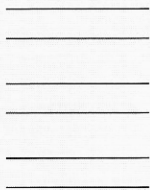


Knowledge and Gestalt Psychology

Some patterns of visual stimulation are more meaningful to us than others. Consider the following pattern. How would you describe it?



Probably you'd say that you see three sets of two horizontal lines each rather than six separate lines. This is so because you perceive items close to each other as a whole. Now consider this pattern:



Because we perceive items that resemble each other as units, you'd probably describe what you see as two vertical rows of circles and one of Xs rather than three horizontal rows of circles and Xs.

Why is one pattern of visual stimulation meaningful while another is not? One answer lies in past experience: Patterns that outline shapes are meaningful if they match shapes that have been experienced and remembered. But meaningfulness also seems to be imposed by the organization of the visual system.

Some years ago a group of German psychologists, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler among them, stud-

ied the basic principles of organization in perception. They insisted that a perception of form is an innate property of the visual system. This group of psychologists became known as Gestaltists, from the German word *gestalt*, meaning "form."

Gestaltists focus on subjective experience and the exploration of consciousness. They see the most significant aspect of experience as its wholeness or inter-relatedness. Thus, Gestaltists believe that any attempt to analyze behavior by studying its parts is futile because such an approach loses the basic characteristic of experiences: their organization, pattern, and wholeness. For Gestaltists, no stimulus has constant significance or meaning. It all depends on the patterns surrounding events. For example, a 5'10" basketball player looks small when seen as part of a professional basketball team but of normal size as part of a random group of individuals.

As part of their focus on subjective experience and the exploration of consciousness, Gestalt psychologists have formulated a number of descriptive principles of perceptual organization. Two are illustrated above in our two simple patterns: the principles of similarity and proximity.

QUESTIONS

1. Do Gestaltists owe anything to the theories of knowledge that preceded their investigations?
2. What connections do you see between Gestalt psychology and Kantianism?