

A Phenomenological Sketch

Insight

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Original E-text:

[<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/insight.html>]

In all the introductory psychology texts I've come across, **insight** gets mentioned only once or twice – in regard to Kohler's work with chimps and Freud's therapeutic goals – and then it is left unconnected to anything else. The interpretation we find is this: Insight is the sudden recognition of relationships, based on unconscious associations.

The **real** meaning – as per Kohler, Freud, and Webster is this: Seeing and understanding the true nature of something. It is, in other words, a conscious recognition of "pre-associational" Gestalts or organized wholes. So the reason for insight not getting more attention is rather clear: The physiological, behavioral, and cognitive mainstreams of modern psychology don't **deal** with consciousness, Gestalts, or the conscious recognition of Gestalts.

Kohler was aware that he mislead his readers with his use of the word insight in regards to Sultan and his associates. In **Gestalt Psychology**, he gives numerous other examples: Understanding that the drinking of a beer on a hot afternoon (and not the sun, a fly on the wall, or the glass) is the "cause" of my pleasure, or that the soprano's voice (not the baritone's, or the cello, or the back of the head of the person in front of me) is what I appreciate, does **not** require association, reinforcement, repetition, etc.

Regarding our insight into our own motivations, he explains: "The layman believes that he often feels directly why he wants to do certain things in a first situation and certain other things in a second. If he is right, the forces which principally determine his mental trends and his actions are for the most part directly given in his experience.... I confess that I prefer the layman's conviction." (pp 320-321)

The roots of the disagreement between mainstream psychology on the one hand, and laymen, Gestalt psychologists, and phenomenologists on the other, can be seen historically: The empiricists began with the idea that all knowledge comes from experience. Then, unfortunately, they – especially David Hume – reduced experience to sensation. Anything apparently more complex than sensations was explained as nothing more than the **association** of sensations.

Immanuel Kant, impressed by Hume's arguments, "saved" us from this radical skepticism by pointing out that certain things – space, time, causality, and the foundations of logic and math – were **prerequisites** to sensation and association, so they must be real, somehow. He placed them in the mind, "behind" sensations and associations, and placed the ultimately unknowable "things themselves" out "beyond" our experiences.

It is from Hume and Kant that most of modern psychology derives its philosophical assumptions. A dualism was established contrasting the subjective world of experience – now reduced to a thin, shadowy "film" – and the objective world that, though only approachable through the subjective, contained the fullness of reality toward which our interests were to be directed.

Phenomenologists suggest that Hume and Kant and the rest began with a mistake. With their belief in and desire to reach a true, ultimate reality, and their corollary belief in the delusional nature of experience, they saw too little.

First of all, phenomenologists would say, we see **objects**, not sensations. We see them in a rich, full-bodied way. We see them with depth – **not** by integrating "retinal disparity" or by using various depth cues, but immediately.

We see the **backs** of objects. As we circle around a tree, we don't construct anticipations based on past experience: The experiences suggest their own completion. As J. J. Gibson (not a phenomenologist!) put it, the "information" is in the "optic array" – i.e. in the light.

Further, we "see" with **all** our senses. We have learned, in our culture especially, to separate our senses as if they were separate channels of information. But it is not my eyes or my optic nerves or my striate cortex that see – **I** see. (Even Skinner understood this!) As Merleau-Ponty points out, we see the fragility of the glass and the sound of its breaking. Synesthesia is not a hypothesis; it is a phenomenological given.

We see **bodily**. We "deal" with the object – reach out for it. We even reflect the pressures and tensions and imbalances – we see with our faces and bodies: Children (and many adults) make tongue and mouth motions while doing close work. (I do when I attempt to play the guitar!) Golfers adjust to the terrain and use "body english." A Japanese engineer told me how he feels the dynamics of hydraulic systems in his body. We smile when others smile, and cry when they cry.

With tools, our experience extends outward **beyond** our bodies. We feel at the **tip** of the cane, not signals transmitted to sensory neurons in our fingertips, in the same way we see **stars**, not images on a telescope lens.

Objects **speak** to us: We directly experience their attractiveness or repulsiveness, even their sexuality. The stairs call to the infant, they invite climbing. Toys are companions – the ball plays with you when you play with the ball.

We see **usefulness**: the grip of a hammer suggests holding; its balance suggests hammering! We see things as endowed with their value to us.

We see objects embedded in **time**. We see the past and the future of a thing. We see where the object is going; we see where it's been. The "now" is **thick**.

Other aspects of experience, such as memory and imagination, show their dependence on perception, and likewise share in its richness. When we remember something – a coffee cup – we are, in the present, recreating "a moment with a cup." Our experiencing body reaches out – perhaps literally, as when we "hold" it (a common occurrence in hypnosis!). Our senses, intellect, feelings reach out, and form a solid, immediate reality that surrounds an emptiness – the imagined cup – which we then take as a **figure** against the ground of this bodily reenactment.

Please note the **holism** involved: The "mind" or "brain" don't do all the remembering. My **hands** must learn the chords; a dancer's musculature is **ready** for dancing, an athlete's for his sport. The relation of hand, arm, shoulders, head, and eye are "just so" for the artist. (Only a reductionist would come up with something called "eye-hand coordination.") My posture and my face are more "suited" to certain expressions of mood – the "sour puss," for example.

In other words, experience is **not** like the processing of information. A better metaphor would be a walk through the jungle: My "senses" might extend only a few feet in any direction, but my experience reaches deep into the foliage. I don't see a snake's head lying on a branch – I see a **snake**! Learning may provide us with the precise detail of what lies beyond the head; but the fact of that "beyond" is immediately given in experience.

If you look at a patch of green on a red background, what would you see if I removed the green patch? Red background, of course, not nothing. The background "**runs beneath**" the patch!

Mainstream psychologists occasionally pay lip-service to the richness of experience – they may even mention phenomenology (almost always incorrectly). But they always seem anxious to get back to association, and suggest that, in fact, all that preceding richness is due to built-in, innate, native, hard-wired – you guessed it! – associations.

For example, **phobias** are thought to be a matter of associations with unpleasantness. Yet the objects of many common phobias – spiders, snakes, mice, heights, enclosed spaces... – are at least uncomfortable to many – even most – people.

Eysenck has suggested that fear of these things is innate. In a sense, phenomenologists agree, but rather than looking for hard-wired associations, we suggest first looking to the objects themselves: Just what **is** it that frightens us about spiders, snakes, and so on? Perhaps, for example, cockroaches

frighten us because they move in ways that are difficult for us to anticipate: They can be across the room one minute – and crawling up your leg the next!

As a psychologist, I'm particularly interested in how "thick" our perceptions of **others** might be. Many people are familiar with Albert Michotte's study where he manipulated the apparent movements of objects and found that people spontaneously see some movements in some objects as causing movements in other objects – clearly demonstrating that Hume and Kant were both wrong: causality is directly experienced.

Fewer people are familiar with a very similar experiment by Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel involving a film made by moving geometrical shapes around in such a way that people spontaneously saw the shapes as alive or "**psychoid**" (Rubin). Again, no one is interpreting or associating – they are seeing.

Stephan Strasser said "When I perceive a being that flees or defends itself, that hides or feeds, then I understand those ways of behaving 'from within' and recognize the being in question as another body-subject." Perhaps the traditional avoidance of anthropomorphism is as prejudicial as anthropomorphism itself!

What we see in other people, without the associative calculation of attribution theory, is **purposefulness**. Franz From, a student of Rubin, has done a series of studies involving the perception of motivation in films. He notes that it is not a big step from the "thickness" of the present moment I mentioned earlier, or from Kohler's idea of insight:

"If I see a man pour himself a glass of beer and drink a mouthful, then I can perceive that he is drinking a glass of beer. Inherent in the perception of an element of the sequence is the perception of the whole sequence.... It does not matter if it is the first mouthful, a later one, or even the last – unless of course the total situation indicates that he is, for example, drinking a mouthful only."

While learning might dictate the precise detail of the sequence, the **fact** of sequence is given in the perception. We do **not** build-up "beer-drinking" from individual sips.

Likewise, what is commonly called **empathy** is **not** something that must be learned; it is in our immediately-given perception of others. Sullivan knew this, and Merleau-Ponty says it very powerfully:

"There is no problem of the alter ego, because it is not I who sees, not he who sees; because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property which belongs to flesh, of being here and now, and of radiating everywhere and forever." (1968, p. 240)

This only seems a bizarre thing to say if we view our sociality as something added from the outside. We are actually never **not** social. Stephen Strasser said "As soon as I'm aware, I am aware of the other who is older than I." I am born into a stream of **consciousnesses**..

The traditional view of language learning, for example, has adults impressing upon the child, first single words, then the appropriate syntactical connections. Chomsky's structuralism only puts the connection in the hands of genetics. Yet I noticed with all three of my kids that they spoke in sentence **first**; only later did words emerge **within** those sentences. To put it in information processing terms, we learn "top-down," from contextually meaningful dialog (however poorly expressed) to phonetic "correctness."

Likewise, recent studies at Oxford, where they videotaped mothers interacting with their infants, show clearly how speech develops within a dialog between mother and child, and within a meaningful stream of activity.

Martin Buber says that **love** involves an immediacy that modern psychology (and life) ignores: It is "I-thou," not "I hidden-away behind my physical presence and trying to make some impact on a physical you beyond which there might be a thou." I find it curious that when I empathize strongly with someone, the curtains of objectivity seem to lift and I feel as if I were falling in love. Perhaps it's just "countertransference." Or maybe empathy does in fact have the **perceptual immediacy** of intimacy.

The objective-subjective dualistic split that dominates modern psychology leads us to deny this extension of consciousness beyond the senses. We tend to see it as wrong somehow, threatening, **scary**: "only crazy people...."

But then we see a hummingbird, or hold a sick child, or fall in love, and we're "crazy" for a little bit. Shakespeare said "Lovers and madmen...apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends." Perhaps we should be crazy more often!