

TimeLine

Person of the Month: Max Wertheimer (1880-1943)

Ankit Patel^{1*}

Born	April 15, 1880 Prague, Austria-Hungary
Died	October 12, 1943 New Rochelle, New York, United States
Citizenship	Austria-Hungary
Known for	Psychology, Gestalt psychology
Education	University of Prague



Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), the originator of gestalt psychology, was born in Prague, the second of two sons of Wilhelm and Rosa Zwicker Wertheimer. His interests reflect the activities of his home, where he came in contact with problems of science, politics, music, art, and education. His father was so successful in tutoring shorthand and bookkeeping that he resigned his position in a bank to devote full time to teaching these subjects. He devised new methods of teaching and eventually established and directed a school, the Handelsschule Wertheimer. The older son, Walter, was trained to succeed his father in the directorship (but died in early adulthood). Wertheimer also participated in discussions of the activities of the school and invented computational devices and a bookkeeping machine. This involvement broadened into an absorbing interest in mathematics as well as in methods of teaching.

His mother was a proficient amateur pianist and dramatist who informally taught Wertheimer how to play the piano. At an early age he also received violin lessons and showed a general aptitude for music. During his teens he composed chamber music and wrote symphonies; it seemed then that he would become a professional musician. Through music he often established social relationships: it brought him in contact with Albert Einstein, with whom he played chamber music and discussed philosophy and science; and Wertheimer's friends, as well as his students, recall the manner in which he often improvised on the piano and asked them to guess the person, object, or event being "described." He participated in musicological research at the University of Berlin and liked to use examples from music in his writings and lectures to demonstrate the concept of structure.

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To establish these ideas in a more precise manner, Wertheimer sought examples from the field of perception, an area of psychology with a high reputation for exactness. He had little success until 1910, when he went on a trip, and while on the train, he thought of an optical phenomenon that seemed suitable. At Frankfurt he got off the train and bought a toy stroboscope. In a hotel room he set up the experiment by substituting strips of paper on which he had drawn series of lines for the pictures in the toy. The results were as expected : by varying the time interval between the exposure of the lines, he found that he could see one line after another, two lines standing side by side, or a line moving from one position to another. This “movement” came to be known as the Phi phenomenon.

Wertheimer explained the significance of the experiment as follows: “What do we see when we see the movements of a hand or a light? Is it appropriate to say that we have a sensation in different places on the retina from which movement is inferred? Is it appropriate to cut the phenomenon of movement in this way into a number of static sensations?” (1937). Although there had been psychologists and philosophers before him who believed that movement was not an inference from static sensations on the retina but was a sensation sui generis, they had not demonstrated this in a scientific manner. Wertheimer now presented the thesis in a way which made experimental decisions possible.

During World War I Wertheimer was a captain in the German army and did research with the physiologist Erich von Hornbostel on the development of a direction finder for locating the source of sounds. Wertheimer was pleased that the direction finder illustrated gestalt principles of auditory perception, but it disturbed him that the device had military applications in the aiming of shells and torpedoes. From 1916 to 1929 Wertheimer was Privatdozent at the University of Berlin. His lectures were considered brilliant, and his seminars stimulated students to do original thinking. The classes were large (as many as 150 students and faculty members attended), and they attracted not only psychologists but also sociologists, philosophers, logicians, mathematicians, and physicists. Kurt Gottschaldt, a student at the time, has recalled that Wertheimer knew how to discuss a problem thoroughly and how to raise questions which led to crucial experiments. His classes were conducted democratically, with lively interaction between the students and himself, and led to discussions that sometimes continued at his home after class. In 1923, during his stay in Berlin, he married Anne Caro. Also while in Berlin, together with Koffka, Kohler, Goldstein, and Hans Gruhle, he started the *Psychologische Forschung* and served as editor for Volumes 1 through 20, from 1922 to 1935. George Humphrey has recalled that he once wrote Wertheimer to ask that a correction be made in his article and that Wertheimer held up publication for several days, maintaining that it was more important to be accurate than for the journal to appear on time.

As a Gestalt theorist, Max Wertheimer was interested in perception, but additionally interested in thought. Max published his ideas in his book "Productive Thinking" (1945) before his death in 1943. He believes that this blind obedience forestalls a person from uncovering the solution. Max Wertheimer's ideas of productive thinking are of continuing

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relevance in modern ideas of schemas, plans, and knowledge structures today. He completed his only book, "Productive Thinking" on the subject in late September 1943. Max died of a heart attack just three weeks after the completion of his book at his home in New Rochelle, New York. Wertheimer is interred in Beechwoods Cemetery, also in New Rochelle. Max is father of Michael Wertheimer, a successful psychologist.

TIMELINE

- 1880:** Max Wertheimer was born on April 15, 1880 in Prague, then part of the Bohemian Austria-Hungary.
- 1903:** 1903 he got his PhD from the University of Würzburg. There he completed research on the lie detector.
- 1910:** Max Wertheimer began the formal founding of Gestalt psychology in 1910 as he began experiments on the phi phenomenon.
- 1912:** His research "Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung" published in *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*. 61 (1): 161–265.
- 1916:** Max left Frankfurt from 1916 to 1929 to pursue a job at the Berlin Psychological Institute.
- 1922:** His publication, *Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt, I: Prinzipielle Bemerkungen* [Investigations in Gestalt theory: I. The general theoretical situation]. *Psychologische Forschung*, 1, 47–58.
- 1923^a:** *Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt, II* published at *Psychologische Forschung*, 4, 301–350.
- 1923^b:** While teaching in Berlin, Wertheimer married Anna Caro (called Anni), a physician's daughter, with whom he had four children: Rudolf (who died in infancy, 1924), Valentin (1925-1978), Michael (born 1927) and Lise (born 1928, Lisbeth Rosa).
- 1929:** As a full professor, where he stayed until 1933.
- 1933:** Wertheimer represented his country in World War I as a captain in the army. After coming back from the war he gave lectures and pursued his research on perception and gestalt in the University of Berlin.
- 1938^a:** Gestalt theory. In W. D. Ellis (Ed.), *A source book of Gestalt psychology* (pp. 1–11). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1924)
- 1938^b:** Laws of organization in perceptual forms. In W. D. Ellis (Ed.), *A source book of Gestalt psychology* (pp. 71–94). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1923)
- 1938^c:** The general theoretical situation. In W. D. Ellis (Ed.), *A source book of Gestalt psychology* (pp. 12–16). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1922)
- 1942:** Max and Anna Wertheimer divorced.
- 1943^a:** He completed his only book, "Productive Thinking" on the subject in late September 1943.
- 1943^b:** His death at October 12, 1943 (aged 63) New Rochelle, New York, United States.
- 1945^a:** His work "Productive thinking". New York, NY: Harper, published.
- 1945^b:** Max published his ideas in his book "Productive Thinking"

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