

COMMENTS ON MAX VISSER'S REPORT: "THE ORGANIZATIONAL GESTALT"

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The power and versatility of Gestalt concepts are illustrated in their skillful application by Max VISSER to the study of organizations and management. To the roster of writings he mentions in his initial paragraph, we might add a few: George KATONA (1959, 1960) on applications to economic and consumer behavior; Norman R.F. MAIER (1973) on industrial organizations; Muzafer and Carolyn SHERIF (1969) on social groups; and our retrospect on Max WERTHEIMER's seminars on social psychology at the New School for Social Research (LUCHINS & LUCHINS, 1978).

We found VISSER's entire paper of great interest, especially the references to the writings of GRELLING and OPPENHEIM. We had originally hoped that our queries and comments on VISSER's manuscript would have reached him in time to be incorporated into his paper, if he cared to do so. But perhaps they are still timely.

Original Sources

We confess to a bias in favor of original sources over (or in addition to) secondary sources. There are several places in VISSER's paper where citation of original sources might have clarified the text. For example, on p. 231 we find:

"Initiated by the treatise of Von EHRENFELS on 'Gestaltqualitäten', Gestalt theory made important inroads in early twentieth century Continental philosophy (HEIDER, 1970; SMITH, 1988). Some twenty years later WERTHEIMER introduced Gestalt theory in the field of experimental psychology, from which the Berlin school of Gestalt psychology emerged (KOFFKA, 1935; KÖHLER, 1947; WERTHEIMER, 1938)."

Aside from the question of whether EHRENFELS' treatise on Gestaltqualitäten *initiated* Gestalt theory or was an *antecedent* or *precursor* or *forerunner* of it (cf. HEIDER, 1970; HELSON, 1969), there is the question of the meaning of the phrase "Some twenty years later" in the last cited sentence. The meaning would have been clearer if the text had included the date of EHRENFELS' treatise (1890) and of WERTHEIMER's paper (1912) on his study of apparent movement arising from discrete displacement of stimuli, which he called phenomenal movement or phi-phenomenon. In Edwin G. BORING's (1950, p. 590) words, it was WERT-

* Max VISSER (1997). The Organizational Gestalt. Images of Organization Revisited. *Gestalt Theory*, 19 (4), 231-240.

HEIMER's *inauguration* of Gestalt theory. It is often regarded as having introduced Gestalt theory in experimental psychology. One might have expected these classical writings to have been included in the Reference list. But it did not include any of EHRENFELS' publications or WERTHEIMER's 1912 paper. The only reference for WERTHEIMER was "Gestalt Theory," a talk in 1924, published in 1925, but with the date given only as 1938, the date of the abridged translation in Willis D. ELLIS' text.

Another case in point: VISSER gave the date for the publications he cited by GRELLING and OPPENHEIM as 1988, the date of the text edited by Barry SMITH in which the reports appeared. There was no indication of when the reports were written or first published, and whether they were translated from the German or originally written in English. Such information was available in the SMITH book.¹ Nor was there correct information about when or where GRELLING and OPPENHEIM lived and worked.

Another example: Referring to one of the EHRENFELS criteria for a Gestalt as transposition, VISSER wrote (p. 233). "a melody played in different keys is a classic example here (SIMONS, 1988). "Although Peter SIMONS' survey chapter in SMITH's book is a fine reference, it could well have been supplemented with *the* classical references: EHRENFELS' treatise (1890), and WERTHEIMER's "Gestalt Theory" (1924/1925), of which ELLIS' abridged translation already was in the References. Both papers centered on the classic example of melody as Gestalt.

The EHRENFELS Criteria

VISSER referred to the criteria of VON EHRENFELS as follows (pp. 233-234).

"In his philosophical treatise on 'Gestaltqualitäten,' Von EHRENFELS specified three criteria for the existence of a Gestalt. The first criterion refers to the unilateral dependence of a Gestalt on its basis (or fundament) The second criterion is concerned with supersummativity, often expressed in the statement that the Gestalt is more than (or different

¹ This information is available in the volume SMITH (1988) edited and in our reports in the present issue. GRELLING's "A Logical Theory of Dependence" was originally written in English, distributed in 1939 at the Fifth International Congress for the Unity of Science at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Unified Science (Erkenntnis)*, 8, but was rescheduled to be published in *Erkenntnis*, 9, 37-45; it was published for the first time in SMITH's book. GRELLING's and OPPENHEIM's "Der Gestaltbegriff im Lichte der neuen Logik," written in German, appeared in *Erkenntnis*, 7, 1937/1938, 211-225 and in translation in SMITH's book. Their "Supplementary Remarks on the Concept of Gestalt," written in English, appeared in *Erkenntnis*, 7, 357-359 and in SMITH's volume; (it was erroneously said to be translated from the German in SMITH, 1988, under the *List of Sources*). "Logical Analysis of 'Gestalt' as 'Functional Whole,'" written in English, distributed in 1939 at the Cambridge meeting, had been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Unified Science (Erkenntnis)*, 8, but was rescheduled in *Erkenntnis*, 9, 70-76; it was published for the first time in SMITH's book and appears in the present issue. Volume 9 of *Erkenntnis* was not published due to war conditions.

from) the mere sum of its parts ... The third and final of the EHRENFELS criteria concerns the notion of transposition."

A difficulty with the above passage is that EHRENFELS' treatise on Gestalt-qualitäten did not specify three criteria for a Gestalt, did not state the criteria explicitly, and did not number the criteria. SIMONS did so, in a section entitled, "EHRENFELS' Conditions on Gestalten" (1988, pp. 164-168). Perhaps in this case SIMONS' chapter should have been mentioned rather than EHRENFELS' treatise. The first EHRENFELS condition was characterized by SIMONS as unilateral dependence of a Gestalt on its basis or fundament. (SIMONS noted that the Berlin Gestalt School, and in particular WERTHEIMER and KÖHLER, required mutual dependence for a Gestalt.) He then referred to "EHRENFELS' two further criteria for something's being a Gestalt: (1) *Supersummativity* and (2) *Transposability*," but added parenthetically "Actually only the first of these was formulated by EHRENFELS as a criterion of Gestalt" (SIMONS, 1988, p. 167). Yet one could gain the impression from VISSER's report that the three criteria for a Gestalt were formulated in von EHRENFELS' treatise.

With reference to GRELLING and OPPENHEIM, VISSER began as follows (p. 233).

"The Austrian philosophers GRELLING & OPPENHEIM applied a rigorous logical analysis to the Gestalt concept, as proposed by VON EHRENFELS and amended by the Berlin Gestalt school. On the basis of this analysis they drew a distinction between the concepts of "Gestalt", satisfying all three EHRENFELS criteria, and "functional whole", conforming only to the first two conditions."

There are several difficulties with this passage:

- GRELLING and OPPENHEIM were not Austrian. GRELLING was born in Berlin and OPPENHEIM in Frankfurt; they lived virtually all their lives in Germany until the Nazis threatened their worlds.
- It is questionable that the Berlin Gestalt school merely *amended* EHRENFELS' concept of Gestalt. KÖHLER (1920; 1938) and WERTHEIMER (1924/1925; 1938) recognized only two EHRENFELS criteria, which they criticized. In his important work on physical Gestalten, KÖHLER wrote:

"Two characteristics of mental phenomena were considered by Von EHRENFELS as criteria of Gestalten. First, when the separate stimuli (tones) of a melody are presented, one each to a number of persons, the totality of experience is poorer than the total experience of *one* person to whom all the tones are presented...[T]he distinguishing feature of the richer experience rests upon a '*Gestaltqualität*' added to the other elements. This, however, does not cover the facts. Actually Von EHRENFELS' first criterion, though necessary, demands too little..."

Von EHRENFELS' second criterion of phenomenal Gestalten is based on transposition...While transposability is undoubtedly a characteristic of many, it does not apply to all cases of Gestalten; thus this is a sufficient but not a necessary criterion and therefore it must be said that whereas the former criterion demanded too little, this one requires too much." (KÖHLER, 1920; 1938, pp. 24-25)

WERTHEIMER respected his former teacher, VON EHRENFELS, and recognized the historical importance of his introduction of the Gestalt problem, but he criticized the attempted solution via the *Gestaltqualitäten*. In his 1924 speech on Gestalt theory, WERTHEIMER remarked:

"When in retrospect we consider the prevailing situation we are struck by two aspects of v[on] EHRENFELS' thesis; on the one hand one is surprised at the essentially summative character of his theory, on the other, one admires his courage in propounding and defending his proposition. Strictly interpreted, v. EHRENFELS' position was this: I play a familiar melody of six tones and employ six *new* tones, yet you recognize the melody despite the change. There must be a something *more* than the sum of six tones, viz. a seventh something, which is the form-quality, the *Gestaltqualität* of the original six. It is this *seventh* factor or element which enabled you to recognize the melody despite its transposition.

However strange this view may seem, it shares with many another subsequently abandoned hypothesis the honour of having clearly seen and emphasized a fundamental problem." (WERTHEIMER, 1924/1925; 1938, p. 4).

It seems to us that the psychologists of the Berlin Gestalt School regarded their concept of Gestalt as more an abandonment rather than an amendment of EHRENFELS' concept. Moreover, there seem to be other difficulties in VISSER'S report:

- GRELLING and OPPENHEIM referred to only two EHRENFELS criteria in their article on the "new logic": *Der Gestaltbegriff im Licht der neuen Logik* (1937/1938; 1988a). They did not explicitly mention von EHRENFELS or any of his criteria in their "functional whole" paper (1938/1939; 1988c; in this issue) except for transposibility, which was not identified as an EHRENFELS criterion. Hence it is surprising that VISSER ascribed such importance to these criteria in determining what they wrote. We cannot find any writings by them that referred explicitly to a concept of Gestalt as "satisfying all three EHRENFELS criteria" or to a functional whole as "conforming only to the first two conditions," as claimed in the paragraph cited (p. 233) about the distinctions drawn by GRELLING and OPPENHEIM.

In further passages (p. 234), VISSER continued to emphasize the EHRENFELS criteria as the basis for distinctions drawn by GRELLING and OPPENHEIM:

"Following the third EHRENFELS criterion, it would not be correct, however, to suppose that only equilibrated functional wholes are Gestalten, since imbalanced distributions can be equally well transposed as balanced ones. This point constitutes the distinction between the functional whole and the Gestalt (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM, 1988ac ...)

In order to satisfy all three EHRENFELS criteria, GRELLING & OPPENHEIM formally defined the Gestalt concept as: 'The Gestalt (of a complex with respect to a correspondence) is the invariant of transpositions (of the complex with regard to the correspondence)'" (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM, 1988a, p. 196).

- The notation 1988a referred to their "new logic" paper and 1988c to their "functional whole" paper, the first translated and the second published for the first time in the volume edited by Barry SMITH (1988). GRELLING and OPPENHEIM did not refer to any of the EHRENFELS criteria as constituting the distinction between the functional whole and the Gestalt. They recognized that functional

wholes may be stable (balanced, equilibrated) or unstable (imbalanced, disequilibrated) and that both may "have a Gestalt." Hence we do not understand on what basis VISSER claimed that "this constitutes the distinction between the functional whole and the Gestalt." What is the referent of "this"? Perhaps some confusion arose because GRELLING and OPPENHEIM stressed that a functional whole (whether or not it is balanced) is or has a Gestalt, whereas VISSER attributed to these philosophers an emphasis on the distinction between a functional whole and a Gestalt, possibly confounding two different uses of the word "Gestalt." Whereas GRELLING and OPPENHEIM wrote about a functional whole *as* a Gestalt, VISSER apparently thought of a functional whole *and* a Gestalt, which might explain the miswording in the title of the functional whole paper given in his Reference list, with *as* replaced by *and* between *Gestalt* and *functional whole*. We also cannot find evidence for VISSER's claim that the desire to satisfy all the EHRENFELS criteria was the motivation for the definition of Gestalten by GRELLING and OPPENHEIM as invariants of transpositions [or as equivalence classes of correspondences].

- In short, VISSER apparently viewed the writings of GRELLING and OPPENHEIM from the perspectives of the EHRENFELS criteria, which were not the perspectives they used. GRELLING and OPPENHEIM recognized the functional whole as a main concept of Gestalt theory and sought to base it - not on the EHRENFELS criteria - but on the notion of interdependence and related concepts of dependence and independence.

It should be noted that our comments are not intended to detract from the contributions VISSER made with his important article relating Gestalt theory, organizations, and management. His report has practical as well as theoretical implications.

Summary

VISSER's paper illustrated the power and flexibility of Gestalt concepts through his skillful application of them to the study of organizations and management. The comments on VISSER's manuscript were originally intended to reach him in time to be incorporated into his paper, if he cared to do so, but it is hoped that they are still timely. LUCHINS & LUCHINS suggest some possible additions to his survey of the literature. Several places in the text might be clearer in meaning if original sources rather than only secondary sources were cited. Most of the other comments pertain to the EHRENFELS criteria for a Gestalt, which seem to be the frames of reference that VISSER attributed to GRELLING and OPPENHEIM, whereas they apparently were not the perspectives used by these philosophers.

Zusammenfassung

VISSERs Aufsatz zeigt durch seine geschickte Anwendung gestalttheoretischer Konzepte auf die Untersuchung von Organisationen und Management deren Stärke und Flexibilität auf. Diese Kommentare zu VISSERs Manuskript waren ursprünglich als Anregungen für VISSER gedacht, um nach seinem Ermessen in seinem Aufsatz Berücksichtigung zu finden. Auch wenn sie dafür zu spät

kamen, haben sie vielleicht auch jetzt noch ihre Aktualität. LUCHINS & LUCHINS regen darin einige Ergänzungen zu VISSERs Auswertung der einschlägigen Literatur an. An einigen Stellen wäre ihrer Auffassung nach der Aufsatz klarer in seiner Aussage, wenn anstelle von Sekundärliteratur die Originalquellen zitiert würden. Der Großteil der übrigen Kommentare bezieht sich auf die Gestaltqualitäten von EHRENFELS. Diese scheinen von VISSER als Bezugsrahmen von GRELLING und OPPENHEIM angesehen zu werden. Dagegen wird eingewandt, daß dies der Sichtweise dieser beiden Philosophen nicht gerecht wird.

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