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Stumpf and Gestalt Psychology: Relations and Differences

I.

The aspects of Stumpf's teaching – which were obviously essential for the Berlin School of Gestalt theory – are manifold and of the utmost importance. We may start from the aspects mentioned by Stumpf in the *Erkenntnislehre* where, a little sternly, he points out to the representatives of the *Gestaltpsychologie* that the psychology theory previous to theirs was not at all entirely characterized by a merely “atomistic” and “summative” ideal of the psychic life and the world of sensation (the *Und-Verbindungen* by Wertheimer) as they (would have) claimed.

First of all Stumpf reminds us that he had already started fighting the idea of a “summative conception of the visual sensations” (Stumpf 1939-1949, vol. I, 244) since 1873 in his great treatise on the psychological origin of space representation.

In *Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumvorstellung* Stumpf firmly asserted that the relation connecting extension and colour does not have an associative nature – as typically reckoned by the Anglo-Saxon associationism tradition, notably by John Stuart Mill – but it rather emerges as a connection belonging in the beginning to visual sensations, and that is perceived directly in the same way as any other quality is perceived (Stumpf 1873, 115). According to the association mechanism, a certain representation reminds of another one, and vice versa. But this does not happen in the case of colour and extension. Extension is not called to mind thanks to the colour representation, but it is always co-represented with this one: as a matter of fact, it is simply impossible for us to represent a chromatic quality without any extension. When we observe a coloured surface, we are indeed aware of two contents: the chromatic quality and the spatial extension. But it is also necessary to add that extension and colour are not two “independent contents” (*selbständige Inhalte*) of this representational complex, but rather “partial contents” (*Theilinhalte*) of this complex. “Quality takes part in the modification of extension” and vice versa: that is to say if the colour is reduced, also the extension is inevitably reduced, and vice versa (Stumpf 1873, 49-50 *passim* and 112). Directly quoting a well-known page by Stumpf, who also

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exerted a significant influence on Husserl¹, “independent contents are present where the elements of a representational complex [...] may be also represented separately; partial contents are present where this is not possible” (Stumpf 1873, 109). More precisely, the latter is the case of contents such as extension, colour and depth or movement and speed. Therefore, in short, there is mutual and original dependence between extension and chromatic quality, not an associative relation. Following the *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) by Berkeley – who was the first one to emphasise the impossibility of representing extension, figure and movement except together with some sensible quality, but also following the indications contained in the *Metaphysik* (1841) and *Logik* (1843) by the master Rudolph Hermann Lotze, Stumpf sets forth his notion of visual sensations. In particular, he argues that visual sensations are far from being a summation of disjointed elements on which the individual has an impact by establishing stable relations, but they are contents with relations and characteristics within them that cannot be derived from subjective activity. Colour and extension are always a whole: they may be distinguished only by abstraction. There is always an “attributive connection” between colour and extension (Stumpf 1907b, 40).

As to the implications of the perspective put forward by Stumpf in *Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumvorstellung*, it is necessary to underline two other aspects – both essential for Gestaltism and deeply intertwined. The first one concerns the mereological conceptual apparatus used by Stumpf in this work through the mentioned concepts of “independent contents” (*selbständige Inhalte*) and “partial contents” (*Theilinhalt*), concepts that directly pertain to the relationship between the whole and its parts. It is completely evident that this apparatus proves to be essential to Gestaltism (as well as to Husserl), as it contains conceptual instruments which are precious for the definition of the notion of the whole and for an approach to the world of sensation which is no longer conceived as a mere agglomerate of elements. To this regard, the other aspect to be underlined concerns Stumpf’s anti-Kantism and, especially, a conception of the world of sensation which is very far from Kant’s perspective. As is well-known, the most characteristic trait of the Kantian conception of experience is the distinct separation between matter (*Materie*, sensations) and forms (*Formen*) of intuition (space, time and intellect categories). Sensations are conceived by Kant as disjointed, incoherent contents devoid of any form and extension. The order we find in experience derives – according to Kant – from something which is entirely “separate” (*abgesondert*) from sensible contents. According to Kant’s perspective, if the world of sensations is a disorganized mass, that which sets in order cannot be a sensation as well. In the case of extension, the possibility of representing two

¹ Although Husserl uses different expressions when he talks about independent and dependent contents, he follows Stumpf in the Third Logical Investigation (1901). See on this Stumpf 1924, 244.

sensations as located in different places necessarily presupposes the representation of space – which therefore shall be assumed a priori with respect to experience. Moreover, while it is impossible to get any external representation without space, it is indeed possible to think of space without thinking of any objects in it: space is therefore an a priori form, completely separate from sensible contents, not derivable from them, but actually the condition of their possibility². In his treatise on space, Stumpf specifically opposes the Kantian separation between form and content of intuition, besides criticising the associationistic tradition. Following Berkeley – as has been already said – Stumpf points out that without sensible qualities (e.g. visual sensations such as colour or tactile sensations of contact) no visual or tactile space can be conceivable. Therefore spatial representation and representation of sensible qualities cannot be separated in any way; the first one does not exist and is inconceivable without the other one (Stumpf 1873, 22). It is evident that such a perspective will prove itself essential to Gestaltism, where the “separation” between form and content is completely abandoned.

The other point mentioned by Stumpf in *Erkenntnislehre*, and that also follows the above-mentioned direction, concerns the notion of “fusion” (*Verschmelzung*) introduced by him in the second volume of the *Tonpsychologie* (1890) to account for the perception of chords (Stumpf 1939-1940, vol. I, 244). In the chord, two synchronous sounds are experienced as a unitary whole and not as a sum of distinct sensations. But – according to Stumpf – the “fusion” of sensations taking place in a chord is not the result of a process or intervention by higher functions to the sphere of sensibility. Instead, in the case of chords, we are in the presence of totalities that in the beginning impose themselves in the sphere of sensibility through structural laws leading exclusively to it: “this fusion – claims Stumpf – does not indicate a process to us, but an existing relationship” (Stumpf 1883-1890, vol. II, 129). Sensibility emerges once again not as a mosaic or a chaotic heap of elements, but as a sphere characterized by its own and immanent laws, a sphere which – with these inner bonds – provides higher functions with matter. To this regard, a conception of sensible data is at work. This conception is profoundly different from both empiricism and the Kantian perspective, so that, as Stumpf writes in the *Tonpsychologie*: relations such as fusion, similarity, multiplicity, increment “are immanent to the data of sensation, and not only added thanks to judgment [...] judgment does not create similarity, but it only ascertains it” (Stumpf 1883-1890, vol. II, 65)³.

Therefore, an idea of the sensibility world completely different from the one resulting from Kant’s intellectualistic phenomenism establishes itself in Stumpf. This idea, which will greatly affect Gestaltism, relies on a comparison with a key

² See Kant 1787/1968, 49-53.

³ See also Stumpf 1883-1890, vol. II, the paragraph “Was Tonverschmelzung ist und was sie nicht ist”, 127 foll.

aspect of the Aristotelian perspective: the one of the relation between sensitive and intellectual soul, the idea that the concepts of the latter become rooted in the former and that the intellectual soul cannot disregard the sensitive soul. These are matters already discussed by Brentano in his *Die Psychologie des Aristoteles* (1867), which remain central in Stumpf and that are transmitted to Gestaltists through Stumpf. It is undoubtedly true that this matter takes a very peculiar turn in Gestaltism as we will see later. Nevertheless, there was someone like Franziska Mayer–Hillebrand who identified in the reaffirmation, through Brentano, in the re-emergence, through Brentano, of the idea of rooting concepts in intuitions – an idea that evidently relies on the Aristotelian perspective – a crucial passage for the culture of that period and in which the theoretical direction that will be characteristic of *Gestaltpsychologie* (Mayer–Hillebrand 1966, 383) is prefigured. There are other points indicated by Stumpf in *Erkenntnislehre* which are no less essential than those we have briefly illustrated and that, therefore, must be added as to Stumpf's influence on Gestaltism.

The first point concerns an aspect marking the parting of Stumpf from Brentano, an aspect that opens the way to a new type of phenomenology and that we could define as the passage from the Cartesian primacy of inner evidence - which is typical of Brentano - to the emphasis of the importance of inter-observation. Whilst Brentano prefers inner perception as the privileged instrument to describe mental life, Stumpf – we read this in one of the paragraphs of the *Tonpsychologie* dedicated to the “reliability of the sensible judgment” – believes that, rather than the evidence that a sensible judgment “has for the person who pronounces it”, it is “its degree of trustworthiness (*Vertrauenswürdigkeit*)” “for another person” which becomes essential (Stumpf 1883-1890, vol. I, 22). It is evident that it marks a sort of revolution compared to Brentano: as the primacy given by the master to inner perception fails, thanks to Stumpf, phenomenology can take a new turn, whereby intersubjective inquiry, inter-observation, experiment, laboratory research become central: in other words, with Stumpf, phenomenology becomes “experimental phenomenology” (see Boring 1950, 381 and Spiegelberg 1965, vol. I, 61). Needless to say, Stumpf's departure from Brentano was very important for Gestaltism.

II.

Albeit all these points are an essential part of the Gestalt background, and despite the debt of gratitude the representatives of the Berlin School will not forget to pay to Stumpf (see Ash 1998, part I, ch. 2), the differences between the two perspectives are significant. The most evident differences are those emerging from the criticism made by Köhler in *Über unbemerkte Empfindungen und Urteilstauschungen* (1913) to unnoticed sensations and unconscious judgments, a criticism that – as well known – is strictly intertwined with an idea that will

remain constant in Gestaltism: demolish two key aspects of sensory psychology, that is the hypothesis of constancy and distinction between sensation and perception, two assumptions (together with the theory of the unnoticed sensations) to which Stumpf will remain instead tightly bound. In this work we will not focus on these aspects, but rather on the characteristics and implications of the different conception of phenomenology we find in Stumpf on the one hand and in Gestaltism on the other hand.

We start once again from *Erkenntnislehre*, where Stumpf strives to give a systematic explanation of his own philosophy. In this work Stumpf severely criticizes Gestaltism – or at least he does not use the kind of tone we can still find in *Selbstdarstellung* (1924). As we have already seen, in *Erkenntnislehre*, Stumpf blames first of all his former pupils for showing themselves as brand new, as if before them there were only tenacious upholders of an atomistic view of psychic life; moreover, he blames them for their universalism, that is for applying the *Gestalt* notion to the most varied fields of knowledge. In the end he points out a certain philosophical approximation or carelessness in making use of some aspects of the Aristotelian philosophy to which implications not grasped (and most likely not desired too much) by Gestaltism are connected (Stumpf 1939-1940, vol. I, 243-245 *passim*).

I would like to spend a few words on this point. The Aristotelian legacy is undoubtedly an important component of the Gestaltist background and, especially, its echo may be often perceived in connection with the problem of the relation between the whole and its parts. Of course, the relation between *Gestaltpsychologie* and Aristotelianism was more indirect than direct. Aristotle was essential for Brentano – as is known – as well as for Stumpf, through Brentano. We can presume the Aristotelian suggestions scattered here and there in the pages of Gestaltism derive most likely from Stumpf. At Stumpf's Institute all the founders of the Gestalt psychology (Köhler, Koffka, Gelb, Lewin, Allesch) wrote their dissertation, except for Wertheimer, who graduated with Külpe at Würzburg in 1904, but only after two years of intensive work with Stumpf in Berlin from 1902 to 1904. If the reading of Aristotle was essential in all of its aspects for Brentano, in Stumpf's production it seems that this reading was essential first of all in the mereological field. For those people who – like Stumpf – explored the new frontiers of the psychology of that time, Aristotle represented, from this point of view, a stimulating and resourcefull ground. Parts of the *Metaphysikvorlesungen* given by Brentano during the years of Würzburg are dedicated to the (Aristotelian) subject of the relation between the whole and its parts. Stumpf, as is well known, was one of Brentano's students, and the frequentation with Brentano has probably played a role for Stumpf's treatise on

space mentioned above⁴. The relation between the whole and its parts is a recurring matter in the Aristotelian philosophy, which cuts across the most diverse thematic fields (ethical, political, physical, aesthetic, organic, logical, metaphysical). In the book Δ of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between for instance whole ($\pi\tilde{\alpha}\nu$) considered as aggregate – where the arrangement of the parts is indifferent as to the nature of the thing, as it happens for example in a stream of water – and the whole meant as $\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\nu$ - in which the arrangement of parts directly affects the nature of the thing, - indicating in the melody ($\alpha\rho\mu\omicron\nu\iota\alpha$) an example of a whole understood in this second sense (Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, Δ , 26 and 27): it is evident that we are facing topics having a very close relation with the matters at the centre of the psychological debate at the end of the nineteenth century. The Aristotelian principle of the immanence of form in concrete reality must have been definitely captivating for those people like Stumpf who – as we have already seen – aimed at getting over the Kantian dualism between form and content.

It is well-known and indisputable that the Aristotelian legacy was deeply rooted in Brentano and Stumpf. However, it is interesting to note that one of the criticisms made by Stumpf of Gestaltism in *Erkenntnislehre* starts exactly from the Aristotelian theme of the relation between the whole and its parts, thus taking a completely unexpected turn. Of the more or less explicit allusions to the Aristotelian philosophy by the Berlin School, Stumpf addresses one of the maxims that most specifically characterizes the Gestaltist perspective: “the whole comes before the parts”. It is – as it is well known – an Aristotelian quotation. Aristotle uses it in the first pages of the *Politics* to state the priority of common good (of the $\pi\acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$) over individual good. But, going well beyond the *Politics*, Stumpf underlines the uniquely finalistic character of the Aristotelian idea of a *priority* of the whole over the parts in commenting on the emphasis put by the Berlin School on this Aristotelian quotation. Stumpf points out that stating that the whole comes *before* the parts makes sense in Aristotle, if we refer to the teleological system that holds his idea of the world. In Aristotle’s philosophy of nature, the principle of the priority of the whole is established in close analogy with what takes place in the artistic field: it is the aim, the purpose that the artist sets himself which causes the beginning of the process (so it comes before that) that leads to a work of art. After all – remarks Stumpf – in the Aristotelian perspective we find the most pregnant “seeds” of the whole philosophy of medieval religion. But if the Aristotelian perspective is entirely admissible in the sphere of the theological or religious options, it is also true that we have to ask ourselves how it may be compatible with explanation of scientific-causal

⁴ According to B. Smith and K. Mulligan (in Smith//Mulligan 1982, 15–110, 30), “unfortunately it is at this stage almost impossible to determine the extent to which Brentano contributed to the account of partial contents developed by Stumpf”. However, they also say that “Brentano’s work on the *Psychology of Aristotle*, published in 1867, contains passages which have a superficial terminological similarity with Stumpf’s 1873 [...]”.

type: in this case, with scientific-causal explanations of sensible experience, of the phenomenal world. In this field – points out Stumpf – it is inevitable to recognise that the Aristotelian conception of the priority of the whole over its parts is entirely “unacceptable” (*unzulässig*) (C. Stumpf 1939-1940, vol. I, 244, 245 *passim*).

The figurative language and the philosophical approximation of Gestaltists – this seems to be the criticism made by Stumpf to his former pupils to this regard – run the risk of becoming in this way a real form of naivety when they end up retrieving those aspects of Aristotelianism which have the undesired effect of calling upon the very thorny problem of finalism and final causes.

In the next paragraph we will try to show that, actually, resorting to the above-mentioned Aristotelian maxim in the pages of Gestaltism is not the result of an incautious use by philosophically naive and careless authors, but it must be rather traced back to a theoretical picture which – compared to Stumpf – shows profound differences at the level of the underlying ontological options. These differences originate in turn from a conception of phenomenology that in Gestaltism assumes different and entirely peculiar distinctive features compared to the conception of phenomenology – derived from Brentano – which we find at work in Stumpf. At the same time, the implications of this difference also coincide with one of the aspects that, in my opinion, is the most innovative and philosophically interesting of the *Gestaltpsychologie*.

III.

In *Selbstdarstellung*, Stumpf deals with phenomenology and its subject matter, and he points out that claiming that there are neither pure nor absolute sensations – that is sensations not in connection with anything else, independent from the network of relations in which they are usually included – seems like an exaggeration to him. The point of view Stumpf contrasts is evidently the one of the Berlin School – according to which pure sensations may be at most considered to be the result of an analytical, attentive and selective intervention on what we usually perceive, an intervention that in the end tends to distort the starting perceptive context (Stumpf 1924, 244). Stumpf cannot give up the idea of pure or absolute sensations. It is precisely the suppression of this concept that – even in *Erkenntnislehre*, - Stumpf continues to blame Gestaltists for (Stumpf 1939-1940, vol. I, 242). This very point – together with the meaning and role of phenomenology – lends itself to a series of considerations.

In the first instance, we will talk about the role and meaning of phenomenology. In Brentano, the descriptive psychology (sometimes also called phenomenology starting from the Viennese lectures of the end of the 80s, see Brentano 1982) was entrusted with the task of describing both the activity and the contents

of conscience, of showing the essential psychic phenomena and of determining their possible connection forms. Brentano's descriptive psychology recognized its primary source in the inner perception, and starting from this one proceeded with analyses that from mere description turned into a sort of logical-conceptual analysis of the psychic life. In the 90s Brentano did not associate his idea of descriptive psychology to the Leibnitzian project of a *characteristica universalis* by accident (Brentano 1895, 34).

This character of the Brentanian phenomenology clearly emerges from the way in which Brentano defines the notion of representation (*Vorstellung*, the correlated process of the psychic activity of representation, whereby an object is simply present to the conscience as detached from any emotional trace or any stance concerning its existence or non-existence) and indicates in it the foundation of every other psychic activity, such as for instance judging or desiring. If we deal with this matter with a logical-theoretic approach, it is inevitable to admit that desiring something or perceiving something as existing implies the representation of that something. But the fact that representations conceived in this way (that is completely detached from affective and judicative components) do not result or hardly ever result, if we stick to a plain and simple description of our actual experiences, seems substantially insignificant for Brentano. The essential fact for Brentano is that no psychic phenomenon which has not a representation as foundation can be conceived: in other words, representation is – conceptually speaking – a condition of possibility and logical foundation of any psychic phenomenon. Representation is a necessary part of the concept of any other psychic phenomenon we may refer to (the wishing, the judging, the perceiving something, etc...).

In this system of the Brentanian phenomenology, a substantially foundational trace may be recognized, and just a perspective like this seems to drive even Stumpf towards the criticism of the elimination of the concept of pure or absolute sensation made by Gestaltism. Such an idea of sensation seems to take form also for Stumpf as something unmissable from a conceptual and foundational point of view. This irremissibility makes the fact that pure or absolute sensations never appear in our ordinary perceptive experience entirely insignificant from Stumpf's point of view. For Gestaltism, instead, phenomenology is indeed description, but a description not associated with that sort of logical-conceptual revision and foundation we find in Brentano and that may be recognized even in Stumpf in the criticism of the elimination of the concept of absolute sensation. In the Gestaltist perspective, the perceptive experience, which must be accounted for by the phenomenological inquiry, must be taken just as it is and the phenomenal and experiential aspects of experience must be left intact. The fact that the phenomenological analysis conceived in this way does not show any *pure* or *absolute* sensations is – from their point of view – a sufficient condition to

consider the latter as a sort of analytical and selective abstraction of what is given in the sensible experience, since, as a matter of fact, there is no sensation unless in context: for instance, a chromatic impression is never alone, but in a global field by which – among other things – that impression is essentially conditioned.

This different conception of phenomenology has profound consequences also in the ontological field of Gestaltism. In Stumpf, the persistence of the logical-foundational preconditions typical of Brentano's phenomenology is totally coherent with an ontological idea, whereby the key-concepts of the Aristotelian tradition remain central, starting from the essential one: the thing-property doctrine, the idea that there is a bearer in whom the different qualities are inherent. This can be continually found in Stumpf, and it emerges in full evidence also from his unwillingness to give up a concept – the one of pure or absolute sensation – which is meant by him as the unmissable foundation in which qualities may be inherent. Instead, in the *Gestaltpsychologie* – just as a consequence of the type of phenomenology practised by it – a different ontological perspective becomes manifest, a kind of ontology that calls to mind some declinations of that ontological conception that in the current philosophical debate is known as ontology of the *states of affairs*. Although it shows an extensive and differentiated spectrum of positions, in this type of ontology things and properties become perceivable only as parts of states of affairs (Tegtmeier 1992, 144), as far as claiming that substances and properties must be conceived as entities *depending* on the states of affairs (see Johansson 1989), deriving from them their statute, their ontological characteristics. This relationship of dependance of things and properties on the states of affairs, on the “field” in the Gestaltist terminology, takes form therefore as ontologically essential, as the precondition of the world ontological constitution, exactly like it emerges from the Gestaltism pages.

Such a conception would have sounded incomprehensible to Stumpf's ears. Similarly, the Gestaltist position, which seems to be very close to the ontological perspective of the *states of affairs*, was incomprehensible to him. In Stumpf, for instance, sounds and colours are recognized as the original foundations and bearers of the properties that may be inherent in them and as elements forming the relations in which they appear as members being in perfect step – as we said – with the Aristotelian ontology. From his point of view, it is quite incomprehensible that relations imply the existence of a certain state of affairs and that this state of affairs comes *before*, because it is something ontologically foundational with respect to substances, relations and properties – as is stated by the Gestaltist perspective and the current theory of the *states of affairs*.

IV.

We now deal with another aspect closely related to the different conception of phenomenology we find at work in Stumpf and in Gestaltism.

As is known, in *Erscheinungen und psychische Funktionen* (1907), with the term *Erscheinungen* (appearances)⁵, Stumpf means in the first place the contents of sensations. When appearances are considered solely in connection with the quality or intensity of a single sensation, Stumpf speaks of – as we have already seen – “perception of absolute contents” (*absolute Inhalte*) (Stumpf 1907a, 4, 22). But we do not usually perceive isolated sensations, but ensembles of sensations, ensembles within which “there are certain *relations*” among the sensations. These relations – states Stumpf – “are not established by us [...], but perceived. They belong to the matter of intellectual functions, but they are neither functions nor are they produced by them” (Stumpf 1907a, 4, 22). With the term psychic functions, Stumpf means the acts and the states of consciousness: functions are “the noting of appearances and their relations, the combining of appearances in complexes, the formation of concepts, the grasping and judging, the movements of the soul, the desiring, the willing” (*ibidem*). Functions therefore indicate the psychic activity, the acts, and there are specific differences among them: separating, uniting, grasping, denying, wishing, rejecting (Stumpf 1907a, 7). In every psychic phenomenon, there is always the further variable of functions together with appearances (Stumpf 1907a, 9).

Back to the perception, for Stumpf perceiving means to notice (*bemerken*) or note (*Notiznehmen*) an appearance meant as absolute content (the quality, the intensity of a sensation, etc...), but also “notice some parts in a whole as well as the relations between these parts” (Stumpf 1907a, 16). As to noting the relations, Stumpf claims with force that they are not “founded” by the comparison and that “the functions do not create the relations, but rather they ascertain them, like the absolute contents”: for instance – claims Stumpf – “the fusion, as well as the similarity, is a relationship immanent to appearances”, and not a relation which is established by the functions (Stumpf 1907a, 22, 23).

Just the relations prove to be essential for the “Gestalt qualities”. With regard to that, Stumpf makes a distinction between “aggregate” (*Inbegriff*) and strictly Gestalt qualities. The aggregate consists of a connection of elements established by our thinking “through an *and*”, in a union where “there is no actual belonging (*sachliche Zusammengehörigkeit*), no binding collective relation that binds the parts” (Stumpf 1907a, 29). As emphasised by Husserl in the *Philosophie der Arithmetik* (1891), therefore, the correlate of the psychic function that unites different elements through an “*and*” (that is the aggregate) is not actually a whole.

⁵ In this text we shall always translate the term *Erscheinungen* with “appearances”, preferring it to “phenomena” and “presentations”.

The matter is different for the Gestalt qualities. They are in any case the correlate of a psychic function, but they differ from the mere aggregates because they are founded on “relations that actually (*sachlich*) bind the members” (Stumpf 1907a, 29): therefore, relations not created by the subject activity, but “actually” immanent to the data, to the sensible material. In this way the Gestalt qualities seem to be strongly connected by Stumpf to the sphere of appearances.

The description of the appearances, of their relations and their structural laws according to Stumpf is not the task of psychology, but rather it is “a distinct field of the knowledge” (Stumpf 1907a, 39). This theme is specified by Stumpf in an essay published in the same year as *Erscheinungen und psychische Funktionen: Zur Einteilung der Wissenschaften*. In the subdivision of sciences proposed by Stumpf in this essay, the sciences of the spirit take care of the psychic functions. The psychology takes care of the most elementary psychic functions among them; the complex psychic functions fall within the state sciences’ competence as well as the competence of the sciences of the society, language, religion, art, etc... (see Stumpf 1907b, 21). Beside the great distinction between sciences of nature and sciences of spirit, Stumpf also indicates three “neutral sciences”: the phenomenology, the eidology and the general theory of the relations – also defined by Stumpf “*presciences*” (Stumpf 1907b, 39). Phenomenology has for its object the appearances as they are and the structural laws immanent to them. “Anywhere— says Stumpf – inside the sphere of the appearances there are *laws* [...] immanent structural laws”. These laws represent one of the objects of inquiry of the phenomenology. Since “these appearance laws have nothing to do with the laws of the psychic functions”, their nature justifies in itself “the principle autonomy” of the phenomenology from psychology (Stumpf 1907b, 27-30 *passim*), an autonomy which is closely related to what is claimed also in the *Erscheinungen und psychische Funktionen* about the “non-transferability of the predicates” typical of the appearance world towards that of the psychic functions, on which we will dwell upon in a short while.

The general theory of the relations is the third of the neutral sciences enumerated by Stumpf, but we deal with it as second. The simplest relations such as the similarity, the identity, the degree of comparison, the dependance, the relation between the whole and its parts are for Stumpf “originary relations”. More precisely, they are actually neither appearances *tout court* nor have they a conceptual nature nor are they psychic functions. Their originarity and their non-absorbability neither in the conceptual nor in the psychic derives from the fact that they “are given to us in the same sense as the appearances are given to us, in them and with them, [...]”. As a matter of fact, they are facts that “impose themselves: we ascertain them, but we do not create them” (Stumpf 1907b, 37). Stumpf reasserts once again his distance from the Kantian perspective: there is no way – in his opinion – to accept to define the relations as “forms of

thinking, since they are neither properties of the intellectual functions nor ways of proceeding of the spirit or the like". "The similarity is not a comparison, the whole is not an union, the dependence is not to make depend" (Stumpf 1907b, 37). These "relations originally given", at most, must be considered for Stumpf as the condition of possibility of the relations we establish at a conceptual or abstract level (Stumpf 1907b, 37-38): the Aristotelian mark is very evident also in this passage – we note incidentally.

As to what we had already synthetically summarized, a certain approximation by Stumpf may be noted both in the indication and definition, respectively, of the object of phenomenology and that of the relationship theory. As a matter of fact, as we have just seen from this short report of *Zur Einteilung der Wissenschaften*, the inquiry "of the relations of similarity, degree of comparison, fusion, etc..." is indicated both as object of the phenomenology (Stumpf 1907b, 27), and object of the relation theory, of which it should be the specific object. But it is important to underline that for Stumpf this overlap is effectively inevitable: "it is positively impossible – claims Stumpf in this respect – to exhaustively deal with the relations without continuously overlapping with phenomenology and eidology and vice versa" (Stumpf 1907b, 40). However, over the years the distinction between phenomenology and theory of relations disappears from Stumpf's works, and – as it can be clearly inferred from the *Selbstdarstellung* (1924) – phenomenology absorbs in itself what in *Zur Einteilung der Wissenschaften* Stumpf calls science of relations (Stumpf 1924, 244-245).

We will now deal with the eidology very shortly: the second of the neutral sciences enumerated by Stumpf and that we deal with as third. The eidology is in charge of investigating the concepts and their relations, the relation between concepts and appearances, the values (aesthetic and ethical), the aggregates and – within those – more specifically the *forms* (*Formen*) or Gestalt qualities. In general, claims Stumpf, the eidology is the science "of the [...] correlates of the psychic functions" (Stumpf 1907b, 33). Therefore, it is not the science of the psychic functions taken by themselves, but of the correlates of these. As we have already seen, the study of the essential psychic functions is the primary object of the psychology, and within this one – entirely in a Brentanian way – such an object may be investigated by both the genetic psychology and descriptive psychology. They are two incomparable disciplines from the method point of view. The descriptive psychology – specifies Stumpf against Husserl - entirely coincides with what Husserl means by "phenomenology of the inner experience", that is with an inquiry aimed at "describing, distinguishing and classifying the 'act-experiences'" (Stumpf 1907b, 35 and note 2 *passim*)⁶.

⁶ Stumpf reserve the term "phenomenology" to the inquiry of matters we have indicated so far, whilst he uses the expression "descriptive psychology" to describe the act experiences. He reckoned at the same time that the Husserlian "phenomenology of the inner experience" entirely coincides with what he [Stumpf] means with

The fact that Stumpf includes the study of Gestalt qualities within eidology might be surprising at first sight, given that in *Erscheinungen und psychische Funktionen* – as we have seen – Stumpf had considered Gestalt qualities as a very specific example of aggregates, that is of aggregates in which an *effective (sachliche)* relation between the elements exists: the fact that, in the case of Gestalt qualities (unlike simple aggregates), there are effective relations which are immanent to sensible matter seemed to tie their analysis very closely to the general theory of relations, and therefore within the field of *Erscheinungen*, i.e. of sensibility and its laws. Nevertheless, it is also true that one firm point of Stumpf's perspective is that Gestalt qualities cannot be analyzed regardless of functions. This is the reason why Stumpf places them in eidology, that is in the science of "objective correlations of psychic functions", deeming the connection between this science and descriptive psychology to be unavoidable. To this regard, the influence of Aristotle's perspective, according to which perception is deemed to always contain a surplus with respect to simple sensation (sensation is a sort of mere alteration) can once again be recognized in Stumpf. One can talk about perception, instead, when the individual takes possession of a sensation.

In opposition to the "formulae of a fossilized Kantianism" and the "usual gnoseological research", Stumpf believes that what is meant by theory of knowledge "is generally or completely included within these pre-sciences", i.e. phenomenology, the science of relations and eidology (Stumpf 1907b, 39). However, to cover the subject of the theory of knowledge exhaustively, not only must pre-sciences intertwine and interact in different ways (Stumpf 1907b, 40), but they should also join up with psychology. Their subject matter, in fact, intertwines inevitably with that branch of psychology which is aimed at describing functions and lived experiences, i.e. descriptive psychology. It is precisely this connection with descriptive psychology, in the sense pointed out above, that *Gestaltpsychologie* is lacking. By reversing one of Husserl's well-known mottos, we might say that, according to Stumpf, phenomenology - in the way it is interpreted by *Gestaltpsychologie* - parenthesizes the conscience activity and focuses on that which is presented to conscience: conversely, act experiences and their description enjoy little consideration by the Gestalt perspective.

This difference of perspective emerges clearly in *Selbstdarstellung*, when Stumpf talks retrospectively of his commitment to phenomenology. Within this context, Stumpf stresses that phenomenology, i.e. the study of sensible appearances, of their relations and their immanent laws should be neither considered as a strictly psychological analysis nor as a sealed and completed analysis, but rather as a pre-science. In other words, it is like "preparatory work". "I, too, have been bound

"descriptive psychology". Unfortunately, in this place it not possible do dwell upon any further on the dispute started by Stumpf with his great student of the times of Halle. See Stumpf, 1907b, 35 and note.

to the preparatory work of phenomenology for a long time – points out Stumpf – but the goal has always been the knowledge of functions” (Stumpf 1924, 244). The difference of perspective from *Gestaltpsychologie* is thus very evident. Phenomenology, according to Stumpf, is bound to be related to the role played by the functions of conscience within experience, without questioning the fact that the sphere of senses exhibits immanent and independent laws of internal structuring. In the Gestalt phenomenology, instead, it can be said that there is no specific interest in the role played by subjectivity on the structuring of experience, nor for that which genetically precedes structuring in the empirical, logical, psychological and transcendental sense of the word.

In 1904, in *Zur Einteilung der Wissenschaften*, Stumpf recalls an argument led by A. Pfänder in *Einführung in die Psychologie* against a concept of psychology exclusively considered as the analysis of appearances. According to Pfänder, appearances, if considered by themselves and if leaving the activity of the subject aside, are just the “drosses of the physical world” and the study of the sphere of experience cannot just be limited to this perspective of analysis. (Stumpf 1907b, 30, note 1). Many years later, this very point of view created a division between Stumpf’s perspective and that of his students. Husserl later addressed a very similar accusation to the representatives of *Gestaltpsychologie* when he blamed them for their naturalism because the role of conscience was allegedly completely neglected within their approach (see for example Husserl 1930, § 6)⁷.

V.

There is finally another aspect connected with the different concept of phenomenology found in Stumpf and the Gestalt movement which deserves some attention. Before discussing it, though, we should spend a few words on the relationship between perception and the outside world.

That which becomes part of our experience – whether it is concerned with that which appears to us or how it appears to us – or, in other words, the world handed to us by our senses is inevitably influenced by their nature, characteristics and reactive capacities (our eye, for example, reacts with a series of colour sensations if stimulated by wavelengths ranging between 300 and 700 nanometres, but light waves which do not fall within that interval are not visible to it and, so to say, they do not exist). What we could define as the essentially contingent nature of our phenomenal world is taken for granted by Stumpf, as it is by supporters of Gestalt psychology. For example, “the fact that appearances qualitatively conform to the world of things beyond appearances is no longer [...] probable

⁷ The alleged underestimation of the importance of subject’s activity and of that which genetically precedes the structuring has been widely stressed in the critical discussions and the historiography which dealt with the Gestalt theory (see. Piaget 1968; Merleau-Ponty 1945; Holenstein, 1972, ch. XIV).

but improbable and needs to be demonstrated for each type of appearances” said Stumpf (Stumpf 1907b, 13). With a nice image, Köhler maintained, in his turn, that science continuously shows us that the injury does not coincide with the gun that fires the bullet (Köhler 1929/1947, 17), i.e. that which we perceive (the injury) does not reproduce that which causes it (the gun). Whether maintaining that there is a form of correspondence between the sphere of sensibility and the external world is admissible is up to empirical studies to ascertain. Somehow, the well-known differentiation between behavioural and geographical environment pointed out by Koffka heads for the same direction.

Within Stumpf’s perspective and later according to the Gestalt movement, the fact that the things that appear to us are influenced by our senses and our psychophysical structure is therefore acknowledged as a trivial and unavoidable truth from the scientific point of view. To this regard, though, we should take into consideration the possibilities that such acknowledgement does not bar.

- (1) A form of realism can be recovered and supported through certain types of analysis: this possibility is not excluded by Stumpf and was developed by Köhler, when he pointed out, by relying on empirical reasons, a correspondence between phenomenal forms and macroscopic forms of the external world. We will not be able dwell on this aspect here, for obvious reasons⁸.
- (2) Within experience, there are experiences which cannot be phenomenally traced back to subjectivity, due to their phenomenally objective nature.
- (3) The organization of the sphere of sensibility cannot always be traced back to the subjective side. This statement went against the Kantian phenomenism, as well as the vision of experience typical of empiricism, in which nexuses and the organization of the sphere of sensibility are considered to be the result of associative operations carried out by the subject out of habit and learning.

We do not need to dwell any longer on point 3 because it deals with a characteristic aspect of Stumpf’s perspective and of the Gestalt theory. Conversely, point 2, which is related to and is a prerequisite of point 3 (and is more precisely a necessary but not sufficient condition for point 3) calls for our deeper analysis.

As Brentano pointed out in *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (1874), both psychic and physical phenomena are part of our experience. Physical phenomena certainly do not coincide with objects as these exist beyond the fact of being perceived by us and as they are described within the framework of physical sciences. This does not prevent them from showing up to our experience with properties which are different and not referable to those of psychic phenomena, which are deemed to pertain directly to our self, the acts, states and lived experiences of the subject. Stumpf is very clear on the fact that, at phenomenal level, there are experiences which cannot typically be traced back to subjectivity.

⁸ See for example Köhler 1938, ch. V.

“From the conditions of the analysis and the unification, the affirmation and the negation, the mediate and the immediate knowing, the desiring and the repudiating, the setting goals and the choosing, one cannot derive any properties within the field of colours and sounds. These properties do not emerge as a result of the activity of those functions, but they rather cause those functions and determine their direction. Appearances are given to us with their properties; they stand before us as something objective having its own laws, which we must describe and recognize” (Stumpf 1907b, 29-30)

To this regard, Stumpf talks about a “non-transferability of predicates” from the world of appearances (the physical phenomena, within Brentano’s terminology) to that of psychic functions (and vice versa), both from the empirical and logical conceptual point of view. From the empirical point of view, the intensity of a smell or a sound, for example, is not like the intensity of the effort of attention required by the solution to a problem and it is just for the sake of analogy that we talk of clarity when we refer to both a visual impression and rational reasoning. These are analogies - Stumpf argues - and not identical meanings (Stumpf 1907a, 10-11 *passim*). At the logical conceptual level – Stumpf points out – between appearances (sensible contents), on the one hand, and acts and psychic functions, on the other hand, there is no relation of “*logical necessity*” (Stumpf 1907a, 11). This page by Stumpf looks like a reposition of an excerpt from *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, in which Brentano, while discussing Alexander Bain’s idealism, stresses that among the essential characteristics of a physical phenomenon is, for example, the fact of having a certain intensity (or of having a certain extension and a certain saturation, as is the case of visual physical phenomena) but not at all that of being object of a psychic phenomenon. As a result, there is no contradiction in thinking that any colour, red for example, can exist even without being perceived by us, i.e. even beyond its intentional existence (Brentano 1874/1924, 130). As Brentano repeated in another part of *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, physical phenomena are not “relative” phenomena, that is to say, the concept of physical phenomenon is not conceivable because it is related and correlated to a psychic act (Brentano 1874/1924, 185). For this reason, also assuming that physical phenomena show us the extraconsciential reality in the way this exists is not a contradictory or absurd assumption in itself, even though it is certainly not very probable. Science, in fact, tells us that the extraconsciential existence of physical phenomena is very different from the intentional one. Similarly to von Helmholtz, Brentano maintains that, for this reason, sensations are mere signs of the extraconsciential reality (Brentano 1874/1924, 129) and that just blind and unjustified beliefs lead us to think that physical phenomena exist in the extraconsciential reality as they are given to us within our experience (Brentano 1928, 19). However, next to this recognition, in his text of 1874, Brentano firmly stated that among the essential characteristics of physical phenomena that is not at all present is that of being perceived by us

and that this identifies physical phenomena as non “relative” phenomena in the sense specified above.

In the wake of Brentano, Stumpf deems it evident that only properties such as height, intensity and similar, which are needed to provide a complete description of appearance, belong to sound as “conceptually necessary”. “The property of being perceived does not pertain to it. It does not differentiate a sound from another and extends beyond appearance to a completely different sphere” (Stumpf 1907a, 11-12). For this reason, Stumpf continues, Berkeley’s assumption according to which we can think of extension only in terms of perceived extension should be rejected and, for the same reason again, “physics’ realism and that of our common conscience are not, in principle, contradictory in themselves. One can only demonstrate indirectly that these assumptions are impracticable by means of deductions from the detail of the facts appearing to us” (Stumpf 1907a, 12). However, the fact remains that “no logical necessity binds appearances to psychic functions” and, contrary to what Berkeley believed, their separability is therefore not contradictory. This appeared like a hardly objectable conclusion to Stumpf, who acknowledged at the same time that “no metaphysical statement should be added to it” (Stumpf 1907a, 14). A question such as “what should be recognized as real [...] that which is physical, that which is psychic or both [...]?” belongs in fact to the metaphysical and not to the gnoseological field according to Stumpf (Stumpf 1907b, 42).

As it has just been stressed, some excerpts of Stumpf’s argument on the lack of a “logical necessity” connection between appearances and functions closely refers to those parts of *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* in which Brentano discusses Bain’s idealism and maintains that physical phenomena are not relative phenomena. As for another crucial aspect, instead, Stumpf’s perspective definitely differs from Brentano. According to Brentano, internal perception differs from external perception because, in the former, intentional existence and effective existence can be fully identified. To give an example, one can have no doubt about feeling a pain or feeling happy. However, this is not the case for external perception, where doubt is always likely: the way a phenomenon effectively is outside its intentional existence cannot be derived from the way a phenomenon manifests itself within intentional existence. For this reason, Brentano only considers internal perception as a true perception, in the strongest sense given by the German etymological origin of the term *Wahrnehmung*, which means “take as true” (Brentano 1874/1924, 128). We have already pointed out that the supremacy attributed by Brentano to internal perception was dramatically reduced by Stumpf and this, as we have seen, paved the way to a type of phenomenology (experimental phenomenology) which was completely foreign to Brentano’s approach. This essential result and the equally essential consequences on the Gestalt theory being understood, means further remarks are now required to this

regard.

In the first part of *Tonpsychologie*, when talking about “sensible judgement” (*Sinnesurteil*), Stumpf maintains that “objects, things or processes, in short, stimuli are judged at the same time through appearances and that stimuli cause appearances (provided that metaphysics allows it)”. Naive and natural perception judges and compares things, and not sensations. Normally, within ordinary perception, we do not say that “a chromatic quality is clearer, an acoustic sensation is higher, a muscular sensation is more intense than another” but that, for example, a piece of paper is clearer than another, a body is heavier than another, a sound made by the chord of a violin is higher than that released by another one. Therefore, in ordinary life, those who perceive something do not aim “at the understanding of their own sensations as such but at the understanding of the world through their sensations” (Stumpf 1883-1890, vol. I, 22–23). Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in the continuation of *Tonpsychologie*, sensible judgment is increasingly disconnected from any reference to the objects of the external world, which are transcending conscience (therefore the approach of the naive and natural attitude mentioned by Stumpf on the initial pages is abandoned), and a greater attention is focused on the field of immanence, on the characteristics of the subject’s internal experience.

To this regard, it is worth noting that, in *Erkenntnislehre*, Stumpf introduces a distinction between “external perception” in the narrowest sense of the word (*äußere Wahrnehmung*) and external perception considered as “sensible perception” (*Sinneswahrnehmung*). The former is taken to mean a type of perception addressed to the external world (*nach außen*), and more precisely the type of perception which is typical of the naive attitude of the man in the street, for whom what we see directly corresponds to what is outside us. As for this interpretation of external perception, it is interesting to point out that Stumpf’s considerations converge with those by Brentano: external perception is essentially supported by blindly believing (*blinden Glauben*). When we say we see a tree, we should actually say to have sensations caused by an object outside us and of which those sensations are – in the way Helmholtz described it – a sign (*Zeichen*) (Stumpf 1939-1940, vol. I, 212–213 *passim*). As was mentioned above, as a result of this, Brentano considered only internal perception as a true perception, in the strong sense of the German etymological origin of the term Wahrnehmung (take as true). Unlike Brentano, Stumpf does not reduce the importance of external perception if compared with internal perception: as has been underlined, this is certainly one of the aspects which mostly differentiates his perspective from that of his master. To this regard, in *Erkenntnislehre*, Stumpf introduces a second interpretation of “external perception”: “sensible perception”. This, according to Stumpf, refers to a perceptive attitude aimed towards the “inside” (*nach innen*), i.e. an approach which is exclusively interested in the conscientious

contents of external perception, which overlooks any reference to the objects of the outside world that may have caused them and any type of confidence in the extraconsciential world, and which focuses, in contrast, on the (intellectual and emotional) psychic functions interlaced with these contents. All this is explicitly addressed by Stumpf against the supremacy attributed by Brentano to internal perception: according to Stumpf, in fact, external perception intended as such, i.e. as sensible perception, is able to provide “knowledge as evident – that is to say immediately evident – as that provided by internal perception” (Stumpf 1939-1940, vol. I, 213–215 *passim*). Whether Stumpf manages to achieve the desired objective (that is the objective of reducing the Cartesian supremacy of internal perception cherished by Brentano) or this “sensible perception” ends up by simply calling differently that which Brentano defined as “internal perception” is a difficult and interesting matter which cannot be discussed here. In this context, we had better highlight that the concept of “sensible perception” defined by Stumpf in *Erkenntnislehre* points to a direction that is very different from the concept of phenomenology adopted by the Gestalt theory.

As mentioned above, Köhler has no problems admitting that science shows us continuously that “the injury” is not “the gun”. At the same time, by availing himself of reasons and arguments taken from physics, i.e. a science he particularly valued, Köhler deemed a form of correspondence between the experiential and the physical world to be sustainable as far as the macroscopic structures of the physical world were concerned. Similarly to Stumpf, Köhler believes that wondering about the existence of the external world and about its characteristics is the result of a metaphysical interest which must be fulfilled by combining philosophical reflection with the results of empirical research. Things appear in a different light from that cast by Stumpf when the phenomenal world becomes the subject matter. The Gestalt theory firmly argues that, to understand the phenomenal world (this is precisely the point: understanding the phenomenal world), we must guard the way in which experiences making up this world appear, with their ontological commitments, their assumptions of existence, maintaining that which emerges as subjective (that is as something that happens within me or is due to me) and as objective (that is something that cannot be traced back to the self and which appears to be located and existing outside it, within the phenomenal world, such as the chair I have before me⁹). To sum up, if the study and understanding of the phenomenal world is the objective, a naïvely realistic approach should be preserved according to the Gestalt supporters. A “sensible perception” and a sensible judgement such as that which emerges in some of Stumpf’s pages has therefore little space within phenomenology, in the way it is conceived by the Berlin school. The phenomenological inquiry and the study

⁹ As for the concepts of subjective and objectives see, for example, Köhler, 1929/1947, 18 foll. and Köhler 1938, 69–70.

of direct experience are certainly only a limited part of psychology (see Köhler 1929/1947, 147 to this regard) and they only cover a portion of the wide range of interests typical of philosophical research. However, when the two inquiries are carried out to pursue heuristic effectiveness, they cannot do anything but qualify like “naïve phenomenology” (Köhler 1929/1947, 143)¹⁰. In other words, they are bound to adopt the point of view of *Naïve Realists* (Köhler 1929/1947, 142), a point of view which Stumpf’s “sensible perception” was supposed to leave aside.

Summary

The influence of Stumpf’s theoretical approach on the Gestalt psychology has been important and far-reaching. However, we can highlight considerable differences concerning aspects of paramount importance between Stumpf’s perspective and the Gestalt theory. It is not by chance that, with the shift from Stumpf to Köhler at the head of the Psychology Institute of Berlin, a “Stumpf era” and a “Köhler era” were spoken of. In this paper, I will try to indicate some aspects on which Stumpf’s teachings had a profound impact for the Gestalt movement, as well as some aspects which mark a deep difference between the two approaches and which can be traced back to the different concept of phenomenology that characterized them.

Keywords: Phenomenology, ontology, perception.

Zusammenfassung

Der Einfluss von Stumpf’s theoretischem Ansatz auf die Gestaltpsychologie war bedeutsam und weitreichend. Dennoch zeigen sich in wichtigen Aspekten erhebliche Abweichungen der Perspektive Stumpf’s von derjenigen der Gestaltpsychologie. Nicht ohne Grund wird der Übergang in der Leitung des Institut für Psychologie von Stumpf zu Köhler als Wechsel von einer Ära zu einer anderen angesehen. Der vorliegende Beitrag versucht, einige der Punkte kenntlich zu machen, in denen Stumpfs Lehren bedeutenden Einfluss auf die Gestaltpsychologie hatten, und ebenso einige Aspekte darzustellen, die die bedeutenden Unterschiede zwischen den beiden Ansätzen kennzeichnen. Beides lässt sich auf die verschiedenen Auffassungen von Phänomenologie zurückführen, die die Ansätze von Stumpf bzw. der Gestaltpsychologie kennzeichnen.

Schlüsselwörter: Phänomenologie, Ontologie, Wahrnehmung.

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¹⁰ This very point of view has been adopted by Köhler also when he addresses, on phenomenological grounds, the problem of understanding the others. See Köhler 1929/1947, 141 foll.

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