

Gestalts: *The Theory That Informs My Work*

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1 Re-inventing the Self.

For my friends and colleagues who are used to the rigour of an academic peer-reviewed article.. This is a "loose reading" of theory to describe the thought behind my work. If you would like to know more, feel free to explore the sources and authors mentioned in the article.

[Ludwig Wittgensteins](#)¹ later work marks a watershed in the field of Philosophy. Until then, we thought objects had a fixed identity. A chair is a chair and nothing else. Wittgenstein suggested that this is not necessarily true. He suggested that in many situations a chair can also be a table. That in every product category there are some objects that do not fit the category neatly. In short he said that the boundaries of identity is fuzzy (he called it "[Family Resemblance](#)", considered an important part of *Fuzzy Logic*). He said the identity of things are based on the way we describe them. He called it a Language Game.

[Michel Foucault](#) ([video link](#)) a French philosopher who also explored the relationship between identity and language. He suggested that our [identity is embedded in a Discourse](#). A discourse is an interconnected system of knowledge that focuses on certain topics and uses certain methods of description. A particular discourse may view identity in a particular way. For example we have created the myth of the imbecile child. Children are not allowed to vote, consume alcohol or drive a car until some [magical age](#) ([wikipedia](#)) when a child transforms into an adult. Children do not have many of the fundamental rights

¹Check out the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#)'s article on him, too.

associated with adult humans. Interestingly, conversations about Child Rights revolve around the Right to Education. Right to Education is the right that a child has to go to school, which most children are coerced to do. There is no hard evidence to suggest that children younger than legal driving age, may not have the motor skills to drive a car. The idea of the Imbecile Child is an identity created as a result of a set of social practices and language we use (the discourse). In short, Foucault suggested that our identity / self depends on the system that we are embedded in and that describes us. For example, if "common wisdom" said that slaves have no soul, then it follows that they are more animals than slaves. If this be the case, they can be bought and sold, even butchered like animals. Animal rights activists would argue that even animals feel pain and fear hence they should be treated humanely.

[Wilhelm Dilthey](#) argued that Natural Science was never intended to describe human behaviour. He argued that there is a fundamental difference between a human being and a physical object like a rock. Hence he argued that we need a Human Science complimentary to Natural Science. Human beings have a physical presence too, and so it is possible to study a person like an object. Such a depiction would talk about his height, weight, shape, gender etc. However such a description quite obviously misses the core thing about being human. When we consider human beings as physical objects, we come to a different conclusion of human nature than if we looked at the person through the lens of a "human science"

So how do I address the question, who am I? Indian Philosopher, [Adi Shankara](#) suggested the [Neti Neti method of enquiry](#) (*youtube practical demo*) to answer this question. In the exercise, one takes each part of oneself and ask the question "Am I this?". It could start with physical attributes like our clothes and our general appearance and then it could move on to our social identity, Am I my designation? Am I my profession? It moves on to our psychological attributes too. At each stage we achieve the realization that this is not me, liberating us from the assumptions in which our identity is entangled in.

Yet so many people associate who they are with their jobs, or their physical body, to the extent that when any of these change they feel personally threatened. [Psychoanalysis focuses on our Historical Self](#). When most people are asked to describe themselves they provide us with a historical narrative, beginning with what they believe are early formative experiences that shape their identity. Young children often describe themselves in the third person and it is at a particular age they begin to develop an idea of the self. Jacques Lacan, a French Psychoanalyst suggests that the development of the self is evident when a child begins to [recognise himself or herself in a mirror](#) recognise himself or herself in a mirror.

2 A Gestalt View of the Self

In short, the SELF is a gestalt. What is a gestalt? In 1912, Max Wertheimer published the first of what would become a series of papers on visual perception.

He showed us how we often group a set of visual units together into a whole. The elements go to make up a single WHOLE, a principle he called [Pragnanz](#). Building on this idea, a gestalt is a set of attributes that are grouped together to form the "idea" of something or someone. It is by necessity an abstraction and perhaps even an over-simplification at times. For example, when we change the position of any object we are looking at, the retinal image of that thing changes. Yet we have no difficulty to recognise that the object is still the same and it is our perspective that has changed. In fact, each time we move our head, the entire picture of the room around us changes drastically, but in our mind we do not see it that way at all. One of the reasons we think that this happens is because we have an independent notion of the object, irrespective of the perspective. All different views of the same object is tied to the idea of the object itself. This "idea" is the gestalt. It is easy to see how life is impossible without the simplification that gestalts give us. William James tells us that a newborn child is born into a buzzing booming confusion of flickering lights and sounds². At this stage the child has not formed many gestalts and hence cannot see. The child achieves "[object constancy](#)" much later. Before it happens, the child's gaze is not focused on anything and is often flitting from one place to another. By the age of 2 months the child is able to focus on objects and can track a person visually as he or she moves across the room. Gestalts are not just about visual perception either. We are used to the idea that our perception can be linked to physical energies, sight is linked to light falling on our retina and our perception of weight is the result of the earth's gravitational pull on an object in our hands. But what is behind our perception of something as being light? Lightness happens when the object weighs lesser than we expect it to be and in the opposite way, when the object is heavier than we expect it to be, we experience it as heavy. When the object meets our expectation it does not attract our attention to it. In customer satisfaction surveys people notice a product or service does not meet expectation but forget those that do meet expectations. Most brand managers want their products to be noticed, but in a good way, not for falling short of expectations. However exceeding expectation (achieving notice-ability in a positive way) is very difficult because it is easier to understand and explain what is missing.

Although a gestalt is formed over time, it is a very stable entity once formed. So when there are instances that do not add up to the gestalt, we tend to ignore it or describe it as an exception, keeping our gestalt intact. This is the only way gestalt can achieve their stability. When applied to people, our use of gestalt is best seen in the field of impression formation, whose foundation was laid by Solomon Ash in the 1946 (see description and link below).

" In a series of investigations, students were asked to form impressions and write brief characterizations of the person to whom a short list of trait adjectives applied. To facilitate evaluation, some groups of judges also rated the hypothetical person on a list of bipolar traits.

²See [this article](#) in Psychology Today for an alternative view.

It appears that traits may be central or peripheral, according to their fit in the general configuration of traits. Altering a central trait in a series changes the impression much more than altering a peripheral trait. Interpretation of a single trait varies with the context of other traits, thus denying the validity of independent, additive traits in personality. The order of listing of traits influences the impression formed from the given set of traits, and inconsistent traits produce different impressions on different judges. The 'halo' effect is interpreted as an attempt to organize a simple impression of a unitary person. Despite halo errors, it is probably more accurate to judge whole impressions than to rate isolated traits. ”

Source: [Asch, S. E. \(1946\). Forming impressions of personality. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 41\(3\), 258-290.](#)

3 When Gestalts go Wrong

Due to its stability, gestalts can become outdated. This leads to situations like “WOW, I never noticed how you have grown / how much you have changed” or in relating to my father as if I am still a child. Sometimes a gestalt is wrong from the beginning. This may happen when gestalts are formed by sampling the WRONG input. (This may involve being told false or misleading things about a person or a set of persons, leading to perceiving them in a particular way, which quite off the mark.) For many people this is reflected in a great deal of conflict either internally or externally. But restructuring gestalts is hard and time consuming and almost always involves managing higher anxiety levels.

Psychoanalysis uses the historical narrative approach to go back to the circumstances when the gestalts were formed and then restructure them to bring them to a more productive set that fits the current situation better. An analysis of the Psychoanalytic process brings out the following elements (1) establishing a safe space where a person can afford to question one’s assumptions and gestalts (2) a relationship of trust and openness (3) approaching conflict areas through conversation (4) the emergence of emotions (transference) (5) an emotional release (catharsis) as he or she is able to achieve a fresh or new perspective. Psychoanalysis is only one way of restructuring gestalts but all different ways involve most if not all of the above elements. There are also those who are able to achieve this safe space and a relationship of trust in the context of God and Spirituality.

4 Shared Gestalts

Gestalts are by no means personal or private. Culture is a system of such gestalts that are more or less codified. Culture is how we store and transfer gestalts to each other and to our future generations, however shared gestalts

are subject to the same limitations as mentioned earlier, they could be off the mark leading to all kinds of conflicts.

4.1 Therapy

Psychotherapy is the process of breaking dysfunctional gestalts and restructuring them. Over the years there have been a number of explanations for why some people have problems adjusting (have mental health issues). The Greeks believed that it was at least partially caused by [the womb of a woman wandering within her body](#) . Others consider psychological disturbances as possession by demons or souls. In more recent times, modern science believes that it is a combination of factors (a) a genetic predisposition, (b) a chemical imbalance in the brain (d) unhealthy relationships (particularly at vulnerable ages / stages in life) (e) developmental and structural abnormalities in brain development etc. Therapy also has consisted of chemical (pharmacological) management, lifestyle management for intractable problems and counseling / short term psychotherapy. Of late there is an increasing awareness of that many disorders arise from basic mis-conceptions, and so [Cognitive Behaviour Therapy](#) is of growing importance in all kinds of psychological disorders, often in conjunction with other forms of therapy.

4.2 Staying Healthy:

As is obvious from the description above, its not just people who have psychological disorders that have mismatched gestalts, yet we need gestalts in our life. For many, bad gestalts and assumptions often reflect in deteriorating relationships, lower quality of life, loss of meaning at work and a general inability to function in society ... to a greater or lesser degree. While individual intervention does have its benefits, often it has to with a correction of shared gestalts that are not working. This means working with the organisation or team, too.

A healthy person is someone who is able to change / restructure gestalts when they are outdated/ unproductive. Such a person exhibits resilience and the ability to adapt to changes in life, in contrast to the unhealthy person. Change is notoriously difficult. Often anxiety or fear is the glue that keeps us from reworking our gestalts. Psychoanalysts say that more adaptable people have higher "Ego Strength", that allows them to overcome the anxiety of change.

5 Dr. Mathai Fenn

As a cognitive psychologist, Dr Fenn has devoted most of his life to understand the process by which ideas (gestalts) shape the world around us, how they develop and how they change. He offers his expertise in three domains; (1) Education: How can we improve our education process so that our young ones are better suited to manage the Knowledge Economy better (b) Executive Coach: Helping executives understand the limitations of the gestalts they use

and help building flexibility and innovation in their lives. This includes coaching groups to do the same