

Karl Duncker (2008): Erscheinung und Erkenntnis des Menschlichen. Aufsätze 1927-1940. Herausgegeben mit kommentierenden und biographischen Beiträgen von Helmut Boege und Hans-Jürgen P. Walter. Wien: Krammer. ISBN-13:9783901811265, pp 199, € 25. - Karl Duncker (2009): Coscienza e vita. Saggi fenomenologici (1927-1940). Cura e saggio introduttivo di Fiorenza Toccafondi. Firenze: Le Lettere. ISBN: 8860871395, pp. 222, € 24.

The book by Karl Duncker, *Erscheinung und Erkenntnis des Menschlichen, Aufsätze 1927-1940*, edited and supplemented with biographical contributions by Helmut Boege and Hans-Jürgen P. Walter represents an important step towards the deepening of the *philosophy of psychology* that so impressed Köhler and Wertheimer that they declared Duncker to be their most brilliant student. Duncker's untimely death at the age of only 37 years was probably the main cause of the dearth of systematic work by him – apart from *Zur Psychologie des produktiven Denkens* of 1935. However the many and varied articles written by Duncker mainly during the 30s and published, some posthumously, in prestigious journals allow us to understand the multiplicity of issues addressed by him.

The title that the two curators have given this collection is particularly appropriate because it reflects the thread of Duncker's studies as he deepened his understanding of *the human being* through analysis of his cognitive potential. Moreover, even though indirectly, the title recalls two rather methodological aspects: through the use of the term *Erscheinung* we tend to think of a phenomenological approach – an essential component of Gestalt Psychology - as indeed the use of the term *Erkenntnis* shows the aim of this research methodology.

This book, published in 2008 by the publishing house Krammer, is effectively subdivided into two sections. In the first section we find six articles, one of which, hitherto unpublished, comes from the typescript held in the *Bundesarchiv* of Berlin and known as “Manuskript ohne Titel” that we find in the collection under the title *Kritik der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*. This subject was most dear to him because his parents were Marxist activists, and because of the difficulty he experienced in obtaining a permanent university position during the Nazi regime.

Thanks to this collection it is possible to get a complete understanding of Duncker's philosophical and psychological interests which, as we see, ranged from technical and theoretical issues concerning the foundations of emerging *Gestalt psychology* to historical and philosophical problems aimed to show the alternative nature represented by Gestalt psychology in contrast to *behaviourism* and *structuralism*. So clearly the subject-matter of first article - “*Der Behaviorismus - die amerikanische Psychologie*”, *Pädagogisches Zentralblatt* 7, 690-702; also *Gestalt Theory* 25, 1/2, 2003 - is the paradigmatic *behavioural drift* of American psychology, an outcome of Watson's critics' reflection on the theoretical ideas

of the *structuralists* (Edward Titchener) and *functionalists* (James, R. Angel). In the second article, “*Behaviorismus und Gestaltpsychologie. Kritische Bemerkungen zu Carnaps ‘Psychologie in physikalischer Sprache’*”, *Erkenntnis* 3, Nr. 11, 1932; also *Gestalt Theory* 25, 1/2, 2003 - Duncker contrasts Carnap’s thesis whereby “every sentence of psychology may be formulated in physical language”. This meant subordinating psychology to physics in the name of a physical language’s unproven universality rather than a psychological approach. Therefore logical behaviourism is not a theoretically feasible approach because it is founded on the belief that, through logical constructs or through inferences based on physical laws, it can pass from the description of states and physical movements to mental descriptions and vice versa.

The diversity of Gestalt psychology’s approach is the subject of the third article *Erscheinungslehre und Erkenntnistheorie des Gegenstandsbewußseins*. This article was translated into English by Luise Haessler and published in 1947 in the *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* and retranslated into German in 1992 by Paul Tholey, *Gestalt Theory* 24 - where in 1941 was also published the fifth article of this collection *On Pleasure, Emotion and Striving*. The article is divided into four parts: phenomenology of consciousness of objects, theory of the conscious image, epistemology of consciousness and psychological explanation of the fundamental facts of consciousness – and focuses on the relationship between *Gestalt Psychology* and *Phenomenology* particularly in its Husserlian form. This was a controversial topic among the Gestalt psychologists during the 20’s and 30’s because it showed the substantial inadequacy of phenomenological approach however much it preserved its spirit. For in Gestalt psychology it is widely known that the phenomenological method consists of the qualitative analysis of experience since the phenomenological observation is the source’s point of a new way to refer to the world. “Back to the things themselves”, Husserl’s slogan, is founded on “look carefully at a thing before you begin to hide it behind a veil of routine ideas” (Köhler, *The place of value in a world of facts* 1938, 46). However the unfitness of phenomenological approaches (beyond the common source-point which has led both *Gestalt psychology* and *phenomenology* to examine and to make a careful study of relationship between *form* and *unitary constitution*) is to be found in the fact that Husserl’s research is essentially theoretical because it has not been proven through experimentation.

The straightforward absence of empirical evidence, peculiar to Husserl’s phenomenology, is not, however, a sufficient reason to disregard the many theoretical similarities. These similarities go beyond any attempt to present this phenomenology as a simple *research methodology*, like Heidegger, ignoring the theoretical value of this formulation. The fifth article of this collection further explores this point: *Über Lust, Emotion und Streben* – translated into German by Hans-Jürgen P. Walter (*Gestalt Theory* 24, 2, 2002, 75-116): *On pleasure, Emotion*

and Striving. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* I, 1941/42, 391-430. In this article Duncker proposes a phenomenological treatment of these three themes. The starting point of this *phenomenology of pleasure*, is “Die Frage, ob wir nach Gegenständen streben oder nach der Lust, die sie uns geben, kann kaum erörtert werden, bevor wir wissen, was Lust ist und in welcher Beziehung sie zu ‘Gegenständen’ steht” (K. Duncker, *Erscheinung und Erkenntnis des Menschlichen*, 86.). Thus Duncker speaks of “three different levels of objects”: ‘Gegenstand’, ‘Umgang mit dem Gegenstand’ and ‘Erlebnisse im Umgang mit dem Gegenstand’. The legitimacy of this theoretical stratification of the field of this phenomenology of pleasure is theoretically based on *three senses of consciousness*, by Husserl introduced in the first section of the Fifth *logical research*. Here Husserl distinguishes between 1) “Bewußtsein als der gesamte reelle phänomenologische Bestand des empirischen Ich, als Verwebung der psychischen Erlebnisse in der Einheit des Erlebnisstroms”, 2) “Bewußtsein als inneres Gewahrwerden von eigenen psychischen Erlebnissen”, and 3) “Bewußtsein als zusammenfassende Bezeichnung für jederlei ‘psychische Akte’ oder ‘intentionale Erlebnisse’” (E. Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* II/1, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1993, 346).

The common ground between Husserl’s approach and that proposed by Duncker is the determination of an objective component within a relationship which is effectively *subjective* [*inneres Bewusstsein*]. This is just one of the points in common between the phenomenological approach and Gestalt Psychology’s approach. Put in more general terms, the close relationship which Husserl returns to several times during his philosophical speculation about perception and representation was addressed to further understand the relationship between multiplicity and unity as the theoretical fulcrum of the Gestalt approach.

Particularly during the journey from *Gestalt psychology* to *Gestalt theory*, the ethical sphere acquires major interest so the fourth article in the collection - *Ethische Relativität? Eine Untersuchung über die Psychologie der Ethik* (original title: *Ethical Relativity? An enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, *Mind* 48, 1939) translated into German by Hans-Jürgen P. Walter, *Gestalt Theory* 25, 1/2, 2003 - is devoted to identifying the psychological implications of so-called *ethical relativism*. *Ethical relativism* is the thesis that there is no single moral standard which is equally applicable to all people at all times. The relativist rejects the distinction between what is thought to be right and what is right – he says there is no difference. Duncker develops the idea that “any conceivable behaviour may, in appropriate historical or ethnological circumstances, take its turn in fulfilling the function of ‘social expediency’ ” referring to distinction between cognitive and emotional meanings. Thus he deepens Westermarck’s idea according to which moral judgments derive from emotions and feelings and not through purely rational principles.

The second section of the book *Über Leben und Werk Karl Duncckers*, as well

as the aforementioned commentary to the unpublished manuscript, consists of Boege's review to Sören Wendelborns biography *Der Gestaltpsychologe Karl Duncker*, edited in 2003, and of an essay of Hans-Jürgen P. Walter the purpose of which is to show the theoretical reasons for renewed interest in Duncker's thinking as well as to formulate some assumptions about the depression that in the last years of his life led him to commit suicide.

What has emerged from this summary of the book's contents is that Duncker's thinking represents an important source to explore further because of the primary role he had in connecting American psychology with Berlin School Psychology. It is precisely because of this attempt at connection, aimed not so much to be a mere assimilation of behaviourism approaches within the broader horizon of Gestalt theory as a critical-comparison and to a productive integration, that Metzger defined Duncker as "der schärfste und vielseitigste Denker der zweiten Generation" (Karl Duncker, *Erscheinung und Erkenntnis des Menschlichen*, 5). It is also right to point out that the German edition of this essay collection was followed by an Italian edition, edited by F. Toccafondi, with the title "Coscienza e vita. Studi fenomenologici (1927-1940)" (published in 2009 by Le Lettere). This is further confirmation of the growth of interest in K. Duncker's thought, as by this means that interest can be based on an actual reading and study of his theories. The apparent simplicity of the title that the editor has given to the Italian edition summarizes and shows in the best possible way the indissoluble relationship between these two issues within Duncker's particular phenomenological-gestalt approach.

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