

Gestalt Level and Gestalt Purity*

A new group of problems from the sphere of cosmic physiognomy attaches to the characterization of the different *types of formedness* [*Typen von Gestaltungen*] that we encounter in the world of experience. The distinctions already drawn – between static and kinetic Gestalten on the one hand and between inorganic Gestalten and Gestalten of organic nature and their derivatives on the other – do not by any means exhaust all the qualitative differences that are here accessible to our grasp.

The fact that there is such a thing as a *degree of formedness* [*Gestaltung*], that every Gestalt has a certain *Gestalt level*, is of fundamental significance. A rose is a Gestalt of higher level than a heap of sand: this we recognize just as immediately as that red is a fuller, more lively colour than grey. The higher Gestalten are distinguished further from the lower by the fact that the product of unity and multiplicity [*Einheit und Mannigfaltigkeit*] is in their case greater. For a fixed degree of multiplicity of parts, those Gestalten are the higher which bind this multiplicity into a stronger unity. For a fixed degree of unity, those Gestalten are the higher which embrace a greater multiplicity of parts. A good means of comparing the level of Gestalten is the following: One imagines the given Gestalten (a rose, a heap of sand) to be subject to gradual, accidental and irregular interventions. Whichever of the two Gestalten thereby survives the wider spectrum of changes is of the higher level. Everything that is intuitive has a Gestalt of some sort: that which is absolutely lacking in all Gestalt structure is something we can only think. When, in the intuitive sphere, we talk of 'blind endings', i. e. of transitions from what has to what lacks Gestalt, then this rests strictly conceived always on a decline in Gestalt, a transition from that which has high to that which has low level

* Originally published in Ehrenfels, *Kosmogonie*, Jena: Diederichs, 1916, 93–96; repr. in Weinhandl, ed. 1960, 44–46. Translated by B.S.

Gestalt, or we refer with this expression to the loss of certain Gestalt qualities, for example of those peculiarities which distinguish organically derived Gestalten from those of inorganic nature.

A further characteristic of Gestalten that has not yet been dealt with is that of *purity*. This, too, is gradual in nature, but it is distinguished from Gestalt level by the fact that it possesses an unsurpassable maximum, where the raising [*Steigerung*] of Gestalt level is thinkable *ad infinitum*. The ideal forms of the mathematically exact sphere and of the regular polyhedra are Gestalten of maximal purity, i.e. it is not even logically possible for this purity to be surpassed, but they are of a relatively low Gestalt level.

Through consideration of the characteristics of Gestalt level and purity a wealth of new, metaphysically significant relations can be uncovered in cosmic physiognomy. It is a long familiar fact that the phylogenetic sequence of evolution from the lowest organisms to man represents an ascent in level of formedness. The process of ontogenetic development of the organism from seed to full maturity reveals – at least insofar as it is visible to us – an ascent in level, bound up with a decline in purity of formedness, the latter brought about by the relatively chaotic effects of the environment. But still there is one group of Gestalten which become ever purer as a result of the accidental wearing down which they receive from outside. These are the frictional Gestalten [*Reibungsgestalten*] (cf. pp.33f. of the *Kosmogonie*), as for example the Gestalten of pebbles in a river, which approximate ever more to the shape of a pure sphere or disc according to the length of their process of formation, whilst at the same time – not all frictional Gestalten, but some of them – losing in dimensions. The *Gestalten of drive*, on the other hand, for example organic individuals – those Gestalten which owe their existence either to the direct deployment of new emanations or to their continuing effects – are such that, in growing outwards, they enjoy a decline in purity and an increase in visible Gestalt level with a gain in dimensions. In general the kind of growth of Gestalten of drive seems to be the rule in nature, the formation of frictional Gestalten the exception.

Gestalt level and Gestalt purity are *values* for our human feeling and desiring – values for themselves [*Werte für sich*], intrinsic values – and indeed very high intrinsic values, perhaps the highest with which we are acquainted. But are level and purity of Gestalten also values in themselves [*Werte an sich*], that is to say *absolute values*, quite independent of particular human feeling and desiring? Do we have any

reason to assume that level and purity of Gestalt are also values for the original psychic wellspring [*psychoiden Urquell*] of all Gestalt? Given all that has been said above it seems reasonable to answer this question in the affirmative. Yet still, it must be emphasized that the hypothesis of cosmogony here presented, even though it probably implies the assumption of absolute values, does not rest on this assumption. In its justification the difficult problem of the existence of absolute values can be entirely excluded.

Perhaps the level and purity of Gestalten are absolute values in a still more profound sense than that which arises when one counterposes the absolute values to those relative values which are founded on the actual feeling and desiring of some given psychic individual. Perhaps *all valuing* of psychic and psychoid beings can be reduced to a drive toward level and purity of Gestalten – all desire to satisfaction of this drive, all pain to its inhibition. The variety – indeed the multiple conflict of the so-called dispositions to value (to feeling and desire) of individuals would then rest on the fact that their inner process of Gestaltung will be advanced or inhibited, depending on their inner constitution, by the same influences from the outside. Those valuings which (for example in the case of human love) are founded in the fact that the inner process of Gestaltung of the given individual is influenced in a homologous way by external processes of advancing or inhibiting of Gestalt might be called *homonomous*, those moving in the contrary direction (such as, for example, evil) could be called *antinomous valuings*. And one could – taking the larger view – enjoy the comforting certainty that homonomous valuings are always those which predominate in number and force and thus the ones which will be victorious in the course of cosmic happenings, the antinomous those which must always remain inferior. This would signify the prevailing of a *cosmic justice* in the nature of things.

But this idea – for whose exact investigation our psychologists and psychophysicists are still not far enough advanced – can be uttered here only as conjecture.