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# 'Blind' to the obvious: Wittgenstein and Köhler on the obvious and the hidden

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## Abstract

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein cites the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler almost as often as he cites William James in his posthumously published writings on the philosophy of psychology. Yet, few treatments of the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation in the philosophical literature could be called sustained discussions. Moreover, most of them treat Köhler as a mere whipping boy for Wittgenstein, one more opportunity to criticize the practice of psychologists. This article emphasizes how much the two thinkers agreed, and the extent to which some of Wittgenstein's work not only agreed with but also has a logical structure parallel to some of Köhler's text. Both thinkers hold that the theoretician should strive to recognize and resist the impulse to step in and purify, distill, streamline, or exclude phenomena: common, everyday experience for Köhler and common, everyday uses of words for Wittgenstein. They both aim to counteract the tendency to discount and disparage what is ordinary and common.

## Keywords

blind to the obvious, Gestalt psychology, Wolfgang Köhler, perception, Ludwig Wittgenstein

## Introduction

What does history matter to understanding Wittgenstein? One way to approach this question is to situate Wittgenstein in the context of the psychology of his time since he had a lifelong interest in psychology. In the early years at Cambridge (1911–13) psychology

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was a ‘hobby’ (McGuinness, 1988: 128) for Wittgenstein. He conducted psychological experiments on rhythm and presented his results at a 1912 meeting of the British Psychological Society at Cambridge. In the 1940s Wittgenstein wrote extensively on topics in the philosophy of psychology, and in both his early and late writings he reflected on the relationship between the subject matter and methods of the empirical sciences and those of logic and philosophy.

This article considers what we can learn by reading Wittgenstein alongside Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967), one of the front runners of the Berlin School of Gestalt psychology. Wittgenstein cites Köhler almost as often as he cites William James (1842–1910) in his posthumously published writings on the philosophy of psychology. In a 1946 letter to Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein mentions Gestalt psychology as a topic of his 1940s lectures: ‘I’m talking about problems of Gestalt psychology and am frightfully unclear myself and unable to get to the deep aspects of the matter’ (McGuinness, 2008: 348). There are many places in Wittgenstein’s writings where Köhler’s influence is felt even when Köhler is not cited explicitly.<sup>1</sup> Köhler was a large presence in Wittgenstein’s thinking and writing in the 1940s.

Most philosophical discussions of Wittgenstein’s relation to Köhler occur in presenting Wittgenstein’s reflections on memory and recognition, psychophysical parallelism, and the differences between philosophical psychology and psychology viewed as a science.<sup>2</sup> Only a small portion of commentaries on ‘seeing aspects’ refers to the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation, even though Köhler’s influence looms large in these elusive discussions.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, in the works on the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation authored by psychologists and historians of psychology, accounts of Köhler are fuller than in those written by philosophers. Pastore, a historian of psychology, is (to my knowledge) the sole defender of Köhler against Wittgenstein’s criticisms. Pastore (1991) argues both that Wittgenstein completely misrepresents Köhler’s views on visual experience and that Wittgenstein is committed to a version of dualism that Köhler shows to be untenable. Wittgenstein, Pastore charges, ignores empirical evidence and relies on ‘magical thinking’ (ibid.: 343). Pastore also finds Wittgenstein’s use of fictional examples regrettable: ‘In contrast to Wittgenstein who presents a hypothetical case of an “aspect-blind man”, Köhler discusses an actual case of a patient whose “organization had disappeared almost entirely”’ (ibid.: 346).<sup>4</sup> However, as Benjafield (2008) aptly observes, Pastore’s criticisms of Wittgenstein tend to ignore Wittgenstein’s methodological commitments and interpret Wittgenstein as offering a competing explanation of seeing aspects.

Benjafield’s important paper (2008) revisits the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation 18 years after Pastore’s initial critical characterization. Benjafield suggests that Wittgenstein has had minimal impact on the research practices of psychologists, despite the continuing validity of his criticisms for contemporary neuroscience, while Köhler remains influential (ibid.: 114). Although I welcome the ways Benjafield enriches our understanding of the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation, especially with his careful presentation of the two thinkers’ overlapping cultural and intellectual contexts, he does not address the vexed question of how Wittgenstein incorporates Köhler’s work into his own.

All in all, few treatments of the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation offer sustained discussions. Even worse, most of them characterize Köhler as a mere whipping boy for

Wittgenstein, one more opportunity to criticize the practice of psychologists. This portrayal of Wittgenstein's engagement with Köhler paints a rather uncomplicated picture of the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation. Wittgenstein's sympathies with Köhler are mentioned only in passing or left out entirely, even in accounts that do not leave Köhler wholly voiceless. This article will emphasize how much the two thinkers agreed, and the extent to which some of Wittgenstein's work actually echoes Köhler's text with regard both to substance and logical structure.

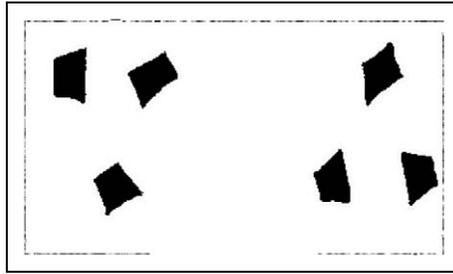
Ter Hark's nuanced accounts (1990, 1994, 1995) are an important exception to the above-mentioned trends. Ter Hark (1995) distinguishes two Gestalt enterprises: Gestalt *theory*, 'a metatheoretical attempt at interpreting empirical findings in psychology and physiology guided by epistemological and ontological principles' (Ter Hark, 1995: 115–16), and Gestalt *psychology*, or 'empirical and experimental psychology' (ibid.: 116). According to Ter Hark, Wittgenstein was critical of Gestalt theory but had a positive appreciation of Gestalt psychology: 'it is especially Köhler's descriptive approach to psychology which is congenial to Wittgenstein's mind . . . the first task of psychology is to *see* what has to be explained' (ibid.: 117).

I follow Ter Hark in thinking that Wittgenstein's appreciation of Gestalt psychology is on the whole positive. Moreover, there are powerful affinities between Wittgenstein and Köhler<sup>5</sup> that emerge when Köhler's views on naïve experience and the dangers of theorizing in psychology are taken into account. Both thinkers are interested in ways the obvious fails to be obvious and the roles that describing aspects of ordinary, common life play in lifting one's blindness to the obvious. They both observe that there is a temptation, when we theorize, to privilege what is hidden beneath or behind the everyday and treat what is hidden as what is 'real' or 'true'. Wittgenstein and Köhler both aim to counteract the tendency to discount and disparage what is ordinary and common. Reflecting on the affinities between the two thinkers sensitizes us to notions of the obvious, the hidden, the naïve, the theoretical, and metaphors of surface and depth. These notions and the interplay between them are fundamental for Wittgenstein, and they operate in a number of ways, as we shall see below.

### **Blind to the obvious: First pass**

Both Wittgenstein and Köhler hold that we can be blind to the obvious.<sup>6</sup> Pervasive features of things (visual experience in Köhler's case and language in Wittgenstein's) escape our notice and are thus 'invisible'. A goal of description, for both thinkers, is to help us notice these unnoticed aspects. Wittgenstein invites us to call to mind what we already know ((2009a[1953]): § 89); he states what everyone admits (ibid.: § 599) at least when they are not doing philosophy of psychology. Köhler believes the Gestalt approach to investigating sensory experience helps us rediscover the obvious.

Readers familiar with Wittgenstein or Köhler or both may find these affinities surprising. Existing commentaries on the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation render the following ideas more familiar. Köhler was anxious to recommend ways to help psychology become a productive science. He was an admirer of the progress of physics and thought psychologists would do well to acknowledge ways scientific psychology in its youth was analogous to physics in its youth. In a well-known passage (2009b: § 371) Wittgenstein



**Figure 1.** Patches.

challenges Köhler's diagnosis of psychology's impediments to becoming a full-fledged science. The barrenness and confusion of psychology, Wittgenstein insists, are *not* due to its youth. Rather, mismatches between problems and methods impede psychology's progress. Psychology is beset by conceptual confusion, which experimental investigation leaves untouched.

However, it is important to appreciate that sometimes Köhler also *contrasts* physics and psychology. A key point of contrast is that the two modes of inquiry face different obstacles to progress:

In many respects our position in psychology is quite different from the situation in which we find ourselves in physics. In the latter science, it is often difficult to discover the most important facts because they are hidden or because they cannot be established without the development of very complicated methods. *It seems to me that in psychology the greatest obstacle is quite the opposite. Often we do not observe the most important psychological facts precisely because they are too commonplace, because their presence every moment of our lives blinds us to them.* (Köhler, 1971[1930]: 147–8; emphases added)

Here Köhler describes a curious yet critically significant form of 'blindness'. The most important facts in psychology are those that are right before our eyes – commonplace and ever-present features of visual experience. Paradoxically, it is in virtue of the pervasive, general occurrence of these facts that we are unable to see them. The phrase 'unable to see' can be understood in two ways that elucidate Köhler's characterization of 'the greatest obstacle' in psychology. First, if something is ever-present, it is difficult to notice. Second, supposing we do notice these features of our experience, we may still fail to find them remarkable because they are commonplace.

One such feature of experience is the organization of the visual field: areas of the visual field that have been grouped into *figure* 'belong together' (Köhler, 1929: 219) and have the 'substantiality of a "thing"', whereas the environment [*ground*] appears as comparatively "empty" and "loose" (ibid.). His simple schematic figures invited the readers to 'look and see' this grouping for themselves. This was a powerful methodological strategy used to visually demonstrate Gestalt perceptual phenomena.<sup>7</sup>

Köhler points out that the visual field can be organized into figure and ground not only in cases where there is a continuous whole but also in cases where separate parts form a unit, as in Figure 1,<sup>8</sup> where we see two groups of three black patches.

Examples that involve grouping of separate parts, such as Figure 1, demonstrate more readily that the segregation of the visual field is flexible. Although we tend to organize the patches into two groups of three patches given common grouping principles, other ways of organizing the visual field are possible (e.g. three pairs, six patches, etc.). Even in cases where the organization is more stable and seemingly less flexible (e.g. a pencil on a desk) we should not take it for granted that the actual organization of the field is the only one possible. Facts like these are ‘of such general occurrence in every moment of our life that, therefore, we have difficulties in seeing anything remarkable in them. This, too, is the reason why they are scarcely mentioned in psychology’ (Köhler, 1925: 700).

Wittgenstein also connects what is most important for his investigations with what is simple, familiar and obvious yet difficult to see:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.)

The real foundations of their inquiry do not strike people at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck them. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (2009a[1953]: § 129)

One obvious fact that we forget to remember is that any arrangement of the applications of everyday concepts emphasizes some conceptual interrelations and suppresses others. There is a powerful tendency to lay ‘stress on some analogies at the expense of others’ (1980b: § 879), to ‘be impressed by an analogy, to the detriment of all the differences’ (ibid.: § 1038). In some cases we might fix on a comparison and neglect other possible comparisons to the point where we forget that we are making a comparison. We may fail to consider other possibilities in contexts that call for acknowledging ambiguities and alternatives. In such cases we do not think ‘This *could be* this too’; instead, we are inclined to think ‘This *is* this’, or, even more rigidly, ‘This *must be* this’. By engaging with Wittgenstein’s examples and crafting our own we become more adept at moving freely among our concepts ‘without repeatedly running up against an obstacle’ (ibid.: § 1054) and at arranging our concepts in elucidating ways. Thus, like Köhler’s visual demonstrations, Wittgenstein’s methods of description teach his readers that different arrangements of our everyday concepts are possible.

## Disparaging the everyday: Privileging what is hidden

The obvious can be hidden in plain sight. Its familiarity and simplicity function to hide it. But another sense of ‘hidden’ also proves relevant: something is hidden when it is inaccessible to all but those who are trained to analyse what *is* accessible to the layperson. Here the hidden is construed as the essence or ‘real’ character of some phenomenon (e.g. language or visual experience) that resides beneath or behind what is visible. This essence can be revealed only through the preferred method – for example, a purifying and clarifying analytic procedure.

Köhler polemicizes against ‘the analytical introspectionists’, those who embody the tendency to privilege what is hidden in the second sense sketched above.<sup>9</sup> Who were the

analytical introspectionists? Commenting on trends in the psychologies of his time, Köhler (1971[1953]) names Wundt and Titchener in connection with analytical introspection: a procedure whereby ‘simple human experiences were established in trained observers, and then critically inspected, until their true nature, no longer discolored by any impurities, was finally revealed’ (ibid.: 419). In his polemic against introspectionism in *Gestalt Psychology*, however, Köhler does not name particular individuals. In this context he is most concerned to identify and challenge general convictions and theoretical commitments to approaches to psychology as a science, wherever they may appear.

Introspectionism assumes a distinction between sensations and perceptions. Sensations are the unmediated, given data of sensory experience. Perceptions are psychological products, the results of projecting knowledge acquired through experience onto the sensory field. They are mediated psychological states – sensations that have been imbued with meaning. Introspection is a procedure that strips away personal and accidental influences on experience (meaning) to get at the ‘pure’ form of experience, one that is not dependent on or affected by what is specific to individual people (Köhler, 1929: 73).

The introspectionist takes seriously only the experiential reports of trained psychologists or skilled self-observers who are able to discern pure sensations from the meanings we associate with those pure sensations:

You cannot see a ‘book’, I am told, since this term involves some knowledge about a class of objects to which this specimen belongs, and about their use, etc., whereas in pure seeing such knowledge cannot enter. As psychologists our task is to separate all these ‘meanings’ from the seen material *as such*, the manifold of simple sensations. (Köhler, 1929: 72)

Introspectionists characterize genuine experience as continually present but hidden beneath our naïve experience and found only by artificial procedure (1929: 86–7). Analysis is the method by which we uncover what is *really* seen.

Köhler employs ‘direct experience’ as his preferred term for naïve, pre-theoretical, or uncritical experience. ‘Direct experience’ designates ‘the world as I find it’ (Köhler, 1929: 3), and this is meant to stand in contrast to the introspectionist’s notion of ‘pure’ experience, which (as I will explain below) excludes most of what we ordinarily call experience in common life. When Köhler characterizes the introspectionist’s method as the observation of direct experience, he means that introspectionists take themselves to be observing and analysing their own direct experience by removing all traces of acquired meaning to reach the ‘genuine’ experience. The crucial point is this: ‘naïve’ is not used pejoratively; instead, he uses it with cautious approval.

The appeal to the ‘naïve’, in turn, holds a central place in Köhler’s counter to the introspectionist’s disparagement of the everyday. Köhler does not claim that pure sensations are unreal: ‘When I apply the introspectionist’s methods I myself can get those special experiences which corroborate his findings’ (Köhler, 1929: 87). Instead, he maintains that the introspectionist’s reasons for giving ‘pure’ sensations such rare value do not trump the reasons he offers for valuing ordinary experience. Köhler agrees that it is undeniable that meaning infiltrates everyday adult experience. But why would this make everyday experience any less important or real? He writes: ‘I do not see why an experience which is constituted by acquired meaning should be less interesting and

important for psychology than experiences not so composed' (ibid.: 88). He suggests that what we judge to be real or true depends on its importance, practical significance, value, interest and on its being worthy of scientific investigation. If anything, direct experience has a greater reality than 'the artefacts of sophisticated and sterile introspection' (ibid.: 87) precisely because it pervades everyday life, in contrast to the rare and unusual kind of experience accessible only through artificial procedures by trained psychologists.

Wittgenstein clearly shares Köhler's interest in this second sense of 'hidden'. This can be seen in his reflections on logical and philosophical investigations that are guided by the thought, '*The essence is hidden from us*' (2009a[1953]: § 92). Wittgenstein warns of the temptation to look at the essence of something as that which 'lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we perceive when we see *right into* the thing, and which an analysis is supposed to unearth' (ibid.).

*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), Wittgenstein's earlier work, exemplifies this attitude about a hidden essence and how to reveal it. In that work, the essence of language lies beneath the surface structure of ordinary language. Logical analysis alone can uncover how language serves as a form of representation that pictures the world isomorphic with language. A complete analysis will eliminate ambiguities and vagueness in everyday language that obscure this hidden structure. Logical analysis reveals what language *must* be like, given that propositions picture the world, the totality of facts.

In his later writings, Wittgenstein discusses a number of ways that this view about the hidden essence of language proves misguided. One way, which connects up with Köhler's complaints against introspectionism, is that this viewpoint turns our attention away from the importance of faithfully depicting what lies at the 'surface'. As the examples below illustrate, we may lose interest in and appreciation for what is ordinary and common, just as it is. The 'surface' is regarded as an obscuring obstacle or as something to see through and discard once what is valuable has been dug out. In short, Wittgenstein and Köhler align in their rejection of the idea that by analysing the everyday person's experience or language the theoretician unmask reality – what our words *really* mean or what we *really* see, what we say and do in common life to the contrary.

## Disparaging the everyday: Making a selection

One possible danger of privileging what is thought to be hidden is treating what is 'at the surface' and accessible without special methods as an obscuring appearance that must be unmasked as such and discarded. Both Wittgenstein and Köhler examine the willful sweeping-aside of phenomena that do not fit a selected ideal of what is deemed genuine and worthy of investigation.

### *Köhler's dust-cloud*

Köhler's (1929) third chapter, 'The Viewpoint of Introspection', opens with an epigraph: 'Round about the accredited and orderly facts of every science there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations'. The quote comes from James's composite essay (1921[1896]), in which he observes that psychical phenomena are treated as outside the science of his day. James argues that psychical phenomena are a legitimate field of

interest, worthy of attention in psychology research programs. His wider agenda is to examine what sorts of attitudes and practices foster new discoveries in science. His advice to scientists is to pay attention to the ‘dust-cloud of exceptional observations’, and then a new, productive era might just come about.

The dust-cloud is an ‘unclassified residuum’ hovering around the ‘accredited and orderly facts’ of an accepted scientific theory. James argues that the acceptance and assimilation of the ideal of science as a ‘closed and completed system of truth’ contribute to the dust-cloud’s formation:

Each one of our various *ologies* seems to offer a definite head of classification for every possible phenomenon of the sort which it professes to cover; and so far from free is most men’s fancy, that, when a consistent and organized scheme of this sort has once been comprehended and assimilated, a different scheme is unimaginable. (James, 1921[1896]: 299–300)

*Ologies* satisfy a longing for orderliness. They seem to provide a way of classifying every possible phenomenon of the sort picked out by the *ology* and to do so without remainder. A consequence of being captivated by such an ideal is that conceiving alternatives or imagining different schemes becomes difficult. In the face of a conflict between the *ology* and a phenomenon that cannot be classified neatly, the ‘disciples’ of an accepted science are inclined to exclude the phenomenon rather than compromise the ideal.

Köhler, like James, holds that a vivid interest in the ‘dust-cloud of exceptional observations’ can spur discoveries. Like James, Köhler wants to give a positive place to ‘exceptions’, to the unclassified residuum, an array of phenomena that remain unclassified because, once they are banished to the dust-cloud, nobody studies them any more. In new productive eras of science, what was previously considered exceptional moves into the spotlight.

James describes the dust-cloud as made up of irregular, minute, seldom-met-with marvels. By contrast, Köhler’s dust-cloud is made up of pervasive experiential phenomena of common life. According to Köhler two competing viewpoints in psychology at the time (introspectionism and behaviorism) are anything but opposite when it comes to their treatment of everyday experience. Both banish everyday visual experience as somehow unworthy of investigation. Here I focus on Köhler’s critique of introspectionism.

Köhler criticizes introspectionism for privileging the rarified experience that comes about through analytical introspection over the layperson’s experience and for protecting itself against the possibility of new productive eras in science. It makes use of a procedure in which most of what we call experience in common life is ‘exiled into the dust-cloud’ (Köhler, 1929: 70) and ‘exiled from his [the introspectionist’s] science’ (ibid.: 85). The introspectionist makes a selection from the layperson’s experience based on some ideal and labels whatever does not fit that ideal as untrue, unreal:

When dining with friends, in what shapes do we see the plates on the table, to the left, to the right and opposite us? We shall be inclined to say that they are circular, just as our own plate. But this again is a statement the Introspectionist will not accept. According to him,

they must be elliptical . . . With some training, he will again remark, anybody can see these real sensory facts . . . (Köhler, 1947: 73–4)

Introspectionism identifies genuine sensory experience with what experience *should* be, given the local stimulation that gives rise to it. If local retinal stimulation varies, then genuine sensory experience should vary in accordance with the changes in stimulation. Likewise, if there has been no change in the local stimulation, then there should be no change in the genuine visual experience. So local stimulation determines what counts as genuine sensory experience. There is a one–one correlation between the two. Köhler calls this the *constancy hypothesis* (Köhler, 1929: 96–7). Here is an example of how the introspectionist would favor this constancy hypothesis over direct experience. In perceptual constancy cases, such as the instance of shape constancy described by Köhler in the above quote, there is sameness of sensory experience even when stimulation changes. Because these phenomena are inconsistent with the constancy hypothesis, the introspectionist would not classify them as genuine sensory experience (*ibid.*: 92). Köhler argues that the introspectionist enters the investigation with a prior commitment about genuine sensory experience, and consequently biases the investigation from the start because what counts as a genuine sensory experience is fixed for him or her before he or she begins to observe (*ibid.*: 100).

### *Wittgenstein's rubbish*

Wittgenstein discusses the temptation to sweep aside as rubbish aspects of the everyday that do not fit an ideal:

The concept of seeing makes a tangled impression. Well, that's how it is . . . And now look at all that can be meant by 'description of what is seen'! – But this just is what is called 'description of what is seen'. There is not *one genuine*, proper case of such description – the rest just being unclear, awaiting clarification, or simply to be swept aside as rubbish. (2009b: § 160)

Here Wittgenstein notes a temptation to impose a division between genuine descriptions of what is seen and all the rest. It can manifest in a hesitation to grant everyday uses of 'seeing' and 'description of what is seen' when those uses do not conform to some ideal we are employing.

Wittgenstein (1980b) addresses the temptation to restrict our naïve, everyday concepts of 'what is seen' and 'seeing' more fully in a stretch of passages (*ibid.*: § 1066 ff.) that focus on an example remarkably like one of Köhler's.<sup>10</sup> Everyday, naïve language is singled out for scrutiny. At § 1066 a description is given: 'I see that the child wants to touch the dog but doesn't dare'. In reply, someone asks: 'How can I see that?' Can one really see the fearfulness of behavior or a facial expression (1980b: § 1068)? This opens a kind of dialog between two 'voices' that later (*ibid.*: §§ 1069, 1101–2) are named by Wittgenstein: the purist and the naïf.

The naïf represents an everyday person, not a philosopher who has contemplated the question 'What's *really* seen', entertained solipsism, idealism and realism, for example,

and then decided to adopt a realist account of the objects of visual perception. Rather, hers or his is the voice of someone for whom the philosophical or other theoretical versions of the question ‘Do I *really* see . . .?’ do not arise. The naïf has no theoretical agenda: ‘For “naïve language”, that’s to say our naïf, normal, way of expressing ourselves, does *not* contain any theory of seeing – it shows you, not any theory, but only a *concept* of seeing’ (1980b: § 1101). The purist’s talk of what is *really* seen, suggests that her or his questions are motivated by some pure concept of ‘seeing’ that serves as a standard to separate what is really seen from what we would ordinarily call seeing but which fails to fit the standard that the purified concept of ‘seeing’ sets.

While Wittgenstein sympathizes with the purist’s attempts to call our attention to already existing differences between uses of ‘see’ he notes that drawing attention to already existing divisions in our everyday concepts is different from making a selection from everyday uses based on some ideal without acknowledging that a new division is being created. It is the latter tendency that Wittgenstein warns us against.

Above I note that Wittgenstein’s key example in this stretch of passages is remarkably similar to one Köhler (1929) discusses. Here and elsewhere in Wittgenstein’s writings on the philosophy of psychology, it is as if he has aphorized bits from Köhler’s sequence of careful observations of ordinary behavior, observations presented in the middle portions of Köhler (1929).<sup>11</sup> Both thinkers discuss the relation between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ and remind us that, ordinarily, in a great many cases, the mental lives of others are not hidden from us, and no dualism between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ is experienced:

In my objective experience of my neighbor’s anger there is no ‘dualism’ between the ‘movements of his body’ and his ‘inner experiences’. (Köhler, 1929: 261)

When mien, gesture and circumstances are unambiguous, then the inner seems to be the outer, it is only when we cannot read the outer that an inner seems to be hidden behind it. (Wittgenstein, 1992: 63)

Wittgenstein and Köhler both use ‘picture’ to characterize the relation between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’:

[N]ot only the so-called expressive movements but also the practical behavior of human beings is a good picture of their inner life, in a great many cases. (Köhler, 1929: 250)

The human body is the best picture of the human soul. (Wittgenstein, 2009b: § 25)

For Wittgenstein and Köhler, in a great many situations in everyday life, the inner is not something hidden behind behavior. We see hesitation in a person’s facial expressions, bodily movements and posture (Köhler, 1929: 234; Wittgenstein, 2009b: § 225). Köhler describes an example of a supervisor who is friendly with his subordinates but must deliver an unfriendly command, and does so hesitantly: ‘Viewed from without the official’s activity is a picture of his inner perturbation’ (Köhler, 1929: 254). Köhler’s supervisor scenario would be a fitting occasion to use a visual report Wittgenstein considers: ‘I noticed that he was out of humour’ (2009b: § 29).

Wittgenstein’s and Köhler’s careful descriptions of everyday, lived experience illustrate how our mental lives manifest in our behavior. This idea – that human behavior

pictures human thoughts, feelings and intentions such that one can see what another person is thinking, feeling and intending by attending to the ways those aspects of the other's mental life are expressed in her or his behavior – contrasts with a view common in both philosophy and psychology; namely, that the 'inner' (thoughts, feelings, intentions, and so forth) is hidden behind the 'outer' (behavior) and must be inferred from it.

## Blind to the obvious: Second pass

Now we are in a position to note other aspects of being blind to the obvious that interested Wittgenstein and Köhler. Aside from 'natural' barriers to seeing what lies right before our eyes (e.g. pervasiveness and familiarity) we can be willfully 'blind' – ignoring, neglecting, or disregarding what is right in front of our eyes. While theorizing there is a temptation to turn a blind eye, or see what one *wants* to see, in virtue of some prior metaphysical or methodological commitment, for example. Wittgenstein exclaims: 'How hard I find it to see what is *right in front of my eyes!*' (1980a: 39). And he prayerfully pleads: 'God grant the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone's eyes' (ibid.: 63). Köhler writes: 'Artificial theory made us a little blind for them [facts of experience]' (1925: 705). He complains: 'It is not our fault that, to a deplorable degree, the obvious has disappeared from learned psychology, so that we have to rediscover it' (1929: 350).

Theoreticians can make the obvious disappear. Sometimes theorizing takes the place of looking. And even when we look we may only see what we want to see or be disinclined to accept what we notice. Wittgenstein urges: '[T]he everyday language-game is to be *accepted*, and *false* accounts of it characterized *as false*' (2009b: § 161). '*Not* to explain, but to *accept* the psychological phenomenon – that is what is difficult' (Wittgenstein, 1980b: § 509).

Adherence to an ideal can make the obvious seem unobvious, even strange: '[W]hat strikes someone as queer when he is philosophizing is not queer. We make the assumption: the word . . . would really have to be used like *this* (*this* use strikes us as a prototype) and then we find the normal use extremely queer' (Wittgenstein, 1980b: § 1074). 'I see a flower' is an ordinary use of 'see'. We say a flower is seen even when the visual impression of the flower alters constantly. While theorizing about 'what is seen', one may have in mind some ideal that restricts seeing to cases where one's visual impression of an object of sight is constant. Then the ordinary use of 'see' seems odd (ibid.: § 1070).

Both thinkers portray the theoretician as craving crystalline purity, exactness and order. But faithfully depicting what one observes when investigating phenomena common in ordinary life (for Köhler the layperson's experience and for Wittgenstein how we use language when we are not doing philosophy) requires courage. The everyday is ragged, piecemeal, rough, chaotic, or indeterminate by comparison with the ideals employed by theoreticians. Wittgenstein notes that from the standpoint of the theoretician's ideals, the everyday is unsafe, like standing on boggy ground (1958: 45). Köhler encourages sympathetic readers to sail 'into the open sea of experience' where one rarely gets 'a glimpse of clear-shaped coasts' (Köhler, 1929: 101).

Both thinkers draw our attention to what lies between or outside of existing classifications. For example, Wittgenstein guides us through many conceptual comparisons to

illustrate that ‘noticing an aspect’ is a concept that lies ‘between’ language-games (1980c: § 462).<sup>12</sup> Although Wittgenstein sometimes describes his philosophical journeying as a search for conceptual clarity, he distances this search from the sort that treats clarity as an ideal of exactness and orderliness to which reality *must* conform. Likewise, Köhler notes the deep need of humankind for ‘clearness’ (1929: 368). Sometimes this manifests as a ‘need for a special type of intellectual clarity’ that can mislead us if we are not watchful (*ibid.*). The need for clarity can prevent us from productive science if we do not venture to look between existing classifications since ‘the most interesting dynamic relations occur between members of altogether different classes’ (Köhler, 1947: 321). When we classify and neatly enumerate, we cut the live bonds of dynamic interrelations found in actual life. Köhler uses terms like ‘artificial’, ‘museum’ and ‘artifact’ to characterize the resulting classifications, classifications that may be instructive but do not coincide with the world as we find it in everyday experience.

### **Conclusion: Wittgenstein and Köhler in harmony**

It is not surprising that there are few sustained investigations of affinities between Wittgenstein and Köhler in accounts of Wittgenstein’s assessment of Gestalt psychology. Both in his early and his late writings, Wittgenstein sharply distinguished the methods and subject matter of empirical science from those of philosophy. Wittgenstein and Köhler had differing attitudes regarding the relation between the psychological and the physiological. Köhler’s working hypothesis was that the structure, order and organization in sensory experience mirror the structure, order and organization of the brain. A consequence of the isomorphism between psychological and physiological facts, he thought, is that careful description of the character of experience could teach us about the character of brain processes.<sup>13</sup> What is more, Köhler expresses enthusiasm for a theory that provides a unifying explanation of the physiological and the psychological. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, there is a disconnect between psychological description and physiological explanation. They are independent modes of inquiry. If scientific investigation reveals that there are neurophysiological states isomorphic with mental phenomena, discovering these underpinnings would not help us with the conceptual difficulties Wittgenstein identifies as the subject matter of his investigations in the philosophy of psychology.

Wittgenstein and Köhler made somewhat different uses of similar observations, and in significant respects their aims and interests were at odds, but there remain nonetheless striking overlaps in parts of their work. I have argued that the force of these parts of their overlapping work is parallel and mutually reinforcing. Despite their differences, both stress that the theoretician should strive to recognize and resist the impulse to step in and purify, distill, streamline, or exclude phenomena: common, everyday experience for Köhler and common, everyday uses of words and concepts for Wittgenstein. They both aim to counteract the tendency to discount and disparage what is ordinary and common. Of course, the movements we make between theoretical and naïve viewpoints differ in key respects for Wittgenstein-as-philosophical-psychologist and Köhler-as-scientific-psychologist.

Wittgenstein grants that as long as we are aware of what we are doing, for particular purposes, we can draw rigid boundaries between our everyday concepts. A crucial task

Wittgenstein sets for himself and his readers, however, is to describe the interrelations between our everyday concepts without attempting to render the boundaries between these concepts exact and without construing the resulting descriptions as ‘indirect hints of explanations’ (1958: 125). Many of Wittgenstein’s investigations encourage the reader to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday uses, a movement from the theoretical to the naïve. Description, for Wittgenstein, is not a preliminary to the solution to a conceptual difficulty; description itself is the solution (1967: § 314).

Unlike Wittgenstein, Köhler hypothesizes that experience is isomorphic with brain physiology such that descriptions of experience *can* serve as possible pointers to physiological explanations. For Köhler, a faithful depiction of human experience is the inescapable starting point for all scientific inquiry. The theoretician eventually may have to introduce concepts that are foreign to the layperson, but to understand what it is scientific psychology hopes to explain first requires a careful description of everyday experience. Such a description determines the subject matter of psychology. Even when scientific psychology ‘advances’ from qualitative description to quantitative measurement, qualitative description remains a ‘necessary supplement to quantitative work’ (Köhler, 1929: 52). Neglecting qualitative description is dangerous for productive science. Doing so can lead to premature conservatism concerning which investigative methods to employ and which phenomena are worthy of investigation. Psychologists should check their theories against the layperson’s point of view; this comparison protects a theory against remoteness and sterility. We might say that Köhler recommends a periodic return to the naïve.

Reflecting on the affinities between Wittgenstein and Köhler sensitizes us more to the notions of obvious, hidden, naïve, theoretical, surface and depth and helps us appreciate how these notions are fundamental themes for Wittgenstein that operate in a number of ways. Wittgenstein’s cryptic statement, ‘Nothing is hidden’ (2009a[1953]: §435), is sometimes treated as a motto for the conception of philosophy’s subject matter he develops in his later writings.<sup>14</sup> Situated in his discussions of the relations between the inner and the outer, ‘Nothing is hidden’ functions as a reminder that in a great many cases we do in fact see what others feel, intend and want; the inner is not hidden behind the outer. ‘Nothing is hidden’ also finds application in Wittgenstein’s discussions of the essence of language in the *Investigations*. Insofar as it makes sense to speak of ‘the essence of language’, such an essence is not hidden, where ‘hidden’ means that the essence would be revealed by a complete logical analysis of ordinary language.

But Wittgenstein’s later writings also explore the ways some things are, in a sense, hidden. On the one hand, some things that are hidden are of ‘no interest to us [i.e. those who are sympathetic with Wittgenstein’s conception of the philosopher’s task]’ (2009a[1953]: § 126). As we have seen, if there are underlying neuro-physiological correlates of mental phenomena that are discoverable through scientific methods, such discoveries would be irrelevant to addressing difficulties with our everyday psychological concepts. Typically, the layperson is entirely ignorant of such processes. Learning the correct application of our everyday psychological concepts does not involve learning anything about these correlates. On the other hand, some things that are hidden *are* of interest to us. For example, surface grammar can obscure depth grammar (ibid.: § 664). Similarities in surface grammar hide differences in depth grammar. Questions of the form ‘What is X?’ encourage us to construe X as an object and ‘X’ as a name that

stands for that object. ‘What is a chair?’ and ‘What is a pain?’ have the same surface grammar, but ‘chair’ and ‘pain’ belong to different language-games and are used in different ways. The two words have different depth grammar. Also, as we have seen, what is right before our eyes can be hidden. But unlike hypothesized neural correlates, ‘unobvious obviousness’ (Cavell, 1996: 273) constitutes ‘[t]he aspects of things that are most important for us’ (Wittgenstein, 2009a[1953]: § 129), and it is the philosopher’s task to help us notice these aspects.

The metaphors ‘surface’ and ‘depth’ are interwoven in Wittgenstein’s discussions of the hidden and the obvious. These metaphors bring to mind a memorable line from Carnap, Hahn and Neurath’s Vienna Circle pamphlet: ‘In science there are no “depths”; there is surface everywhere’ (1973[1929]: 306). But are there depths that are of concern to Wittgenstein’s philosopher? Yes. Paradoxically, the depths are what is familiar and ‘at the surface’: ‘In order to climb into the depths one does not need to travel very far; no, for that you do not need to abandon your immediate and accustomed environment’ (1980c: § 361). Even as one might say that Wittgenstein stays ‘at the surface’, the confusions he tackles have the ‘character of depth’ (2009a[1953]: § 111).

One of Wittgenstein’s stated aims is to change the reader’s way of looking at things (2009a[1953]: § 144). But this is not an easy aim to fulfill. Ways of looking at things are deeply rooted and resistant to change. Assessing Bacon’s contribution to such a task, Wittgenstein wrote: ‘[I]t is by no means clear whether Bacon started anything moving, other than the surface of his readers’ minds’ (1980a: 61). Wittgenstein was pessimistic about whether his own work would teach his readers how to get ‘hold of the difficulty *deep down*’ (ibid.: 48) and uproot it. And yet this is what is needed for the philosopher’s advice ‘*look and see!*’ (Wittgenstein, 2009a[1953]: § 66) and ‘Look at things like this!’ (1980a: 61) to effect lasting change on our ways of looking at what is right before our eyes.

## Notes

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1. I focus on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (2009a[1953]) and his 1940s writings on philosophy of psychology, and on Köhler’s 1920s and 1930s writings. Köhler’s (1929) is the only work by Köhler that Wittgenstein is known to have read, lectured on and written about, although it is likely that he was at least familiar with some of Köhler’s other works. There is no indication that Köhler was familiar with Wittgenstein’s writings.
2. See Ayob (2009), Harré and Tissaw (2005), Hacker (1996, 2010), and Ter Hark (1995), for instance. For a historically informed discussion of the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation see Benjafield (2008). Unlike other commentaries, Benjafield’s (2008) pays careful attention to what Wittgenstein may have meant by the barrenness of psychology as distinct from its confusion.
3. Budd (1989), Johnston (1993), Glock (1996) and Day and Krebs (2010) make passing mention of Köhler and Gestalt psychology. Good (2006), a book-length treatment of Wittgenstein on aspect-seeing and theories of perception, has a single reference to Köhler. Stromberg (1980),

- McFee (1999) and Schulte (1993) make more of the Wittgenstein–Köhler relation, and yet these commentators rarely provide an interpretation of Köhler’s actual words. Eilan (2013) is a notable exception. In her account of Wittgenstein’s critiques of Köhler on Gestalt switches she carefully examines Köhler’s claims.
4. Pastore is correct, but unintentionally brings out the relation between the philosopher and the psychologist. On many occasions Wittgenstein turns one of Köhler’s observations of a matter of fact into an example that makes a powerful philosophical point. Many empirically minded readers will be rightly offended by this, but we should remember that Wittgenstein attached great importance to examples, and thought that a logical point was not affected by whether he was referring to fact or fiction. Wittgenstein writes: ‘We are not pursuing a natural science; our aim is not to predict anything. Nor natural history either, for we invent facts of natural history for our own purposes’ (1980b: § 46). One purpose Wittgenstein might have in mind is to help us gain some distance from our preconceptions about whatever phenomenon is under investigation.
  5. Hausen and Ter Hark (2013) briefly note one affinity between Wittgenstein and Köhler in their concluding remarks: both thinkers place much importance on ‘wholes’ in perception.
  6. Cavell (1976, 1988, 1995) has done much to bring out the senses in which Wittgenstein can be fruitfully read as addressing the ways the obvious fails to be obvious. According to Cavell the obvious is the subject matter of philosophy for Wittgenstein. See Ichheiser (1943, 1970) for interesting discussions of why psychologists tend to be blind to obvious facts.
  7. Palmer (1999: 258) notes that such demonstrations ‘can actually be viewed as ongoing experiments with an indefinitely large number of subjects – of which you are now one – virtually all of whom “show the effect”’.
  8. This figure appears as Figure 1 in Kohler (1929: 154).
  9. For an excellent discussion of varying notions of introspection, including different senses of ‘analytical introspection’, see Hatfield (2005).
  10. Wittgenstein’s example may be a variation of Köhler’s. I am grateful to Ian Hacking for encouraging me to compare and contrast Wittgenstein’s example with a similar one Köhler (1929) introduces with his claim that we perceive (as opposed to infer) the emotions of others. Köhler cites Watson’s 1925 experiments on reactions children have to animals and conditioned emotional responses (Watson, 1926).
  11. For reflection on some of these examples in relation to autism, see Hacking (2009a, 2009b).
  12. For more on ‘between’ language-games see Wittgenstein (2009b: § 79 and 1992: § 761).
  13. See Epstein and Hatfield (1994) for a helpful discussion of Gestalt psychology’s relationship to recent philosophy of mind.
  14. See, for example, Malcolm (1986).

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