

Topic Page: [Wertheimer, Max, 1880–1943](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/wertheimer_max_1880_1943)

Summary Article: **Wertheimer, Max (1880–1943)**

From *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science*

Max Wertheimer's father Wilhelm directed a private business college for many years; his mother was an accomplished amateur violinist. A competent violinist and pianist himself, Wertheimer was educated at a Catholic school in Prague and then studied at Charles University in Prague, first law and then philosophy and psychology. He was particularly impressed by the teachings of the philosopher-psychologist Christian von Ehrenfels, who in 1890 had published an important paper on form qualities. In 1902, Wertheimer transferred to the University of Berlin, where he studied primarily philosophy and psychology with a number of notable members of the faculty, especially Carl Stumpf. In 1904, he moved to the University of Wurzburg, where he completed his PhD in psychology the same year, under Oswald Kulpe, with a dissertation on the use of the word-association method for the detection of criminal guilt.

During the next six years, Wertheimer worked at psychological and physiological institutes in Vienna, Berlin, Wurzburg, and Prague, doing further experiments on the word-association technique and applying the methods of experimental psychology to clinical studies of aphasia. In the summer of 1910, while on the train to a vacation destination, he had an insight about the perception of apparent motion, disembarked at Frankfurt, bought a toy stroboscope, and began perceptual experiments in his hotel room. He soon moved his work to Friedrich Schumann's psychological institute at the Frankfurt Academy (later the University of Frankfurt), where Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka, who served as his subjects in these experiments, joined him in elaborating the principles of what was to become the influential school of Gestalt psychology. All three saw the experiments on the "phi phenomenon" (perception of a particular form of motion stimuli that are actually stationary) as refuting the then-prevalent theories of this kind of perception. The studies, published in the *Zeitshrift fur Psychologie* in 1912, are generally considered to have launched the Gestalt School.

Wertheimer stayed on at Frankfurt for some years, worked as a civilian during World War I on a military device for detecting the direction from which a sound is coming, and then moved to the University of Berlin. In 1929, he accepted the chair in psychology at the University of Frankfurt, and early in 1933, wary of the growing Hitler menace, emigrated to Czechoslovakia and then to the United States. He taught at the New School for Social Research in New York from the fall of 1933 until his death in the fall of 1943.

Ehrenfel's form-quality doctrine had challenged the prevailing theories of perception. Ehrenfels argued that a whole percept is not just the sum total of its constituent elementary sensations, but is instead this sum total plus one element: the form quality. For example, a square is four equal straight lines plus four right angles, plus squareness; the whole is not equal to, but more than, the sum of its parts. Wertheimer's Gestalt theory went much further than Ehrenfels's doctrine. He suggested that the whole is quite different from the sum of its parts—not just more, but prior to the parts. Most wholes are integrated systems, the subparts of which stand in complex relationships to each other; the parts are what they are because of their place, role, and function in the whole of which they are parts. In a genuine systemic whole (a Gestalt), change of one part can cause a major change in the whole and in many other parts.

This radical approach became a major school of psychology during the first half of the twentieth century, with Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka as its chief proponents. Many Gestalt ideas reappeared during the 1970s and 1980s, in the modern areas of information processing, problem solving, artificial intelligence, and other aspects of cognitive psychology. The approach also stayed viable in the psychology of personality and in social psychology.

Wertheimer's publications were sparse, but they were highly influential. Aside from the 1912 paper on the phenomenon, among the most significant were a fundamental contribution in 1923 that provided a Gestalt analysis of the principles of organization in perception; several papers in the 1930s and 1940s that applied a Gestalt approach to the analysis of the nature of freedom, democracy, and truth; and a posthumous book, *Productive Thinking*. The book's Gestalt analyses of problem solving and of scientific thinking (including how Albert Einstein formulated the theory of relativity) continue to challenge contemporary cognitive psychologists.

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Chicago

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