ABSTRACT

As Gestalt Psychology deals with “phenomenological subjectivism”, that is to say the analysis of “human experience” and its conditions, this approach can be defined as “science of immediate phenomenal data” (that which appears here and now). If we try to apply the thesis of critical realism which Gestalt is based on, we can say that language refers not directly to physical reality, but to the “phenomenological one”; in fact when we communicate, we do not speak of the external world, but of our personal experience of the world. One of the most suitable theories in order to represent the relation between language and phenomenal reality is the textual theory elaborated by J.S. Petöfi, who analyzes at the same time the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of a text. From this point of view, language cannot give meanings to perception; on the contrary language derives from perception, that is to say linguistic structures are based on cognitive structures and primarily on the perceptive ones. In such an outlook, we can focus on metaphor: it is a linguistic form which can suggest images and express meanings figuratively as Lakoff and Johnsons’ research points out. The relation perception/thought/language and the contribution of hermeneutics and of contemporary semiotic theory lets us understand the existence of several levels of interpretation and the important use of metaphorical and symbolic language both in everyday life and in literary and scientific works.

GESTALT THEORY AND PHENOMENAL REALITY

INTRODUCTION

The study of man requires the analysis of various aspects of reality and each of them has to be dealt with from a different point of view. That is why we can find a great variety of subjects which study the human being in all its complexity and distinguish between natural sciences and cultural sciences.

The main areas of reality and consequently the most relevant approaches to it are:

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- man as shape = antropometric approach;
- man as architecture = anatomycal approach;
- man as machine = bio-physical approach;
- metabolic man = bio-chemical approach;
- action man = behavioural approach;
- man as “symbolic animal” = phenomenological approach;
- developing man = evolutionary approach;
- ill man = clinical approach.

In order to try to explain and understand the various aspects of reality, we can refer to Galileo’s distinction between “primary qualities” (concerning material substance) and “secondary qualities” (concerning human senses).

PHYSICAL REALITY AND PHENOMENAL REALITY

As Lewin points out, Galilean theory goes beyond phenomenal dichotomies and unifies the field of physical events. Köhler points out how modern physics destroyed naïve realism, developing a clearer distinction between the physical object and the phenomenal one. There is no correspondence between a physical object and the various phenomenal objects which can be perceived by many different observers of reality.

In the psychological field, we have to ask what kind of reality we are studying and in which way we are studying it. Gestalt theory (that is to say the “Psychology of the Form” elaborated by Wertheimer and the other Gestalt thinkers\(^1\)) deals with phenomenal reality (the inner experience) and distinguishes it from the transphenomenal one (the bio-physical and social world, which goes beyond conscience and phenomenal experience). According to this point of view, the whole is much more than the sum of the various elements, as we have to above all consider the relation among them.

Physical reality is a product of the researcher’s rational activity, in which observation and theory are deeply related; on the basis of phenomenal reality, which is built through processes of self-organization, Gestalt thinkers approach reality by adopting a specific method of observation. Differently from the phenomenal objects, those of physical sciences are “not natural”, in fact they are artificial constructions resulting from complex processes.

That is why in the study on the human mind, it is important to abandon the atomistic approach typical of physics and chemistry so as to choose a holistic, relational and functional approach focused on the study of the various Gestalten within the “psychical continuum” like Lewin’s.\(^2\) As Metzger explains,\(^3\) it can be useful to distinguish among the following types of “qualities”: (a) sensory qualities (like “hot” or “cold”); (b) global qualities (that is to say the qualities concerning the whole structure, which can be divided into: structural, material, expressive and relational qualities); (c) measuring qualities