Max Wertheimer: 1880-1943

In the death of Max Wertheimer, psychology loses one of its distinguished members. He died of a heart attack October 12, 1943, at New Rochelle, New York. He was at the time Professor in the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City. He is best known as the founder of Gestalt psychology. Together with Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, he has been a leader of this important movement for the last thirty years.

Wertheimer was always a restless investigator. His interests touched on many fields. In perception, he wrote about apparent movement and figural organization. His earliest interest was law; his earliest papers were on the psychology of testimony. He wrote about the problems of logic and their relation to the psychology of thinking, about the music and language of primitive peoples, about ethics and its relation to culture. In each of these fields what Wertheimer wrote was fresh and original. It had that quality which frequently made a person remark, "Why hasn't someone thought of that before?" It was often fragmentary; it could not help being tantalizing. What Wertheimer never wrote and, I believe, never cared to write, was a systematic treatise. He only occasionally wrote in defense of Gestalt psychology. He never completed an ordered and definitive treatment of any field of his interest.

All of Wertheimer's particular interests were subsidiary to his contribution to psychology as the author of *Gestalttheorie*. It was in Wertheimer's paper on apparent movement[1] that Gestalt psychology was first presented as such. It was in discussions with Wertheimer during 1910 and 1911 that Köhler and Koffka had first formulated their own views of the subject. It was from Wertheimer's lectures, first in Frankfurt and later in Berlin (1910-1929), that other psychologists such as Fuchs and Gelb, Lewin, Duncker and Metzger learned what Gestalt psychology meant. In America, on the other hand, it was Koffka and Köhler who were the better known. Koffka's *Growth of the Mind* and Köhler's *Mentality of Apes* both appeared in English in 1924. Koffka came to America for the first time in 1924. Köhler came in 1925. Both were familiar figures in American universities during the following decade.

It required the political cataclysm of 1932-1933 to bring Wertheimer to New York. To some of us who had seen him in Frankfurt it seemed

[1] M. Wertheimer, Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung, *Zsch. f. Psychol.*, 61, 1912, 161-265. This paper was reprinted in M. Wertheimer, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Gestalttheorie*, 1925, 1-105.

quite impossible to imagine this *Akademiker* transplanted to the American scene. And in some senses he remained unchanged in this new environment. In as many other ways he became thoroughly American, with his lively interest in our political scene, in the views and problems of American psychology, in his cherished new citizenship. Yet even at the time of his death he was the least well known of the Gestalt psychologists.

The role which he played in the development of Gestalt views has not been well understood. It may not be out of place to relate here some of the more personal side of Wertheimer's activities for the light they may throw on that question.

Max Wertheimer was born April 15, 1880, in Prague. His father taught in and directed a school for commercial subjects. Wertheimer attended school in Prague, finishing the Gymnasium at the customary eighteen. Then for two and a half years he studied law at the University, "during which time," as he says, "I had taken part in lectures and seminars in philosophy." In the spring of 1901 he gave up law and turned his interest entirely to philosophy. Three semesters he spent in Prague, three in Berlin, and two in Würzburg. Here he received the Ph.D., *summa cum laude,* under Külpe. The next five years he spent apparently at various tasks, in various places. Part of the time he was in Prague, part of it in Vienna, and part at the Phonogramm-Archiv in Berlin with von Hornbostel. In the fall of 1910 he arrived in Frankfurt, full of plans for his experiments on apparent movement. Here he met Köhler; here Koffka came the following year.

In Frankfurt Wertheimer became Privatdozent in 1912. After four years he went to Berlin, first for three years on leave from Frankfurt, then for three more as Privatdozent there. He became assistant professor in Berlin in 1922 and full professor when he returned to Frankfurt in 1929 to take Schumann's chair. Political events in Germany soon made that position so untenable that Wertheimer joined the first group of refugee scholars who arrived early in 1934 to set up the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research. He continued at that post without interruption until his death.[2]

Prague, Berlin, and Würzburg—Wertheimer must have carried away something from each. Just what, we cannot say. We know the men whose lectures he attended. Arleth, von Ehrenfels, Marty, Rietsch, Steinach, Schultz and Willmann in Prague; Dilthey, Friedländer, Paulsen, Schaefer,

[2] The photograph of Wertheimer, which appears as the frontispiece of this number of the JOURNAL, is taken from a family group of the Wertheimers on their arrival in America in 1933 and is by Wide World Photos.

Schmoller, Schumann, Stumpf, Wagner, and von Willamowitz in Berlin; Boll, Brenner, Külpe, and Marbe in Würzburg. Among them, only Stumpf and Schumann, Külpe and Marbe were psychologists. Steinach was a physiologist, Hering's assistant. Rietsch, Schultz, and Friedländer were historians of music or art. Schmoller, Wagner, and Schaefer were political economists. Boll, Brenner, and von Willamowitz were philologists. The rest were philosophers.

Prague did not boast a psychological laboratory. It did have, however, men who were keenly interested in psychological problems. Wertheimer spent a good many hours in the Physiological Institute where he was able to do visual experiments in Hering's laboratory. He doubtless found far more phenomenology in this atmosphere than he would have found in Leipzig at that time.

In Berlin, psychology was far more firmly established. Stumpf was still busy with his studies on the psychology of music. Schumann, as Stumpf's assistant, was full of interesting observations and ideas for experiments, but he was not intellectually stimulating. Wertheimer apparently busied himself making the acquaintance of the growing discipline; he once related that he spent most of his first semester in Berlin reading the growing *Zeitschrift für Psychologie,* volume by volume from the beginning. He also met von Hornbostel, who had just taken charge of the Phonogramm-Archiv to collect this material in which Stumpf had always shown such a lively interest. The friendship between these two men, formed then, was to last until von Hornbostel's death in 1935.

It was in Würzburg, however, that Wertheimer received his degree. It was there that he found the opportunity to work out a problem which he had carried over from his early interest in law. Together with a young lawyer named Klein, Wertheimer applied the technique of free and controlled association to the psychology of testimony. Their reasoning seems to have run something like this: The law is concerned with finding out the truth. The taking of testimony on the witness stand is one method of discovering that truth. May there not be other methods, dependent upon psychical dispositions which are the result of experiences and events, and which will reveal themselves in other ways? Could the methods of Jung, which were found to reveal complexes of the pathological person, not be applied also to the criminal who is intentionally withholding information? In many respects this paper[3] is peculiarly unlike the later Wertheimer. There is certainly nothing like Gestalt psychology here; the paper is more

[3] M. Wertheimer, Experimentelle Untersuchungen zur Tatbestandsdiagnostik, *Arch. f. d. ges. Psychol.,* 6, 1905, 59-131. This followed an earlier paper, M.

a mirror of the interests of that period in psychology. Only one thing in it foreshadows his later interests. That is the emphasis on the problem of the truth, a problem which becomes even more acute in the realm of logic and reasoning.

Where did Gestalt psychology come from? Certainly neither from Prague, nor Berlin, nor Würzburg. Details of what Wertheimer later wrote came from each but the basic plan was apparently his own. Two things were true of the intellectual situation at that time. First, it was a period in which many people were finding fault with the simpler elementarism and associationism of the Leipzig tradition. The aggressive, active period in Leipzig had passed. The time was ripe for new and fresh systematic views which would give coherence and direction to the work of younger men. Secondly, a lot of new ideas were in the air. A more naive and phenomenological introspection was implicit in the work of G. E. Müller's laboratory, of Schumann, of Hering, and probably of many others. Von Ehrenfels' views were generally known. Many people were tinkering with new concepts which might be grafted on to the older more formal systems: *complexes, mental set, attention, feelings of stress, intention* are samples.

Wertheimer seems to have decided that the analytical method itself was at fault. Psychological events had been treated piecemeal, when it was in their relations to one another (*Zusammenhang*) that they had meaning. Such piecemeal methods could never do justice to the symphonic sweep of natural events. Wertheimer would say, "Man muss an die Sache von oben her, nicht von unten, kommen." Order was not to be imposed on events arbitrarily; it resided in the events themselves. By approaching them from above, we might sense their meaningful relations; regarded in the conventional, analytical manner from below, we could see only meaningless, accidental combinations (*sinnlose Und-Verbindungen*).

Some of this, perhaps not all, must have been in his mind when he conceived the plan of the experiments on apparent movement. This occurred, Wertheimer once related, while he was on the train en route from Vienna to the Rhineland for a vacation. Interrupting the trip at the next good stopping point, he proceeded at once to put the idea to a test. This town happened to be Frankfurt. He put his bags in a hotel, shopped for a toy stroboscope, and, returning with it to his hotel room, started constructing figures to test the new hypothesis. The rest of the story is more familiar. He found at the University (then the Akademie für Socialwissenschaften and a number of related Institutes) Schumann and Köhler. Schumann had

Wertheimer and J. Klein, Psychologische Tatbestandsdiagnostik, *Arch. f. Kriminalanthrop.*, 15, 1904, 72-113.

just completed a new tachistoscope which he graciously offered to Wertheimer for these experiments. The next months saw the principal experiments completed, first with Köhler and later with Koffka as subjects. In that period, Gestalt psychology was born and its first two converts won.

It was not until some years later that more of the typical Wertheimer papers appeared. The war years intervened during which Wertheimer and von Hornbostel spent a good deal of time developing binaural listening devices. Some of the experiments were conducted aboard submarines; others were concerned with harbor defense installations such as were used at Ostend and Zeebrugge. Still other work concerned locators for air-borne sound. Publication of this work was limited principally to the one report in the proceedings of the Prussian Academy in 1920.[4]

The immediate post-war years saw the publication of two other papers by Wertheimer marking out new directions in which his interests had taken him. The one was on creative thinking,[5] the other on perceptual grouping.[6] Both covered material which was familiar to students who had listened to his lectures. The first one, in particular, was strongly reminiscent of an early paper on the number concepts of primitive people. The problem is much the same; the solution to it has become much clearer by 1920. The same thing can be said about the famous "Punktarbeit," the paper on perceptual grouping. Some of the illustrations were well-known, some of the principles must have occurred in lectures as early as 1912. But by 1923 the formulation had become considerably sharper; it remained to set the matter down in reasonably ordered fashion.

For the remainder of Wertheimer's views it is necessary to turn largely to work of his students. For ten years in Germany and nearly as many in New York, he directed and influenced an ever-widening circle of workers. In Berlin and Frankfurt, the work done was largely in the field of psychology. At the New School Wertheimer was thrown with a mixed group of social scientists and characteristically gave a leaven to the group that it is hard to evaluate. His short paper on ethics gives some clue to the views he represented there.

It is not easy to account for what Wertheimer did; it is even more difficult to give a true picture of the influence that he had. A few points can be adequately established. After the year in Frankfurt, Koffka went to Giessen,

[4] E. M. von Hornbostel and M. Wertheimer, Ueber der Wahrnehmung der Schallrichtung, *Sitzungsber. d. Preuss. Akad. d. Wiss.*, 20, 1920, 388-396.

[5] M. Wertheimer, *Ueber Schlussprozesse in produktiven Denken*, Berlin, Leipzig, 1920. Also reprinted in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Gestalttheorie*, 1925, 164-184.

[6] M. Wertheimer, Untersuchungen zur Lehre von Gestalt, II, *Psychol. Forsch.*, 4, 1923, 301-350.

some forty miles north of Frankfurt. There followed from his laboratory the distinguished series of papers elaborating Wertheimer's thesis about apparent movement. But Koffka did not limit his papers to experimental results alone. He became somewhat impatient with the lack of a formal statement of Gestalt principles and included in his discussion a good deal of what Wertheimer had been saying in his lectures in Frankfurt. Köhler, in the meantime, finished his acoustical work and departed for Tenerife where he was to write both the *Physische Gestalten* and the series of papers we know as the *Mentality of Apes.*

Back in Frankfurt, the new views were influencing other students. Schumann had set Fuchs the task of developing certain observations of Schumann's about the phenomenon of transparency. It soon appeared to Fuchs that only by following Wertheimer's new principles could the results be understood, a view not at all to Schumann's liking. As a result, a coolness developed between these two older men, a break which was never really healed. Fuchs unhappily could not get Schumann to agree to publication of his work until more than ten years had passed.

From Berlin came a number of papers which bear the unmistakable print of Wertheimer's approach. The earliest was probably von Hornbostel's *Ueber optische Inversion.* Then came some from his students. Ternus, for instance, carried the concepts of grouping an important step further in terms of phenomenal identity. Arnheim, on the other hand, in dealing with the problem of expressive actions, touched on one of Wertheimer's favorite exercises: no course of Wertheimer's was complete without his improvisation at the piano with the class guessing which of three philosophers, or comic strip characters, was intended. Duncker's work on induced movement built significantly on the work on stroboscopic movement on the one hand, and on Ternus's work, on the other. Metzger's paper on phenomenal identity in 1934 also belongs to the same group.

After Wertheimer's return to Frankfurt, there followed in quick succession a number of theses which round out the picture. Their authors can only be listed here: Siemsen, Oppenheimer, Krolik, Becker, Turhan, Goldmeier. Some of them were done with help from Metzger who went to Frankfurt as assistant. Still later, Metzger carried on with a number of students after Wertheimer had left Germany. Political pressure gradually enforced an estrangement, and Frankfurt passed into eclipse.

Teaching at the New School brought Wertheimer into close contact with a group of social scientists. While he frequently lectured on productive thinking, he had much greater influence in the general seminar. Here he found himself at odds with the more extreme views of cultural anthro-

pologists and sociologists, concerning the 'relativism' of standards of human conduct. *Homo sapiens,* he argued, was not so named from caprice alone. Man in his best moments did know the meaning of his actions and could distinguish right and wrong. There are things, Wertheimer believed, demanded of us by the situation, things which we must do. Gestalt psychology becomes Gestalt ethics.

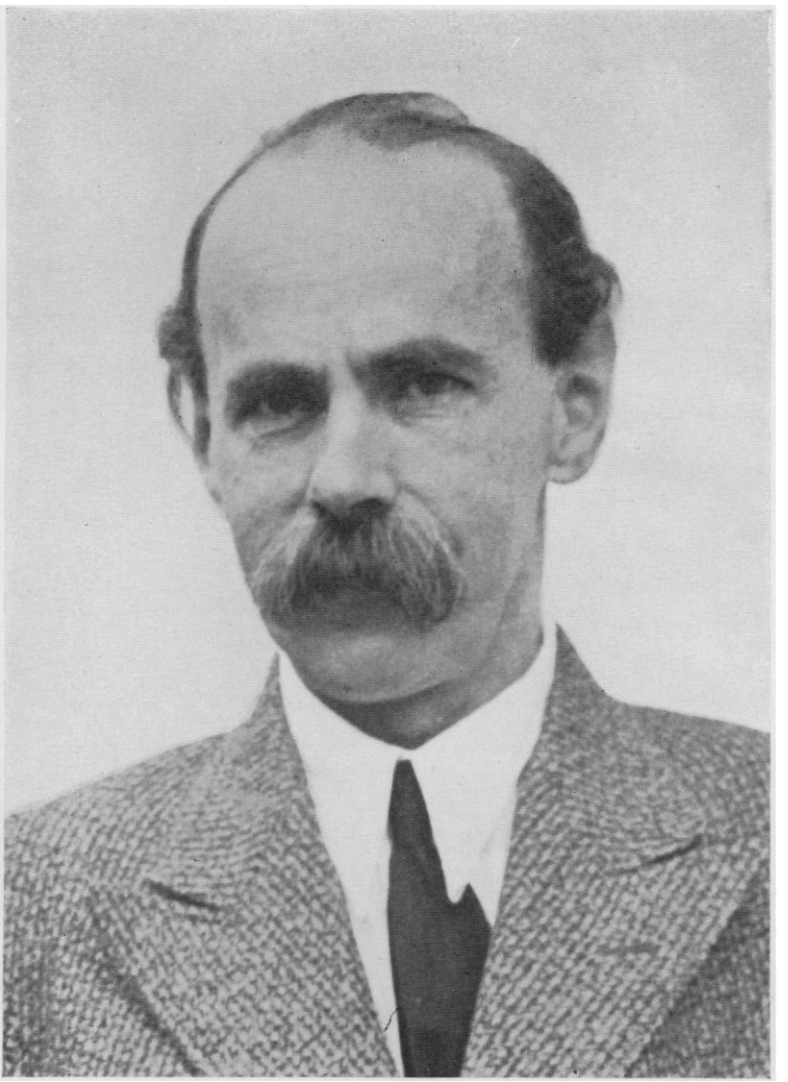
To write about Wertheimer's work is to give only a very distant view of the man. The picture needs warmth and color. Whatever was the task at hand, he always threw himself into it with fervor and spontaneity. He was always making an experiment into a game, a discussion into a test of one's ingenuity. He tended to be impatient with experimental plans that called for meticulous care in their details. The neatest of plans were invariably upset and rearranged after he had finished with them. It was not easy to work under Wertheimer just because of this restlessness. On the other hand, what would start out as the dreariest experiment would become cosmic in its scope as he would brush aside details and keep pushing you on, insisting that you get to the heart of the matter. I think he always felt that the *experimentum crucis* should be sought out; there was so much truth yet to be discovered that we need not pause now, earnestly seeking for that next decimal place.

Wertheimer was a romantic at heart, a poet, a musician. The truth was to him like a great musical theme, a majestic canvas, of which he could capture only a phrase now and then, could glimpse only some small corner. But the whole was always there waiting only for the man with courage and vision to come and see. Once having seen, having heard, he had to set it down, though ever so imperfectly. Wertheimer's difficulty with words was the difficulty of a composer whose written work fails always to convey the scope of what he hears. Words, written words in particular, were always far too unwieldly a medium for expressing the truth; for him no symbols could ever do the truth justice.

Wertheimer, moreover, seemed always to find his greatest satisfaction in striving, in going ahead. To reach an end was not his goal. For instance, I don't recall ever having won a game of chess while playing with him. Likewise he never won a game from me, for we would always stop halfway through when it became clear that either of us had played stupidly. We would go back and start over, so that we might do it better. He played the piano, he lectured, he wrote in the same way. It was his common complaint that he could never settle on the order in which a subject should be presented. He would start off from one point and go along gaily; but, long before the matter was finished, it would become clear to him that

quite a different order of presentation would more fairly present some other aspect of the problem. So each time he would have to make a fresh start. This constant re-embodiment of his thought seemed never to trouble him, for each new form provided its own satisfaction. In the same way, I think he was never too much concerned about what final answers would be found to some of the problems which Gestalt psychology raised. It was more important that the investigator find some of them out for himself, and then that the process should not end there. After all, is it not in this constant search that we find man at his best?

Swarthmore College EDWIN B. NEWMAN



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