for action. "Action" is therefore prior to "substance": meaningful engagement with the world is prior to the determination of things (Koffka, 1921, 215).

Koffka therefore argues that, instead of an initial chaos, we should posit a primordial, primitive structure that is developed in future refinements, with these primitive structures conceived as based around actions rather than things.

In Wertheimer's presentation given to the Kant Society in Berlin in 1924 he said: "For Hume and largely also for Kant the world is like a bundle of fragments, and the dogma of meaningless summations continues to play its part. As for logic, it supplies: *concepts*, which when rigorously viewed are but sums of properties; *classes*, which upon closer inspection prove to be mere catchalls. . ." (Wertheimer, [1924], 9-10). Kant is rejected together with Hume. One might wonder if this is not too hasty, if some element of transcendental philosophy is not necessary for Gestalt Theory to make sense? We will see that both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty think so.

Thus, we still need to press Wertheimer and Koffka, where these primitive structures appear from. Could it be anything other than some form of *a priori* condition? We have seen that Köhler explains the whence of the Gestalten via physicalism. However, both Köhler in his work with chimpanzees and Koffka here describe a meaningful relation between subject and world that the physicalist reduction fails to account for. There is then an unresolved conflict in Gestalt theory between wholes in terms of physicalism and wholes in terms of meaning that remains unresolved, a dualism that fails to be bridged.

Will Goldstein's theory manage to solve this problem? Goldstein draws on both Gestalt

Theory and the transcendental theories of Uexküll and Cassirer for his solution. Thus, before

we get to Goldstein's organicist theory, we need to understand Uexküll's Umwelt Theory.[21]

1-7 Uexküll's *Umwelt* Theory[22]

The biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944), like the Gestalt theorists, responded to the

linear, mechanistic approaches of the 19th century by offering a holist approach instead.[23][24]

And, like the Gestaltists, he rejected a mechanistic understanding of the organism.

He argues that by reducing the animal to mechanism we obscure, from the beginning, the

subject that is doing the perceiving (*merken*) and acting (*wirken*) (Uexküll, [1934], 17-18).

He explains that the living being, animal and human, has a world within which she perceives:

her *Merkwelt* (perception-world) and a world within which she acts: her *Wirkwelt* (action-

world). Together these make her *Umwelt*. Uexküll imagines a soap bubble around each

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[21] *Organicist* here denotes a theory that treats the organism as *one irreducible whole.*

[22] As the term *Umwelt* (German, literally translated as *environment*) is listed in the Oxford Dictionary as a word in English usage, I leave it mostly untranslated.

[23] On Uexküll's relation to Nazism: He initially supported Nazi ideology hoping it could "save Germany from international greed of capitalist forces" (cited in Heredia, 2021, 29). However, this initial enthusiasm soon eroded and he was vocally opposed to Nazi race theory and the persecution of Jews which he described as "the worst form of barbarism" (cited in Heredia, 2021, 29).

[24] Uexküll was immensely influential and read by Cassirer, Scheler, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Agamben and others.

organism, which contains all the characteristics (*Merkmale*) which are available to this organism. Each animal, then, has its own distinct *Umwelt* (Uexküll, [1934], 19).

He thus also rejects traditional reflex theory. He writes that the "reflex arc functions with motion transference like any other machine. No subjective factor . . . appears" (Uexküll, [1934], 23, my translation). Instead, according to Uexküll, exactly the opposite is the case: "we are dealing everywhere with machinists and not machine pieces because all cells of the reflex arc function not with movement transference but with stimulus transference. A stimulus, however, needs to be *noticed* (*gemerkt*) by a subject and does not appear at all for objects" (Uexküll, [1934], 24, my translation).

Note that this objection not only applies to Helmholtz's theory and that of the Behaviorists but also to Köhler's. Köhler describes the physiology of perception in terms of *shifts of current density.* And, we have seen that it is unclear how this physiological Gestalt could become infused with meaning, that is, how the subject can come into play.

Instead of a reflex arc Uexküll proposes a *function-circle* (Fig. 8).
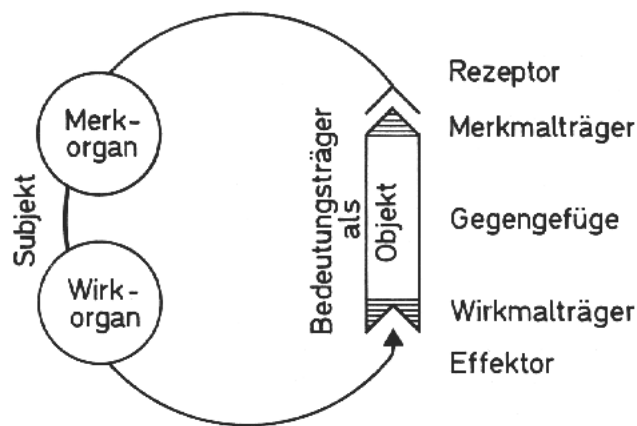
Schema des Funktionskreises

Fig. 8 (Uexküll, [1934], 27)

He explains:

> [The function-circle] shows how subject and object are fitted into each other and
> together build a systematic whole. If we further imagine that a subject is connected
> through several function-circles to one or several different objects, then we gain
> insight into the first fundamental theorem of the *Umwelt* theory: all animal subjects,
> the simplest to the most complex, are fitted into their respective *Umwelten* with
> equal completeness. The simple animal possesses a simple *Umwelt*, the complex one
> an equally complex *Umwelt*. (Uexküll, [1934], 26-27, my translation)

With this theory in place Uexküll goes on to explain how we can understand this *function-circle* in the case of the tick. For the tick there are three *function-circles* that occur systematically one after another. He explains that the skin glands of a mammal form the *characteristics-carrier* (*Merkmalträger*) of the first circle: the stimulus of the hydrocyanic acid triggers in the perception-organ (*Merkorgan*) a particular smell-characteristic

(*Geruchsmerkmal*). These occurrences in the perception-organ call for a particular response from the action-organ (*Wirkorgan*), namely letting go and falling on the mammal. The tick imparts on the hairs of the mammal the action-impression (*Wirkmal*) of pushing, which further triggers the perception-characteristic of touch, the previous perception-characteristic of smell is now let go of. The new perception-characteristic of touch (*Tastmerkmal*) triggers *walking around* until the tick finds a hair-free spot. The perception-characteristic of taste is now replaced with the perception-characteristic of warmth which triggers *drilling into the skin* (Uexküll, [1934], 27).

Uexküll admits that these *seem* to be a chain of three reflexes, which consist of objectively determinable physical or chemical effects. However, he writes:

> If one is satisfied with this assessment and assumes that the problem is thus solved, he has only proven that he has failed to see the actual problem. The question is not the chemical stimulus of the hydrocyanic acid, nor the mechanical stimulus (triggered by the hairs), nor the stimulus of the temperature of the skin, but alone the fact that, under the hundreds of impressions which emanate from characteristics of the mammal's body, only three become characteristics-carriers for the tick, and why exactly these three and no others? (Uexküll, [1934], 27-28, my translation)

Uexküll thus argues that instead of a power transference between two objects we are rather dealing with a living relationship between subject and an object. The tick can remain for 18 years on the tree branch and countless stimuli "leave it cold", only one particular stimulus, that is the smell of the blood of the mammal, that fits just right into the particular

perception-receptors of the tick will instigate its response (Uexküll, [1934], 28). Of the

enormous world that surrounds the tick "only three stimuli light up like light-signals in the

dark and serve like sign-posts for the tick that lead it with safety to its goal" (Uexküll, [1934],

28, my translation). For the tick, then, the whole wide world that surrounds it is reduced to

three perception-characteristics (*Merkmale*) and three action-characteristics (*Wirkmale*),

which, together make its *Umwelt*.

Interestingly, Uexküll posits that not only space but also time is dependent on this organism-

Umwelt relationship. Just as the different animals do not live in one objective space, neither

do they live in one objective time. "Without a living subject there can be neither space nor

time" (Uexküll, [1934], 30, my translation). We find a similar existential notion of time in

Merleau-Ponty.

We asked of Koffka, where does the goal-directedness of his instincts come from, as it surely

cannot be explained by Köhler's self-enclosed physical Gestalten. Here we have a holist

theory that places *meaning* centre-stage. This organism is a *subject* embedded in its own

particular world and meaningful *whole* behaviours arise from this relationship.

As Heredia points out "Uexküll's approach is developed within the framework of a return to

Kant's transcendental philosophy" (Heredia, 2021, 22). These animals that we understand

not as object or machines but as subjects that are sensitive to a very specific set of stimuli

therefore have very specific *a priori* conditions of perception. "[I]n other words, it is

assumed that specific transcendental conditions prescribe what an animal can and cannot

perceive" (Heredia, 2021, 22).

These specific transcendental conditions are such by *conformity to a plan*. Uexküll describes this *plan* as acting like a force of nature "that combines the manifold details into one whole by means of rules. Higher rules, which unite things separated even by time, are in general called plans" (cited in Ostachuk, 2021, 160).

However, this notion of a fixed plan raises questions regarding autonomy: if an organism's relationship to her Umwelt is predetermined by a species-specific plan, how can there be autonomy? Moreover, if each being is enclosed in her own soap bubble of an *Umwelt*, then how can there be any interaction between beings? We will see, in the third chapter, that Uexküll himself tries to provide an answer to this question in his late work.

Now, let us turn to Goldstein, who, prior to Merleau-Ponty and Gurwitsch, tried to find a way to reconcile Gestalt theoretical principles with a transcendental philosophy (although influenced by Uexküll and Cassirer instead of Husserl).

1-8 Towards *meaning*: Goldstein's Theory of the Organism as one Whole

The Organism as one Whole

Goldstein admits readily that his theory has much in common with Gestalt Theory but insists that it must not be misunderstood as an application thereof. The initial important difference

is that, for Goldstein the *whole* or the *Gestalt* always encompasses the *whole organism.* So, unlike both the traditional reflex theory and Köhler, if there is a stimulation somewhere in the organism we can observe that "*the whole organism participates in the response*" and not just one region (Goldstein, [1934], 171, my translation). We have learnt that a Gestalt is a whole where a change in one part affects the whole. For Goldstein *the whole of the organism* is to be understood as a Gestalt in this sense. If there is a bright light, for instance, unless the body is unnaturally immobilised, it is not only the iris that responds but the whole body moves importantly to protect the eye from the painful light (Goldstein, [1934], 171).

Goldstein writes:

> *the occurrences in the rest of the organism belong lawfully [gesetzmässig] to the achievement*. Therefore, we need to speak of a *reaction-Gestalt, which incorporates the entire organism*. Here we can . . . even if only in a certain abstract manner differentiate between two aspects: the "figure and the "background". (Goldstein, [1934], 181, my translation)

We have seen that Köhler described the functioning of the isolated perceptual apparatus in terms to figure and ground. For Goldstein the figure is the foreground behaviour and the whole rest of the organism is the background.

Goldstein draws on examples from pathology to further explain how the organism functions as *one whole*. For instance, it has been shown that right-handed people after losing their

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right hand can very quickly learn to write with their left hand. They, in no way, need to re-learn writing like they learnt it for the first time. Goldstein writes:

> *There is probably no more instructive and still such a simple manner to demonstrate that the achievement is not linked to a particular anatomical connection, that the achievement is not essentially dependent of a particular chain of a stimulation . . .* but that it depends on reaching a particular goal, that is, the particular relation to the whole is what is decisive. (Goldstein, [1934], 190-191, my translation)

Goldstein thus affirms (and agrees with Koffka) that learning is not something that occurs through local connections but rather that it is an acquisition of meaningful structures.

The vital and the human sphere

In rejection of Köhler's "isomorphic parallelism", Goldstein argues that the physical and the psychical cannot be considered two separate realms. He anticipates Merleau-Ponty's notion of the human being as being irreducibly *both* consciousness and physiology, as we will see later, when he writes:

> If something which we usually describe as spirit really belongs to the human being, then we cannot avoid this problem, as according to our own theory, which states that nothing can be "next to", "outside" but always considers the organism as one whole in which each isolation is artificial and each expression a phenomenon of the whole. (Goldstein, [1934], 359, my translation)

Goldstein explains that all "world-creation, everything we call culture, is only comprehensible through the joint working of "spirit" and "vital sphere", that is the uniform whole that makes the human being" (Goldstein, [1934], 367, my translation).

Goldstein explains that all animals, human and non-human, can be understood via the same epistemology as they all possess the character of *subjectivity*. In other words, each animal is understood via its engagement with the world, that is via the organism-Umwelt relationship that we have already come to know from Uexküll.

This whole, in the case of the human being includes "spirit, soul and body". Therefore, Goldstein argues, the psychical cannot be isolated, nor can it be reduced to physicality. Trying to see the physical without the psychical or the psychical without the physical is just as wrong as trying to analyse the part-process of a classical reflex. In each case the question needs to be "how does this or that phenomenon relate to the whole? What does it mean for the whole" (Goldstein, [1934], 368-369, my translation)?

Goldstein's critique of Gestalt Theory

We asked of Wertheimer: why do certain Gestalten appear as privileged? And similarly of Koffka, where do the behavioural Gestalten come from, that is, why these actions and not others? Goldstein suggests that these questions are left unresolved by the Gestalt theorists (Goldstein, [1934], 388).

He argues that his organicist theory, that is his theory that treats the organism as *one irreducible whole*, can show whence the privilege arises. A "good Gestalt", for Goldstein,

corresponds to a very particular kind of engagement between organism and world in which tasks are accomplished "in the quickest, surest and rightest manner" (Goldstein, [1934], 389, my translation).

If we imagine the organism as machinistically put together parts, and then place the organism in its natural behaviour, we can deduce quickly that it does in no way make use of all the possibilities that the machine might suggest but instead that only a limited number of behaviours are privileged (Goldstein, [1934], 269). Note that this recalls Uexküll's notion that each organism-Umwelt relation comprises a certain number of *Merkmale* and *Wirkmale*. For Goldstein these priviledged behaviours comprise what he calls "distinctive behaviour" (*ausgezeichnete Verhaltensweisen*) (Goldstein, [1934], 269).

Good Gestalt, for Goldstein, then, corresponds to *distinctive behaviour*, which, in turn, most closely corresponds to the organism's *essence*. We will discuss this notion of essence shortly. For now it is important that there can be different good Gestalten for different organisms who in their *difference of essence* have different "distinctive" engagements with their world (Goldstein, [1934], 389). Note the similarity to Uexküll's different "soap bubbles" for different organisms.

Goldstein criticises the Gestalt theorists' experiments for unnaturally isolating certain aspects of perception and thus failing to get to the actual heart of the phenomenon of good Gestalten. Goldstein argues that is only in this existential engagement between organism and Umwelt that Wertheimer's laws – for instance the principle of closure – become

comprehensible. Only through analysis of the *whole situation* we can understand why a particular Gestalt appears as privileged (Goldstein, [1934], 394).

Goldstein writes that "[w]ithout reference to the organism nothing can be said about the properties of a Gestalt and whether or not it is simple [privileged]" (Goldstein, [1934], 395, my translation).

Goldstein is thus in agreement with Uexküll that only a limited number of *distinctive* behaviours belong an organism's essential relationship to her Umwelt. Events in the world that do not belong to my Umwelt will often have no impact on me – as we saw in Uexküll's example of the tick. However, according to Goldstein, sometimes they are strong enough to have an impact on me, but when they do they cannot lead to distinctive behaviour and will instead lead to what Goldstein calls a "catastrophe reaction" (Goldstein, [1934], 104). This will have implications on the possibility of extrapolating an intersubjectivity from Goldstein's theory, as we will see.

Critique of physical Gestalten

Goldstein admits the importance of Köhler's work on physical Gestalten but raises important objections. Köhler aims to explain the togetherness of a whole-process through self-organisation, as we have seen. However, Goldstein asks, is this possible in the case of organisms? Goldstein argues that a self-organising system, such as we have seen in the electrostatic charge, could at most lead to instigate a switch from disturbance to a re-establishing of a calm equilibrium in an organism but never lead to an actual achievement.

Goldstein concurs that "organisms agree with the physical systems of a particular topography insofar that they have a holist character" (Goldstein, [1934], 400-402, my translation). However, Goldstein argues that this is not sufficient. A Gestalt in Köhler's sense has a "particular structure based on an inner necessity" (Goldstein, [1934], 400-402, my translation). The whole character of the organism, according to Goldstein, is not of this type.[25] Instead of an isolated, self-regulating equilibrium the whole character of the organism arises from an existential, meaningful engagement between organism and world.

Goldstein suggests that the more we isolate particular functions, such as individually observed reflex-functions, the more those parts of the organism can be said to function like "physical Gestalten" (Goldstein, [1934], 400-402). However, according to Goldstein, this is not much of an improvement from a mechanist notion of the organism as it again seems to view the organism in machine-like terms and not as the vital behaviours of a living being and so fails to explain said behaviour.

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[25] Even though Goldstein rejects the term "Gestalt" here in this particular Köhlerian sense, he does make use of the term in numerous places in this work and we have to differentiate between the strict Köhlerian Gestalt he rejects and the more loose understanding of the term he makes use of.

1-9 Towards an ontology

Goldstein's idealism[26]

Goldstein tells us that the usual approach for gaining knowledge in biology is to begin with "analytically won facts and to design a whole from that" (Goldstein, [1934], 300, my translation). This whole is then supported with further experience and gradually we gain a better and better understanding of the organism. Goldstein denies that biological knowledge can be gained solely on the grounds of this kind of "analytic" method (Goldstein, [1934], 300).

This image of the whole of the organism is not a *synthesis* of individually observed part-processes, Goldstein argues. These part-processes may point towards the structure of the organism but we cannot reach an image of the whole of the organism through them (Goldstein, [1934], 300-301). Goldstein explains that we "*do not search for a real ground [Realgrund], which grounds being, but an idea, the ground of knowledge*, in which all parts receive their meaning [*Bewährung*], an "idea", which allows the parts to become intelligible. . ." (Goldstein, [1934], 301, my translation). This *ideal image of the whole of the organism* can only be reached through creative acts, through which, gradually, it gains clarity (Goldstein, [1934], 301).

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[26] Ernst Cassirer was Goldstein's cousin through his mother's side (Rosalie Goldstein, née Cassirer) and the two had a close friendship from early childhood. Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923/1928/1929) is an important influence on Goldstein's thought in this work.

Goldstein writes – drawing on a discussion by Ernst Cassirer – that Heinrich Hertz found that

the most important outcome of gaining knowledge of nature [*Naturerkenntnis*] was that it

would allow us to presuppose future experience. The way to do this was through the

creation of "inner simulacra [*Scheinbilder*] or symbols" of outer objects.

Hertz explains:

> Once we have succeeded in deriving images with the necessary properties from the
>
> gathered experience, we can use them to quickly develop [potential] results like with
>
> models . . . the images of which we speak are our ideas [*Vorstellungen*] of things.
>
> (cited in Goldstein, [1934], 308-310, my translation)

These images have an *essential* agreement with the things, but, as far as Hertz is concerned,

there is no need for any other agreement. Indeed, for Hertz, in neo-Kantian fashion, there is

no way of knowing whether there is any further agreement between idea and thing

(Goldstein, [1934], 308-310).

Goldstein writes that his theory of gaining biological knowledge fundamentally agrees with

this epistemology but there is an important difference. He writes that the "symbols which

biology requires to order empirical facts are of a different kind as those required by physics"

(Goldstein, [1934], 308-310, my translation). Whereas physics does not seem to be hindered

by having different symbolic ways of understanding the same phenomenon, for biology it is

very important to have the *right image*. Most importantly, images that only explain part-

processes cannot be sufficient. Hence we had to reject classical reflex theory, so Goldstein.

Thus, in biology, Goldstein argues, ideas need to be closer to "reality" than in physics, where a description can be purely mathematical.

> Of course biological knowledge also remains symbolic. Certainly we are concerned with nothing other but a "representation" [*Stellvertretung*], but not a representation through arbitrary symbols . . . The biological images need to respect a particular qualitative structure [*Gestaltung*]. The symbol needs to possess the character of a "Gestalt". (Goldstein, [1934], 310, my translation)

Goldstein's Urbild

This ideal image acts like a primordial ground (*Urgrund*), which allows us to make sense of individual human behaviours and part-processes (Goldstein, [1934], 416).

The *Urgrund*, for Goldstein, is not a "concept in the abstract sense" but it possesses the "image-like character of an *Urbild* [primordial image]". Goldstein explains that an *Urbild* goes beyond what we can understand by its parts and compares this notion with Goethe's *Urpflanze* (primordial plant).[27] Goldstein argues that only when we can gain a clear image of this *Urbild* are we in a position to start thinking about "such questions as the relationships of organisms to each other" (Goldstein, [1934], 416, my translation).

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[27] Goethe had the idea that there must be a primordial plant from which all the other plants emerged. See: Goethe, [1790].

We have seen that there are moments when the organism interacts with her *Umwelt* in a "distinctive" manner. These moments, Goldstein writes "*present being in order*" and it is these moments that allow us to establish an *Urbild* of what the organism is. The moments when this engagement fails, which Goldstein calls "moments of catastrophe", would never lead us to win the *Urbild*. "If the organism is to be, then he will always have to return from moments of catastrophe to ordered behaviour" (Goldstein, [1934], 417-418, my translation). The *Urbild*, then represents the organism's essence, her best, most smoothly running engagement with her *Umwelt.* And moments when things do not go well and the organism-Umwelt relation is somehow disturbed show the organism as not displaying the essence of her being. He writes:

> If these catastrophes are an expression of a collision between the individuality of the organism and the otherness of the world, then the organism has to go from catastrophe to catastrophe. But this is not his actual being, only a transition to actual being. The collision is some sense only presents the shakeup from which new structure [*Gestaltung*] can grow: the actual structure, the actual achievement, the disclosure of the organism and the world. (Goldstein, [1934], 418, my translation)

Goldstein himself raises the immediate objection: why is "distinctive behaviour" to be seen as the essence of being and not the more frequent struggle and conflict? The moments of struggle, for Goldstein, can only ever represent a part and not a whole and thus cannot lead to the *idea of the whole organism*. Whereas the moments of "distinctive behaviour" are those moments during which we can glimpse the whole and which allow us to make sense of the part (Goldstein, [1934], 419-420).

Importantly, Goldstein stresses that the *Urbild* of the organism is *atemporal*, it exists in "eternal time" and does not does not begin with birth nor end with death (Goldstein, [1934], 417). If it is atemporal, then the *idea of the organism* cannot be something that is created within experience. Is this *idea* thus to be understood as an organising principle opposite a meaningless matter? However, the *idea* only becomes accessible through the *experience* of distinctive behaviour. Thus it does not seem to function as we would expect from an organising principle. We get the impression that these two aspects of Goldstein's theory, namely the atemporal idea of the organism and the emergence of the whole through experience, do not entirely fit together.

Moreover, it seems that the *essence of being* – as an eternal idea – is something beyond individuality. Thus we need to repeat our critique of Uexküll's notion of the plan, namely that it is unclear how there can be autonomy. And, if the encounter with *otherness* is likened with catastrophe and not a real mode of being for the organism, then how can there be intersubjectivity? We will return to both of these questions in the third chapter.

We are thus presented with two holist approaches to the body, on one hand Köhler's physiological Gestalten and on the other Uexküll's and Goldstein's idealist suggestions. Köhler's approach left us with the questions regarding how meaning might enter such a self-enclosed equilibrious form and, indeed, if it could lead to an achievement at all. Both Uexküll's and Goldstein's approaches, however, raised questions regarding autonomy and the possibility of intersubjectivity.

1-10 Interlude: Gurwitsch

This conflict between an atemporal *idea* and an autochthonous organisation that we have just see in Goldstein's thought also comes up in the work of Gurwitsch. Hence, before we turn to Merleau-Ponty we will briefly take a look at Gurwitsch.[28]

Gurwitsch argued that Husserl's notion of hyletic data ought to be relinquished and intentionality no longer conceived of as an organising function, a "bestowal of sense" (Gurwitsch, 1966b, 717). He argues, with the Gestalt theorists, that atomic theory fails to show how it is that the parts can be combined into a whole.

Heinämaa comments:

> His main argument was that organization is an original, "autochthonous," feature of all contents of consciousness, perceptual and non-perceptual. Thus he proceeded to present his thesis of a universal formal pattern of organization, realized in all activities of consciousness regardless of their content. (Heinämaa, 2009, 276)

Thus, Gurwitsch, like Merleau-Ponty, follows the Gestalt theorists to posit an autochthonous organisation. However, a conflict arises. Remember that for Husserl the mind constructs our

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[28] As Goldstein is clearly of paramount importance to Merleau-Ponty (*The Organism* is the most-cited work in the *Structure*) I believe Merleau-Ponty's thought around transcendentality in the context of Gestalt Theory was developed more in response to Goldstein than to Gurwitsch. Much of the relevant Gurwitsch texts were published after the *Structure* and the *Phenomenology* and as my aim is to show something of Merleau-Ponty's intellectual background and development, Goldstein is more important than Gurwitsch. Hence I devote more space to Goldstein, in contrast to commentators like Dillon who read Merleau-Ponty in the context of Gurwitsch. See: Dillon, 1971.

world and hence, his approach demands that objects are not conceived of as worldly things but rather as "essences: meanings, categories, ideal types, and laws" (Dillon, 1997, 71).

Dillon explains that on Husserl's view

> only that can be known which *is*, and that which genuinely *is* excludes coming into being and passing away. The objects of rigorous science must be atemporal essences whose atemporality is ensured by their ideality. (Dillon, 1997, 71)

Note that this recalls Goldstein's *idea* of the organism.[29] Like Husserl and Goldstein, Gurwitsch adopts an atemporality of meaning:

> Sense, signification, and meaning do not denote real features or real constituents of the act of perception, but, on the contrary, an objective ideal unit, similar to the case of meanings of symbols. (Gurwitsch, [1957], 170)

Dillon suggests that Gurwitsch, as he endorses a notion of autochthonous organisation, should thus hold, "with Merleau-Ponty, that meaning is intrinsically bound to experience", however, by adhering to Husserl's thesis of the atemporality of meaning he is implicitly accepting the "Husserlian notion of supervenience he explicitly rejects" (Dillon, 1997, 74). In other words, the thesis of the atemporality of meaning seems to necessarily endorse a notion of a higher meaning that is secondarily placed on meaningless matter.

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[29] Dillon adds that this idea goes back to Parmenides (Dillon, 1997, 71). Goldstein also draws on Parmenides to explain his idea of the organism (Goldstein, [1934],311-315).

We have seen that there is such a conflict in Goldstein's work, too. But we can only gain access to Goldstein's *idea* through "distinctive" autochthonous organisation in experience. We do not possess the *idea a priori* to organise meaningless matter. Thus it seems that Goldstein's *idea* cannot properly be understood as an organising principle. However, the fact that the idea is *atemporal* does mean that it needs to – at least in some sense – be *a priori*. It is thus not entirely clear, as I have said, how *idea* and *autochthonous organisation* are meant to work together. In an case there remains here a division between sense and existence, both in Gurwitsch and Goldstein, that Merleau-Ponty will aim to overcome with a more radical autochthonous organisation that states that "the miracle of the real world is that in it *sense and existence are one*" (PP, 338/380, my emphasis).

This is the tangle of problems around organisation and the related questions of how we are to conceive of body and consciousness that Merleau-Ponty picks up and intends to find a solution for. Let us now turn to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body and consciousness, followed by his suggestion for a theory of intersubjectivity.

Chapter 2 – Body and Consciousness in Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

We have seen that Gestalt Theory argues against a division between matter and form and posits an autochthonous organisation instead, which it finally reduces to physical Gestalten. Thus knowledge is ultimately based on physicality. In response, both Goldstein and Gurwitsch argue that a transcendental turn is necessary to account for *meaning* and that knowledge thus requires a transcendental basis. For this, both Goldstein and Gurwitsch maintain the idealist notion of *atemporal meaning*, which, as we have seen is in conflict with the notion of autochthonous organisation.

In this chapter I discuss Merleau-Ponty's critique of Gestalt Theory and the development of his own version of the autochthonous organisation that includes a transcendental element whilst remaining *temporal*.

2-1 Ambivalent engagement with Goldstein

Merleau-Ponty, following Koffka and Goldstein, begins the *Structure* – which comprises his most explicit engagement with Gestalt Theory – by devoting his first chapter to an in depth discussion of the reflex and a rejection of atomic, classical reflex theory.

Strangely, when Merleau-Ponty discusses the Gestaltists positive view of reflex behaviour, he refers to Goldstein, Koffka and Köhler interchangeably, and draws on all as if they were supporting the same thesis. Grouping them together in his initial assessment of Gestalt Theory implies that this critique also includes Goldstein.

However, both the full statement of his critique of Gestalt Theory that appears later in the book and Merleau-Ponty's own positive view – as we will see – are heavily indebted to Goldstein. He must thus have been aware of the differences between Goldstein and the Gestaltists. He continues to draw on Goldstein when he gets to his own transcendental turn – indeed, Goldstein's *The Organism* is the most-cited work in the *Structure*. So it is surprising that Merleau-Ponty does not clearly state the considerable differences between the thinkers.

Indeed, this shortcoming threatens to disguise just how important Goldstein is for Merleau-Ponty's thesis. This lack of clarity and lack of credit given to Goldstein's influence may be the reason why this important source is mostly overlooked in the secondary literature.[30]

The organism as one whole

Merleau-Ponty discusses experiments done with dung beetles by Albrecht Bethe and Ruprecht Matthaei, that Goldstein also reports and analyses:[31]

> It has long been known that the dung beetle, after the amputation of one or several phalanges, is capable of continuing its walk immediately. But the movements of the stump which remains and those of the whole body are not a simple preservation of those of normal walking; they represent a new mode of locomotion, a solution of the unexpected problem posed by amputation. Moreover, this reorganization of the functioning of an organ (*Umstellung*) is not produced unless it is rendered necessary by the nature of the surface: on a rough surface where the member, even though shortened, can find points of application, the normal process of walking is conserved; it is abandoned when the animal comes upon a smooth surface. Thus, the reorganization of the functioning is not released automatically by the removal of one or several phalanges as would happen if a pre-established emergency device were involved; it is accomplished only through the pressure of external conditions. . . (SB, 39-40)

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[30] Neither Dillon's nor Heinämaa's otherwise excellent treatment of Merleau-Ponty's critique of Gestalt Theory mention Goldstein's influence on Merleau-Ponty at all (Dillon, 1997), (Heinämaa, 2009) Foultier mentions Goldstein but fails to mention the important aspect of Goldstein's transcendental idealism (Foultier, 2015).
[31] For Goldstein's discussion on these experiments see: Goldstein, [1934], 193-196.

He continues:

> "Moreover, functional reorganization, as well as the putting into effect of substitute
> actions (*Ersatzleistungen*) in which a member or an organ takes upon itself the
> function of another, takes place in a characteristic manner only if a vital interest is at
> stake . . . Which is to say that it represents the means of a return to equilibrium for
> the whole nervous system and not the releasing of a local anatomical device. (SB, 40)

Merleau-Ponty adds that this re-organisation only occurs when the limb has truly become
unusable and not merely momentarily immobilised. If the latter is the case the animal's
focus will be, as we know from Goldstein, on freeing itself from the confines that immobilise
it, an activity that will "gradually degenerate into disordered behavior", again, the reference
to Goldstein's *catastrophe* reactions is clear (SB, 40).

Most importantly, the notions of *Ersatzleistungen* and *Umstellungen* are precisely examples
that Goldstein uses to emphasise the need to think of the organism as *one whole* and not as
local individual physical Gestalten that are secondarily *added* together as we saw in Köhler's
theory.

However, a little later on Merleau-Ponty refers directly to Köhler's notion of *weak* Gestalten,
that is individual strong Gestalten that are secondarily added together, and how this might
work in the organism:

> Just as a series of conductors within which electrical charges are distributed
>
> according to a law of equilibrium can be joined by very small wires without
>
> constituting a single physical system, so nervous activity can be subdivided into
>
> partial groupings and articulated in distinct processes whose mutual influence is
>
> negligible. (SB, 43)

If these "very small wires" are severed, the individual smaller Gestalten can continue to function. However, as we have seen, Goldstein disagrees with this and Goldstein's *Ersatzleistungen exactly aim to explicate the opposite*: the behaviour is a whole and after a catastrophic injury the organism aims for the renewed whole that will allow, once again, to accomplish an *adequate* behaviour in relation to its Umwelt.[32] It is difficult to see how Köhler's localised theory could account for *Ersatzleistungen*. If the functions of the organism were to be understood in Köhler's localised manner, how can we explain the rest of the organism's compensation for the missing limb? If the organism in Köhler consists of weak Gestalt-connections, then it would fall prey to the same criticism Goldstein voiced in regard to Sherrington's *nocireceptors* we encountered in the first chapter – what is it that regulates their working together or one overriding another? Goldstein's organism as one whole solves this issue.

Köhler rejects the notion of an overall whole (although, to be fair, he had the universe in mind and not a *whole organism*) (Köhler, 1920, 153). And Merleau-Ponty is clearly referring

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[32] The term 'adequate' in traditional reflex theory refers to a process of stimuli followed by a typical response, for Goldstein it is a response that leads to a good outcome for this type of organism in this type of situation. Cf. Weizsäcker, 1927, 36.

to Köhler when he writes: "If everything really depended upon everything else, in the organism as well as in nature, there would be no laws and no science" (SB, 43).

For Goldstein everything in the organism exactly does depend on everything else (to varying degrees).[33] Merleau-Ponty seems to be endorsing Goldstein's view also (as attested by the example of *Ersatzleistungen*) but failing to see that this is in conflict with Köhler's view. Indeed, he continues to endorse a view that treats the organism as one whole as his work progresses, as we will see.

We have seen that for Goldstein, physiological functions as well as higher behaviours are *meaningful* and not mechanical, working (generally) for the good of the whole organism. Merleau-Ponty agrees with this assessment. Indeed, we have seen this meaningful engagement also portrayed in Koffka's work, highlighting a conflict within Gestalt Theory itself between this meaningful organism-Umwelt relation and Köhler's physicalism.[34] We will get back to this problem later.

We will see shortly that Merleau-Ponty follows Goldstein's critique of Köhler's physiological Gestalten closely. Lumping Goldstein and Köhler together in this manner, here, is therefore puzzlingly confused and constitutes an inaccurate portrayal of the sources used.

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[33] Goldstein tentatively speculates about a greater whole that includes the organism as one of its moments, reminiscent of Uexküll's overall harmony of all the melodies of the different organisms (Goldstein, [1934], 403).
[34] A meaningful organism-Umwelt engagement is also at the basis of the social Gestalt theorists Kurt Lewin and Tamara Dembo (Lewin, 1926) (Dembo, 1931). Interestingly, neither of them insist on Köhler's isomorphism.

In spite of the shortcomings of the first chapter, Merleau-Ponty is clear about the value of

the Gestalt:

> The notion of form has value precisely because it goes beyond the atomistic
>
> conception of nerve functioning without reducing it to a diffuse and undifferentiated
>
> activity, because it rejects psychological empiricism without going to the
>
> intellectualist antithesis. (SB, 91)

He sees in the notion of the Gestalt, as we already saw in his early proposals above, a tool

for critiquing Neo-Kantian philosophy, as well as naturalism. Thus, we will see that, insofar as

Gestalt Theory is naturalist, he will use the Gestalt to turn on itself and critique the work of

the Gestalt theorists themselves. Before we get to Merleau-Ponty's critique, however, let us

take a look at his initial sketch of the structure of behaviour.

2-2 The Structure of Behaviour

Syncretic, Amovable and Symbolic Forms

As I have already suggested, Merleau-Ponty's initial sketch of behaviour follows Goldstein's

closely. He describes an organism that functions as one whole in relation to her Umwelt.

Merleau-Ponty further differentiates between three different kinds of Gestalten of

behaviour – though all three are understood as *meaningful* organism-Umwelt relations –

which he calls syncretic, amovable and symbolic forms. The first two, he suggests are shared

between human beings and non-human animals. The last is solely applicable to humans.

Syncretic forms comprise the types of behaviours which are usually called "instinctive". As

Koffka shows so well, these behaviours are meaningful and goal-directed. Syncretic forms,

according to Merleau-Ponty, "remain involved in the matter of certain concrete situations"

and are therefore "not available for true learning" (SB, 105). I suggest that syncretic forms

are comparable to Koffka's inherited behaviours, but – just like Koffka – I am sure Merleau-

Ponty would not rule out that some of them might require maturation and are not instantly

available.

Amovable forms, on the other hand, constitute types of behaviour that are capable of a

certain amount of learning. Merleau-Ponty considers the learning that is observed in

chimpanzees by Köhler to be of this category. As we have seen from Koffka and Köhler, this

kind of learning is fundamentally different from the maturation of "instincts".

Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The constant error of empiricist and intellectualist psychologists is to reason as if a
>
> tree branch, since, as a physical reality, it has in itself the properties of length,
>
> breadth, and rigidity which will make it usable as a rod, also possesses these
>
> characteristics as a stimulus, and so much so that their intervention in behavior

would follow automatically. What is not seen is that the field of animal activity is not *made up* of physico-geometric relations, as our world is. (SB, 114)

As Merleau-Ponty adds in a footnote "our world" is also not usually made up of physico-geometric relations but only when we observe it thought the eyes of analysis (SB, 114 f173). My flat is not made up of physico-geometric relations for me when I in the flow of my everyday activity. Similarly, the chimpanzee's enclosure is filled with meaningful relations between organism and environment.

As we have seen above, at the moment of "insight" the stick that was "to be bitten" becomes "thing for getting the fruit". Unlike Köhler, Merleau-Ponty is reluctant to grant the chimpanzee intelligence. He concedes, however, that the definition of intelligence, or "insight", that Köhler assigns to chimpanzees is appropriate for the animal. Remember Köhler's definition of insight from above:

> *The appearance of a complete solution with reference to the whole lay-out of the field.* The contrast to the [additive approach where] (parts [are] put together by chance) is absolute: if there the "natural [parts]" were neither coherent with the structure of the situation, nor among themselves, then here a coherence of the "curve of solution" in itself, and with the optical situation, is absolutely required. (Köhler, [1921], translation altered)

In other words, it is the *whole* of the meaningful engagement of the chimpanzee's engagement with its Umwelt – here most notably the *optical situation* – that allows the "insight" to arise.

Merleau-Ponty doubts that chimpanzees are really capable of a "superior mode of structuration" and that perhaps the term "intelligence" ought to be reserved for humans (SB, 116). What chimpanzees lack, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a kind of symbolic engagement with the world, that is *symbolic forms.*

Merleau-Ponty explains the distinction thus:

> The sensory-motor *a prioris* of instinct bind behavior to individual stimulus-wholes and to monotonous kinetic melodies. In the behavior of the chimpanzee, the themes, if not the means, remained fixed by the *a priori* of the species. With symbolic forms, a conduct appears, which expresses the stimulus for itself, which is open to truth and to the proper value of things, which tends to the adequation of the signifying and signified, of the intention and that which it intends. Here behavior no longer *has* only one signification, it *is* itself signification. (SB, 122)

There is then, for Merleau-Ponty, an autonomy that the human being is capable of that remains impossible for the animal.

The most important thing to note here, however, is not a difference between animals and human beings. It is that – even though Merleau-Ponty presents them in this order – the

increasingly complex structures are not to be understood in any sense as *additive*. In other words, the human being does not possess syncretic, amovable and symbolic forms but *everything for the human being is subsumed under the symbolic order*. Hence, Merleau-Ponty's contention that for the human being behaviour does not *have* signification but *is* signification. We will return to this point later when we discuss that the human being is not a rational animal.

Remember that Koffka, too, stated that we must understand reflexes in terms of more complex behaviours and not the complex behaviours as longer chains of reflexes.

Behaviour is neither situated in the in-itself nor the for-itself

Traditionally, Merleau-Ponty tells us, we differentiate between an order of the *in-itself*, which he identifies as mechanical functions that "unfold in objective time and space" – from the order of the *for-itself*, that is ""higher" reactions which do not depend on stimuli, taken materially, but rather on the meaning of the situation" (SB, 125). What is important about *behaviour* is precisely that conceived in holist terms, as a Gestalt, it is not situated in either of these two orders (SB, 125).

We have seen in Koffka and Goldstein a psychology in which everything carries meaning. In this sense theirs is a psychology "founded on the idea of intentionality", as Embree writes (Embree, 1980, 103). We can now begin to understand something of Merleau-Ponty's approach of bringing Gestalt psychology and a Husserlian transcendental phenomenology together. We can see here an *intentionality* but one that is no longer a mental organising act. Instead it is an intentionality that arises autochthonously from the meaning of the situation

constituted by this particular organism-Umwelt relation. This is a *pre-cognitive* engagement with the world, *a pre-cognitive motor intentionality*. As Embree writes: "Nowhere does Merleau-Ponty say that *all behavior is behavior of* . . . but plainly he could have" (Embree, 1980, 103).

In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty introduces the term *motor intentionality*:

> we must acknowledge, between movement as a third person process and thought as a representation of movement, an anticipation or a grasp of the result assured by the body itself as a motor power, a "motor project" (*Bewegungsentwurf*), or a "motor intentionality" without which the instructions would remain empty. (PP, 113/141)

He therefore argues that motricity needs to be understood as original intentionality: "Consciousness is originally not an "I think that," but rather an "I can"" (PP, 139/171). Thus, *behaviour*, understood according to these holist terms, exceeds both the in-itself and the for-itself and instead points towards a *third order*.

However, Merleau-Ponty argues that the Gestalt theorists fail to see this important implication of the notion of the Gestalt and in some sense – due to Köhler's reductionist physicalism – remain trapped in order of the in-itself.

2-3 Critique of Gestalt Theory

Gestalt as synthesis of matter and idea

Gestalt Theory, for Merleau-Ponty, permits "a truly new solution," and has the potential to "expand into a philosophy of form which would be substituted for the philosophy of substances" (SB, 131, 132). However, he argues that the Gestalt theorists have "never pushed this work of philosophical analysis very far" because they were caught up within the bounds of physicalism (SB, 132). As long as one remains faithful to the "realistic postulates which are those of every psychology", "one can only fall back into the materialism or the mentalism which one wanted to surpass" (SB, 132).

Köhler and Koffka, as we have seen, have fallen back into materialism through Köhler's reduction of the Gestalt to a physical/physiological Gestalt. And Koffka admits this explicitly: "in our *ultimate* explanations, we can have but *one* universe of discourse and that . . . must be the one about which physics has taught us so much" (cited in: SB, 133). The physical universe thus becomes the universal milieu, a role which, for Merleau-Ponty, ought to be taken up by *Gestalt*.

In explicit rejection of Köhler's notion of physiological Gestalten, Merleau-Ponty argues that, if behaviour is reduced to physical Gestalten, then consciousness is thus reduced to "what happens in the brain" (SB, 136). If this is the case, then it is the physical Gestalt and not consciousness that *defines* the human being. For Merleau-Ponty, this reduction of consciousness to physiological Gestalten is entirely unsatisfactory and precisely misses the

great philosophical implication of the notion of the Gestalt: the potential of the Gestalt, of autochthonous organisation, to provide a solution to the problem of a substance dualism and thus to move beyond the dichotomy of the *in-itself* and the *for-itself.*

Merleau-Ponty suggests that we need to ask "in what sense forms can be said to exist "in" the physical world and "in" the living body, and to ask of form itself the solution to the antinomy of which it is the occasion, the synthesis of matter and idea" (SB, 136-137).

Physiological Gestalten?

Recall Köhler's notion of the physical Gestalt, described with the example of the electrostatic charge, as a self-organising equilibrium. Following Goldstein, Merleau-Ponty, too, argues that this notion cannot be carried over into physiological Gestalten. And like Goldstein he argues that such a notion could only lead to an alternation between disturbance and equilibrium and that this is clearly not what we see when we observe behaviour. Instead, the behaviour reaches out and "executes a work beyond its proper limits and constitutes a proper milieu for itself" (SB, 146). Thus, behaviour is relational in a manner the physical Gestalt cannot account for. Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty, different people will perform actions with different individual styles of movement. If they were more like electrical charges, we would expect them to be more uniform (SB, 146).

Referring directly to Goldstein and very much in line with him, Merleau-Ponty asks how it is that, given Köhler's theory a "good Gestalt" can appear in the first place, that is why a certain behaviour can be privileged:

what is it that confers their preference on preferred modes of behavior? How does it happen that they are treated as "the simplest" and "the most natural," that they give a feeling of balance and facility? Is the orientation toward these preferred modes of behavior comparable to the formation of a spherical soap bubble? . . . Can it be said in the same way that the preferred modes of behavior of an organism are those which, in the *de facto* conditions in which it finds itself, objectively offer the greatest simplicity, the greatest unity? But most of the time they do not have any privilege of simplicity or of unit *in themselves*. (SB, 146)

It is not because behavior is simple that it is preferred; on the contrary it is because it is preferred that we find it simpler. And if one tried to hold with Köhler that preferred behavior is that involving the least expenditure of energy, besides the fact that its economic character is not objectively established, it is too clear that the organism is not a machine governed according to a principle of absolute economy. For the most part preferred behavior is the simplest and most economical *with respect to the task in which the organism finds itself engaged*. (SB, 147)

Like Goldstein's *whole organism*, Merleau-Ponty's is also a *whole organism in relation with her Umwelt*. The whole, the Gestalt, then, depends "not on local conditions, but on the total activity of the organism" (SB, 147). Still following Goldstein closely, Merleau-Ponty suggests that each organism in relation to her Umwelt and her project has certain optimal behaviours that respond to certain optimal conditions. We might describe this as a kind of equilibrium but it is not one that can be reduced to physical conditions but is characterised by a "general attitude toward the world" (SB, 148). He sums up the difference between physical Gestalten

and behaviour, which we might call *vital Gestalten*: "[t]he unity of physical systems is a unity of *correlation*, that of organisms a unity of *signification*" (SB, 156).

Thus, like Goldstein, Merleau-Ponty argues that Wertheimer's laws only make sense in light of a transcendental understanding of behaviour (SB, 150). In other words, a physical Gestalt is suitable for inorganic structures but the behaviour of a living being, be it animal or human, requires a transcendental turn in order to be explicable. "The whole in the organism is an idea", Merleau-Ponty concludes, echoing Goldstein (SB, 160).

We have seen that Goldstein asserts that this idea of the organism is *atemporal*, but that the notion of an *atemporal* meaning threatens to reassert the dualism of meaning and existence which it is trying to overcome. By contrast, meaning, for Merleau-Ponty will be temporal, as we will see.

Autochthonous organisation in Merleau-Ponty

In order to describe the experience of autochthonous organisation, Merleau-Ponty draws on child psychology and argues that it has been clearly shown that, for the child, speech and other persons "cannot derive their meaning from a systematic interpretation of sensory phenomena" but that they are instead "indecomposable structures and in that sense are *a prioris*" (SB, 172). In other words both patterns of speech and other persons are perceived as immediate wholes by the child. And, like we have seen in Uexküll, the organism possesses a special kind a receptivity for those *Merkmale* that are relevant for her:

If language did not encounter some predisposition for the act of speech in the child who hears speaking, it would remain for him a sonorous phenomenon among others for a long time; it would have no power over the mosaic of sensations possessed by infantile consciousness. . . (SB, 169)

However, does Merleau-Ponty's notion of a predisposition for language position us at a dangerous edge that might slip back into a form/matter dualism? Is the predisposition to speech a kind of form that organises the matter of sonorous phenomena? Merleau-Ponty argues, however, that the distinction into sensible content and *a priori* structure is an artificial, secondary distinction, "impossible in infantile consciousness" (SB, 172).

He suggests that we should understand this predisposition closer to a kind of "material *a priori*", a notion he ascribes to Scheler (SB, 172). And earlier in the book Merleau-Ponty himself describes a kind of *material a priori* when explains that there is a species *a priori* "a manner of elaborating the stimuli which is proper to [this species]", a notion that again clearly recalls Uexküll (SB, 129). This "material *a priori*", then, is not a *mental intentionality* but a *motor intentionality*, it is not an intellectual function but nevertheless provides a *ground* of possibility. However, this notion seems to move dangerously close to slipping into a naturalism, with the body reduced to a *cause*. Or, to the contrary, the predispositions and material *a priori* might be read as *atemporal*, in line with Uexküll's *plan*, renewing the problem of how this might be reconciled with autochthonous organisation. We still detect in Merleau-Ponty's theory, then, a danger of either tipping back into idealism or into naturalism. We will return to these questions later.

2-4 A New Transcendental Philosophy?

The "human" as "condition of possibility"

If behaviour is an autochthonous organisation, that is if there is no mental organising principle that provides form to a meaningless matter, then we need to rethink the relationship between mind and body.

Like Goldstein, Merleau-Ponty stresses that 'mind' cannot be conceived as separate from the organism:

> Mind is not a specific difference which would be added to vital or psychological being in order to constitute a man. Man is not a rational animal. The appearance of reason and mind does not leave intact a sphere of self-enclosed instincts in man. . . . The alteration of higher functions reaches as far as the so-called instinctive structures; . . . But if the alleged instincts of man do not exist *apart* from the mental dialectic, correlatively, this dialectic is not conceivable outside of the concrete situations in which it is embodied. One does not act with mind alone. Either mind is nothing, or it constitutes a real and not an ideal transformation of man. *Because it is not a new sort of being but a new form of unity, it cannot stand by itself*. (SB, 181, emphasis added)

In the human being mind, vitality and physicality are all part of *one order*, *one structure* that makes *one whole* human being.

Therefore:

> from the moment behavior is considered "in its unity" and in its human meaning,
> one is no longer dealing with a material reality nor, moreover, with a mental reality,
> but with a significative whole or a structure which properly belongs neither to the
> external world nor to internal life. (SB, 182)

We have thus not only gained an understanding of behaviour as something that can neither be reduced to physicality nor to mentality, that the structure of behaviour includes *irreducibly* both, but more fundamentally that there can be no separation between body and mind. Here the "human" is not juxtaposed unto a physical and vital foundation but rather becomes their "condition of possibility and their foundation" (SB, 202).

Transcendental Attitude

Conceiving of the *human* as the condition and possibility of behaviour, clearly takes us into the domain of transcendental philosophy and indeed, we have already seen that Merleau-Ponty conceives of the organism-Umwelt relation as *meaningful*, and thus *requiring* a *transcendental turn* (SB, 206). However, and as we also already know, "matter and form in the object-organism and the relations of the soul and body were found to be conceived differently than in critical thought" (SB, 208). He argues that what is profound about the notion of the Gestalt is not that it is *idea* but that it is *structure* and thus joins "an idea and an existence" through an autochthonous organisation in such a way that they have become indiscernible. Here we find "intelligibility in the nascent state" (SB, 206-207).

Thus, this philosophy is to be understood as transcendental in the sense that it is *meaningful* but the meaning does not, in any way, pre-exist the moment of experience. *Meaning arises temporally within our experience*.

This carries the consequence that meaning, on this view, cannot have the transparency it has in critical philosophy:

> While critical thought pushed the problem of the relations of the soul and body back step by step by showing that we never deal with a body in-itself (*en soi*) but with a body for-a-consciousness and that thus we never have to put consciousness in contact with an opaque and foreign reality, for us consciousness experiences its inherence in an organism at each moment; for it is not a question of an inherence in material apparatuses, which as a matter of fact can be only *objects* for consciousness, but of a presence to consciousness of its proper history and of the dialectical stages which it has traversed. (SB, 208)

A constituting consciousness, one that functions as an organising principle, does not have to come in contact with opacity because everything it perceives it constituted and is thus transparent. However, if meaning arises autochthonously, then we are in touch with opacity. Opacity is a constant aspect of our experience. This will become important in the third chapter where we will discuss it further.

For now it is important that although we are dealing with a *meaningful* and thus *transcendental approach*, this approach is nevertheless fundamentally different from critical philosophy. Merleau-Ponty thus combines something of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology with the autochthonous organisation of Gestalt Theory whilst at the same time critiquing both.

Defining transcendental philosophy anew

Merleau-Ponty ends the book with the observations that:

> If the essence of the critical solution consists in driving existence back to the limits of knowledge and of discovering intellectual signification in concrete structure, and if, as has been said, the fate of critical thought is bound up with this intellectualist theory of perception, in the event that this were not acceptable, it would be necessary to define transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real. (SB, 224)

This sounds disappointingly tentative, and the book leaves us with the impression that synthesis of matter and form in the notion of the Gestalt – that is a possible *third order* – is finally a question rather than an answer. The theory still seems to run the danger of either tipping back into an idealism or a naturalism. It remains to be seen if the question moves any closer to an answer in the *Phenomenology*.

Moreover, the engagement with Goldstein remains ambivalent. Goldstein's idealism, in particular his notion of the *atemporal idea of the organism* is not directly engaged with.

Although, we can see that Merleau-Ponty clearly posits a *temporal idea of the organism*, this is done without dialogue with Goldstein, even though this is the one clear point where the two thinkers differ. This oversight, again, threatens to disguise the immense influence Goldstein clearly did have on Merleau-Ponty.

2-5 Towards a third order in the *Phenomenology of Perception*

The anonymous body

This autochthonous organisation that arises in the moment of experience, as we have seen, cannot be merely mental nor merely physical. That means both mental and physical aspects partake. How are we to understand the contributions of the material aspects of the body without reducing them to causes?

We saw that Helmhotz's atomic theory of perception was supported by an atomic notion of the perceptual physiology. Thus, from early on, the Gestalt theorists hypothesised that the body had to be of a particular kind in order to support the immediate perception of wholes. And it was this question that inspired Köhler to develop his theory of physical and physiological Gestalten (Köhler, 1920, XIII). Both Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty critiqued Köhler's reductive physicalism and argued that a transcendental turn is necessary to explain the structures of behaviour.

This move, however, runs the danger of going too far in the other direction and becoming a pure idealism, again. If the materiality of the body is not to be subsumed by this transcendental attitude, then we need to clarify its role.

One of the most important ways in which Merleau-Ponty shows the impact of the physical on the whole is via his notion of *impersonal existence* or the *anonymous body*. The species *a priori* is an important part of this.[35] We have seen that the organism of a particular species is such that it has "a manner of elaborating the stimuli which is proper to it" (SB, 129). And, importantly, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty the lower functions are not to be understood as separate from the higher ones. Hence it is just as true that the lower functions are subsumed by my human order as that I cannot have a "human order" apart from these lower functions. Moreover, the whole of the organism is understood as a strong whole by Merleau-Ponty and thus any change in any part impact the whole. Thus my *species a priori* must have a bearing on my higher functions.

As this impersonal body can in no way be understood as separate from the personal, Merleau-Ponty does not interpret the anonymous body as a restricting facticity opposite a free subjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, "the anonymity of our body is inseparably both freedom and servitude" (PP, 87/113). The anonymous body both enables and circumscribes our possibilities for action. We will see later that the anonymous body plays an important role in intersubjectivity.

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[35] Merleau-Ponty also compares the anonymous body to a complex in psychoanalysis and explains that general existence "plays the role of an innate complex beneath the level of my personal life" (PP, 86/113).

Merleau-Ponty uses the phenomenon of the phantom limb as an example:

> It is *as though* our body comprises two distinct layers, that of the habitual body and that of the actual body. Gestures of manipulation that appear in the first have disappeared in the second, and the problem of how I can feel endowed with a limb that I no longer have in fact comes down to knowing how the habitual body can act as a guarantee for the actual body. How can I perceive objects as manipulable when I can no longer manipulate them? The manipulable must have ceased being something that I currently manipulate in order to become something *one* can manipulate; it must have ceased being something *manipulable for me* and have become something *manipulable in itself*. Correlatively, my body must be grasped not merely in an instantaneous, singular, and full experience, but moreover under an aspect of generality and as an impersonal being. (PP, 84-85/111-112)

Merleau-Ponty's point is that the phenomenon of the phantom limb reveals something of the *impersonal, anonymous* body. This notion of the anonymous body, the impersonal being, reminds us of Goldstein's atemporal ideal organism, as well as Uexküll's *plan* according to which a particular organism fits into its *Umwelt*. Is Merleau-Ponty thus agreeing with Goldstein and Uexküll and positing that an important aspect of the organism is *atemporal*?

He does not. We will see later how we can understand the species *a priori* of the general existence in terms of temporality. First, however, we need to note another aspect of the habitual body, which is more explicitly temporal.

Sedimentation; Figure-Ground

Besides revealing something of our species generality the habit body is also the history of our being-in-the-world. When I learn a new skill, for instance rock climbing, or engage in one I already have, for instance yoga – every instance of my engagement with the world, in short – is *sedimented* in my being. The habit body thus both points towards a general, anonymous existence and contains the dialectic of my being in the world. This provides a "certain ground" for our movement.

Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The intellectualist analysis . . . is less false than it is abstract. The "symbolic function" or "representation function" certainly underlies our movement, but it is not an ultimate term for the analysis, it in turn rests upon a certain ground. Intellectualism's error is to make it depend upon itself, to separate it from the materials in which it is realized, and to recognize in us, as originary, a direct presence in the world. (PP, 126/157)

The "symbolic function", which we have come to know as that meaningful organism-Umwelt relation, for the intellectualist is a mental intentionality. We have already seen that Merleau-Ponty posits a *motor intentionality* instead. Thus the movement of our intentionality "rests upon a certain ground". How are we to understand this ground?

A little earlier Merleau-Ponty explains, referring to Goldstein:

for the normal person, every movement has a *background*, and that the movement and its background are "moments of a single whole." The background of the movement is not a representation associated or linked externally to the movement itself; it is immanent in the movement, it animates it and guides it along at each moment" (PP, 113/141).

We have seen that Goldstein understands a behaviour to be a *figure* against the *ground* of the rest of the organism. So too, for Merleau-Ponty, the behaviour is to be understood as a *figure against a ground*. And just like for Goldstein, the movement and ground are "moments of a single whole". However, for Goldstein, the whole of the organism is *atemporal* and so the background that is provided by the whole of the organism must also be *atemporal*. For Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, meaning is temporal, and so the background will ultimately need to be understood as temporal, also.

The ground against which the movement can stand out, for Merleau-Ponty, is provided by our *general* existence and the sedimented history of our being in the world. We must be careful not to confuse sedimentation with the empiricist notion of creating association links that we discussed in the first chapter. Sedimentation, for Merleau-Ponty, is not a creation of causal links but rather it is an *acquisition* of structures, similar to what we saw in Koffka:[36]

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[36] The term sedimentation was borrowed from Husserl.

The body, as has often been said, "catches" (*kapiert*) and "understands" the

movement. The acquisition of the habit is surely the grasping of a signification, but it

is specifically the motor grasping of a motor signification. (PP, 144/178)

Of course, "understand" is not meant in a purely mental sense here. The structure of

behaviour is beyond both for-itself and in-itself and thus the *acquisition* of new structure

must be understood thus too (PP, 145-146/180). We might still press Merleau-Ponty if this

acquisition of structures does not result in an acquisition of causes? In other words, is

Merleau-Ponty's aim of moving away from a purely transcendental approach moving too

much in the opposite direction and in danger of becoming a naturalism? Merleau-Ponty

persists in trying to carve out a path in between:

Sedimentation does not *cause* the movements it grounds. Spontaneity and sedimentation –

that is *figure and ground* – constitute a "double moment" of one whole, and as such are "at

the center of consciousness" (PP, 132/163). If one were a cause of the other we would again

be back in a realm of *elements*: sedimentation and spontaneity as two separate things. But

instead we are thinking holistically here, they are *irreducibly one*: as a figure-ground

structure it is already the *smallest unit* of mental life and cannot be reduced to any smaller

components. Thus Merleau-Ponty says that "the anonymity of our body is inseparably both

freedom and servitude" (PP, 87/113).[37]

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[37] This notion becomes the basis for his theory of *embodied freedom* at the end of the *Phenomenology*.

Thus, on one hand, we have a real impact from the physicality of the body and on the other we have the symbolic order that subsumes everything into humanity, as a "double moment" of one *irreducible* whole. Merleau-Ponty is balancing on a very fine line between transcendentalism and naturalism.

This is a necessary for Merleau-Ponty's *meaningful*, *temporal* autochthonous organisation. If meaning were all powerful it would once again become an organising principle. If physicality became all powerful we would lose meaning. This way, we have meaning that appears temporally from the moment of my whole experience that cannot but include my entire situation. This is the balancing act of Merleau-Ponty's *third order.*

However, if meaning does thus arise temporally, this raises the question of how we can sustain identity over time, as Gurwitsch points out (Gurwitsch, [1957], 165-167). Does Merleau-Ponty have a solution?

World Horizon and Identity

Merleau-Ponty posits the notion of a *world horizon* as the background of all backgrounds. He explains:

> The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, and the style of all styles, which ensures my experiences have a given, not a willed, unity beneath all of the ruptures of my personal and historical life. (PP, 345/386-387)

As Dillon writes, the world horizon is the background unity that allows Merleau-Ponty to account for identity "without freezing time or relapsing into ideality" (Dillon, 1997, 78).

We may, of course, ask: what of the timeless truths of science or mathematics? If any theme needs a horizon then the mathematical theme would also need to be sustained by the world horizon. It is indeed a consequence of Merleau-Ponty's position that, as Dillon writes "all meanings, both those which are manifest in the flux of the perceptual world and those which are extracted from that world and arrested in language, are subject to historical processes of becoming" (Dillon, 1997, 78).

The world horizon, too, of course, is *temporal*, subject to a historical unfolding. We saw that, according to Gestalt theory, any change to any moment of the whole has an impact on the whole. Thus changes in the world horizon will have an impact on the things that arise from it as figures. Presumably these changes to the world horizon are slow enough that the identity of a mathematical truth can be sustained for us. Merleau-Ponty does not say.

Let us briefly return to our earlier question if Merleau-Ponty's notion of a species *a priori* or the general existence does not come dangerously close to an *atemporal* idea? One might suggest that a notion of evolution shows that any species *a priori* needs to be considered as temporal. However, evolutionary theory is a naturalist theory and Uexküll's Umwelt Theory was developed in explicit opposition to Darwin.[38] I think – even though Merleau-Ponty does not give an explicit answer – we need once again to read him as treading the middle path

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[38] See: Heredia, 2020, 20

between naturalism and intellectualism and see his notion of the species *a priori* and the general existence as being beyond both a purely naturalist and a purely intellectualist solution. Thus, I think we are not wrong to consider these as *temporal* (though very slow moving).

Sum up

We saw that the Gestalt theorists, according to Merleau-Ponty, failed to take the Gestalt to its fullest potential by reducing it to naturalism instead of using it to overcome substance dualism and find a third order beyond both the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*. Goldstein's transcendental turn brings consciousness back to its central importance but the organism as an *atemporal* idea means that the notion of autochthonous organisation loses its potency.

With Merleau-Ponty we have reached a notion of autochthonous organisation that through its temporality can conceive of consciousness and material body as moments of one whole thus finding a solution that moves beyond the substance division. With body and consciousness thus reconceptualised, we can turn, with Merleau-Ponty, to the question of intersubjectivity.

Chapter 3 – Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Intersubjectivity

Introduction

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty has established a compelling notion of the subject's relation with her world. So far, however, we have not yet seen how this subject might relate with other subjects, that is, how this view might extrapolate into a theory of intersubjectivity.[39]

Merleau-Ponty writes early on in the chapter "The Other and the Human World" in the *Phenomenology* that his solution to the problem of other selves will "obviously . . . assume that the notion of the body and the notion of consciousness have been deeply transformed" (PP, 366-367/408).[40] This transformation is, of course, his development of Gestalt theoretical principles to provide a new way of understanding both the subject-object and the mind-

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[39] The problem of other selves comprises the questions of how we can know that there are other subjects (or minds); how the being needs to *be* in order to be able to know other subjects; and, finally, the nature of my relationship with the other. We could think of these as epistemological, ontological and phenomenological questions. Merleau-Ponty does not discuss these separately and, thus, for the purposes of this thesis I will not differentiate between them either.

[40] Merleau-Ponty revisits the problem of intersubjectivity in his late work *The Visible and the Invisible*. Although, for the purposes of this thesis my focus remains on the *Phenomenology*: in short I suggest that the thesis of intersubjectivity in *Visible/Invisible* is not a departure but a deepening and reformulation of what is discussed in the *Phenomenology*.

body relations that we have come to know through his own notion of the autochthonous organisation.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the problem of other minds is only a problem for *intellectualism* – with his implicit targets undoubtably Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. If everything in the world as I live and perceive it is constituted by my mind, then I cannot conceive of other minds: something alien in the sphere of experience – something I did not constitute – is inconceivable (PP, 365/407). Solipsism, on this view, is insurmountable, according to Merleau-Ponty. If, in contrast, we understand our own experience in terms of autochthonous organisation, then – as we will see – we do not constitute but *inhere* the world, hence an encounter with others is not foreclosed. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty posits a primordial sociality and we find that the other is primordially like me through our shared *anonymous body*.

However, whereas the first approach faces the problem of solipsism, the second approach is in danger of losing both ego and alter-ego in a sphere of common generality. Indeed, Levinas famously argues that the *other subject* is lost in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of anonymity.

I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's solution can be found in the notion of the figure/ground structure. We have learnt that the movement of consciousness, or the *behaviour*, is to be conceived as a *figure* against a *ground*, and ultimately against the world horizon. I will argue that *primordial sociality* is to be understood as always already part of the world horizon. And, that thus, when I perceive myself as a subject, I appear to myself autochthonously as a figure against a ground of sociality. In the same way, when I perceive the other as behaviour,

she appears autochthonously as a figure against our shared ground of sociality. Merleau-Ponty can thus account for *difference* within the context of a primordial intersubjectivity.

I thus argue that Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity is profoundly informed by Gestalt theoretical principles and, moreover, that it is *these principles* that allow us to see how Merleau-Ponty's theory supports difference.

Before we get to Merleau-Ponty's positive view, let as see the Gestalt Theorist dealt with intersubjectivity.

3-1 Intersubjectivity in Gestalt Theory, Uexküll and Goldstein

Wertheimer and Köhler

Both Köhler and Wertheimer theorised that the perception of other persons, just as all perception, is an autochthonous organisation. Specifically, we perceive the other as an immediate whole with particular emotional qualities.

Köhler, Koffka and Wertheimer called these qualities "physiognomic" characteristics. Ash refers to a former student of Wertheimer, Fritz Heider, who reports that Wertheimer pursued physiognomic characters in one of his seminars in Berlin. Heider recalls that Wertheimer maintained that "each person has a certain quality . . . called his *radix* – the

Latin word for root." This quality was said to "express itself in a person's appearance, handwriting, mode of dress, movements, talking, and acting" (Ash, 1998, 257). Wertheimer is reported to have stated in a lecture in 1924 that

> [i]t is really an imposition on an unsophisticated person to ask him to believe, when he sees another person shocked, terrified or angry, that what he has seen are just certain physical data . . . simply linked externally to what happens psychically in the other person. (cited in Ash, 1998, 258)[41]

Although Merleau-Ponty would clearly agree with this notion of the perception of the other as one immediate whole, Köhler goes on, once again to reduce intersubjectivity to physicality, in a move that Merleau-Ponty would certainly reject.

Köhler explains that not only does the other person arise as a whole, but the whole includes several relations: In our usual human behaviour, the self is most often the most important point in the field of experience. This is not always the case, however, "there are circumstances under which [other persons] occupy a more conspicuous position in the field than the self does" (Köhler, [1947], 298). This is the case when we are absorbed in the observation of another's behaviour. When we perceive another's behaviour, for instance a dog barking, we usually perceive it in relation to an object in the world. Köhler calls this intentional relation a "bipolar organization" (Köhler, [1947], 299). Bipolar organisation

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[41] It is unlikely that Merleau-Ponty was familiar with Wertheimer's thought on this matter, as we only know about it through later writings from his students. There is, however, a remarkable similarity here between this notion of the *radix* and Merleau-Ponty's notion of a person's *style*.

implicates both the other and me: *I* am observing the other engaging with an object. Hence we are both actors in the same dynamic field.

He explains:

> Obviously, bipolar organization resembles situations in physics in which lines of force or directed processes refer one part of a field to another. . . . Our comparison of bipolar psychological organization with field action in physics is meant quite seriously. In fact, we are inclined to assume that when the self feels in one way or another referred to an object there *actually is a field of force in the brain*, which extends from the processes corresponding to the self to those corresponding to the object. The principle of isomorphism demands that in a given case the organization of experience and the underlying physiological facts have the same structure.
> (Köhler, [1947], 301, emphasis added)

If we agree with Köhler's physicalism then other persons are no problem, ego and alter ego are both part of the same physical field. However, if we agree with Merleau-Ponty and Goldstein that Köhler's isomorphism cannot account for human behaviour then his theory fails in terms of intersubjectivity also. Gestalt theory thus takes a few steps towards intersubjectivity but fails to provide an adequate theory.

Uexküll

We have seen that Uexküll's organism-Umwelt relation is founded on meaning and thus succeeds where Köhler fails. However, Uexküll's theory raises two important problems: the

notion of each being living in a "soap bubble" of her Umwelt which contains all the signs available to her seems to ensue solipsism; and his notion of the organism-Umwelt relation being based on a plan raises the question of autonomy. If there can be no autonomy then there can be no individuality and if there can be no individuality any notion of self and other becomes unintelligible.

Heredia explains that Uexküll aims to provide an answer to the question of solipsism by "applying Leibniz's monadological scheme":

> In [*Der unsterbliche Geist in der Nature*] Uexküll compares the multiplicity of *Umwelten* that populate Nature to the drops of dew that bathe a field in the morning and points out that "each of these myriads of drops mirrors all the world with the sun, the mountains, the forests and the shrubs, a magical world within itself." He then adds that if you imagine that "[e]ach one of these innumerable drops does not only shine in the diversity of the shimmering colors, but also possesses its own subjective tone, the one that distinguishes all living beings, then you will understand that the theory of the environment has nothing to do with the silly solipsism." (Uexküll 1938, 47f, Heredia's translation, in: Heredia, 2020, 31)

The idea seems to be that each soap bubble, like a drop of morning dew, adds, with its own uniqueness, to the tapestry of the whole. Though a beautiful image, it is not clear how this overcomes the problem of solipsism. The individual soap bubble could be both isolated within itself and as a whole contribute to an overall tapestry of all the soap bubbles. It does

not show how the individual subject can reach out of her soap bubble and encounter another being.

With regards to the problem that each individual merely enacts a predetermined plan and has no autonomy, Uexküll provides the example of a theatre play: the role may be pre-determined but each actor performs it in her own unique way (Heredia 2020, 31-32). Does an individual interpretation of a role provide sufficient difference to account for the individuality of the ego and the alter-ego? Perhaps it does. We may even say that this idea of autonomy may have some similarities with Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied freedom. We have already said that Merleau-Ponty's notion of general existence – which we have seen to ground the movement of freedom – bears some resemblance to Uexküll's theory.

However, with this similarity in mind we might then wonder about the relationship between the *temporal* difference of individuality and the sameness that is posited by the *atemporal* plan. Whence does the difference arise? It is unclear that Uexküll can account for the difference, other than dogmatically stating it.

Thus, although getting closer, Uexküll also fails to provide a theory of intersubjectivity that could be satisfactory for Merleau-Ponty.

Goldstein

Goldstein did not write about intersubjectivity but we can, nevertheless, ask how his solution to the combination of a transcendental philosophy with Gestalt theoretical principles would fare in relation to intersubjectivity.

Unfortunately, his notion of the *atemporal idea* of the organism raises several problems for intersubjectivity. Unlike Uexküll's, Goldstein's organism is not restricted to a limited amount of stimuli. This does not, however, solve the problem of autonomy. For Goldstein, too, only certain actions are "distinctive" and point towards the image of the ideal organism. Actions that fall outside of those that correspond to the idea are merely transitory or even catastrophic. Hence it is difficult to see how there can be autonomy and individuality in Goldstein's theory. Others, then, it would seem, either correspond to the ideal organism and are thus exactly the same as me or they depart from the ideal organism in which case they are "catastrophic". If we apply Goldstein's *atemporal organism* strictly, such "catastrophe" could not lead to anything new and thus only ever lead back to the same organism (or death).

Hence, both for Goldstein and Uexküll it is the *atemporal* aspect of their theories that causes problems with regards to individuality and thus also otherness and intersubjectivity.

3-2 Husserl

Merleau-Ponty's implicit targets in the chapter "Others and the Human World" in the *Phenomenology* are not the Gestalt theorists but Husserl and Sartre. We will get back to Sartre later, but for now let us take a look at the problem that Husserl identifies and how he tries to solve it.

The fifth of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* is a foundational text in the phenomenological tradition. Dillon calls it a "noble failure" (Dillon, 1997, 114).

Husserl conceives of a sphere of "ownness" as the primordial, "original" mode of experience (Husserl, [1931], 104). The sphere of "ownness" is described as "*the ego, taken concretely having a universe of what is peculiarly his own*" (Husserl, [1931], 104). This is, of course, immediately reminiscent of both Uexküll and Goldstein. Husserl, therefore, has his own version of the "soap bubble" and aims to theorise a notion of intersubjectivity that proceeds from this primordial "ownness".

Husserl writes that when we see another, "neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his essence" can be given in my experience originally (Husserl, [1931], 109). If something of the other person's essence were given to me directly it would only be a moment of my own essence "and therefore he himself and I myself would be the same" (Husserl, [1931], 109). Instead, he explains:

> *A certain mediacy of intentionality* must be present here, going out from the substratum, "primordial world", (which in any case is the incessantly underlying basis) and making present to consciousness a "there too", which nevertheless is not itself there and can never become an "itself-there". We have here, accordingly, a kind of *making* "*co-present*", a kind of "*appresentation*". (Husserl, [1931], 109)

The question is, and Husserl asks this himself: "How can appresentation of another original sphere, and thereby the sense "someone else", be motivated in my original sphere. . ." (Husserl, [1931], 109)? As Barbaras writes, "here we are at the maximal point of tension . . . since what is at issue is to constitute "within" the ego a being whose sense is to transcend this ego" (Barbaras, 2004, 27).

Husserl aims to explain appresentation via the notion of "pairing". He explains: "*ego* and *alter ego* are always and necessarily given *in an original "pairing*" (Husserl, [1931], 112). He explains that as an ego "constituted withing my primordial ownness" and as a "psychophysical unity" when an "Other enters my field of perception" she is presented to me as "a body "similar" to mine" which thus enters into a "phenomenal *pairing* with mine" (Husserl, [1931], 110, 113). Thus, because I perceive myself as a "psychophysical unity" can others be appresented as bodies with perceptually hidden minds. This is not, as Husserl insists, a mental inference, but instead a kind of existential analogy.

We have already seen that Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl's distinction between the transcendental ego and the body, even if characterised as a "psychophysical unity": The notion of *behaviour* shows clearly that no distinction can be made between ego and body. However, as we will see, the deeper problem for Merleau-Ponty, is that for Husserl the Ego with its sphere of "ownness" is primordial.

3-3 The beginnings of a solution

Open to the world instead of constituting it

For Merleau-Ponty, as long as we conceive of the subject as a constituting subject, then the problem is unsolvable:

> If I constitute the world, then I cannot conceive of another consciousness, for it too would have to have constituted the world and so, at least with regard to this other view upon the world, I would not be constituting. Even if I succeeded in conceiving of this other consciousness as constituting the world, it is again I who would constitute it as such, and once again I would be the only constituting consciousness. (PP, 365/407)

If the world is constituted within my sphere of "ownness", then, according to Merleau-Ponty, it is inconceivable how anything *other* can be constituted within my ego.

We have seen that, for Merleau-Ponty, the subject does not constitute her world: there is no pre-existing meaning that organises an atomic matter, my body is not a mere object *thought* by my "bare consciousness" (PP, 365/406). Instead, meaning arises autochthonously within experience. We therefore have a very different notion of the relationship between the subject and her world.

Thus Merleau-Ponty suggests that his notion of the autochthonous organisation goes at least some way towards rectifying this problem.

This autochthonous organisation shows human experience to be beyond both the merely objective and the ideal. On this view, body and consciousness are not two separate substances, but rather, as we saw in the *Structure*, the notion of *behaviour* allowed us to move beyond this distinction, forming a "third genre of being between the pure subject and the object" (PP, 366/407). I am thus neither constituting my body nor my world, instead I am both *open* to the world and irreducibly entangled with it. I *have* the world as an unfinished individual through my body as a power for this world." (PP, 365-366/407)

Opacity

This new notion of the subject, no longer a *pure* subject but always already implicated in physicality and world, as we have already seen, loses her "transparency". In Merleau-Ponty's notion of the temporal autochthonous organisation, meaning is always in a process of becoming and thus always in some sense deferred:

> my possession of my own time is always deferred until the moment when I fully understand myself, but that moment can never arrive since it would again be a moment, bordered by the horizon of a future, and would in turn require further developments in order to be understood. (PP, 362/403-404)

There is thus primordially something indeterminate and out-of-my-control about my experience. And as Merleau-Ponty's subject, therefore, does not have constitutive power

over her experience she does not have that same problem that Husserl's faces. *Otherness* is inherently part of her experience and thus the possibility of an *other* person entering her sphere of experience does not cause any contradiction.

Therefore, this opacity, this alienness that is an inherent part of the temporal autochthonous organisation, seems to open up a possibility – or, at least, take away a barrier – to encountering another person.

Not a case of analogy

We have seen that Husserl's solution required a kind of existential analogy. He suggested that as I know myself to be a "psychophysical unity" when the other enters my field of perception and I see her as having a body similar to mine, I know her to be a psychophysical unity, too. Merleau-Ponty argues contra Husserl that the *perception of the other* is *prior* to self-knowledge and the ability to make any deductions based on emotional expression and such. Hence it cannot be a case of analogy (PP, 367-368/409). Merleau-Ponty thus argues with Scheler that reasoning by analogy "presupposes what it is meant to explain" (PP, 367-368/409).

He explains with his famous example of the baby:

> A fifteen-month-old baby opens his mouth when I playfully take one of his fingers in my mouth and pretend to bite it. And yet, he has hardly even seen his face in a mirror and his teeth do not resemble mine. His own mouth and teeth such as he senses them from within are immediately for him the instruments for biting, and my

jaw such as he sees it from the outside is for him immediately capable of the same

intentions. "Biting" immediately has an intersubjective signification for him. He

perceives his intentions in his body, perceives my body with his own, and thereby

perceives my intentions in his body. (PP, 367-368/409) [42]

Morris writes that as the baby has no idea what his mouth and teeth look like, he "lacks

access to the premise that would be essential to any argument from an analogy between its

mouth and mine" (Morris, 2012, 115).

Rather, the perception of the other allows the baby to recognise a possibility within his own

body. In *The Primacy of Perception* he calls this, following the psychologist Wallon, a kind of

"postural impregnation" – we can clearly spot the echo of Wertheimer's notion of the good

form and Prägnanz in this term (PrP, 118). The perception of a "good form", then, allows the

baby to feel the possibility of this same structure in his own body. We have spoken before of

the species *a priori*, that is, that the organism of a particular species is such that it has "a

manner of elaborating the stimuli which is proper to it" (SB, 129). The species *a priori* is the

initial anonymous body which allows the baby to sense the possibility of the biting action in

his body. We can already detect here the beginnings of a primordial sociality.

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[42] Both Carman and Romdenh-Romluc make a comparison here to contemporary research on so-called "mirror neurons" (Carman, 2020, 131) (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011, 141). Romdenh-Romluc writes: "Experiments conducted on monkeys establish that the same neurons in the motor cortex – 'mirror' neurons – fire whether the animal is performing a particular action itself or watching another animal perform the same action (Rizzolatti et al, 1995). Experiments provide evidence for an analogous human mirror system, although mirror neurons are not found in humans (Rizzolatti et al, 1996). It is hypothesised that the mirror system underpins our ability to perceive each other's bodily movements as actions. When I see you acting, the mirror system fires as if it was me performing the action, thus generating a perception of you as an agent engaged in behavior, rather than a mere object moving" (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011, 141). I suggest, however, that Merleau-Ponty would read this as a reduction to physicalism on par with Köhler's reductionist physicalism and would most likely judge "mirror neurons" unable to provide anything more than a partial explanation.

Although, Merleau-Ponty will ultimately argue for a primordial sociality, much of the chapter "Others and the Human World" is argued from the point of view of the individual subject. This is a natural step to take from the subjectivity-oriented Umwelt theory that Merleau-Ponty adopts from Uexküll and Goldstein. And, indeed, after developing his notion of autochthonous organisation and behaviour that arises from the organism-Umwelt relation, he argues that the other appears as *behaviour*:

> if the other's body is not an object for me, nor my body an object for him, if they are rather behaviors, then the other's positing of me does not reduce me to the status of an object in his field, and my perception of the other does not reduce him to the status of an object in my field." (PP, 368/410)

We are strongly on Gestalt theoretical grounds here: the other appears as an immediate whole. She appears as behaviour, as a "third genre of being between the pure subject and the object", neither in the mode of the in-itself nor the for-itself (PP, 366/407). The other appears as an autochthonous organisation within *my* experience.

This is no contradiction for Merleau-Ponty: we have seen that through his temporal notion of autochthonous organisation there is necessarily an opacity to my being and thus the other is at least not impossible. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty tells us, not only experience in general but my experience of my *own behaviour* already includes an element of opacity: I sometimes glimpse the *anonymous body*, the *general existence*, underlying my own behaviour:

> . . . through reflection, I find in myself, along with the perceiving subject, a pre-
> personal subject given to itself, if my perceptions remain eccentric in relation to
> myself as the center of initiatives and judgments, or if the perceived world remains in
> a neutral state, neither verified as an object nor identified as a dream, then not
> everything that appears in the world is immediately spread out in front of me and
> the other's behavior can have its place in the world. . . . the perceiving self enjoys
> no particular privilege that renders a perceived self impossible, these two are not
> *cogitations* enclosed in their immanence, but beings who are transcended by their
> world and who, consequently, can surely be transcended by each other. (PP, 368-
> 369/410)

Thus, as my very own behaviour is not "immediately spread out in front of me" the other
behaviour specifically can have its place without contradiction.

I am therefore open, not only to my own personal milieu, but to a world that transcends it, a
world that might potentially be shared. Thus, what we have established so far is an
openness: we can see that Merleau-Ponty's organism is not (entirely) enclosed in a soap
bubble, she does not constitute the world but inheres it.

However, the other is not just an opacity, she is distinctly another *subject*, another *freedom*.
And, there is a long way from allowing the possibility of opacity within experience to the
encounter with another person. Thus, Husserl's question remains: how can I account for the
alter ego within the experience of my ego? This openness to the world is *necessary* but not
yet *sufficient* for encountering another freedom.

Sartre, too, speaks of encountering the other in terms of her behaviour in the world. He asks: seeing someone in the park, I perceive her as an object among objects yet simultaneously as a human being – how so? Drawing on the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin's notion of *hodological space* and Martin Heidegger's *equipmentality*, Sartre explains that through my project, that is through the motion of the for-itself, I posit my situation, my world and thus have a space around me that is *for* me.[43] This is, of course, reminiscent of Uexküll's and Goldstein's organism-Umwelt relations. Things in the world arise as possibilities or obstacles according to my project. However, when an object-other enters my space something curious happens: the objects that had previously grouped "*towards me*" now "have an orientation *that flees me*" and instead group towards the other (BN, 293/349). This other, then, is simultaneously perceived as an object and experienced as a possible threat to my free engagement with the world. However, as long as I *see her* as an object in my world, I can contain her within objecthood: "The universe, the flowing away and the drainage hole, all these are retrieved once again, seized back and frozen into an object" (BN 351/295). Keeping the other in her objecthood comes at the cost that she can only be a *probable* other for me, I can have no certainty of a consciousness beyond the object.

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[43] Sartres make use of Lewin's notion of the hodological space to describe my world *for me*. However, Lewin, in his 1917 essay "Kriegslandschaft" – in the context of his discussions on the affordance character (*Aufforderungscharakter*) of objects, that is how objects solicit us according to our project – describes how an object that is perceived one way during times of peace becomes a *Kriegsding* (war thing) in times of war (Lewin, 1917). This would be difficult to make sense of in a world that is not grounded in a common sociality, if our spaces could not meaningfully overlap. Indeed, the main goal for Lewin's field theory was to develop tools for education that would allow children the best environment to flourish (Lewin, 1935). Here the gaze of the teacher does not freeze the child's freedom but *enables* it.

Seeing the other *seeing* my world and thus drawing it towards her makes me aware of the fact that she *might see me*. And indeed, for Sartre it is ultimately in *being-seen* through what he calls the *look* that we experience the *subject-other.*

Merleau-Ponty writes, in a passage that clearly echoes – or, according to Morris, even *satirizes* (Morris, 2012, 109) – Sartre:

> My gaze falls upon a living body performing an action and the objects that surround it immediately receive a new layer of signification: they are no longer merely what I could do with them, they are also what this behavior is about to do with them. A vortex forms around the perceived body into which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in: to this extent, my world is no longer merely mine, it is no longer present only to me, it is present to X, to this other behavior that begins to take shape in it. The other body is already no longer a simple fragment of the world, but rather the place of a certain elaboration and somehow a certain "view" of the world. A certain handling of things – which were until now mine alone – is taking place over there. Someone is using my familiar objects. (PP, 369-370/411)

When Sartre's subject sees an other in the park, he sees an other with an entirely alien freedom producing a threatening drainage hole in the middle of the world. For Sartre intersubjectivity is thus inherently conflictual. Merleau-Ponty aims to show that the other's presence, her co-existence – although it can – does not necessarily need to be threatening. The opacity at the centre of my being means that the alien need not be threatening but is

already part of my experience as a subject. Moreover, as we now learn, we share a common horizon of primordial sociality which means that we share a fundamental togetherness.

3-4 Originary Sociality

About half way through the chapter, Merleau-Ponty changes tack and instead of continuing to try to argue from the viewpoint of the individual subject, he argues – although somewhat half-heartedly – for a primordial sociality. He writes:

> There is, between my consciousness and my body such as I live it, and between this phenomenal body and the other person's phenomenal body such as I see it from the outside, an internal relation that makes the other person appear as the completion of the system. (PP, 368/410)

Merleau-Ponty's own language is somewhat ambiguous here. We could read this either from a primacy of the individual who, *secondarily*, discovers a deeper sociality. Or, we could read it as positing sociality as primordial and any conception of a separate individual is incomplete. I argue that the second is correct but that Merleau-Ponty's language, which is still wedded to a subjective viewpoint, gets somewhat in the way of his argument.

'System' in this passage, of course, is another term for 'structure' and thus Gestalt. With this we are already getting a hint towards his ultimate argument that does indeed posit sociality as a primordial whole.

The child's world

Merleau-Ponty's genetic phenomenology of intersubjectivity pays careful attention to the development of the child's relationship with the other. He argues that the child begins without differentiation between self and other:

> The perception of others and the intersubjective world are only problematic for adults. . . . He is unaware of himself and for that matter, of others as private subjectivities. He does not suspect that all of us, including himself, are limited to a certain point of view upon the world. . . . He does not have the knowledge of points of view. (PP, 371/412)

Therefore, as Dillon puts it, the question is not "how does the infant begin to recognize others as other consciousnesses?" but instead "how does the infant learn to differentiate himself and others as separate beings within a sphere of experience that lacks this differentiation" (Dillon, 1997, 121).

Merleau-Ponty argues that "children must in some sense be correct against adults" (PP, 371-372/413). He continues:

if there is to be a unique and intersubjective world for the adult, then the barbarous

thoughts of the initial stage must remain like an indispensable acquisition beneath

the thoughts of the adult stage. The consciousness I have of constructing an

objective truth would only ever provide an objective truth for me, and my best effort

at impartiality would never lead me to overcome subjectivity, as Descartes expresses

so well with the hypothesis of the evil genius, if I did not have beneath my judgments

the primordial certainty of touching being itself; if, prior to every voluntary *decision*, I

did not already find myself *situated* in an intersubjective world . . . With the *cogito*

begins the struggle between consciousnesses in which, as Hegel says, each one seeks

the death of the other. For this battle to even begin, for each consciousness to even

suspect the external presences that it negates, they must have a common ground

and they must remember their peaceful coexistence in the world of childhood. (PP,

371-372/413)

We have thus shifted from an initial viewpoint that centred on an individual subject to a

viewpoint that posits sociality as utterly *primary*.

The subjective view shows a subject who is open to her world, and, because of the inherent

opaqueness in her being encounters otherness with no contradiction. However, this view

does not seem to be able to move beyond an openness, it does not seem to be able to

bridge from ego to alter ego. This openness provided by the autochthonous organisation is,

as we saw, *necessary* but not *sufficient* for intersubjectivity.

The second view that posits a primordial sociality does not overturn what we have seen previously but merely discloses a more fundamental level below what we have learnt so far. It is not yet clear how this can help us move from a mere openness or possibility of otherness to positively being able to account for other freedoms.

3-5 Ego and Alter Ego

Moreover, examples such as the baby's species *a priori* and the "peaceful coexistence in the world of childhood" seem to suggest that this other that I am encountering through my openness towards the world and the primordial sociality is *the same as me* and not *other* at all. The impersonal at the centre of being that I share with others, that is the *general existence* of the *anonymous body*, is a *sameness* and not a *difference* and it seems we have erased both ego and alter ego. Merleau-Ponty recognises this problem and asks:

> But is it really the other that we reach in this way? We, in effect, level out the I and the You in an experience-shared-by-many, we introduce the impersonal into the center of subjectivity, and we erase the individuality of perspectives – but, in this general conflation, have we not caused the alter Ego to disappear along with the Ego? (PP, 372/413-414)

It seems then that we may have gone too far, from a problem of how the ego can encounter another ego we are now faced with the question of how this primordial sociality can account for difference.

Levinas

Levinas famously argues that the other person is lost in Merleau-Ponty's "antihumanist . . . tendency to refer the human to an ontology of anonymous being" (Levinas, 1990, 57). For Levinas this is not just a failure of ontology but an ethical problem. In this anonymity he identifies an underlying "affection", a "non-in-difference" in Merleau-Ponty's theory, which fails in its "responsibility before the unique" (Levinas, 1990, 64). In other words, Merleau-Ponty's intersubjectivity reduces the other to the same and thus fails not only to grasp her alterity but fails her ethically.

The question if Merleau-Ponty's theory is able to account for alterity has received much attention in the secondary literature:

Hass, for instance, argues that the encounter with the other in "affection" *is* an encounter of genuine alterity missing in Levinas' own account. However, he argues that Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity cannot account for how the other can *"interrupt"* "my living experience" (Hass, 2008, 114). According to Hass, "for Merleau-Ponty the relation between self and other is about interacting or "coupling" through behavior. It is about distinct embodied selves coming together in syncretic overlapping, as in a conversation or a handshake," which fails to explain how the other can put me in "*question*" (Hass, 2008, 114-115).

But, the notion that two "distinct" selves come together precisely misses Merleau-Ponty's point. For him, as we have seen, we are primordially always already together. This, as we will see, does not mean that the other is reducible to me: the primordial togetherness is the generality that provides the ground that allows alterity. This ground is not yet either affection or friction, it is what makes them possible.

Merleau-Ponty, admittedly, often does focus on examples of affectionate and friction-free encounters with others. I suggest, this is more in response to Sartre's inherently conflictual notion of the other than to submit that we always meet others in affection. Merleau-Ponty does account for the possibility of being profoundly changed by the other and thus certainly "interrupted" and brought into "question". In the unfinished *Prose of the World* that he was working on shortly after completing the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> if the book really teaches me something, if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented. If we are to meet not just through what we have in common but in what is different between us – which presupposes a transformation of myself and the other as well – then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. They must become meaning. In the perception of the other, this happens when the other organism, instead of "behaving" like me, engages with the things in my world in a style that is at first mysterious to me but which at least seems to me a coherent style because it responds to certain possibilities which fringed the things in my world. (PW, 142-143)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty stresses that it is exactly *difference* and not opacity and sameness that characterises my encounter with the other, a difference that is grounded by togetherness.

We have seen that the subject is always open to the world, the world is always encroaching on me and I on it. We have further seen that the opacity in my being that comes necessarily with Merleau-Ponty's notion of temporal autochthonous organisation means that otherness poses no contradiction. Therefore, I agree with Ware when he writes that "[b]ecause I can always transcend myself, be another for myself, or experience otherness within myself, I can be open to the otherness of another person" (Ware, 2006, 508-509). However, Ware explains this notion of self-alterity in terms of a temporality that introduces a "split" in my experience and hence a *self-alterity*. He writes that Merleau-Ponty "rediscovers a profound split between my past and present, my origin and existence. . . . I am "split" within myself" (Ware, 2006, 512).

This "split" suggests a duality that is antithetical to Merleau-Ponty's holist project. Present and past are not split from each other: in my present action I take up my given situation, my past, and transform it. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> "Transcendence" is the name we shall give to this movement by which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation. Existence, precisely because it is transcendence, never definitively leaves anything behind, for then the tension that defines it would disappear. (PP, 173/208)

And, in the *Structure*: "For life, as for the mind, there is no past which is absolutely past" (SB, 207).

Ware is right, however, that the movement of transcendence – which we will understand in terms of a figure-ground structure – is indeed the locus for understanding both my own and the other's particularity. But, this notion of a "split" obscures the fact that the generality is not separated from us but provides the ground of possibility for particularity.

Dastur argues, in agreement with Levinas, that the notion of the "shared corporeality" – that is the species *a priori* and the general existence – "can be understood as the negation of the difference between me and others" (Dastur, 2008, 41). She suggests that the aporia of the other cannot be solved. If we begin from the subject we face what appears to be an insurmountable problem of how we can account for the alien within the sphere of my world. But if we begin with sociality we cannot account for individuality, neither that of the ego nor of the alter ego (Dastur, 2008, 41).

And, Barbaras argues that "through its very excess," this primordial sociality "leads back to its contrary, namely, the abyss between insular subjectivities" (Barbaras, 2004, 37-38). In other words, the extremity of this stance demands, once again, the isolated subject, and that, thus, Merleau-Ponty "cannot get beyond Husserl's perspective" (Barbaras, 2004, 38). Barbaras speculates that "[w]hat one has to do" instead "is [to] reconcile the irreconcilable – identity and difference, fusion and separation", a step Merleau-Ponty fails to take, according to him (Barbaras, 2004, 37-38).

I will show that Merleau-Ponty does have at least the beginnings of a theory in which, (contra Hass) the other is able to question us. Furthermore, (contra Ware) it is not via a "split" but rather through *deepening his holist thinking* that he is able to begin with sociality, whilst still (contra Dastur) allowing for both ego and alter ego.

And (contra Barbaras) I argue, that Merleau-Ponty does reconcile "identity and difference" through the notion of the figure-ground structure.

3-6 Reconciliation of sameness and difference

Solitude and communication are two sides of the same phenomenon

Merleau-Ponty writes:

> How then can I – namely, me who is perceiving and who thereby affirms myself to be
> a universal subject – perceive another person who immediately deprives me of this
> universality? The central phenomenon, which simultaneously grounds my
> subjectivity and my transcendence toward the other, consists in the fact that I am
> given to myself. *I am given*, which is to say I find myself already situated and engaged
> in a physical and social world; *I am given to myself*, which is to say that this situation

is never concealed from me, it is never around me like some foreign necessity, and I am never actually enclosed in my situation like an object in a box. (PP, 377/417-418)

That which *grounds* both my subjectivity and my "transcendence toward the other" (the possibility of encountering an alter ego) is that "I am given". We have seen that Merleau-Ponty accepted the Gestalt notion of the whole, the Gestalt being the smallest unit of perception and consciousness more generally. We saw that this whole is an autochthonous organisation that arises temporally within experience. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty posits the figure/ground as the smallest unit. We have thus seen that the movement of consciousness requires a *ground*. We have further seen that Merleau-Ponty posits a world horizon (or ground) as the horizon of horizons. Thus, the behaviour needs to be understood not only as grounded in my own immediate horizon of my personal history of being-in-the-world but further grounded in the world horizon: "My freedom, that fundamental power I have of being the subject of all of my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion in the world" (PP, 377/418). And, therefore, what grounds my subjectivity, namely the world horizon, is also what allows my "transcendence toward the other". How are we to understand this?

I argue that we need to understand the social world as being integral of the world horizon. In other words, sociality is utterly primordial, *there is no possibility of beginning with a lone subject.*

Merleau-Ponty writes:

Against the social world, I can always make use of my sensible nature, close my eyes, plug my ears, live like a stranger in society, treat others, ceremonies, and monuments like mere arrangements of colors and lights, and strip them of all human signification. . . . But *I can only escape from being into more being*; for example I escape from society into nature, or from the real world into an imaginary that is made up of the debris of the real. (PP, 377/418, my emphasis)

Thus, any "escape" from sociality will *inescapably, irreducibly* include the debris of sociality. Sociality is not a form I may choose to impose on matter. If it is a part of the world horizon, then all my movements of consciousness will include sociality at its horizon. For instance, "I can construct a solipsistic philosophy, but by doing so I presuppose a community of speaking men, and I address myself to this community" (PP, 377-378/418).

Solipsism could only be rigorously true of someone who succeeded in tacitly observing his existence without being anything and without doing anything, which is surely impossible, since to exist is to be in the world. (PP, 378/419)

Thus, we must rediscover the social world, after the natural world, not as an object or a sum of objects, but as the permanent field or dimension of existence: I can certainly turn away from the social world, but I cannot cease to be situated in relation to it. (PP, 379/420)

If sociality is thus primordially integral of the world horizon, then solipsism is an abstraction. If sociality is the whole, then individuality is a moment of a whole, a figure against a

ground.[44] Strictly taken, then, the moment cannot the adequately understood in isolation. Hence, we read in the *Structure* that "the face – whether I touch my own or I see that of another – will be integrated into the structure: alter-ego" (SB, 170-171). And in the Phenomenology, as we have seen:

> There is, between my consciousness and my body such as I live it, and between this phenomenal body and the other person's phenomenal body such as I see it from the outside, an internal relation that makes the other person appear as the completion of the system. (PP, 368/410)

The figure/ground structure

I argue thus that we can make sense of the relationship between the general existence and difference in terms of the figure/ground structure.

We saw that Merleau-Ponty begins with the individual in this chapter, and that consequentially, the other appears as an autochthonous organisation – as *behaviour*. We might have wondered why Merleau-Ponty would begin with the individual subject when that was the Husserlian stance he was trying to overturn?

However, if we now remember that for Merleau-Ponty the smallest unit of experience is the figure/ground structure then we can see that neither my own subjectivity conceived as "figure" nor the "figure" of the other as behaviour can appear without its ground. Thus,

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[44] The social could, of course, also become "thematic" and stand out as a figure against a ground. This ground would still include a wider sociality.

even though he appeared to begin with the individual subject, this subject was always already embedded in sociality.

For Merleau-Ponty there is no transcendental ego, there is no atemporal meaning. Thus the meaning I have of myself as a subject also arises autochthonously within the moment of my experience. And like any other perception, the identity of my own subjectivity is upheld by the world horizon. Thus both my perception of my own subjectivity and of the other as another freedom appear as figures against the background of a shared sociality, a shared world horizon. Both our individual temporal identities are upheld by the subtly shifting world *social* horizon.

Remember that we noted difficulties regarding autonomy with both Uexküll's and Goldstein's theories. Their atemporal meanings of the organism meant that we could not account for difference and thus failed to posit a satisfactory intersubjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty there is no such atemporal meaning – even notions such as the species *a priori* are to be understood as temporal – there is no *essence of sameness* that the difference fails to be established against. The social *general existence* and the *anonymous body* are not atemporal meanings, they are *temporal ground, horizon* and, moreover, unlike Goldstein's organism the anonymous body does not denote the *whole*: as ground it is only a *part* and requires the figure to make it a *whole*.

Thus, the other does not appear to me as the *same*. On the contrary. She stands out as a figure (and is thus *different*) from the ground of our shared sociality. However, the other person is also not *entirely* different, she is not Levinas's radical alterity. Her difference is

grounded on a common sociality and world horizon. There is thus a "reconciliation" of sameness and difference at the primordial heart of our experience of intersubjectivity.

As we saw above, "My freedom, that fundamental power I have of being the subject of all of my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion in the world" (PP, 377/418). The sameness and the difference, my freedom and my "insertion in the world" are like two sides of a coin utterly irreducible but still point to different *moments* of our experience. My intersubjectivity-subjectivity is a *strong whole* and the *moment* of my individuality certainly exists as a recognisable moment but it can in no way be made sense of in isolation of the intersubjectivity that is its ground. I am always already both my freedom and my situatedness, "simultaneously creating [*naturant*] and created [*naturé*]" (PP, 382-383/423-424).

Merleau-Ponty does recognise this as a paradox and it is this paradox that allows me to recognise the other person both as the same as me and as different just as I recognise an anonymous existence underneath my personal one.

The Gestalt structure of the figure/ground thus points towards an understanding of intersubjectivity that begins with a primordial sociality but allows for the *difference* of both ego and alter-ego. Indeed, if the figure/ground is truly understood as the smallest unit of cognition, then the ground is nothing without the figure: it is just as impossible for there a generalised sociality or sameness without the figure of the individual that stands out against it, as it is impossible to have a lone individual without her horizon of sociality. Thus, those

views that see Merleau-Ponty as reducing intersubjectivity to a realm of generalised

sameness are making the mistake of analysing only an *isolated part* of the whole Gestalt.

Merleau-Ponty's insistence to begin with the subject followed by a statement of primordial

intersubjectivity that stresses generality and sameness unfortunately disguises the radicality

and originality of his solution. Moreover, much of the Gestalt theoretical principles that help

us understand what he is aiming to do are not repeated in this chapter and hence mostly

overlooked by commentators. However, through keeping the Gestalt theoretical background

– which I have aimed to establish in this thesis – clearly in mind, we have now been able to

gain insight into Merleau-Ponty's theory and – even if his statement lacks decisive force – to

understand something of the highly original and creative solution he is aiming for.

Conclusion

We have seen that Gestalt Theory posits a notion of autochthonous organisation in response and opposition to an atomically-oriented matter/form division. Instead of the sensation, the Gestalt, specifically the figure/ground structure, is conceived as the smallest unit of cognition.

Gestalt Theory, according to the critiques of Goldstein, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty runs into problems when it reduces the Gestalt to physicality and fails to recognise that a transcendental turn is required.

However, Goldstein's and Gurwitsch's solutions, by positing an *atemporal* meaning, unwittingly reintroduce a meaning/matter division. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, tries to establish a notion of autochthonous organisation that is meaningful but whose meaning arises temporally.

Merleau-Ponty's development of the Gestalt theoretical notion of the *temporally meaningful* autochthonous organisation entails that the subject does not constitute the world but rather inheres it and that, thus, there is always an element of opacity to her experience. Hence – in contrast to intellectualist views – the notion of encountering an alien subject within the sphere of her experience is not a contradiction.

However, although necessary, this is not yet sufficient for encountering another freedom. And, indeed, Merleau-Ponty does not stop there. He posits a primordial sociality that is always already there in our background with the world horizon. Hence both ego and alter-ego need to be understood as appearing autochthonously as *figures* against the *ground* of primordial sociality. And, as Merleau-Ponty's meaning arises temporally, he avoids the problems of autonomy that Goldstein and Uexküll face.

The figure/ground structure, conceived as the smallest unit of cognition, entails that neither *figure* nor *ground* can be understood in separation from the other. Thus, there can be no prior individual who secondarily has to bridge into intersubjectivity: the figure cannot be intelligible without the ground. Nor can we conceive of an undifferentiated generality, a "non-in-difference" as Levinas would have it – the ground cannot be intelligible without the figure.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity is thus deeply embedded in holist, Gestalt theoretical principles, and I argue that it is necessary to read it firmly within this context if we are to gain a clear understanding of it.

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