§I. The Surrounding World

At every waking moment of one’s life, one finds oneself—and this is but a purely objective fact—in the world, which one takes as really existing. Wakefulness consists in nothing else than in being conscious of the surrounding world, as well as of oneself as located in this region of the world, a region delimited in a more or less indefinite manner and constituting the environment of the subject in question. In this environment, the subject is presented with a great diversity of objects belonging to different sorts. In respect of these objects, one does not always comport oneself as a mere spectator. On the contrary, a purely contemplative comportment, far from being permanent, is a specific attitude in which no subject can continuously persevere, not even if he is someone for whom it has become a habitual disposition, as it is with the scientist.

In everyday life, which is the usual and—in this sense—the normal case, the subject finds himself in a concrete situation within the surrounding world, a situation in which he acts and which poses to him problems of a practical nature that he seeks to solve. Such a situation is one which consists of objects employed by the subject, or on which his activity has a bearing. These objects appear to him in light of their function in the given situation and under the aspect of the role they play therein. A hammer, for example, presents itself as suitable for this or that employment in a situation of this or that nature. It is defined in terms of the use it can be put to. But it is not a mere reiform thing possessed of a certain length, width, and depth, of a given shape and quite definite shade of color, of a given weight, etc. All of these determinations, which one undoubtedly perceives and notes, do not play a role in the practical attitude, except insofar as they point to the object’s utility and suitability for the purpose
of being employed for this or that end. The objects which make up the surrounding world, and with which one has to deal in everyday life and the practical affairs thereof, are not in the first place characterized by those determinations which, in order to be qualitative and perceptible, must always be designated as objective, in the sense that they belong to the object taken in itself and independently of any relation to a situation in which it can be utilized.

The familiar objects of the surrounding world are not defined by what they are, but by what they are in the service of, by what one can do with them. Now, a new object previously unknown does not become familiar to us by dint of frequent observation. One becomes acquainted with it not so much as one notes its objective determinations (in the sense indicated), but as one discovers the use it can be put to, and the manner in which one must handle it—in the proper or figurative acceptance of the word—in that employment of it, that is to say, when one comes to relate it to the situation for which it is intended and understands the function it is meant to perform therein.

The nature of the objects that make up the surrounding world is determined by the “functional values” they take on, whether in typical situations or in a particular one. These values are derived from the total situation and from its structure as a whole. This is why here they shall be referred to as objects of use or, better yet, as functional objects.¹ On the

¹ Cf. W. Köhler, “Intelligenzprüfungen an Anthropoïden I,” Abhandlungen der königlichen preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phys.-math. Klasse (Berlin: 1917), pp. 29–32; The Mentality of the Apes, 2nd. rev. ed., trans. E. Winter (New York: Vintage Books, 1959). Besides Köhler’s observations concerning the behavior of the higher apes, we are referring, in this rather quick discussion of functional objects, to those made by A. Gelb and K. Goldstein about aphasic difficulties. [Vide A. Gelb, “Remarques générales sur l’utilisation des données pathologiques pour la psychologie et la philosophie du langage” and “L’analyse de l’aphasie et l’étude de l’essence du langage,” respectively.] Vide the summaries of their views which they have published in the Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique (1933), Nos. 1–4. They see in those difficulties a regression toward a less abstract, less rational, more immediate and concrete behavior, which is therefore, in this sense, more primitive (cf. loc. cit., p. 408). Such primitiveness, however, must not be assimilated to that which, according to L. Lévy-Bruhl, is characteristic of the mentality of lower societies (cf. ibid., pp. 424–429); [see the latter’s La mentalité primitive (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1922); Primitive Mentality, trans. L. A. Clare et al. (London and New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1923).] The authors, moreover, underscore