RELATIONS AND STRUCTURES

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Die Lehre von der Gestalt ist nicht etwa ein Teilgebiet der Psychologie neben den anderen. Sie ist eine aus der Natur der Sache entwickelte Art, jedes beliebige Problem der Psychologie - und auch anderer Wissenschaften - anzugreifen. (Metzger W. [*])

Gestalt Theory is not a sector within the field of psychology. It is a method based on the nature of things of dealing with any problem in psychology or in any other science.

I. Gestalt theory as a theory of phenomenal relations

Relations have been studied from several standpoints:

- Ch. von Ehrenfels studied the relations between perceptual structures. For him similarity and transposing of perceptual objects are based on the qualities of the whole (Gestaltqualitäten);

- M. Wertheimer analysed relations within structures. He demonstrated the connection between the qualities of the whole and the role or function of the parts in the whole. In his theory of social relations**,** Wertheimer considered the WE as a whole and the EGO as a WE-part;

- Koffka, according to Wertheimer, elaborated the "Total-Field" theory which includes two interacting poles, the self and the environment;

- Wertheimer, Köhler and Lewin suggested a new way of looking at the relations between a person and their world: the EGO is not always the source of interest and motivation. "The vectors often arise from the requirements of the situation not from egocentric interest" (Wertheimer 1935, 366);

- Lewin held that the dynamics of psychological processes is always to be derived from the relation of the individual to the total situation, which includes the relation between the researcher and the subject. After emigrating to the USA**,** he focused his research on social relations;

- In his book *Psychologie* (1954), Metzger investigated theoretically relevant problems of structure. In his final works, Metzger analysed a series of social relations which he takes not only from gestalt theory but also from other psychological schools;

- Heider used phenomenology to analyse interpersonal relations of everyday life. He believed that "insights concerning interpersonal relations are embodied in fables, novels and other literary forms" (Heider 1958, 6).

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[*] Wolfgang Metzger, *Die Lehre von der Gestalt,* (unpublished lecture)

II. Gestalt theory as a school of respect

The principle of respect has different meanings, both ethical and epistemological.

We must respect phenomenal reality in the same way as physical reality. Metzger says: "Phenomenal reality must be accepted with respect and love in its 'So-sein' " (Metzger 1954, 12).

In order to investigate this level of reality, gestalt psychologists use the phenomenological approach. The psychologist has two sources of phenomenal observations: his own consciousness which can be reached directly and the consciousness of the other, which cannot. In the case of the other, the psychologist has to establish a "cooperative dialogue" with the person. According to the principle of respect, the cooperation of the subject must be free and arise from his sharing in the aim of the situation which must be described by the researcher, at least in general terms.

Cooperative dialogue has different qualities in the field of "phenomenal objectivity" and that of "phenomenal subjectivity".

The principle of respect and the relation between researcher and participant in phenomenal objectivity

A typical example is the study of Wertheimer on stroboscopic movement. Wertheimer constructed an experimental situation which produces in all the observers - his colleagues Köhler and Koffka and the other participants (who are not trained in psychological observation) - the same perceptual effect which he defines as "spontaneous, univocal and coercive". This effect is the starting point for the study of the conditions which support perceptual phenomenon. The focus of the research is on what is common in perception by the different observers and not on their individual manner of perception.

This situation is defined by Bakhtin: "position of a third party".

"The position of the third party is quite justified when one person can assume another's position, when a person is completely replaceable. But it is justified only in those situations, and when solving those problems, where the integral and unrepeatable individuality of the person is not required, that is, when a person, so to speak, is specialized, reflecting only a part of his individuality that is detached from the whole, when he is acting not as I myself, but "as an engineer," "as a physicist," and so forth. In the area of abstract scientific cognition and abstract thought, such a replacement of one person with another, that is, abstraction from the I and hou, is possible (but even here, probably, only up to a certain point)" (Bakhtin 2003, 144).

The "sharing" of perception justifies inviting a person to participate and cooperate in scientific research and to observe and describe a perceptual phenomenon. Under these conditions, the principle of respect is observed.

The principle of respect and the relation between researcher and participant in phenomenal subjectivity

In the field of phenomenal subjectivity we do not have a "sharing" of perception of an external object by many observers but an individual perception of the self. The self is a phenomenal entity that, as James writes, "arouses self-feelings and self-preservation". In order to allow the other to overcome his feelings and fear of revealing himself, the researcher must establish an intimate relation. Bakhtin said:

"Intimate speech is imbued with a deep confidence in the addressee, in his sympathy, in the sensitivity and goodwill of his responsive understanding. In this atmosphere of profound trust, the speaker reveals his inner depths." Bakhtin 2003)

Field theory suggests that amongst the "hundred" qualities of a person, in the sense of Pirandello, those emerge which are, at any given time, in accordance with the aim of the situation and the type of interpersonal relations. For this reason, in order to understand and interpret self description it is important to define the type of relation that the person establishes with the researcher and what role the individual plays in this relation.

Recently I analysed self-reports of cancer-patients, who revealed their feelings and emotions in a public seminar entitled: "The cancer-patient cured". The aim of this seminar was to increase awareness that the end of cancer is not death but restored health. The patients reveal their inner emotions because they share the aim of the situation with the organisers. I was one of these organisers and the patients were willing to enter into a dialogue with me and to analyse the meaning of their self-reports.

The principle of respect in Lewin's research

To create a cooperative relation, the researcher must share with the participant the aim of the research and its consequences in the sense of Lewin's "action-research" and its development.

Action-research is based on dialogues between researcher and participant. This is not an accidental characteristic, but one of its basic epistemological elements, one which has a great many implications.

The relation between researcher and participant in contemporary culture

In our culture there is an increasing sense of self-dignity as a person and the need for paritetic (democratic) relations rather than for hierarchical relations. This transition influences the relation between researcher and participant in scientific research.

Interpretation of self description

In the field of "phenomenal objectivity" we have, as Metger (1966) says, "a structural identity of perception and description by the different observers and of a replacement between researcher and participant", whereas in the field of "phenomenal subjectivity" we have a text that describes an individual's experience of the self. The meaning of this text and its parts must be analysed and interpreted by means of an intimate dialogue with the subject. Knowledge of the other is inevitably influenced by the conceptual and linguistic parameters of researcher. The end product of this process is what Bachtin defines: "one's own-another's". I would argue that there is a connection between Bachtin's term "one's own-another's" and the approach of the hermeneutic who says that it is impossible to leave the hermeneutic circle or our own preconceptions towards the other, but it is possible and useful to know what these preconceptions are. If we try to know our own parameters, we respect, as far as possible, the 'otherness' of the other.

III. Gestalt theory and structural analysis

Wertheimer shows that a structure can be analysed not only through the qualities of the whole but also through the roles and functions of its parts.

In his article dated 1923 he writes:

"Proceeding from above, from the structure of the whole and descending from there to the subwhole and to the parts, the parts are not mere pieces in additional relation together, but parts of the whole; these parts are in hierarchical relation together."(Wertheimer 1923, 349-350)

In a short paper dated 1933, Wertheimer illustrates the connection between whole-qualities and the roles of the parts with examples of perception. This connection has been demonstrated by pupils of Wertheimer (Goldmeier, E.; Rausch, E.) in experimental studies on similarity of configurations.

On the grounds of this discovery, Wertheimer suggests analysing the roles of the parts in a structure rather than breaking down the whole into isolated elements. He offers applications of this methodology in different fields:

- analysis of perception;

- analysis of productive thinking;

- analysis of concepts such as "truth" and "democracy";

- analysis of some problems of ethics;

- analysis of the behaviour of "two boys playing badminton";

- analysis of a dialogue with "a girl who describes her office".

In these analyses, Wertheimer demonstrates the importance of the centering in a structure and the "change of meaning of the parts in accordance with their structural place, role and function." (Wertheimer 1959, 179)

Development of the structural analysis

I will consider the contributions of the scholars Lewin, Metzger and Arnheim.

Lewin in his field theory follows closely the approach of Wertheimer's structural analysis. He writes:

"What is important in field theory is the way the analysis proceeds. Instead of picking out one or another isolated element within a situation, the importance of which cannot be judged without consideration of the situation as a whole, field theory finds it advantageous, as a rule to start with a characterization of the situation as a whole. After this first approximation, the various aspects and parts of the situation undergo a more and more specific and detailed analysis." (Lewin 1951, 63)

For the analysis of "life space", Lewin elaborates new theoretical constructs: regions, atmosphere, reality and irreality levels and so on.

Metzger in his work *Psychologie* (1954) enlarges the phenomenology of a structure with the differentiation of the various whole qualities and their relations, with the theoretical study of the concept of frame of reference and of centering (hierarchical relations of the parts in a whole). These concepts are available both for the analysis of phenomenal objectivity and of phenomenal subjectivity. In his work *Gesetze des Sehens* (1953) Metzger organizes the contributions of experimental research on visual structures according to the constructs presented in *Psychologie*.

In the study on the development of behaviour, Metzger and his pupils uses the structural analysis according to Lewin's field theory.

Rudolf Arnheim (1954), according to Wertheimer, distinguishes "genuine parts from mere pieces" in a structure and uses the concept of the role of parts to analyse what he defines as the "structural skeleton" of a visual configuration. He shows that the structural skeleton can be found not only in simple geometrical shapes but also in the complex configurations of the visual arts.

Structural analysis and interpretation of a verbal text

A verbal text can be considered as a structure with its own qualities that are dissimilar to the qualities of the structure of perception. In the perception of an object, we have immediate "encountered" experiences in the sense of Metzger. In the understanding of a verbal text, we have experiences which are "mediated" through interpretation. A gestalt psychologist does not have established models or methods of analysing a verbal text. He may find similarities in the methods and approaches of hermeneutic theory.

The interpretation of verbal texts has a long tradition in juridical and religious hermeneutics. In these fields the principle of relation between whole and parts has always been recognised. The Roman jurist Giuvenzo Celso says: "Incivile est, nisi tota lege perspecta, una aliqua particula eius proposita iudicare vel respondere."(Digestum I.3.24). (It is wrong to judge and apply a single part of a law, without seeing the law as whole.)

Contemporary structural analysis of verbal text starts with the work of Vladimir Propp *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). For Propp the term "morphology" meant the study of the structure of a folktale. According to the principle of gestalt theory, the analysis must be focused on the whole (the plot of the story) and contextually on its parts (the role or function of the characters).

The structural analysis founded by Propp was further developed by Claude Lèvi-Strauss, Greimas and others.

In the gestalt school, examples of structural analysis of verbal texts are not common. Examples can be found in the research of Hellmuth Metz-Göckel, who uses gestalt constructs to analyse the texts of jokes and my analyses of novels and other texts through the concepts of scene, role and system of reference.

Structural analysis of a text and the role of the listener or hearer

One of the main concepts of gestalt theory is that of "total-field" which includes two interacting poles, the subject or self and the object. In research on perception, remembering and thinking within the Gestalt school, the self of the observer, rememberer and thinker is not considered. The investigation is focused on the object-pole alone and aims to analyse its structure.

In the investigation of a verbal text and its meaning it is not possible to ignore the role of the hearer or listener, because the meaning is not embedded in the text itself but in the relation between text and interpreter, who inevitably has his own preconceptions.

Interpretation of a verbal text must take into consideration the interaction between text, interpreter and situation. This means analyzing:

- the structure of a text: semantics; syntax; pragmatics…..

- the world of the interpreter: theory; values; emotional involvement….

- the aims and characteristics of the situation: dialogue or monologue; education or therapy,….

In my experience during the "Seminars on interpretation", which took place every year from 1979 to 1999 at the Department of philosophy of the University of Macerata, the interaction between gestalt theory, hermeneutics and text theory was very fruitful. This interaction has enabled me to analyze the phenomenal self in a new way: through "scenic analysis" of literary texts, I have studied body experience and interpersonal relations, which I define as "social virtues".

Structural analysis of the inter-semiotic transposition

According to Jakobson (1971), "inter-semiotic transposition is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non verbal sign system". Structural analysis can be used to compare a verbal text with a visual configuration. Arnheim compared the "structural skeleton" of a painting with the structure of a verbal text. Successful transposition is achieved if the roles of the parts in the verbal text are maintained in the visual structure.

Returning to the quote from Metzger with which I began, I agree that Gestalt Theory is a way of dealing with any problem in psychology, as long as Gestalt Theory is open to interaction with methods of other schools.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag ist in 3 Teile gegliedert: Gestalttheorie als Theorie der Beziehungen innerhalb der phänomenalen Welt; Gestalttheorie als Schule von „Liebe und Ehrfurcht" (Wolfgang Metzger); Gestalttheorie und Strukturanalyse.

Im ersten Teil werden die wichtigsten Beiträge über Beziehung und Struktur vorgestellt, die von den Begründern der Berliner Schule sowie deren Schülern der ersten Generation vorgelegt wurden. Mit diesen Beiträgen wurde nicht nur eine Psychologie, sondern implizit auch eine Anthropologie formuliert. Im zweiten Teil werden die verschiedenen Bedeutungen des Prinzips der Ehrfurcht analysiert. Es wird gezeigt, dass in der Erforschung des phänomenalen Ichs das Eintreten in einen dialogischen Prozeß mit dem Gegenüber eine Grundvoraussetzung ist, um die verschiedenen Aspekte des Ichs erkennen zu können. Im dritten Teil werden die Entwicklungen der Strukturanalyse, die von Wertheimer begründet wurde, in ihren verschiedenen Anwendungsbereichen außerhalb der Wahrnehmungs-forschung, wie Analyse des Verhaltens oder Analyse verbaler Texte dargestellt. Meine langjährige Erfahrung in multidisziplinären Seminaren über die Interpretation verbaler Texte zeigt, dass in diesem Bereich der Strukturanalyse Gestalttheorie und Hermeneutik eine fruchtbare Verbindung eingehen.

Summary

This paper is divided into three parts: Gestalt theory as a theory of phenomenal relations; Gestalt theory as a school of respect; Gestalt theory and structural analysis.

In the first part there is a description of the contributions to 'Relations and structures' made by the founders and first students of the Gestalt school. These contributions form a theory which

is not only psychological but also anthropological. In the second part, I analyze the different meanings of the principle of respect. In the study of phenomenological subjectivity, the principle of respect must be combined with the principle of dialogue in the sense of Bakhtin. In the third part, I describe developments in the methods of structural analysis used in different fields of research: perception and cognitive processes; behaviour; verbal texts. It is my belief that in analyzing a verbal text it is productive to use Gestalt theory together with hermeneutics.

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