Gestalt (gēštält’ [Ger., =form], school of psychology that interprets phenomena as organized wholes rather than as aggregates of distinct parts, maintaining that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The term Gestalt was coined by the philosopher Christian von Ehrenfels in 1890, to denote experiences that require more than the basic sensory capacities to comprehend. In 1912, the movement was given impetus in psychology by German theorists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka as a protest against the prevailing atomistic, analytical psychological thought. It was also a departure from the general intellectual climate, which emphasized a scientific approach characterized by a detachment from basic human concerns. According to the school, understanding of psychological phenomena such as perceptual illusions could not be derived by merely isolating the elementary parts for analysis, because human perception may organize sensory stimuli in any number of ways, making the whole different from the sum of the parts. Gestalt psychologists suggest that the events in the brain bear a structural correspondence to psychological events; indeed, it has been shown that steady electric currents in the brain correspond to structured perceptual events. The Gestalt school has made substantial contributions to the study of learning, recall, and the nature of associations, as well as important contributions to personality and social psychology. Gestalt therapy, developed after World War II by Frederick Perls, believes that a person's inability to successfully integrate the parts of his personality into a healthy whole may lie at the root of psychological disturbance. In therapy, the analyst encourages clients to release their emotions, and to recognize these emotions for what they are. Gestalt psychology has been thought of as analogous to field physics.

See Köhler, W., The Task of Gestalt Psychology (1969);
Max, W. Productive Thinking (rev. ed. 1959, repr. 1978);
Higgins, G., Gestalt Psychology and the Theory of Emotional Growth (1987);
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