

GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

Commentary on UHLHAAS and SILVERSTEIN'S article (with some comments on PLAUM'S comments on the same article)¹

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I

Gestalt psychology, and Gestalt physics, which the authors mention, are long overdue a re-appraisal in mainstream psychology and psychiatry. There are all sorts of incidental reasons why the school was eclipsed by behavioural and cognitive psychology, and why psychoanalysis was not itself eclipsed. ASH (1995) provides an excellent account of all this.

My view is that of all the extant schools of psychology Gestalt psychology still provides the best account of schizophrenia. It does not explain all the psychopathology of schizophrenia, but what it does attempt to explain it explains better than anything that other schools try to explain.

II

UHLHAAS and SILVERSTEIN's article is an excellent summary of the Gestalt approach to schizophrenia. CONRAD and MATUSSEK are the best known advocates of a Gestalt approach, but their work was done fifty years ago, and the authors are correct to draw together evidence in the intervening period in support of the validity of this approach.

Certainly, when I was researching the psychological nature of schizophrenia in the 1980s and 1990s, I was particularly influenced by an article by PLACE & GILMORE (1980), which showed, against all the behavioural and cognitive theories of what should happen, that schizophrenics did better than normals on a task where not having a Gestalt was an advantage. PLAUM quotes favourably the book by CHAPMAN & CHAPMAN (1973) – behaviourists – but this single experimental result undermines the entire behaviourist and cognitive, and general neuropsychological,

¹ UHLHAAS, Peter J., & Steven M. SILVERSTEIN (2003a): The continuing Relevance of Gestalt Psychology for an Understanding of Schizophrenia. *Gestalt Theory*, 25 (4/2003), 256-279. – PLAUM, Ernst (2003): Auf der Suche nach schizophrenie-spezifischen Störungen. *Gestalt Theory*, 25 (4/2003), 280-288. – UHLHAAS, Peter J., & Steven M. SILVERSTEIN (2003b): „Can Gestalt Psychology inform the Search for the Etiology of Schizophrenia?“ *Gestalt Theory*, 25 (4/2003), 289-298.

approach to schizophrenia, which, in brief, is that whatever schizophrenics do they will do badly. The Gestalt approach, for all its problems – see below – at least recognizes that schizophrenics do better on some tasks than you or I. This simple fact is a vast advance in understanding.

III

I am not going to go into detail about UHLHAAS and SILVERSTEIN's approach, nor into PLAUM's criticisms. I have sympathy for both sets of authors – the former, as I say, because a Gestalt approach is superior to any other psychological approach, the latter, because a Gestalt approach still does not explain even a minority of the overall psychopathological phenomena of the condition.

If we take MATUSSEK's 1952 article, for example, as a paradigm Gestalt approach, on a personal note, when I had this translated into English (CUTTING & SHEPHERD, 1987), the very fact that one of the best applied behavioural psychologists around (HEMSLEY, 1994) was thrilled about it indicates that the description of the psychopathology still leaves several interpretations open. HEMSLEY latched on to the claim that there was an attentional problem, which he could explain within his behavioural framework. MATUSSEK himself gave neither an explanation for why the 'framing' of certain qualities in a pastoral scene occurred, nor why these and not others were the focus of the framing.

IV

It seems to me that the Gestalt approach to psychiatric conditions has to be elaborated in two completely different directions. The first is neuropsychological; the second is philosophical.

V

In neuropsychological terms, there is no place these days for general statements about schizophrenics having 'brain damage' or 'dementia praecox'. What they have is a quite specific neuropsychological profile, where whatever one hemisphere does in normals is not done properly by schizophrenics, and whatever the other hemisphere does in normals is enhanced. This seesaw principle can even be found in subjects who actually have a morbidly pathological form of dementia – Alzheimer's or cerebrovascular dementia. Such subjects (MILLER et al 2002) start showing prodigious artistic talent, for example, and do better than you or I, and better than they themselves did when in a premorbidly 'normal' state, in this respect. Their ability to see Gestalts or their ability to benefit from not seeing Gestalts is enhanced, depending on the precise location of the predominant brain damage. Gestalt formation and appreciation thus becomes one of the many approaches to the World, and one which is neither 'normal', nor 'typically human', and nor is its converse 'typically schizophrenic'.

One patient (UNNITHAN et al, 1991), a schizophrenic by all the usual diagnostic criteria, convinced me of the inadequacy of a Gestalt approach on its own. This was a young man who would fixate on banal things and part-things – radiator taps, the ends of curtain rails, door handles – always in his right visual field. What Gestalt theory cannot explain is the forced attention to ‘thingness’ and the locus of it in the right visual field. A neuropsychological theory of schizophrenia implicating a right hemisphere dysfunction can explain the forced attention to items in the right visual field (KINSBOURNE, 1993), and, to some extent, the preoccupation with thingness as opposed to, say, living entities (GAINOTTI, 2000). But a further philosophical dimension is really required to explain this preoccupation with thingness.

VI

Philosophically, Gestalt theory played an important part in the development of 20th Century philosophy – not the Anglo-American variety, nor the HUSSERLIan version of phenomenology, and not the HEIDEGGERian sort of existential analysis. It was avidly devoured by Max SCHELER, who then influenced a generation of psychopathologists – Kurt SCHNEIDER, VON GEBSATTEL, for example – and, who, from a purely philosophical point of view, then used it to create a philosophical corpus which, to this day, is still scarcely mined.

What one finds, if one delves into his philosophy (CUTTING, 2002), is, from the standpoint of trying to understand schizophrenia, a wealth of ideas which, in my view, explain the condition more than any psychological school has been able to.

Gestalt psychology thus becomes a stepping-stone, in SCHELER’s philosophy, to a comprehensive view on human existence, which then became a more general perspective, which illuminates the condition to such an extent that the majority, if not the entire condition, falls into place.

This is not the place to argue this point, but consider whether Gestalt psychology can explain the following: the increased fullness of qualities such as colour, as experienced by schizophrenics; the enhanced sense of personal responsibility for the world reported by schizophrenics; or the divine, spiritual and metaphysical preoccupation that many schizophrenics show.

VII

A theorist must be tough enough to face up to their failure to explain what they seek to explain.

UHLHAAS and SILVERSTEIN do indeed provide a plausible account for some of the psychopathology of schizophrenia, but not nearly enough to leave one satisfied that Gestalt psychology is the methodology of choice to investigate schizophrenia.

Summary

In his short commentary on UHLHAAS and SILVERSTEIN, the author points out that Gestalt theory and Max SCHELER's philosophy, both sharing the phenomenological approach, have a lot in common. The author believes that SCHELER's work explains the condition of schizophrenia better than any other theoretical framework, and he calls on Gestalt theorists to mine SCHELER's work.

Zusammenfassung

In seinem kurzen Kommentar zu UHLHAAS und SILVERSTEIN zeigt der Autor, daß es zwischen der Gestalttheorie und der Philosophie Max SCHELERs, die beide auf einem phänomenologischen Ansatz beruhen, viele Gemeinsamkeiten gibt. Der Autor glaubt, daß SCHELERs Arbeit Schizophrenie besser erklären kann als jedes andere theoretische Gebäude und er fordert Gestalttheoretiker auf, SCHELERs Arbeit zu nutzen.

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