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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
CHICAGO 37 - ILLINOIS
DEPARTEMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
December 6, 1951

Dear Professor Luchins:

I could hardly blame you if you feel offended by my long silence. I apologize. This year my correspondence has suffered badly because I concentrated all my energy on physiological work. It is not easy to convince the physiologists that they have overlooked a particularly important possibility. Both the experimental investigation and the writing of a long report about the results proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated.

You have sent me two manuscripts. I have read both with great interest, and have found the second especially well done. There are a few misunderstandings, the cause of which is mainly semantic; but, on the whole, you have written with far greater understanding of the main issues than have other authors.

Let me try to explain two points. We can apply the Prägnanz principle only to functional wholes, but not always directly to parts of such wholes. Furthermore this principle obviously means that functional wholes tend to become as "good" as they can become under the conditions given in each case.

It follows from the first point that the principle cannot generally be applied to an object as we see it. Both Wertheimer and I have always held that, physiologically speaking, an object has a "field" (auf Deutsch: Umkreiswirkung) which extends beyond the area of the object itself. This field is part of the functional whole, only one part of which, the figure, is accessible to direct inspection. The field of the object is, as a rule, not given in specific visual terms. If therefore it is the functional whole which follows the Prägnanz principle, the way the object itself looks does not give us a full appreciation of what happens under the pressure of Prägnanz. In other words, a fully adequate treatment of Prägnanz in individual cases seems to be possible only in physiological terms, because the functional whole of which we have to take account extends farther than the seen object. In the earlier years of Gestalt Psychology we have overlooked this. Hence certain difficulties which Koffka met when he found that Prägnanz apparently works in two ways, toward greater simplicity of seen objects in some instances, but toward accentuation of certain characteristics of the objects in others. Koffka and Wulf could not go beyond this puzzling dualism. From the point of view of physiological theory there is no particular difficulty. Parts of

functional wholes may have to develop in one direction or the other because only in this fashion Prägnanz can be reached for the total wholes (cf. the eighth chapter of *The Place of Value...*, where the same argument is applied to the organism as part of a larger functional whole.)

As to my second point, the distribution of physiological processes always depends upon the conditions prevailing in the medium in which the distribution occurs. Now, the study of figural after-effects has shown that these conditions may be locally altered by preceding processes. But such alterations are not, as such, accessible to direct inspection. Consequently, there is no second reason why we cannot always see whether the change of a test object represents a modification toward the best functional whole possible under the given conditions. As a visual figure, the test pattern affected by satiation may have less Prägnanz than the same pattern in the absence of satiation. Nevertheless, the total functional whole may be very "good" if account is taken of the special conditions of satiation which we cannot see; and thus, the principle of Prägnanz may still hold.

You will realize that under these circumstances the principle of Prägnanz, which I regard as very important, is probably in need of a revised formulation. The new formulation will probably agree better with the general spirit of Gestalt psychology than the customary formulation in which the principle is applied to the seen objects per se. These are instances in which this procedure may do no harm, namely when Prägnanz happens to work the same way in which the visible figure as it does in the functional whole. But there are also cases in which judging about Prägnanz on the basis of the visual pattern alone must lead to trouble (cf. Koffka-Wulf).

I will mention your name when I hear of openings at colleges or universities in the States. Thanks for sending me your curriculum vitae, etc.

Very sincerely yours,

Wolfgang Köhler

(Abschrift, vgl. verkleinerte Kopie des Originals auf der folgenden Seite)