THE GESTALT OF PROBLEM-SOLVING:
AN INTERPRETATION OF MAX WERTHEIMER'S
PRODUCTIVE THINKING

by Gayne Nerney

I. INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARIES

Taking Max Wertheimer's work as representative of the
gestaltist contribution to problem-solving, my task in this essay
will be to work my way through his Productive Thinking (Wer-
theimer 1959). While basically an analysis and interpretation of a
text, my own 'productive' contribution will be to fill out Wer-
theimer's deceptively straight-forward account by supplying a
reflective dimension from a phenomenological viewpoint. This
will be done throughout, both during the process of assembling
Wertheimer's descriptive results, and in the interpretation and
assessment of these in the concluding section of my essay. The
pretense here is not to understand Wertheimer better than he
understood himself, but, by employing the phenomenological
viewpoint, to act as a guide of sorts through a knotty problem,
made all the more difficult, let it be said, by the very straight-
forwardness of Wertheimer's homely and unpretentious prose.

Wertheimer's investigation of productive thinking does not
begin with an elaborate characterization of his subject. At the
outset productive thinking is defined very broadly as thinking
that "really forges ahead," that "really grasps an issue," that gives
birth to a "genuinely creative idea." It is a surprising, even
though not uncommon, event, exhibiting "the transition from a
blind attitude to understanding in a productive process." This
kind of event, where thinking does become an 'achievement' of some distinctive sort, "however modest the issue," occurs in all sorts of life situations, and is experienced by adults and children of all ages (Wertheimer 1959, pp. 1-2). Further, while asserting that productive thinking is quite common, and is not something that men by nature seek to avoid, Wertheimer does not begin by situating it in the wider context of life, nor does he describe how it comes to pass that men are in a problem-solving attitude. Wertheimer offers no thesis to the effect, for example, that the capacity for productive thought is a supplement to the workings of animal instinct, a means of bringing instinct to bear on novel situations. Wertheimer says nothing at the outset about whether or not this experience is specifically human, or is also characteristic of the sensibleness of animal life. Save one clause in the conclusion of his study (1959, p. 240), this remains a more or less open question. Neither does Wertheimer set out by attempting to specify examples of other-than-productive thinking, thinking not oriented to either the solution of some problem or the satisfaction of some goal-project. These issues, the situating and distinguishing of productive thinking, I set aside until concrete research provides the proper occasion for comment.

On the basis of his very general characterization of productive thinking, Wertheimer then raises more specific questions. What takes place when one really thinks, i.e., when one attempts to think productively? What are the decisive steps and features of this process? What are the grounds of these? What are the conditions favorable to the occurrence of productive thinking? What distinguishes 'good' and 'bad' productive thought? How can this process be improved and enlarged? These are the basic questions that guide his research. They mark out four basic tasks: 1) a description of the relevant and decisive facts; 2) the recognition and accounting for the value distinctions 'given' in these facts; 3) noting the circumstances that contribute to 'sensible' productive thinking; and 4) a generalizing reflection on the implications and significance of the descriptive findings.

We will also see that Wertheimer carries out his inquiry into productive thinking according to the principles of his own theory. The problem of productive thinking itself constitutes an incomplete gestalt, even to the point where, because of 'structural hiddenness,' the problem itself requires clarification. It is the pro-