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Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

Gerhard Stemberger[1]

Ego and Self in Gestalt Theory

"The genesis of an Ego..."

> "… the genesis of an Ego is one of the strangest and most remarkable of phenomena which, it would appear, is also controlled by whole-processes", Max Wertheimer, the founder of Gestalt theory, once observed (Wertheimer, 1924 in 1944, 90).

And indeed, hardly anyone ponders in daily life or pays attention to in other ways, whether or not there might be such a thing as an ego. In our lives it is just there either a matter of course, or as an implicit point of reference for the spatial coordinates "in front of me," "next to me," "behind me"—or sometimes it is not there at all.

There are situations in which the ego is "everything"—where about in the raging pain, hardly another world exists besides the ego. There are situations where the ego spatially expands and subsumes otherwise in separated areas of the environment, such as the clothing, the car, sporting equipment, and again other situations in which it involuntarily or voluntarily dwindles away, possibly shrinks to a small point, or in extreme cases, becomes disembodied. At times the ego is the center of its world, then again marginal, sometimes it functions as a member of a larger whole, such as in a team sport or in a well-coordinated working group, then again there are situations where another person serves as an "extension" of one's will, or even as an extension of one's ego.[2]

Everyday experience already shows that the ego is not a solid, more or less steady "object," but something very mutable in many ways. Our life would obviously

[1] The article is loosely based on the lecture "The Phenomenal Ego and its World" at the Symposium "100 Years of Gestalt Psychology" in Helsinki, 28.-29.9.2012. I thank Ed Ragsdale, Ian Verstegen, and Michael Wertheimer for reviewing the drafts and for encouraging its publication. The remaining deficiencies remain my responsibility.

[2] The whole variety of relevant Gestalt psychological research in this area unfortunately cannot be presented here for reasons of space. Some of it should be referred to at least briefly. The work of the German Gestalt psychologists Kurt Kohl (1956) and Paul Tholey (1989, 1990, 2018) in sports psychology deserves mention. They investigated the "coalescence" of the athlete with the sports equipment (or even with the relevant environment, such as the ski slope) and to the inclusion of the self in a structured We in team sports. Furthermore, the lucid dream research of Paul Tholey (2018) and others have contributed extensively to a differentiated understanding of the phenomenal self. The work of the German Gestalt psychologist Edwin Rausch on the perception of paintings (Rausch, 1982) gave the impetus to the development of the multiple-field approach in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (cf. Stemberger 2009, 2018, 2021).

not be possible at all without this high plasticity and constant changeability of the ego in a flow of constantly changing situations and their demands.

Our ego may be experienced, or it may be functionally present without being experienced. It may take center stage or may take a very marginal place in our phenomenal world. Sometimes it may also assume quite different functional roles in the phenomenal world—perhaps subordinated as part of a larger whole, acting as a specific limb for some complex activity, or in the role of a subordinate element in a collective action, or fully identified with a purpose itself, or even dissolve in the demands of a specific situation. It may vary in its permeability with respect to its phenomenal world. It may vary in the extent and strength of the internal differentiation of its inner "regions" or "layers," which may also vary in their level of interaction with each other and with the phenomenal environment: It consists of manifold dynamic internal and external interactions and thus finely regulates its internal life, and likewise its relations with the phenomenal environment, especially also with the fellow human beings. Its energy level and state of tension will vary in accordance with its specific objectives. Under certain conditions the ego may double or multiply, with each of these phenomenal egos having its own phenomenal environment—just think of "daydreaming" or a visit to the cinema, in which you may be "drawn" into the thrilling movie action with the result that you (your first ego) can sit in your seat in the auditorium (the environment of your first ego) on the one hand as the moviegoer, and on the other hand you (your second ego) simultaneously live and act as the adventurer in a completely different world (the environment of the second ego).

Any changes in that area of the phenomenal field that forms our phenomenal ego, inevitably results in corresponding changes in the field of its phenomenal environment—and vice versa—in an unceasing dynamic interrelationship. If the ego is central, its environment would be peripheral and vice versa. If it expands, its phenomenal environment would shrink and vice versa. The tensions of its needs and intentions lead to specific changes in its experienced environment while vice versa the occurrence of corresponding issues in his experienced environment provides opportunities and impetus for relaxation or "transformation" of its needs. Changes of its world can originate, at times, due to the ego's activity, or at other times, without its active involvement. And in all of this, the phenomenal processes are intimately intertwined via action and "feedback" with the physiological organism and its physical environment, including the other people and organisms in it.

1. Early Gestalt Psychology Contributions

The dynamic variability of the phenomenal ego and its phenomenal environment, as well as the terms of their relative phenomenal constancy and the way they interact with the rest of the physical world, have been subjects of discussion in

Gestalt theory dating from the early work of its founders.[3] I would like to refer to three of these early contributions first—already these show that Gestalt theory was from the very beginning an approach that anticipated all the important moments of today's debate in cognitive science about embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition (the "4E cognition") with original approaches that deserve more attention.

As a first reference for this I mention the explanation of the genesis and cure of a case of paranoid disorder, given by the German psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte inspired by Max Wertheimer[4] (Schulte, 1924 in 1986): In this case an ego, experiencing itself as completely segregated from the others and suffering from this situation in an intolerable manner, manages to get into the very center of the situation and into a strong relationship with the group through a radical paranoid restructuring of the situation as this ego perceives it.

As a second reference, I will address the Berlin experimental program of "Investigations in the Psychology of Action and Emotion" (1926–1937) of Kurt Lewin and his students: Here the mental tension systems and the structure and dynamics of the ego-environment division are at the center of diverse experiments on laws governing human behavior.[5]

For a third example, we will take a closer look at Kurt Koffka's Gestalt theory of the ego, the first and most systematic early treatment of the subject from a Gestalt theoretical perspective (in Koffka's "Principles" 1935).

2. Disturbances in the Ego-World Relationship

Sometimes, unexpected disturbances of usual processes and situations reveal their otherwise unnoticed dynamic order and functioning in ordinary life. Therefore (and also because in my field, psychotherapy, we are mostly confronted with disturbances and their painful consequences) let me start with some examples of such disturbances in the relationship of the ego and its world. As the following examples show, the disturbance can take its origin from a functionally inappropriate positioning of the ego in its world, or from an inappropriate fusion of the ego with parts of its world, or from an either too high or too low reciprocal permeability of the environment regions and the ego-regions, or the disorder

[3] Some of the terminological and conceptual differences in the consideration of ego and self among the founders of Gestalt psychology, not covered in this paper, are discussed by A.S. Luchins 1961.

[4] Wertheimer's assistant and collaborator Erwin Levy: "The author in fact was Max Wertheimer, who years later told me that he had outlined the theory to Dr. Schulte, who was to work it out in final form." Levy 1986, 230. We therefore speak of the "Schulte/Wertheimer these."

[5] For an overview see Lewin's "Survey of Experimental Investigations," Lewin 1935, 239–273; the translation and discussion of some of these studies can be found in De Rivera 1976; for a discussion of the further continuation of this approach, see Lindorfer 2021.

may manifest itself in a problematic interrelation between simultaneously existing multiple phenomenal worlds. These four cases probably contain the most important constellations according to clinical experience; nevertheless there is no reason to regard the list as conclusive.

Let me now give you four examples of how these constellations can practically manifest themselves in certain life difficulties and mental disorders:

1. **Problems arising from inappropriate positioning of the ego in its world:** As already mentioned, the paranoid delusions are understood by Schulte/Wertheimer as a disturbed Ego-We-organization. In this case (Schulte, 1924 in 1986), a Tatar war prisoner in WW I finds himself in an unbearable marginal position excluded from the We of the other war prisoners because nobody understands his language and he does not understand the others. As a prisoner, he cannot escape from this unbearable situation. A process of restructuring the situation—as he experiences it—sets in for him. The Tatar prisoner finally perceives himself in the very center of the situation as being the person persecuted by all the others. This is by no means a comfortable solution for him but one which is more bearable than being completely cut off from the others in a situation which demands so strongly a We-affiliation of some kind. This mental restructuring of the situation comprises not only a change of locus of the ego in its phenomenal world, but also a total reorganization of all the functional relations in the environmental field.

2. **Problems arising from a boundary violating, in extreme cases even abusive behavior of a person**, who perceives other people as an extension of its own ego: Such a person has "incorporated" the other, made him a part of its own ego, or uses the other as a "continuation" or "extension" of its own ego, for example, as a mere tool. Here an expansion of the ego, incorporating other persons, combines with a corresponding functional rearrangement of the complete phenomenal field, which is perceived as being structured entirely in the service of its own immediate interests. Such inclusion of the other in one's own person need not be linked to a negative, abusive context, but is in other situations a completely normal, functionally demanded and useful process. Koffka mentioned, for example, the initial inclusion of the infant in the ego of the mother, as indicated by her tendency to react in the same way regardless of whether she herself or her child is placed in a particular situation. This initially is a perfectly sensible and functional structural characteristic of the field, however, it may become problematic and conflictual to the extent that the mother's incorporation of her child as part of herself comes to clash with the child's own growing independence. Similar constellations can be observed in

intimate personal relationships of adults, but also in all other areas of working, social, and political life, in both positive and negative manifestations.

3. **Disturbances of the functional relationship between parts of the phenomenal field:** Stuttering is usually associated with a specific disorder of the whole-relationship in the phenomenal world: fluency of speech requires that the attention is focused on the other and on the relationship to this other and not on the technical process of speaking or even on the organs of speech (see Figures 1 and 2). Again, we are dealing here with a restructuring of the phenomenal world, in which the functionally meaningful relationships between the parts and the whole in the field are disturbed.

4. **Disturbances in the relationship of multiple total fields:** The research of Gestalt psychologist Edwin Rausch has shown (Rausch, 1982), that under certain conditions the ego-environment-structure of the phenomenal field differentiates further and a second phenomenal ego segregates with a second phenomenal world, for instance in "daydreaming," mental sports training, "mind wandering," and similar processes (Stemberger, 2009, 2018, 2021). The interrelationship between these two total fields can have a constructive effect (for example for problem solving) but can also be part of a problematic process. Eating disorders, for example, are understood by Thomas Fuchs as solidifying the segregation of a second phenomenal total field with a second phenomenal ego to maintain a livable balance in an otherwise difficult or even unbearable situation (see Fuchs, 2010, 2021).

Figs. 1 and 2. The situation of stuttering: fluent speech requires that the focus of attention is on the other person and the relationship to him (Figure 1) and not on the speech process or even on the speech organs (Figure 2). (GSt after a screenshot from the movie "The King's Speech").

3. The Basic Position of Critical Realism

The Gestalt theoretical conception of a close correlation between an ever-adapting phenomenal world and an equally variable ego, is closely related to the epistemological core position of Gestalt theory, critical realism:

According to this basic position, first formulated by Köhler, 1929 (see Figure 3), it is necessary to clearly distinguish between, on the one hand, (a) the phenomenal world, encountered in experience (with a phenomenal bodily ego segregated within this phenomenal world), and on the other hand, (b) the transphenomenal world, including the physiological organism within his physical environment.[6]

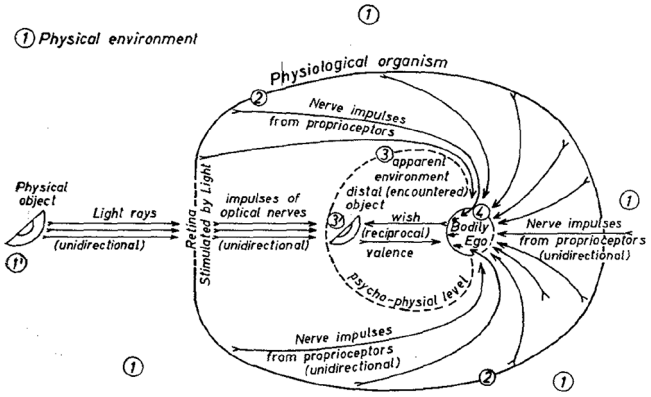

Fig. 3. Schema of ego-environment relations (after Köhler, 1929), in the graphic representation of Metzger 1941/2001, 283, in English in Metzger 1972, 244. Relationship between physical world including physiological organism (= Macrocosm) and phenomenal-perceptual world including experienced bodily Ego (= Microcosm). 1 = physical environment of organism; 1' = physical object, reflecting light rays; 2 = physiological organism, as part of the physical world; 3 = apparent (perceived) environment of bodily Ego; 3' = apparent (distal) object or percept, representing the physical object; 4 = bodily Ego, as part of the phenomenal-perceptual world, representing the organism.

The physiological organism and its physical environment provide via nervous and brain processes the material basis for the phenomenal world of each person. Between the both worlds, the transphenomenal and the phenomenal, constant coordination processes take place that are needed for life and survival of the human being in its physical environment. The person can experience some of the workings and effects of this transphenomenal side of his existence in his phenomenal world but has no immediate experiential access to it.

The phenomenal world of each person is a microcosm within the macrocosm of the physical world. These microcosms are part of the physical macrocosm but have specific features—phenomenal and dynamic qualities whereas other parts of the physical world do not have. Gestalt theory holds that the phenomenal world is in fact not just a more or less good and veridical "image" of the physical world but possesses the dynamic characteristics of a field. This field is mainly organized by the needs and quasi-needs of the phenomenal ego on one hand, the attractive

[6] In Koffka's terminology this is the differentiation of "geographical world" and "behavioural world." (Koffka, 1935, 40 ff) Cf. Sternek 2021 for a more detailed account of critical realism.

and repulsive qualities in its phenomenal environment on the other. The facts appearing and occurring in the phenomenal world stand are not unrelated to each other, but are in close dynamic (field-like) interaction with each other. They are not neutral but are experienced as attractive or repulsive and organize according to the given total field situation and the constant cybernetic interaction of the phenomenal world with the organism and its physical environment, their constant influences and feedback (cf. Metzger 1965/1986; Metzger 1972). It is this peculiarity which makes the phenomenal world apt to function as the "central steering mechanism" of the human organism in its physical environment and along the same path to interaction with other humans which interact in the same way from their microcosms with the common physical environment.

4. A Model of "Super-Veridical Representation"

At this point, a brief side glance at the debate in the cognitive sciences is allowed regarding whether representationalist models or non-representationalist models do better justice to the human cognitive process. In my opinion, such confrontations have not proved fruitful (cf. Verstegen, 2012). With its critical realist model Gestalt theory offers an alternative. It assumes that a man with his phenomenal world has at his disposal an embodied microcosm which not only represents veridically to an astonishingly high degree the part of the macrocosm surrounding him which is relevant for him in his given life situation but can do much more. It can not only represent its macro-physical environment like a veridical picture or film recording, it can do beyond that what no film camera of the world can do: It can create a representation of this world in constant flux, in which not only this world, but simultaneously also his own relationship to this world and the dynamic development of this relationship is represented in constant interaction. In this sense the microcosm of man is not only veridical, it is *super-veridical*, insofar as it is able to represent veridically not only the objects surrounding man and the influence of his actions on these objects, but beyond that also his personal dynamic relation to these objects (including the most significant "objects" for him, his fellow people). Only this super-veridicality enables this microcosm to serve as a steering organ for man's experience and behavior in the macrocosm, which surrounds him and of which he is an active part.

5. The "Central Steering Mechanism"

I adopt here the term "Central Steering Mechanism" from Wolfgang Metzger.[7] In 1969 he asked the question:

[7] Lewin 1935 has already pointed out the steering role of the perceptual field, referring to Köhler, 1922; Lewin & Sakuma, 1925: "Thus there occurs a *steering* of the process by the perceptual field." (Lewin, 1935, 48) Metzger, however, deserves credit for having elaborated this idea conceptually in a systematic way.

> "What is the use of this duplication of the world into a physical and a perceptive one, of the person into an organism and a bodily ego, of stimulation into configurations of physico-chemical impacts upon receptors and valences affecting the ego, and of reaction into intended changes of the bodily ego and motions executed by parts of the organism? What relevance can all this have? It is extremely improbable that so highly complicated an organization could have developed during evolution and preserved without a considerable survival value." (Metzger, 1972, 247).

Metzger answered that question as follows:

> "The function of the phenomenal world, then, would be to make possible just those dynamic interactions and to transfer them to the organism through an intricate system of circular conductors that allow for the necessary feedback in such a way that the organism itself is made to behave 'with regard to' the objects encountered in its environment and relevant for its survival." (ibid, 249)

To explain this, Metzger chooses as an example a goal-directed body movement. If a person wants to reach for a water glass, the movement of his phenomenal hand toward the phenomenal water glass leads to the corresponding movement of his respective physiological limb toward the physical object "water glass." Appropriate cybernetic feedback processes control the physiological movement and the continuous feedback about the successful coordination between the movement of the phenomenal hand and the movement of the physiological hand.

> "My intention to lift up my right hand, e.g., can only be directed to the phenomenal hand as a part of my phenomenal bodily ego but never directly to the anatomical part of my organism that is related to the former and bears the same name." (ibid, 245) That there are significant differences between the experienced arm and the corresponding physiological part of the organism, becomes somewhat obvious from the "discrepancy between the region of the bodily ego on which our will immediately acts, and the region of the organism that, at the same time, is subject to innervation. […] the former region lies unmistakably within the hand itself as a part of the bodily ego, whereas the latter just as unmistakably lies within the muscular system of the upper arm and the shoulder of the anatomical organism." (ibid, 245)

> "The interrelations between the subject and the object, […] become themselves a steering mechanism, in which—in the case of attraction—the place of the phenomenal object represents the value aimed at, the position of the subject the actual value, and consequently the distance between them represents the difference between these two values by which the human steering machine viz. the muscular system is set in motion so that in the physical world the distance between the organism and the object diminishes and finally disappears." (ibid, 251)

Metzger points out the similarity of this steering function to a servomechanism, for example the mechanical steering of a large vessel, emphasizes, however, that this similarity is limited.

This steering process depends, of course, on whether and how the central nervous and peripheral nervous connections required for it between the corresponding phenomenal processes and the organism that are active. This is largely not the case during sleep, for example, where as a consequence movements of the dream body do not lead to corresponding movements of the organism. To a large extent this kind of connection is also shut down for those areas of the phenomenal world, which have segregated as a second total field of experience with its own phenomenal ego, for example during a "daydream." Metzger mentions also other examples where it does not come to such a coupling of phenomenal motions and motions of the physiological organism: "in the hallucinations of motion due to affections of the brain by psychoses, lesions, or poisoning, as well as in the illusory movement of phantom-limbs after amputation." (ibid, 245)

Of course, Metzger's example of an arm movement is just a very simple example of how the phenomenal world of man acts as a central steering system. Not only bodily movements, but the whole maneuvering of man in his environment, from the simplest life and species-sustaining activities such as food procurement, securing his physical integrity, reproduction, etc., up to the most complex interactions in his interpersonal environment would be controlled according to this thesis by this kind of interaction between the phenomenal world, its organism, and its other physical environment.

Mind you: This steering function is attributed by Metzger to the phenomenal world in its entirety—not primarily, or even solely to the phenomenal self within this phenomenal world. In this point, Gestalt theory differs significantly from many other approaches that deal with the ego and attribute to the ego a much "more prominent" role, as does Gestalt theory. To characterize these Gestalt theoretical positions, I will sketch now some key ideas of relevant representatives.

6. Max Wertheimer: "Strange and Most Remarkable"

As early as 1924 in his famous lecture "Gestalt theory" before the Kant society Max Wertheimer made the following remark—which might sound a bit strange for contemporary ears:

> "Here I am – the Ego – first a part of the field. I am not fundamentally an Ego standing in relief against other Egos, as has usually been maintained; no, the genesis of an Ego is one of the strangest and most remarkable of phenomena which, it would appear, is also controlled by whole-processes. As I have stated, I am a part in this field." (Wertheimer, 1924 in 1944, 90)

Here, in this early presentation of Gestalt theory, Wertheimer already postulates some basic theses, which are characteristic for the Gestalt theoretical conception of the ego (later on elaborated in more detail, especially by Koffka):

First: An ego neither exists from the outset in the experience and behavior of humans nor does it exist always, but it is formed only under certain conditions. This remark does not, or at least not primarily, refers to the developmental process of the genesis of an ego-experience in infancy (cf. for this topic Arfelli Galli, 2012). Rather, it states also for the adult that an "I versus the others" is experienced only under certain conditions. His ego may, for example, under certain conditions, at least for some time dissolve entirely in a group, or forget about himself completely in a specific activity.

And secondly: This ego does not unfold as a psychic apparatus, "command center" or the like, for example, an agency that does and controls everything. Instead, this ego forms as a field-part—as part of the psychological field of experience and behavior—and abides by the same "laws of the whole" (i.e., Gestalt factors) as all the rest of the experiential and behavioral world.

This conception of the self in Gestalt theory viewing the ego as a field part besides and interrelated with other field parts appears quite unpretentious compared with much weightier conceptions of the ego as a powerful psychic apparatus and the like. This has prompted the Italian Gestalt psychologist Giuseppe Galli in later years to speak of a "narcissistic deflation" of this concept in Gestalt theory as opposed to the "narcissistic inflation of the ego" in other theories (Galli, 2005, 46).

But Wertheimer goes even further:

> "Man is not only part of a field, but a part and member of his group. When people are together, as when they are at work, then the most unnatural behavior, which only appears in late stages or abnormal cases, would be to behave as separate Egos. Under normal circumstances they work in common, each a meaningfully functioning part of the whole. Consider South Sea Islanders working together, or children at play. An Ego standing vis a vis or in contrast to the others usually develops only under very special circumstances." (Wertheimer, 1924 in 1944, 92)

Wertheimer links this to the assumption:

> "If for any outward or inner reasons a harmonious balance is not attainable between a person and the people with whom he lives, then definite disturbances of the equilibrium must appear and in extreme instances lead to precarious substitutes for the natural equilibrium which will transform the psychological structure of that person. This led to the hypothesis that a wide range of mental disease, for which no actual theory had previously been submitted, might be the consequence of such fundamental processes." (ibid)

This hypothesis has been elaborated in depth in the aforementioned treatise of the German psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte, under supervision of Max Wertheimer, on the origin and cure of a case of paranoid disorder (see Schulte, 1924 in 1986).

Thirdly, therefore: As far as the phenomenal ego in its phenomenal world is concerned, there are special relations of belonging and centering with regard to its fellow human beings. These fellow men are of particular importance for man in comparison to other issues and facts in his world; therefore humans (or shapes that resemble people) are particularly highlighted in everyday perception (even in the case where there are no humans: just think of the "man on the moon")—man needs his fellowmen most essentially for his life and survival. These relations of belonging and centering in his phenomenal world are therefore in most cases the decisive factor for loosing and for regaining mental health.

7. Kurt Koffka on Ego and Self

Therefore, from the Gestalt theoretical point of view, the phenomenal ego is a field-part that is segregated from the phenomenal field. This field-part is more or less closely interrelated to all other parts of the field, as well as the field as a whole. Kurt Koffka systematically explained this concept in 1935 in his major work *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (especially in chapter 8) and further elaborated on it.

In a letter to his long-time collaborator Molly Harrower on March 24, 1933, Koffka already characterizes his ego-concept with four key statements:

> "**One**: The phenomenal Ego and the phenomenal environment are a segregated field part.
> **Two**: When Ego disappears from the phenomenal world or consciousness ceases altogether, the need tensions within the Ego system survive.
> **Three**: Therefore, the real, psycho-physical Ego is not identical with the phenomenal Ego, but it is permanent. This persistence of the Ego is not memory in the usual sense, but comparable to the persistence of the real organism in the real environment. This makes a theory of personality possible.
> **Four**: If the Ego as a segregated system persists independently of consciousness, then the environment from which it is segregated must also persist independently of consciousness. Otherwise, there would be nothing to segregate and unify the Ego system" (Harrower, 1983, 31f).

According to Koffka (on this point heavily relying on Kurt Lewin), the phenomenal ego is made up of tension systems, which are in constant interaction with the environment. These tension systems owe their existence to the needs and quasi-needs (a term Lewin uses for the conscious and non-conscious intentions) of people. Depending on the possibilities of satisfying these needs and quasi-needs or of

finding some substitute satisfaction—these possibilities depending on what the environment has to offer but also on the personality structure and dynamics—the processes originating from these tension systems will eventually result in a relaxation of the subsystems in play, leading to a redistribution of tension in the entire system (see Lindorfer & Stemberger, 2012; Lindorfer, 2021).

Thus, this constant process of satisfaction, partial satisfaction, substitute-satisfaction, or non-satisfaction of needs and quasi needs is accompanied by a constant change in the tension systems that make up the ego in its relationship with its environment. In this interaction, necessarily there must be constant changes in the field part ego just as changes in the surrounding field parts.

But there is not only variability in these processes; there is also a certain constancy of structural and dynamic characteristics which is reflected in the experience of identity of oneself and of the world over time. Therefore, as far as the ego is concerned, we are dealing according to Koffka on one hand with various temporary sub-systems of the ego, on the other with a relatively enduring subsystem of the ego, a core-ego, which is now referred to as the "Self" by Koffka:

> "The sub-systems do not simply exist side by side; they are organized in various ways. One principle of organization is that of surface-depth organization. The Ego has a core, the Self, and enveloping this core, in various communications with it and each other, are other sub-systems, comparable to different layers, until we come to the surface, which is most easily touched, and most easily discharged. Another principle of organization concerns the communication between the different systems, a third relative dominance." (Koffka, 1935, 342)

8. Koffka on the Internal Structure of the Ego

Koffka discusses in detail the question as to what conditions determine the segregation of a phenomenal ego as a separate field-part within the phenomenal total field. He presents the case of an Austrian mountaineer who fell in a crevasse, losing consciousness, and then only gradually awakening from unconsciousness. This mountaineer described afterward how there was first no ego at all and how then an ego came into existence during this process. From the description of this process Koffka concludes that the body perceptions of primarily proprioceptive nature seem to have played a decisive role in this case for the segregation of a phenomenal ego from the rest of the phenomenal field. These body perceptions brought sufficient non-homogeneity into the originally homogeneous field. Following certain Gestalt principles (especially the factors of proximity, similarity, and common fate), these body perceptions enabled the fusion of a region of the field as sufficiently different from the rest of the field. Thus, they brought about the collapse of the first unified field in a bi-polar field, having the two

poles ego and non-ego. One pole—forming the "core of the self"—attracts all the bodily experiences and gives rise to the emergence of a bodily ego while the auditory and visual experiences remain on the "external pole" and thus belong to the environment part of the field.

> "How this point-core itself was formed, we do not know. It must have had a great deal to do with the victim's earlier Ego [Koffka is talking about the mountain climber fallen in the crevasse], his wishes, fears, determinations, which are now brought into play." (Koffka, 1935, 324f)

In 1936 Koffka writes to Harrower again on this topic:

> "What factors are responsible for Ego organization? What kind of properties must processes have in order to operate in the Ego? From this point of view the normal and pathological case is equally in need of explanation.... We do not necessarily have to search for Intra Ego forces but may envisage the whole structure of the person's mind, including both Ego and Environment processes, and looking for special characteristics in either field." (Harrower, 1983, 127f)

This shows that Koffka considers it important to deal also with the internal structure of the ego whose core he addresses as the self. This subsystem "self" is characterized according to Koffka by much stronger stresses than the other (temporary) subsystems of the ego: He thinks that the reason for this is that these stresses correspond to real needs, as opposed to the tensions of quasi-needs which arise from more superficial and temporary intentions (Koffka, 1935, 342).

As an example of the dynamic importance of the internal structure of the ego, Koffka refers to the Berlin experiments of Kurt Lewin and his students, especially to the work of Bluma Zeigarnik (1927):

> "For an ambitious person to miss the solution of a problem means 'failure', means that the achievement has fallen below his 'personal standard', means therefore a definite affection of that part of the Ego system which we shall now call the 'self'." (Koffka, 1935, 341).

9. Köhler: Small Objection, Big Approval

Wolfgang Köhler's views differ only slightly from those of Koffka. Only in one point does he announce objection (see Luchins, 1961, 21); while Koffka normally situates the thoughts of the person in the ego (1935, 327–329), Köhler cautions against regarding thoughts or thoughts objects as part of the phenomenal ego—this would result in leaving strictly phenomenological grounds and would invite "a most unfortunate vagueness in the use of the term self" (Köhler, 1938, 90; see there also Footnote 2 on Koffka).

Except for this difference Köhler shares the arguments put forward in Koffka's ego-theory in all of its main points. Koffka reports in a further letter to Harrower on 06/15/1933 that he had many good talks with Köhler, and "he agrees with my Ego Theory completely. It did not even seem to be new to him. He finds it as necessary a conclusion as I did, which gave me great satisfaction." (Harrower, 1983, 11)

Köhler also shared Koffka's beliefs that the phenomenal ego and its phenomenal environment correspond to a neural ego as well as a neural environment in the brain processes, which may in turn account for even just part of the whole brain activity. This aspect is related to the important question, of how to explain how something apparently from my phenomenal ego and also something from my phenomenal environment seems to have a continuing existence even when my self-awareness and my world-awareness are interrupted (in sleep or in unconsciousness)—after waking my phenomenal ego and my phenomenal environment are available again, as if there had not been any interruption of my awareness. This conception of a neural correlate of the phenomenal ego and a neural correlate of its phenomenal environment Köhler himself addresses in 1938 as follows:

> "Although many sources contribute to its make-up, the 'subjective' part of the phenomenal field, including the emotional life, the kinesthetic and the visual components of the self, represents under normal conditions a unit which as such has commerce with the 'objective' world. We are thus forced to postulate a similarly intimate organization and centralization of all the neural events which underlie the phenomenal self. And as the phenomenal self generally represents one entity in its commerce with the 'objective' world, so its complex neural correlate will behave as a unit in its functional relations with the correlates of 'objective' percepts." (Köhler, 1938, 354)

10. Lewin on the Internal Structure of the Ego

Similar to Koffka, Lewin goes after the issue of internal differentiation or internal structure of the ego, as well as its role in relation to the environment. However, Lewin uses a slightly different terminology than Koffka. Where Koffka speaks of the "self," Lewin speaks of an "inner core of personality," of "inner regions of the soul" and "intra-psychic systems," of "deep layers" and terms alike. So Lewin and his students take a topological perspective, the viewpoint of the spatial internal structure of the person. As we have seen, we find this perspective also in Koffka's writings where he speaks of surface and depth, layers and core, etc.

Lewin represents in any case the

> "view that a special region, within the psychical totality, must be defined as the self in the narrower sense. Not every psychically existent system

> would belong to this central self. Not everyone to whom I say 'Du,' not all the things, men, and environmental regions which I know and which may perhaps be very important to me, belong to my self. This self-system would also have in functional respects – this is most important – a certain unique position. Not every tense psychical system would stand in communication with this self. Tensions which have to do with the self would also have functionally a special significance in the total psychical organism (…), and it is possible that within this region differently directed tensions would tend to equilibrium considerably more strongly and that relatively isolated dynamic systems within it could much less readily occur." (Lewin, 1935, 61f)

In this context, Lewin and his students speak of "intra-psychic districts" or "intrapsychic systems" (Dembo, 1931 in 1976, 405), further of an "inner core of personality" ("Ich-Kern") within the "deeper layers" of the person (see Figure 4):

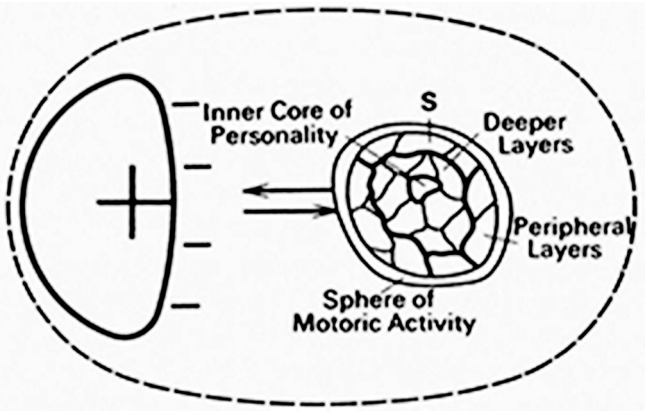

Fig. 4. Lewin's "inner core of personality" (Dembo, 1931 in 1976, 406, Figure 17).

These more central layers of the ego-core are usually "functionally enclosed." In certain situations, however, with increasing affectivity stresses can break though to these deeper layers of the person (see Dembo, 1931 in 1976, 407).

Ferdinand Hoppe, another student of Lewin, further elaborates on the dynamic importance of the internal structure of the ego, describing the dynamic relationship of the ego-core (the "central I") and the levels of aspiration (Hoppe, 1930 in 1976, 482f). In this context, Hoppe forms the concept of "ego levels" for the self-worth (ibid, 481, 483–485). According to him, there is a dynamic relationship between the level of aspiration for the particular task at hand and an ego-level, which goes beyond the single task and on which one's own person as a social being is based (ibid, 483; see also the dynamics of the ego-level, the trend to keep it as high as possible, 484).

11. Mary Henle: The Self as a System of Related Functions

The American Gestalt psychologist Mary Henle, the most important collaborator of Wolfgang Köhler in the USA, draws attention to a further important aspect. She sees in the self a system of closely related functions:

> "The most obvious fact about the self as we experience it is the multiplicity of aspects it presents. We do not ordinarily appear to ourselves as an undifferentiated 'I'." (Henle, 1962, 396). And: "It seems that even when we confine ourselves to what is phenomenally present, the self consists of a variety of functions. […] Although we often tend to personify them, actually they are functions, not entities." (ibid, 397)

Further, Henle gives the following examples for such functions: observing and acting, criticizing, accepting or rejecting, [the inner friend: comforting, encouraging], Protecting/adorning/embellishing, realistically assessing/imagining, dreaming... (see for more details Henle, 1962).

On the relationship between the various aspects of self Henle says: "… although conflicts are experiences, as in some of the examples given above, these experientially distinct aspects of the self work together, on the whole, in an organized manner, with reference to each other if not always in harmony." (Henle, 1962, 400)

Here one can see a bridge connecting Henle's and Koffka's thinking: Koffka had found that the body perceptions of a primarily proprioceptive nature play a decisive role for the segregation of the phenomenal bodily ego from the rest of the phenomenal field. In line with this, one can proceed, including Henle's reflections on the functions of the self:

> For his orientation and ability to act in the world, in particular in his co-human environment, man does not need only "outward directed sense organs" and "intra-corporeal senses," but also functions like a permanent self-reflection, self-examination and self-care, directed towards his phenomenal ego in its identity and in its relationship with its environment. These functions in the ego-region of the field are of paramount importance for the "fine-tuning" of the phenomenal world as a "central steering organ" (Metzger), especially for all human interactions in life. Henle gives some examples which point in this direction in her references to the correlation between self-criticism and response to "external" criticism or on the relationship between self-acceptance (being one's own "inner friend") and having "outer" friends.

12. Edwin Rausch: Multiple Egos—Multiple Fields

At least briefly, reference must be made here to Edwin Rausch's research on the multiplicity of the ego in perception. Henle's findings have a complement in the function of the multi-field division of the phenomenal world, as we find it in a

considerably large part of the waking life of man. As Edwin Rausch has found out in his experimental research (Rausch, 1982), it comes to the formation of a second ego with its own phenomenal environment, if in one's primary world of experience circumstances occur, which are not compatible in one and the same world (an effect of the Prägnanz tendency). This is subsequently connected with a sometimes closer, sometimes looser interdependence and interaction between these two total fields and thus also between the two phenomenal egos. The relations between the ego in the primary total field and the ego in the secondary total field can show many of Henle's functions of the ego "in action." For example, the ego in the secondary total field of a wish-fulfilling daydream or in co-experiencing with the hero in a film or novel may be the ego that the ego in the primary total field could not stand up to its own criticism. Or it may be already the decisive condition for the segregation of the second total field that one discovers the experience of another own ego, which cannot be reconciled in one and the same world—at least not immediately and only the interaction between the two egos in the primary and secondary total field makes their later unification possible.

I can only hint at these connections here and refer to the more extensive Gestalt-theoretical literature on the multiple-field approach (Stemberger, 2009, 2018, 2021).

13. Metzger's Differentiation of Self-Awareness

Going forward with these considerations one might find helpful what Wolfgang Metzger says about the differentiation of the phenomenal world from the viewpoint of one's awareness: He distinguishes between self-awareness, awareness of one's "inner world," and awareness of one's "outer world":

> "1. Self-awareness is to be understood as the awareness of the phenomenal, experienced ego (...). Awareness in this sense comprises in first place the simple awareness of one's own existence; secondly an already somewhat more differentiated awareness of one's state of mind; and finally, the very slowly developing awareness of one's own uniqueness, an awareness of one's enduring personality in its specificity, in being different from others, this being the true subject of self-knowledge (...).
>
> The actual and unquestionable core of self-perception is certainly the awareness of one's state of mind: as the awareness of how one is at this moment, in what mood one is, what one 'feels like'; in other words: the whole world of moods, feelings, emotions and affects, intentions and aspirations, as one experiences and feels them directly in himself. (...)
>
> 2 and 3. The two remaining areas of awareness or of the phenomenal world are best understood in their mutual stand-off. They are, as I have said, the inner-world consciousness, for the contents of which I have suggested the

> expression 'the envisioned,' (das Vorgestellte) and the outer-world consciousness, for the contents of which the expressions 'the encountered' (das Angetroffene) or 'the encountering' (das Begegnende) seem to me most appropriate." (Metzger, 1959, transl. from German)

14. Galli: Forms of Prägnanz in the Ego-World-Relationship

Finally, the contribution of the Italian Gestalt psychologist Giuseppe Galli must be addressed. He has devoted a significant part of his life to the research of the phenomenal self. In one of his major works, *the Psychologie der sozialen Tugenden* (psychology of social virtues; Galli, 2005), he discusses the phenomenology and dynamics of various social behaviors, or "modes of being together." This can be understood as Gestalt qualities of human relations or—as Galli himself proposes—as "Forms of Prägnanz of relationship structures" (Galli, 2010, 58ff).

Galli explicates this in dealing with the "social virtues" of dedication, of gratitude, of wonder, of repentance and forgiveness, of trust, honesty, and hope. As Galli shows, these "virtues" are not properties or traits of a person, but specific forms of *prägnant* order of the psychological field, especially the structural and functional integration of the phenomenal ego in his interpersonal environment in concrete situations.

Galli continues with this analysis, what Max Wertheimer in his posthumously published work *Productive Thinking* tried to demonstrate with his examples "Two boys playing badminton" and "A young girl describes his office" (Wertheimer, 1945/2020). Wertheimer as well as Galli try to understand the structure and dynamics of the field, what factors determine the behavior of the phenomenal ego in his phenomenal world, in particular in relation to his fellow men. So here we come full circle again in our brief review of Gestalt theoretical approaches to ego and self.

Summary

The paper presents basic Gestalt theoretical concepts of ego and self. They differ from other concepts in the way that they do not comprehend ego and self as fixed entities or as central controlling instances of the psyche, but as one specific organized unit in a psychological field in dynamic interrelation with the other organized units—the environment units—of this field. On this theme, well-known representatives of Gestalt theory have presented some general and special theories since the early days of this approach that could partly be substantiated experimentally. They illuminate the relationship between ego and world in everyday life as well as in the case of mental disorders. Not only the spatial extension of the phenomenal ego is subject to situational changes, but also its place in the world, its functional fitting in this world, its internal differentiation, its permeability to the environment, and much more. The German Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Metzger emphasizes the significant functional role that this dynamic plasticity of the

phenomenal world and its continuously changing segregation of ego and environment have for human life by designating the phenomenal world as a "Central Steering Mechanism." In this article, ego and self as part of this field in their interrelation with the total psychological field will be illuminated from the perspective of the thinking of the Gestalt psychologists Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Lewin, Wolfgang Metzger, Mary Henle, Edwin Rausch, and Giuseppe Galli.
Keywords: ego and self, Gestalt psychology, critical realism, psychophysics, embodiment, Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag stellt grundlegende gestalttheoretische Auffassungen von Ich und Selbst vor. Sie unterscheiden sich von anderen Konzepten darin, dass sie Ich und Selbst nicht als feststehende Gegebenheiten oder als steuernde Zentralinstanzen des Psychischen verstehen, sondern als Teil eines psychologischen Feldes in dynamischer Wechselbeziehung zu ihrer psychologischen Umwelt. Zu diesem Thema haben namhafte Vertreter der Gestalttheorie seit der Frühzeit dieses Ansatzes einige allgemeine und spezielle Thesen vorgelegt, die zum Teil auch experimentell belegt werden konnten. Sie beleuchten das Ich-Welt-Verhältnis im Alltäglichen wie auch im Fall von psychischen Störungen. Situativen Veränderungen unterworfen ist schon die Ausdehnung des phänomenalen Ich, aber auch sein Ort in der Welt, seine funktionale Einpassung, seine Binnendifferenzierung, seine Durchlässigkeit zur Umwelt und vieles mehr. Die bedeutende funktionale Rolle dieser Plastizität der phänomenalen Welt in ihrer wechselnden Ich-Umwelt-Gliederung für das Leben der Menschen hebt Wolfgang Metzger hervor, indem er die anschauliche Welt als "zentrales Steuerungsorgan" bezeichnet. Ich und Selbst als Teile dieses Feldes in ihrer Wechselbeziehung zum psychischen Gesamtfeld werden im vorliegenden Beitrag aus der Perspektive von Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Lewin, Wolfgang Metzger, Mary Henle, Edwin Rausch und Giuseppe Galli beleuchtet.
Schlüsselwörter: Ich und Selbst, Gestaltpsychologie, Kritischer Realismus, Psychophysik, embodiment, Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie.

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Gerhard Stemberger, born in 1947, lives in Vienna and Berlin. He is a psychotherapist and supervisor as well as a teaching therapist for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy. His work focuses on the history and theory of the clinical application of Gestalt theory, in particular the theoretical foundation of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy. He is the former president of the Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), long-time editor of the journal Gestalt Theory and co-publisher of Phänomenal – Zeitschrift für Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie (Journal for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy). He is also the editor and co-author of the books Psychische Störungen im Ich-Welt-Verhältnis (Mental Disorders in the I-World Relationship; 2002), Giuseppe Galli: Der Mensch als Mit-Mensch (Man as fellow-human; 2017), and Paul Tholey: Gestalttheorie von Sport, Klartraum und Bewusstsein (Gestalt theory of Sports, Lucid Dreaming and Consciousness; 2018).
Address: Wintergasse 75-77/7, 3002 Purkersdorf, Austria.
E-mail: gst@gestalttheory.net
ORCID: 0000-0002-1049-6578