

Reflections on Gestalt Ontology

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Arne Naess

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Part 1

The slogan most commonly used to introduce gestalt perception is: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." But using the example of a known melody, the more characteristic feature is the influence of the whole upon each part. Whatever the part of the melody that is heard, the particular character of the whole influences the experience of the part. A 'part' of a gestalt is more than a part. That is, if we listen to a part of an unknown melody the experience is different from listening to that part when the melody is known.

Moving from the consideration of gestalt perception of gestalt apperception or thinking, the characteristic part/whole relation is even more clearly that of parts 'being more than parts.' It is tempting to use the old slogan *aliquid stat pro aliquo* used in characterizing the relation of a word and what it stands for, only that in this case every individual part of the gestalt 'stands for' the total gestalt without losing its individuality. Using the example of being in a known forest, a forest of which we have an apperception, however imperfect, a tiny part of it visually present when walking in it, provides an experience influenced, or better, determined, by the apperception of the forest as a whole. The experience of the part somehow contains an experience of the whole. If this seems queer to some, it is to be due to a too strong attachment to the more or less abstract spatial aspect of the forest.

If now part of the forest (considered in its spatial aspect) is changed, for instance by a road of a certain kind or houses or industrial undertakings,

the forest as a gestalt may remain the same, change, or vanish. Experiments on the apperception of Norwegian forests suggest that the introduction of a small scale traditional farm house with a narrow road will not change the gestalt because for hundreds of years forests in Norway have not been entirely without settlements. On the other hand, there may be roads or developments which severely change or destroy the gestalt. The latter implies that walking or being in the forest, in whatever part of it we consider, there is an experience of a specific kind that is destroyed. It is usually said that the forest remains *really* the same except for a, perhaps tiny, part. This is misleading in so far as the spatial arrangement is taken to be the real forest, whereas the forest as a gestalt is taken to be subjective. For gestalt thinking or ontology, there exists no such spatial reality which can be isolated from the reality of the gestalt. 'Parts' being easily thought of as spatial, it may be misleading to speak of parts of a gestalt, better to speak of subordinate gestalts. The so-called parts of a sonata as a gestalt will be meaningful subordinate wholes contained non-spatially in the sonata as a whole.

In a sonata with three movements, a fast, a slow, and a final fast movement, it may so happen that to some people the slow movement is known, but not the two other movements. They then know the slow movement as a gestalt, but not as a subordinate gestalt. As a subordinate gestalt "it" will be a qualitatively different gestalt determined by the sonata as a whole. "It" is written between quotes because of the abstract status of that which we talk about. A most clearly and easily describable difference of quality is experienced during the transition from the fast to the slow movement. The slowness will then be apperceived in sharp contrast to the fast. When only known as a separate gestalt, the beginning of the slow movement will not have its slowness as sharply pronounced. Naturally, people not interested in certain kinds of music do not have *access* to these spontaneously experienced realities. But they may have access to other music unexplored by the sonata lovers.

If somebody utters "menacing!" and points to something, there is perhaps a menacing something that needs immediate defensive action. Or there is absolutely no need, because of the absence of *structural relationships* that suggest immediate danger. Does the something nevertheless have the property to be menacing ontologically on par with its colour and length? Yes, ontologically, but not socially and pragmatically. We understand that from socially accepted criteria of being, we are mistaken if we expect an attack. We may be as wrong in our estimation of actual menace as of actual length.

Or, in the terminology of *relationism*, there is a constellation of relations in which the utterance “menacing!” makes up a part. The constellation has gestalt character: One cannot adequately cut up that constellation in such a way that there is some subject, N.N., which has a conscious experience of something outside its consciousness that is menacing. There is strictly speaking no subject of such a kind, nor any consciousness, nor any material things which are (rightly or falsely) conceived as themselves being menacing. That is, there are no potentially separable such things. *Sarvam dharman nihsvabhavam!* (Every element is non-separate-self-existent!).

All different answers to whether the water in a definite jug at a definite time is cold, warm or something else, are not equally valid socially, according to Protagoras. Humans are sometimes in a natural state (*kata fysin, secundum naturam*). In that state, humans each experience approximately the same sensation when dipping their hands into water. Water near the freezing point is then felt to be cold. But this does not mean that it is not also warm and even hot. The socially correct answer to the question “Is the water in the jug cold?” is “Yes.”

In short, I wish to justify my view that reality has secondary and tertiary qualities. And that these qualities inhere in it as firmly as any other kind of quality, if there exist other kinds.

On the other hand, I wish to avoid certain pitfalls that Bishop Berkeley perhaps fell into. I wish to avoid what loosely is called idealism of spiritualism in favour of realism.

Gestalt thinking combined with nominalism results in saying that the subject/object dualism is simply a projection of subjective states of consciousness on the outside world. But the joyfulness, liveliness, threatening size, dejectedness, gravity, or solemnity of a tree are properties of a tree on par with tallness, weight, and chemical structure. More precisely: the properties refer to situations or states of the world (Nature) which have gestalt character. The chemical or physical tree is an abstraction referring to elements, subordinate gestalts of the total gestalt.

If A says “The tree is mournful” and B says “The tree is jubilant” there is no contradiction as long as “the tree” is not meant to characterize the same gestalt, but only elements (identified through social conventions: pointing to “the tree,” mapping it, touching it etc).

What A and B talk about is states of the world without a subject (epistemological ego). If C says “I see a jubilant tree,” there is a subject (if C genuinely describes an experience).

Gestalt thinking brings poetry and science close together in the sense that genuine poetical descriptions, that is, descriptions of experiences, are taken to be on the same level of ontological reality as the physical, chemical, geological, ecological, etc. The experienced world is taken to be *the* world, and the experienced world is one of gestalts. *Lebenswelt* is not identical with any physical model, nor ecological.

Good popularizations of abstract structure research need familiar gestalts to make the structure *seem* to be close to familiar contents. Consider the example below using text, dots, stars, and spaces:

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* * * **
  The life story of our galaxy, the Milky Way, is the
    *                               *
  history of our cosmic ancestry. We ourselves are made of
carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, iron and dozens of other
                                **
elements, which astrophysics believe were cooked inside

      *      *
the stars that lived and died in the Milky Way before the
**
sun was born.
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This is taken from Beatrix M. Tinsley, a teacher of astronomy at Yale.¹

The stars suggest concreteness of metaphors used. Popularization of the “hard” natural sciences is a mixed blessing: It lets us be aware of gigantic structural relationships in time and space, but confuses us about what is the content of reality.

Experiences in terms of gestalts cannot properly be articulated through sentences ending with a full stop. The most appropriate is the exclamation mark. In logic and related fields the exclamation mark indicates imperative announcements. But there are other kinds of exclamations. We shall have need of several.

Gestalts like melodies or works of art as experienced realities have *appeal*. If I play a melody for an audience some may be unimpressed. No melody-gestalt is formed. If a gestalt is formed, an appeal is there,

negative or positive, or with other appeal qualities. Thus there is no need of a concept of completely neutral gestalts. Even “indifferent!” is an exclamation.

Part 2

(1995)

It we look up the *indices* in contemporary well-known philosophical treatises we shall rarely find much under the heading “real,” “reality,” or “ontology.” But many of the sections deal with what is traditionally associated with those terms. I shall start with some burning questions in the philosophy of science.

Until the emergence of general relativity and quantum physics, theoretical physics with interest in problems of foundations could explain fairly easily and very convincingly what was mathematics and what was physics in their so-called mathematical physics. At that time as today (purely) mathematical assertions are conceived as categorically different. From a set of mathematical assertions as premises no physical ones can be concluded, and vice versa. The argumentation leading to the field equations of Einstein, for instance, is expressed by a mile long procession of (rather boring, but not easy) *purely* mathematical transformations. The physical content cannot be scaled off! This means that there are no scientific concepts of the physical world any more, not to speak of the *physical* reality. But that does not mean that the questions of realness and reality are not highly interesting and important any longer. On the contrary, interest increases!

So do questions about the reality of numbers and logic. We now know the real value of *pi*, 3.14159 . . . , more than 400 million decimals. In what consists the reality of the infinite series of numbers? Maybe we should deny the “Platonic” reality of numbers?

Let me make a new start discussing realness and unrealness.

We ask sometimes “Is it *really* so? Is not this rather illusionary? virtual? visionary? Doesn’t it lack substance? Isn’t it really a nothing?” We sometimes talk about grades: I find so and so more real than so and so. In some contexts something acknowledged as existing does not count as real: there are dreams, illusions exist. That is, if we in the dream fly out of the window, it will not really be so.

The philosophical discipline ontology contains hypotheses about what is, and what is not, real. The following are simplifications, but may be useful as a starting point:

Descartes said that only the atoms and the void are real. George Berkeley said “esse est percipi,” there is no reality beyond our perceptions (except God, perhaps). Cosmologists of today tend to identify reality with the cosmos. There are immense clusters of galaxies, the Milky Way is one of them. Inside the galaxies we have solar systems, . . . and somewhere there I am writing this.

“Gestalt ontology” is a convenient name for a set of tentative answers to some of the questions raised in ontology.

A classical one: If I feel one of my hands to be cold and the other to be hot, and I put them both in a tub of water it may happen that I say: “This water is cold according to my hot hand, and hot according to my cold hand.” What is the water *really*? The standard kind of answer is “neither.” With our kind of sensory equipment, we “project” warmth and coldness “into” the water. It is purely subjective! Protagoras, according to Sextus Empiricus, answered “Both! Both cold and warm!” (“The both-and answer.”) “Contradiction! Contradiction!” the neither-people shout. And there are two logical contradictions in the neighbourhood. “The water is hot and *it is not so* that the water is hot” and “The water is cold and *it is not so* that the water is cold.” But that does not really touch what Protagoras is supposed to have said. “The water is both cold and hot” is not a contradiction but a description of two gestalts. Reality may be much richer and much fuller of relations than one usually thinks or seems to think. As real as standard things, chair and tables and mugs with water. We may have water W_1 *in contact with* hand H_1 , and water W_1 *in contact with* hand H_2 . The exclamations “cold!” and “hot!” may both be excellent descriptions of *two* realities, two parts of an overwhelmingly rich reality. The so-called “water” with no sensory qualities whatsoever may be an abstraction from reality, a very useful but misleading name of immensely important structures of part of reality.

“Shall we go and see Mr. NN this morning?” This does not mean to look at him and then leave. To see Mr. NN may be analyzed as a very complex gestalt. If he is ‘seen’ through many years the gestalt changes, but it may of course remain stable for some time. The author Niko Kazantzakis starts his book on Jesus with a famous description of the waiting for and longing for a Messiah among Jews at the time of the birth of Jesus. As an artist, Kazantzakis is able to give word to

spontaneous experiences which are highly complex, but nevertheless make up units, not a heap of fragments.

What does a river mean? What was meant by the thousands who said “Let the river *live*?” Obviously we are right when we in our daily life point out that there is a river *and* a set of personal and national attitudes to it. The river is wet, the attitudes are not wet. But nobody can see, or even think of, any river stripped of meaning.

When we first hear about gestalt ontology it seems to be *very* different from other ontologies. But that impression is scarcely tenable. Let us inspect a list of what is real, a list made by non-philosophers or philosophers: material things, liquids, hardware, sounds, waves—“objects,” and then toothaches, pains in general, joys, percepts, the thought of a calf with two heads, numbers. As not real we have: the illusions of winged horses, the castle we dreamed about last night, etc. Philosophers’ ontologies are conveniently classified as materialistic, idealistic, monistic, dualistic, etc. Only if these lists comprise things-in-themselves, existing things with only length and certain other “primary qualities” there is a *clear* conflict with gestalt ontology. What we do in gestalt ontology is practically only to insist on, not only to suggest, a difference between contents of the real and the abstract structures of the real. The difference is acknowledged by most ontologies. They are comparable with gestalt ontology, but it belongs to the latter to focus on the difference. It leads to a rejection of too sharp a difference between what is called “subjective” and what is called “objective.” This gestalt ontology has, in common with many other contemporary ontologies, a reaction against what is thought to be the opinions of Descartes, Newton, and others. The river *itself* cannot be identified with its chemistry or its physics, nor with an *x*, the river as a *Ding an sich*. What gestalt ontology does is to remind one of the inescapable complexity and unity of the river as spontaneously experienced, and therefore not at all rejecting everyday life conceptions. Other ontologies might want to go beyond ordinary language. This is not the approach of gestalt ontology but is compatible with it.

Gestalt Ontology and Phenomenology

Gestalt psychology, phenomenology, perception-primacy—these terms, and what they express to very different interpreters, are highly relevant to gestalt ontology.

Certainly many philosophers down the ages have started in the way Merleau Ponty suggests.² The notion of spontaneous experience is a good example of a notion pretending to cover the unreflected. It belongs to phenomenology, but, as far as I can judge, at least slightly, from the most well known phenomenological concepts. Husserl tended to reject Gestalt psychology entirely. Thinking in terms of gestalt ontology implies rejection of at least one central part of Gestalt Psychology, but certainly not all.

In so far as Gestalt psychologists accept the last assertion of this remark, they certainly try to solve different problems than gestalt ontologists. The latter try to avoid introducing the term “consciousness” (without of course denying that we are conscious beings). It also avoids introducing questions relating to dependency of spontaneous experiences upon physiology, chemistry and physics. It is said that we *must* assume the existence of our brains. But the relevant point is that this assumption is not *part* of gestalt ontology. The gestalt ontologist, as such, reacts with *epoché* (self restraint) in this case, neither acceptance nor rejection.

It is not the business of gestalt ontology to describe the relation of gestalts to the natural order of events. This order is taken for granted in the way it is in ordinary life. We may say “Could you please describe your spontaneous experiences while looking at this picture and throwing it into the fire?” We presume that there is a person listening, a picture and a fireplace, but in a non-flective manner. This sentence belongs to the metagestalt ontology.

The postulate of the radical and absolute originality of consciousness serves to distance the phenomenology of Husserl from naturalness and natural science, and more generally from assertions of facts. This goal is not inherent in the pursuit of gestalt ontology. It partakes in the endeavour to loosen up to the subject/object dualism, retaining subject/object distinctions made in everyday life (the life-space environment), but trying to avoid a philosophical quagmire which threatens more absolutistic distinctions. Being conscious of something is admittedly of extreme practical and theoretical importance. But it may be useful to avoid the *word* “consciousness.” Relinquishing the word we may more easily avoid what Husserl calls idealism. His terminology includes two central terms of idealism: idea and consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty rescues the aspect of Gestalt psychology which is important to gestalt ontologists. His way of formulating what is rescued is in terms of spontaneous organization.

The term “spontaneous organization” is of course of interest to gestalt ontologists. But from their point of view, it is somewhat misleading. The underlying assumption is that of ‘tabula dynamica’ (1) stimuli reach the sense organs and the central nervous system, (2) the stimuli are subjected to intricate processes, “organization” if you wish, and by some unknown process, (3) the lucky owner of the system experiences something, for instance a tree just in front of him. A vast synthesis is thought to lie ‘behind’ the spontaneous experience. From the point of view of gestalt ontology, there are no stimuli which present reality *before* these stimuli are ‘organized.’ They are not given colour through the organizing agency of perception. We have direct access to reality in our spontaneous experience, but no good guide as to how to act. We must acquire social and abstract structural knowledge. The argumentation concerning this is based on such concepts and experiences as visual perception of figures like the duck rabbit, the Necker cube, the Peter-Paul goblet, and so on. Experience shifts looking at such figures makes sense given the hypotheses of gestalts as flexible forms of organization.

Experience and Gestalt

Suppose three people are walking together and one says to the other two: “Look at that tree!” The spontaneous experiences of the two persons presumably have much in common, but presumably there is also much they ‘see’ differently. What they see may be said to be “full of meaning,” but not the same meanings. One is perhaps struck by seeing it momentarily as a Christmas tree and a world of meanings related to good and bad memories from last Christmas colours the intricate stream of “meanings” which are *internally related* to what we conventionally call the *seeing* of the tree. Intentionality is, of course, implied but not necessarily “an organization of the so-called elements.” Gestalt ontology does not accept a reality that is somehow the tree in itself. We do not project meanings into the tree. There is no tree itself *plus* a process of organization resulting in two different successions of spontaneous experiences.

If the one, but not the other, spontaneously “sees” the tree as a kind of Christmas tree, what he sees is reality, but not the same part of reality

as the others. His personal particularities make him capable of seeing a part that the others do not see.

Speaking is a social affair, and the utterance “Look at that tree!” plus pointing in a definite direction make the two people look at something classed as a tree in the public language.

The decision point is the following: Because of the different background, past experiences, mental capacities, two persons *have access* to different parts of (an indefinitely rich) reality, contact with reality and need not “organize” something.

If one person utters “How joyful it is!,” and the other “How melancholic! Look at the branches pointing down, not up!,” there is no neutral tree making different impressions. Speech makes it possible for the two persons to identify in space and time a definite something. But if we say that it has no colour, and certainly no joyfulness (the “secondary” and “tertiary” sense qualities), we refer to a social *way of* identification, not to reality. Because of the complexity and the internal relations between the complex features, of the spontaneous experiences of reality, reality may be said to have gestalt character. The socially definable something is an abstract structure of reality, not a content or part of reality. In gestalt ontology we are led to distinguish concrete content and abstract structure.

Notes

¹ Beatrice M. Tinsley. “Life and Death in the Milky Way.” *Natural History*, Vol. 85, No. 3, 1976, p. 74,.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 92.