

A Course in Miracles and Gestalt Psychology

by R. Gordon Seeley

Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt psychology is a branch of science that studies human perception. Much of the early work was performed in Germany, which accounts for the use of the word “gestalt.” In German, gestalt means “form,” “shape,” or “figure” which are convenient ways to describe certain aspects of perception. The studies show that human perception doesn’t work the way most of us believe. In fact, the findings seem so preposterous that gestalt psychology is one of the few fields of modern science whose findings are routinely rejected. We may agree with it intellectually, but when it comes to everyday living we continue to cling to our old ideas about perception. Perception is undoubtedly the most important aspect of human experience, and yet hardly anyone accepts the reality of how it works.

Rubin’s Vase

A Course in Miracles is the practical application of gestalt psychology. A simple demonstration reveals the intimate connection between ACIM and gestalt psychology. The image on the left is called “Rubin’s Vase.” It was designed by Dr. Edgar Rubin, a research pioneer in the field of gestalt psychology, and, although many have seen the image, few realize the amazing story it tells about the one who sees it. If you are unfamiliar with the image please look at it for a few moments before proceeding. Hopefully, you have seen two objects: 1) a white vase, and 2) a profile of two people looking at each other in black. If not, please continue looking until you have seen them; otherwise, it is unlikely you will derive much from this article.

Nothing We Perceive Is Real

Rubin’s Vase is testimony to the fact that a picture is worth a thousand words. It demonstrates unequivocally the most uncanny, fascinating, and important faculties of the human mind. Even after seeing Rubin’s Vase, however, most people continue to believe that the vase and profile images they have seen are on the paper they were looking at. In fact, it is almost impossible to convince them that the images aren’t on the paper, but in their mind. And, our mind is not a camera or a copy machine. If we could look into our mind we would find nothing that looks like the images we thought we saw on the paper. The truth revealed by Rubin is that human perception is a figment of our imagination! And, a truth that is even harder to believe is that *everything* we perceive is formed by our mind in the same way.

Ground and Form

Gestalt psychology uses two words when describing a Rubinlike experience: “ground” and “form.” The definition of form is obvious, but what is ground? Ground is simply the source from which form arises. In the case of Rubin, the vase and profile are form and the ink pattern on the paper (the source of the images) is ground. An analogy would be a plant (form) arising from the earth (ground). In spiritual terms ground is usually said to be God or unformed consciousness. So, aside from being source, the other primary characteristic of ground is that it is formless. In Buddhism it has been called “nothingness.” In Trinitarian terms some would say that “Father” is ground (Source) and “Son” is form (Word). Of course, since form is simply ground-in-form they are in essence the same thing, which is probably why Jesus assured us that “I and the Father are One.”

The Whole Enchilada

Science further informs us that the gestalt phenomena is active on *all* levels of human perception (auditory, tactile, etc.). Not just on the visual level. Combining all levels of perception into one is what produces our integrated view of the world. And, since human perception is nearly flawless, we are thoroughly tricked into believing that our view is “the real world.” We won’t accept that we made it up because “it seems so real.” Of course, ACIM echoes science in stating that nothing we perceive is real, which, in part, explains why many of us have so much trouble with ACIM.

(Space limitations prevent a detailed description of gestalt psychology and perception theory to be presented here, however the Internet is a wonderful place to search for information about these fascinating subjects.)

Heaven and Hell

Now that we see how Rubin images are formed in our mind and not on paper, and we know that entire worldviews are really gestalt images, let's play a little game...a thought experiment. Recalling that words are nothing but "symbols of symbols," let's change the words of the objects in Rubin's Vase from "vase" and "profile" to "heaven" and "hell" respectively. Now, let's say that whenever we see the white image we are seeing heaven, and when we are seeing the black image we are seeing hell. It may seem a silly exercise, but that is precisely what ACIM is trying to help us with...to see heaven rather than hell.

(For accuracy, it should be noted that ACIM terms the two primary worldviews "dreams," with our normal dream being hell and our "happy dream" being the equivalent of heaven on earth. Since the real Heaven is a creation of God it is beyond human perception and thus not a gestalt. That explains why we can be brought to Heaven's door, but must leave our perception behind as we enter.)

Worldviews

The preceding exercise brings to light something that is even harder to explain. That it is possible for our mind to organize itself into worldviews. The word "worldview" is useful because it describes the total gestalt we happen to be experiencing at any given time. It is how *we* see the world. We begin making a core worldview as infants and children and add on to it from there, eventually consisting of many diverse parts. Some of the parts are more or less solid and stable while others seem to come and go. Since worldviews are mental formations it is easy to see that no two individuals have identical worldviews. They can be similar, but are *never* the same. It is also easy to see that worldviews aren't fixed because our perceptions change over time. (Sometimes very quickly.)

Multiple Worldviews

Even more astounding is the fact that our mind is capable of forming multiple worldviews that can be swapped in and out of consciousness just as rapidly as it switches from vase to profile. Most of us have probably experienced this worldview swapping at some point in our own life and wondered what was happening. Now we can see that it is simply Rubin's Vase operating on a larger scale. No one knows exactly how our mind does this amazing trick, but the worldview swapping phenomena has been observed in many people. (Think road-rage for example, or a serious lover's quarrel.)

We Must Be Taught

Another odd thing about human perception is that we must have an idea what a vase and a profile look like *before* we can see them with Rubin's Vase. If we never saw a vase before we looked at Rubin's Vase we would never see one. It's strange, but we must learn what things look like *before* we can see them. We perceive things because we have learned over time to see them. We all know what our hell worldview looks like because that is what we have been taught and learned. In the same way, if we are going to see a new world, we must first be taught what it looks like. That's ACIM's job! It teaches us what we are looking for so we can see it for ourselves.

Varieties of Spiritual Experience

Students of spiritual literature know the gestalt phenomena by different names. Enlightenment, spiritual awakening, rebirth, white-light and near-death experiences are all gestalt worldview swapping phenomena. All involve a radical shift in consciousness that is no different than the radical shift we see in Rubin's Vase. The form is different, grander, more encompassing, but the mechanism that produces the shift is the same. Since worldviews are far more complex than the image of a vase or a profile we should not necessarily expect them to form and flip as fast we see in Rubin. However, it can happen quickly, as was the case with St. Paul on the road to Damascus.

And, Switch Back Again

Students of spiritual practices are also well aware of the problem of losing their spiritual worldview – their spiritual gestalt. We can be on the spiritual beam one day and off the next. It's no different than flipping from vase to profile. It happens, because we have yet to train our mind to stay fixed on one image...one worldview. Flipping is not a tragedy. It simply means we need more practice in holding our mind on the worldview we want to hold. In time our mind will respond accordingly. And, yes, it is a choice that we make to stay focused on one or the other.

Conclusion

Of all spiritual literature, perhaps none reflects gestalt psychology more than *A Course In Miracles*. Once we know what the gestalt phenomena is, it is easy to see references to it imbedded throughout ACIM literature. Here's a

sample:

The world of perception is based on interpretation, not on facts. It is learned rather than given, unstable in its functioning, and inaccurate in its interpretations. The world we see merely reflects our own internal frame of reference... we look inside first, decide what kind of world we want to see and then project it outside, making it the truth as we see it. Pages x and xi of the preface to the Text (Excerpt)

Nothing I see means anything...I have given everything I see all the meaning it has for me. Lessons 1 and 2

It is impossible to see two worlds [simultaneously]. Lesson 130

Yet, you must learn the cost of sleeping, and refuse to pay it. Only then will you decide to awaken. And then the real world will spring to your sight...when you want only love you will see nothing else...nothingness will become invisible, for you at last will have seen truly. T12.VI.5.2, VII.8.1, VIII.8.5

There is another vision and another Voice in which your freedom lies, waiting for but your choice. And if you place your faith in Them, you will perceive another self in you. T21.V.3.1, 2

Perception is a choice of what you want yourself to be; the world you want to live in, and the state in which your mind will be content and satisfied. It chooses where you think your safety lies, at your decision. It reveals yourself to you as you would have it be. T25.I.3.1-3

The Holy Spirit has the power to change the whole foundation of the world you see to something else. T25.VII.5.1

Alternatives are in your mind to use, and you can see yourself another way. T31.VII.6.5

It's no secret that many candidates for *A Course In Miracles* never complete the Course. Surely, it would have been easier for them if they had taken a course in gestalt psychology before enrolling in ACIM. For example, the science of gestalt psychology assures us that *nothing* we perceive is real...even in the ordinary sense of the word. It also shows us how we literally make up our worldviews from our own experience and project them as though they were real. And best of all, gestalt psychology assures us that we aren't stuck with *any* view of hell that we may have made. That, with proper training, we can make a new world and bring it to the forefront of our mind where it will seem real. It may not be Heaven, but it can be the next best thing.

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