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Seeing the Meanings: Wittgenstein and Köhler

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein had nourished an ever-growing interest in psychology and, in particular, in the philosophy of psychology since the early 30s, but became pre-eminent in 1944. In the very same year, Wittgenstein quit the philosophy of mathematics to devote himself to psychology, and he gave his first series of lectures on the philosophy of psychology in Cambridge (cf. Monk 1990). His interest in psychology was paramount until his visit to the United States of America in 1949 (cf. Schulte 1983, in Gargani 1983, 41). It is well known that Wittgenstein hardly ever directly mentions the names of the authors who inspired his reflections. Wolfgang Köhler is one of the exceptions. As a matter of fact, Köhler is mentioned only once in *Philosophical Investigation* (published posthumously in 1953), in connection with the see-how. In the last paragraph of the text, instead, where Wittgenstein questions that the problems and difficulties of psychology must be traced back to the fact that it is a “young science”, Köhler is not directly mentioned. Nevertheless, it is so clear that Wittgenstein refers to him that no margin of doubt is left (nor was there ever any doubt in the first place). Wittgenstein’s controversial target here is the second chapter of *Gestalt Psychology* by Köhler, whose title is precisely *Psychology as a Young Science*. Furthermore, in *Philosophical Investigation*, Köhler and the themes developed by the Berlin School of Gestaltism are clearly (though not directly) referred to. Besides the see-how issue (Wittgenstein 1953, II: chapter XI), expressive qualities (*ivi*, I: par. 285, 537, 302, 281-285) and the role played by physiology in the *grammar* of psychological terms (*ivi*, I: par. 158, II: pag. 278) are dealt with. But what is found in *Philosophical Investigation* is only the tip of the iceberg. Köhler, in fact, was constantly in Wittgenstein’s mind from the end of the Second World War up to 1949. At the end of the 70s of the past century, this became evident from *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s «Philosophical Investigations»* (1977), a reconstruction conducted by Garth Hallett on materials that, at that time, were available only as manuscripts or typescripts. Wittgenstein’s interest in the theses of Köhler could be appreciated even further after the publication of a great many materials used by Hallett. This is the case for *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, where Köhler (together with William James) turns out to be one of the most often mentioned Authors. The *Lectures on Philosophical Psychology, 1946–47*, which include the notes taken by Peter Thomas Geach, Frank Cameron Jackson and Kanti J. Shah (cf. Geach (ed.) 1988), are equally eloquent. As witnessed by

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Jackson – Wittgenstein’s student in those years – many of Wittgenstein’s lectures on the philosophy of psychology started precisely by reading an excerpt from *Gestalt Psychology*, which is indeed rather unusual for the Austrian philosopher (see Hallett, 1977, 1985², 769). Nevertheless, the constant comparison with the thesis expressed by the *Gestaltpsychologie* and the rare privilege of being explicitly portrayed as an interlocutor of Wittgenstein did not give Köhler any philosophical credit. To his students, listeners and readers, Wittgenstein delivered an evaluation of the theoretical approaches taken by the representative of *Gestaltpsychologie* which was far from gratifying and which actually brought upon him a thick shadow of philosophical discredit. *Philosophical Investigation* in particular projects an image of Köhler that seems to embody all the *conceptual confusions* which lie concealed in psychology according to Wittgenstein. This image is boiled down in allusive fashion to the above-mentioned last paragraph of *Philosophical Investigation*, where Wittgenstein tried to bring to an end the considerations regarding psychology developed throughout the text: as we have outlined before, precisely in this passage Wittgenstein refers to the chapter of *Gestalt Psychology* titled *Psychology as a Young Science* and Köhler seems therefore implicitly to be involved not only in reference to the appropriateness of an analogy between the status of psychology and that of the early stages of physics, but also for all those *conceptual confusions* Wittgenstein pointed out in the course of the text, about the possibility of a private language, the semantics of psychological concepts, the relationship between seeing and interpreting:

“The confusion and barrenness of psychology is not to be explained by calling it a ‘young science’; its state is not comparable with that of physics, for instance, in its beginnings. (Rather with that of certain branches of mathematics. Set theory). For in psychology there are experimental methods and *conceptual confusion*. (As in the other case conceptual confusion and methods of proof).

The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by.

An investigation is possible in connection with mathematics which is entirely analogous to our investigation of psychology. It is just as little a *mathematical* investigation as the other is a psychological one. It will *not* contain calculations, so it is not for example logistic. It might deserve the name of an investigation of the ‘foundations of mathematics’ (Wittgenstein 1953, 232).”

In this way – and perhaps praeter intentionem by Wittgenstein, since it is thanks to Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Rush Rhees, the work’s editors as well as Wittgenstein’s executors, that this piece found its final location – the closing paragraph of *Philosophical Investigation* affects one of the highest ambitions of Köhler’s work. I believe this is particularly evident to whoever might have read something by the Gestalt psychologist and might know his objec-

tives: the connection between philosophical reflections and empirical research, the overlapping between the level of conceptual clarification and the qualitative analysis of experience. But it is a question of verifying whether the conceptual mistakes attributable to Köhler, according to Wittgenstein's allusive pages, can be actually found in his texts or whether, instead, they should be put down to the casualness with which Wittgenstein has sometimes interpreted other people's theses.

2. The *trenchant* picture of Köhler's perspective offered by Wittgenstein is also evident in the "seeing meanings" issue. In a passage from *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, the exponent of the Berlin Gestalt School is directly mentioned by Wittgenstein with an extremely critical and preemptory tone: "It is – contrary to Köhler – precisely a *meaning* that I see" (Wittgenstein 1980, vol. I, par. 869, 153). The excerpt from Gestalt Psychology on which Wittgenstein seems to focus here draws an accurate picture of one of the underlying ideas of the Berlin point of view, namely:

"Gestalt Psychology claims that it is [...] the original segregation of circumscribed wholes which makes it possible for the sensory world to appear so utterly imbued with meaning to the adult; for, in its gradual entrance into the sensory field, meaning follows the lines drawn by natural organization; it usually enters into segregated wholes" (Köhler 1929/1947, 82).

Köhler goes on to propose the following reflection:

"[...] Whenever we say to ourselves or others: 'What may that something be, at the foot of that hill, just to the right of that tree, between those two houses, and so on?' we ask about the empirical meaning or use of a seen object and demonstrate by our very question that as a matter of principle, segregation of visual things is independent of knowledge and meaning" (*ibidem*). So, Köhler finishes, "it follows that my knowledge about the practical significance of things cannot be responsible for their existence as detached visual units" (*ibidem*)¹.

Preliminarily, it is interesting to note that this fixed point of the Gestalt horizon (the idea of the spontaneous segregation of specific entities in the sensory field) leads the Gestaltists to elaborate the clearest, most explicit and radical criticism which had ever been voiced, at least before the text by John L. Austin *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), against a way of conceiving perception which even Wittgenstein

¹ Paragraph 869 from *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* above, which reads "It is – contrary to Köhler – precisely a *meaning* that I see" clearly recalls this page by Köhler. This is exactly the way Wittgenstein's statement has been interpreted (see, for example, Schulte 1983 in Gargani 1983). However, we should not forget that the paragraphs immediately preceding and following paragraph 869 mainly concern the aspect-seeing issue. In this regard, Wittgenstein's and Köhler's outlooks relative to the role of the meanings are somewhat different (cf. Toccafondi 2012, forthcoming) and it is therefore probable that the target of Wittgenstein's statement "It is – contrary to Köhler – precisely a *meaning* that I see" could be also the position held by Köhler on this matter.

disapproved of – according to some interpreters². It was the conception underlying theories based on *sense data*, according to which perception would consist of a primary level made up of simple and undoubtable sensible impressions (forms and colours) and of a second level (what we say we perceive), which is actually the outcome of interpretations, judgments, conclusions we draw from those same impressions by virtue of our past experience. Even Wittgenstein seems to consider this way of regarding perception as untenable. As is written at the beginning of chapter XI, in the second part of *Philosophical Investigation*, if ordinary seeing were to be the outcome of visual impressions always accompanied by their interpretation, we should both know it and be able to refer to them directly, and not only indirectly, in the same way as we can refer to red without necessarily talking of the colour of blood. According to the empiricist, Wittgenstein points out, “[...] the description of what is got immediately, i.e. of the visual experience, by means of an interpretation – is an indirect description. ‘I see the figure as a box’ means: I have a particular visual experience which I have found that I always have when I interpret the figure as a box or when I look at a box. But if it meant this I ought to know it. I ought to be able to refer to the experience directly, and not only indirectly. (As I can speak of red without calling it the colour of blood)” (Wittgenstein 1953, 193-194).

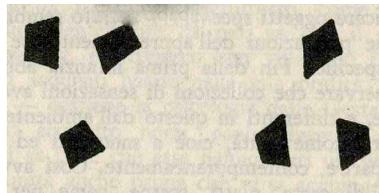
Going back to Wittgenstein’s criticism of Köhler, it must be observed that failure to bring into focus the context within which Köhler develops the statements contained in the mentioned page (in particular, the passage reading “segregation of visual things is independent of knowledge and meaning”) risks creating an extreme trivialization of Köhler’s theory. This is precisely what happens in *Philosophical Investigation*, where Wittgenstein simply seems to warn Köhler that, for instance, when we say we perceive a tree, a house, a pen, etc. we do not see forms at all, but meanings, or better, we see things with their meaning, that is with the determinations of sense and use that the meaning of the terms “tree”, “house”, “pen”, etc. sets out. But the question is whether Köhler had actually stated something so far from this qualification made by Wittgenstein.

It must be first observed that in the quoted passage, Köhler states without any doubt that “segregation of visual things is independent of knowledge and meaning”, but he also states with equal clarity that to the eyes of an adult the world does not appear at all as being populated by pure forms, but as “utterly imbued with meaning”, which is not a trivial statement. Adults, in fact, almost always conceptually recognize what they see, therefore their knowledge and their capacity of conceptual classification are an integral part of their visual experience. Their visual experience could be defined as epistemic seeing, to adopt a well-known expression by Frederick I. Dretske (see Dretske 1969). In other words,

² Cf., for example, Budd 1989, Lewis 1976 in Vesey 1976, Seligman 1977.

that which Köhler acknowledges without any difficulty when he talks of the adult's world is that when we conceptually recognize what we are seeing, we do not see only the segregation of a specific entity in the sensory field because the content of our experience also includes our beliefs, judgments, thoughts, conceptual competence about the meaning of what we see (for this reason Köhler explicitly says that the adult's world is "utterly imbued with meaning"). Köhler's conception is therefore the contrary of the view attributed to him by virtue of Wittgenstein's statements³. That which is instead targeted by Köhler in the controversial excerpt, and which he intends to confute, is mainly a traditional Anglo-Saxon conception of the sensory world which – as we have already seen – Wittgenstein did not find satisfying. That conception revolved around *impressions, sense data*, "colour spots", which are completely disorganized and waiting to be arranged by the subject's cognitive operations. According to this theory, every organization we carry out "is not a sensory fact", and that which Köhler intends to prove is exactly the contrary, that is that both segregation and organization are a visual fact originating in our very sensory experience. The paper, the pencil, the cigarette in front of me, remarks Köhler, are definitely "objects which are known by use" and the recognition of what they are in those terms ("objects which are known by use", precisely) is definitely a performance of our epistemic competence. We read in *Gestalt Psychology* that "But from these facts there is a large step to the statement that papers, pencils, and so forth, would not be segregated units without that previously acquired knowledge" (Köhler 1929/1947, 81).

In the following figure



two groups of blotches can be seen. Köhler asks himself: why not six blotches or three groups of two blotches each? It is difficult to back the idea according to which we would be faced with visual objects that are from the very result of our epistemic knowledge and that we may consider, in particular, as the "generalized effects of learning". Let's think of Cassiopea or Dipper: in both cases we are faced with visual units consisting of distinct parts (stars) that at the same time seem to belong to each other at the very same moment in which they seem to come away – all together – from the surrounding environment. Human beings have seen

³ On Wittgenstein's statements is for example founded the interpretation of Köhler's viewpoint given by Joachim Schulte in Schulte 1983, in Gargani 1983, 47.

these two constellations like this for millennia, and children do not need any training to see them like this. Of course, one might reply that we are led to see certain clusters of stars in this way only because we have learned through experience to consider all the ensembles of elements that “regularly move together” as a *cluster*. As Köhler points out, however, it is a difficult idea to generalize. Experience, in fact, teaches us both that the members of a cluster cannot often move independently from each other and that they can do it just as often. In this respect, Köhler invites us to imagine five flies on a table, which appear like a group of five black dots when seen from a certain distance. At a certain moment each fly starts moving, each one on its own and in different directions. It may happen that, after the independent movement of each member of the group, the group of flies forms again and visually isolates itself as it did before. But this happens despite our immediately previous knowledge, of the independent and separate behaviour of the individual members (Köhler 1929/1947, 83).

I believe that it is now evident that the context of the passage of *Gestalt Psychology* which seems to be targeted by Wittgenstein in the above-mentioned paragraph 869 of *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* is entirely devoted to questioning the empiricist idea according to which there is no organization of the visual field merely consisting of a sensory fact. In the case of the pencil, Köhler does not deny at all that when I say I see a pencil I see an object imbued with meaning. More precisely, Köhler does not deny that, at the very moment I say I see an object by naming it, the meaning is a part of what I say I see. Rather, that which he denies is the idea that “my knowledge about the practical significance of things” is to be deemed “responsible for their existence as detached visual units”, stating - exactly in contrast with such an idea - that “segregation of visual things is independent of knowledge and meaning” (Köhler 1929/1947, 82). In a nutshell, ignoring what an object is for does not mean one cannot discriminate it visually.

3. That being clarified, wondering now why Köhler asserts that “it [the meaning] usually enters into segregated wholes” is not devoid of interest (Köhler 1929/1947, 82). It is necessary to ask oneself why this happens “usually” and not always. One of the reasons of this clarification by Köhler – which should be reiterated here – is to be traced back to that type of qualities – the so-called tertiary or expressive or physiognomic qualities – which represent an aspect of great importance of the Gestalt perspective that Wittgenstein found deeply interesting. According to the Gestalt tradition, the phenomenological investigation shows that the set of facts our experience consists of is far richer than the one given to us both by a physical-geometric and an epistemic description of the world. That is, the experience neither consists only of “merely factual components” nor of those contents imbued with those conceptual meanings we mentioned above, but also of facts, events, structures and contexts that immediately disclose the

value of that fact, object or event that they have to us (about which, see Köhler 1938, 103). In a few words, according to the point of view of the Gestalt phenomenology, the objects and situations which we bear a relation with sometimes show some expressive characteristics allowing us to grasp immediately a meaning, consisting of the immediate recognition of the value held for us by what we perceive (a value may be positive or negative, attractive, tempting or repulsive, as well as an invitation or hindrance to certain actions – *Aufforderungscharakter* by Kurt Lewin (Lewin 1926, 350)). The perception of the “rumbling *crescendo* of distant thunder”, for instance, is a “menacing” perception in itself, that is emotional in itself, burdened with an emotional aspect, and these characteristics disclose to me the negative value of what I perceive to be negatively connoted, by getting me ready to look for shelter, run away, etc... (Köhler 1929/1947, 144). Paradigmatic examples of tertiary properties are expressed, according to Köhler, by terms such as threatening, clumsy, lovely, cruel, mean (as a face may be, for instance) (Köhler 1938, 91 note 27, 77 foll.), or, to quote the examples given by Wolfgang Metzger in *Psychologie. Die Entwicklung ihrer Grundannahmen seit der Einführung des Experiments Psychologie* (1941), by terms such as vehement, placid, merry, proud, gloomy, lovely, feminine, masculine (Metzger 1941, 61). In short, to employ one of Köhler’s incisive statements, “just as objects are round or tall, events slow or sudden, so some have charm, some are ugly by themselves”, regardless of our attitude (which might even be well-disposed) towards them (Köhler 1938, 78-80). This is exactly one of the reasons why Köhler states that “it usually [and not always] enters into segregated wholes”: there are, in fact, also cases where the meaning is not something that is to be added top-down, i.e. through our linguistic and conceptual competence, to visual facts, but it is directly, originally grasped in the perceptual experience, and it cannot be separated from that which we immediately perceive, just as the colour perceptual experience cannot be separated from the extension perceptual experience. In the cases of the expressive qualities, therefore, we might say that what we perceive are directly meanings.

Although incidentally, it is necessary to recall that the recognition of expressive qualities represents another remarkable element of the anti-inferentialism and anti-interpretationism of the visual experience typical of the Berlin Gestaltism. Besides, Wittgenstein himself discussed the expressive qualities over and over, giving this interpretation.

If we now put together that which Wittgenstein stated against Köhler in regard to seeing the meanings and that which Köhler actually claimed, I believe we can state that the concise and laconic nature of Wittgenstein’s statements resulted in the attribution to Köhler of a view of the visual experiences and their objects which is a great deal less complex than the actual one. From Köhler’s pages in fact emerge:

i) visual objects that impose themselves by virtue of the field's immediate segregation and for which meanings – and more precisely conceptual meanings – do not seem to play any role (the example of the flies or of something we see in the distance and about which we ask questions with regard to their meaning);

ii) visual objects which “utterly” incorporate a meaning (and more precisely a conceptual meaning), it being understood that the meaning is not to be “responsible for their existence as detached visual units” (this is the case of the house, paper, pencil, etc..) (Köhler 1929/1947, 82);

iii) visual objects in which there isn't a meaning that is ‘incorporated’ into the visual perception, since the meaning is originally a part of the visual experience itself: in other words, the meaning is directly perceived through the senses, needs no intellectual integration and is therefore a non conceptual sort of meaning (this is the case of the expressive qualities).

In all these three cases it is a matter of seeing, but the way in which we can say that a meaning is present or absent in each one of them is different.

Summary

The attention paid by Wittgenstein to Köhler and the great themes of the Gestalt tradition has been significant since the 1940s. But Wittgenstein's publicity was rather negative, as the Austrian philosopher often considerably distorted and simplified the positions taken on by Gestaltism. This aspect also concerns the problem of seeing the meanings. In this paper I will try to show that Köhler's stance in this respect is far different from the substantially trivial and simplistic one that had been attributed to him through Wittgenstein.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Köhler, meanings, perception, misunderstandings.

Zusammenfassung

Seit den 40er Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts brachte Wittgenstein Wolfgang Köhler und den Themen der Gestaltpsychologie bedeutendes Interesse entgegen. Wittgensteins Bekanntheitsgrad erwies sich dabei für Köhler als letztlich negativ, da der österreichische Philosoph die Positionen der Gestaltpsychologie oft erheblich verzerrte und vereinfachte. Das gilt auch für die Wahrnehmung von Bedeutung. In diesem Beitrag versuche ich zu zeigen, dass Köhlers Standpunkt in dieser Frage sich wesentlich von dem, der ihm durch Wittgenstein zugeschrieben wurde, und der sich in der Substanz als banal und vereinfachend erweist, unterscheidet.

Schlüsselwörter: Wittgenstein, Köhler, Bedeutung, Wahrnehmung, Mißverständnisse.

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