THE CONCEPTS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY

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This paper is meant to collect the variety of dispersed epistemological remarks in Gestalt psychology, compare them to classical phenomenology, and interpret them in some new ways which continue the intentions of the original Gestalt theorists. Koffka, Köhler, and Duncker are the Gestaltists whose works are considered — Koffka and Köhler in selected texts and articles and Duncker in a single article that provides a rare explicit dialogue with classical phenomenology. Apparently Duncker did not feel the progress of the article was complete, since he didn’t publish it prior to his death, but Köhler realized the article’s worth and had it published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* in 1947. In many respects this present paper aims to continue the spirit of Duncker’s project in the 1947 article, tracing out the system of Gestalt psychology’s epistemology in view of phenomenological issues. Still, if the spirit is Duncker’s the system is not. The system outlined below represents a synthesis for which Duncker’s work is only a partial contribution.

At a time when popular American psychology, in the form of Behaviorism, was proud of its naive realism, Gestalt psychology took the trouble to unravel epistemological complexities indicated by their psychological research. At the height of the Behaviorism-Gestalt conflicts Heidbredder wrote:

Gestalt psychology has an awareness of epistemology that behaviorism considers it a virtue to lack. Behaviorism
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solves its epistemological problems by crashing through them, assuming the realism of common sense. But Gestalt psychology picks its way deliberately through the mazes of epistemology. (1933, p. 346)

First Gestalt psychology had to establish that there are epistemological issues to be considered. American psychology had become annoyed with the philosophical entanglements of its early history and it wished not to untangle them but to do away with them. As a result Behaviorism's naive realism was appealing, pretending, as it does, to do away with every epistemological question. Naive realism simply asserts: The perceptual world is what it is because the real world is what it is. In the physicalistic psychology which is Behaviorism, that naive realism tends spontaneously to translate into the "constancy hypothesis" of perception. How do the real things jump into my head to take the form of experienced things?—by means of the sense organs, as every biologist knows. I see this page in front of me just the way I do because the image reaching my eye is just what it is. Nothing could be easier. The sense organ mediates perfectly between the object in itself and my experience of it. To say that events at the sense organ directly determine perception is also to say that “sensations” directly determine perception. Like the sense organs “sensations” have a mediating place between the physical and the phenomenal, providing the link which can perfectly connect the two and allowing the physicalistic psychologist to ignore the latter.

Gestalt psychology was disdainful of naive realism and of a “constancy hypothesis” that allows naive realism to become “scientific.” In his Principles Koffka called naive realism “banal,” “inadequate,” and “wrong” (1935, p. 77) and Köhler dismissed the constancy hypothesis at every turn. Over and over again the Gestaltists demonstrated that perception does not correspond to the bundle of sensations predicted by the physical events at the sense organs. On the one hand, identical sensory stimulations can give rise to nonidentical perceptual qualities depending on contextual factors (e.g., in all illusions and contrast effects). On the other, nonidentical varying sensory stimulations can give rise to identical nonvarying perceptual qualities (e.g., in all perceptual constancies which characterize everyday perception). The phi phenomenon, pure stroboscopic movement whose investigation