

Max Wertheimer and Gestalt Psychology after 1933

Continuity and Change

Presentation to the Third Scientific Meeting of the
Max Wertheimer Minerva Center for Cognitive Processes and Human
Performance

Haifa, Israel, March 30, 2000

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The presentation begins with a brief summary of the careers of Max Wertheimer and Gestalt psychology before 1933. The primary argument here is that Max Wertheimer – trained as he was in both philosophy and experimental psychology, during a period in which the foundations of modern culture appeared to be in question – developed the basic principles of Gestalt psychology in an effort to unify epistemology and natural science by radically revising the conceptual and methodological assumptions of both fields.

The second part of the talk details the circumstances of Wertheimer's forced emigration from Germany in 1933 due to the Nazi takeover of power, and his success in establishing a small but devoted following at the New School for Social Research in New York.

The third and most important part of the talk discusses the ways in which Wertheimer continued the lines of theory and research that he had begun long before 1933, while at the same time addressing fundamental issues posed by his own experience as an emigre and also responding to the challenge of American Neo-Behaviorist learning theory. In connection with the latter issue

the work of Wertheimer's associates Abraham Luchins, George Katona and others will be discussed as well.

The fourth and final part presents a preliminary assessment of the short-term and longer-term impacts of Wertheimer's ideas and research in cognitive science.