

## **The Place of Fact in a World of Values:**

### **An Interpretation of Michael Wertheimer's Memoirs**

#### **Facets of an Academic's Life: A Memoir**

*By Michael Wertheimer. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer, 2020. 545 pp. Softcover, \$39.88.*

In 1938 Wolfgang Köhler published a provocative and now classic book titled *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*. Just under 90 years from the publication of Köhler's work there is growing concern about "The Place of Fact in a World of Values." Köhler (1938/1966) noted that the study of values had been forbidden territory in psychology because values were regarded as subjective and unacceptable as "sound scientific material" but then he argued that "Human living would simply collapse if all value experiences and corresponding activities were suddenly to disappear" (p. 7). In reading Köhler, one gains the sense that the neglect of values in a culture obsessed with "objectivity" would result in a cold and impoverished horizontal intellectual and personal flatland. Now, at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is an apparent Gestalt shift in the fact-value equation. There is concern about the demise of beliefs in facticity resulting in a loss of respect for science, logic, history, and philosophy itself. Strong value orientations associated with systematic ideological loyalties threaten receptivity to facts. In his long awaited memoir, Michael Wertheimer (2020) shares his enduring commitment to "empiricism, experimentalism, objectivity, and a respect for convincing evidence and rational argument." (p. 230). At the same time and in the spirit of a robust classic empiricism, Wertheimer generously opens the door to his inner world, a world sometimes fuzzy and regularly suffused with values, unexplained attachments, toxic affections, desires, ambiguities, tensions, uncertainties, and questions. His

memoir straddles and embraces the worlds of fact and value and the related problems of objectivity and subjectivity.

The organization of Wertheimer's 545-page memoir is unique and heartening to anyone intimidated by its length. The first 11 chapters consist largely of descriptive biography covering a period from Michael's idyllic childhood in Germany to his retirement nearly 90 years later in Boulder, Colorado. I used the term biography but the term autoethnographic is more appropriate because personal experiences throughout this memoir are so often tied to larger cultural, moral, and philosophical settings and developments. The first half of the book ends with an enticing epilogue titled "Who am I?" The second half of the book abandons linear progression in favor of 9 appendices covering varieties of more focused specialized topics of interest to those who may wish to dig deeper into some of Wertheimer's many interests and concerns. The appendices include topics such as Mike's curriculum vitae, an overview of his extensive involvement with the American Psychological Association, a survey of widespread domestic and international family travels, and brief descriptions of selected scholarly efforts. Wertheimer's love of family, ideas, language, mountaineering, sailing, travel, skiing, art, and music are evident throughout. A unique feature is the extensive use of figures and pictures numbering 245 in the first 10 chapters alone and 195 in the appendices. Many of the pictures are of famous psychologists. The careful organization of the book compensates somewhat for the absence of an index.

Readers of Wertheimer's memoir might reasonably expect to encounter a tightly woven intellectual history marked by an exposition, analysis, and defense of Gestalt psychology or perhaps a detailed exploration of a problem in one of the major content areas of psychology. But this is not the case; the picture is larger, more eclectic, more personal, and much more closely tied to the mysteries of direct experience along with probing value questions such as: Who am I? How can we leave a better world for our descendants? In view of all the empirically established problems of memory, how can I hope to write an accurate life story? What is the meaning of my life's work? Wertheimer's memoir reminded me that life precedes science, religion, politics and

all other organized systematic endeavors. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841/1950) who reminded his readers that life is “ahead of theology . . . the people knew more than the preachers taught” (p. 170). In that same spirit Wertheimer’s memoir reminds the reader of the thinness of all conceptual systems compared with the thick, overflowing, effusive, dynamic nature of ordinary pre-reflective experience.

Wertheimer’s academic career spanned a period in American history marked by shifting expectations regarding the nature and distribution of professorial workloads. Early in his career there was an emphasis in most universities on the value of a balance between the instructional and discovery missions. “The University of Colorado proposed that 40% of the workload “should be for teaching, 20% for service, and 40% for scholarly work” (p. 377). Such a distribution worked especially well for professors like Wertheimer with strong interests in research, but equal interests in history, language, philosophy, the arts, and what is commonly regarded as a broad-based liberal education. Rapidly growing availability of sizeable funds for scientific research would change the equation with a new emphasis on entrepreneurial activities including rewards for the acquisition of external funds for research. It was Karl Spencer Lashley who warned that increased availability of large sums of money would inevitably “create pressures that would undermine scientific honesty and the integrity of the scientific process” (King, Viney, and Woody, 2013, p. 347). Lashley was not simply an administrator of laboratory activities, he was directly involved in every aspect of his research program including data collection and analysis. Lashley understood that the availability of funding for research would inevitably shape the kinds of problems investigated, not always in terms of what is most scientifically interesting, but usually in terms of important and pressing social and political interests. The major criterion for advancement became the acquisition of outside grant funds. Wertheimer (p. 378) notes that the emerging new value orientation has involved a shift from “publish or perish” to “publish *and* perish” meaning that published papers no matter how scholarly were no longer a sufficient basis for academic promotions and salary raises in the sciences. The ensuing materials survey Wertheimer’s

prodigious scholarly work followed by commentary on the problem of identity; a theme encountered throughout the memoir.

*A look at Productivity*

It is informative how the slicing of time into various blocks results in understandings and insights unavailable through attention to mere lockstep chronology. It was 1952 when E. G. Boring stepped from the door of the examining room at Harvard University to congratulate the then 24-year old Michael Wertheimer on the successful completion of his doctoral dissertation. Just 18 years prior to this event 6 year-old Michael arrived in the United States with his family as immigrants from Hitler's Germany. What took place in that 18-year block of time from the arrival in America in 1933 and the conferring of the doctorate in 1952 is instructive. For one thing, the youngster had to learn and become comfortable with a new language. There were difficult social adjustments in a world that must have seemed radically foreign. In this period there were family problems not the least of which was the divorce of his mother and father and resulting physical and social dislocations. Two years later he had to deal with the trauma of the death of his famous father. Four months later without a high school diploma the 16 year old was enrolled as a first year student at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Michael graduated with a BA from Swarthmore with high honors in psychology in 1947, an MA from Johns Hopkins in 1949 and the Ph.D. from Harvard in 1952. By any standard, the accomplishments and productivity in that 18-year block of time were stunning but diagnostic for the magnitude of achievements that were to take place in the many years to come.

The topic of productivity is partly clarified by an examination of the 53 page Curriculum vitae including 58 books, over 250 journal articles, notes, etc., 112 papers presented at professional and scientific conventions, 50 book and videotape reviews, and over 150 invited addresses. The 58 books included all those associated in one way or another with his name (single author works, multi-authored works, chapter entries or edited works). Curiously Wertheimer is a bit dismissive or even skeptical about the significance of his work. He is not his own advocate or

follower! He laments his failure to generate “any significant scientific or intellectual lasting breakthroughs” (p. 396). This is an admission that very likely applies to well over 99 percent of academics in all fields. Unfortunately it ignores the broader nature of university life. The discovery mission is extremely important especially in large research universities with graduate programs; but instructional and outreach missions remain central to the very definition of a university. Wertheimer does mention, somewhat in passing, his many teaching awards, but fails to fully recognize or celebrate his lasting influence on literally thousands of students. This reviewer sat through his senior level course in the history of psychology at the University of Colorado. It was a singular and lasting punctuation mark in my educational history. Mike always went to the classroom with a vast fund of knowledge that was shared with students with enthusiasm and superb organization.

Wertheimer’s Ph.D. was in experimental psychology and he always emphasized a rigorous experimental approach to standard topical content areas such as sensation and perception, learning, motivation, and cognitive processes. Nevertheless he completed an internship in clinical psychology at Worcester State Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts but remained “somewhat dubious about much of clinical psychology.” He worried that it was “obviously not as thoroughly based on solid empirical evidence as experimental psychology is” (P. 111). He had no such reservations however about the importance of the history of psychology and this may be partly attributable to close connections between history and the Gestalt approach to productive thinking.

Wertheimer understood history as an inherently developmental, dynamic, and processive way of thinking that moves students beyond the surfaces of the present. History challenges students to live in broader time frames as captured in the inscription over the west entrance to the Norlin Library on the Boulder Campus: “Who knows only his own generation remains always a child.” Wertheimer prioritized history partly because of its relevance to value schemes that, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1956) enable “the present to live at the expense of the future”

(P. 155). History is also highly relevant to Gestalt approaches to thinking. Mary Henle (1976) argued that history “gives us distance not only from our immediate objective, but from our own thinking” (p. 16). Some of Max Wertheimer’s work on productive thinking grew out of his many conversations with Albert Einstein on the cognitive and intellectual precursors of relativity theory. The present is enriched by identifying some of the fragments that demonstrate “how we got here,” but also demonstrates how the contemporary scene has had to endure the mistakes of the past. For good reasons Michael Wertheimer was a champion for courses in the history of psychology and, for that matter, courses in the history and philosophy of science. He believed psychologists, of all academics, should work to identify and overcome distortions and bondages resulting from blind spots caused by tribal loyalties, cognitive limitations, and neglect of history.

Earlier it was noted that the distribution of professorial efforts in most major universities was based on a 40 (teaching) 20 (service) and 40 (research) model. It is likely that most newly minted doctoral students in the 1940s and 1950s expected to divide their efforts in such a manner. Excellence in all three areas is rare, but clearly evident in Wertheimer’s vita. Service activities (committee work, community talks, work with student organizations such as Psi Chi, and work as secretary, treasurer, or president of numerous divisions of professional organizations) are, by any standard, excessively generous. This reviewer was not sufficiently humorous to attempt to count the number of service entries on Wertheimer’s vita. What is most striking about Wertheimer’s curriculum vitae is not just the prodigious output but the balance and excellence of work among the research, teaching and service missions. Wertheimer points however to the fact that he “never did succeed in bringing in large research grants or contracts” (P. 377). The record reveals a large number of highly technical publications in sensation and perception, but the problems explored, while solid scientifically, apparently lacked marketability. This is all the more true for the large number of publications in history and philosophy. The beneficiaries of Wertheimer’s expertise in these areas were the students as well as colleagues.

*The Problem of identity*

What may stand out to every reader is encountered in the following statement from the epilogue: “All my life I have been aware that I am a son of Max Wertheimer” (p. 228). The connection between father and son in Mike’s early years is characterized by a kind of mild indifference along with feelings of security at having a “warm, impressive, supporting and caring grandfather-aged father.” (p. 228) Later there was growing recognition of the eminence of Max Wertheimer along with resentment over a nagging felt need to compete. Mike even admitted to being proud when the number of his published works exceeded those of his father, but the accomplishment was tempered by the claim that his father’s “contribution to psychology is, and will continue to be, far greater than mine” (p. 229). In later years there is resignation to the idea that the status of a parent need not define who we are. Still, for Mike, the shadow of the father persisted: were admissions to Swarthmore, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard facilitated by having a famous father? Did later job offers result from the Wertheimer name or from the many connections with other famous people such as Wolfgang Köhler? Clearly there was a sense of appreciation or even a felt debt for the connections with a famous father. These feelings were manifested in an early ambition to celebrate his father’s life in an intellectual biography. Plans for the project started as early as 1943 but it was many decades before the finished book would finally appear in print. Brett King, senior instructor in psychology at the University of Colorado, helped provide some of the inspiration to bring the project to fruition. Michael views the book as the pinnacle of his scholarly efforts but gives a great deal of credit to Brett King who, following Michael’s wish, served as senior author (King and Wertheimer, 2005). The book was copiously researched in archives, diaries, family letters, interviews with family members and

scholars, and travels to libraries and early family dwellings. It serves as a rigorous model for scholars engaged in biographical research and writing.

The question “Who am I” is salient to most people but few have explored the question in the detail we find in this memoir. Michael revisits the large number of names and labels attached to his person over the years. Some of these come from social roles: doctor, professor, Herr Professor Doktor, and Dr. Mike. Others come from relationships or interests. “I’m a son, a brother, a brother-in-law, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a great-grandfather, a sailor, a mountaineer, a former president of several professional organizations, an author of lots of books and technical articles, an editor, a champion, as we noted earlier, of the history of psychology, and a skeptic about the so-called practice of psychology” (p. 216). The list goes on: cook, gardener, pipe smoker, amateur musician, bridge player, outdoorsman, amateur etymologist and linguist, agnostic, Quaker, humanist, eclectic, etc. Each identity describes but a facet, none captures the central integrating core of the person if there is such a thing. Hermann Hesse (1929) in his novel *Steppenwolf* challenged the idea of a singular unified self.

Even the most spiritual and highly cultivated of men habitually sees the world and himself through the lenses of delusive formulas and artless simplifications . . . it appears to be an inborn and imperative need of all men to regard the self as a unit . . . In reality, however, every ego, so far from being a unity is in the highest degree a manifold world, a constellated heaven, a chaos of forms, of states and stages, of inheritances and potentialities. (p. 78-79).

William James (1890) however, insisted that in addition to the many social selves, there is something suggestive of a core, a “self of selves,” a kind of consciousness of

consciousness that sits in judgment, promotes the kinds of questions raised by Wertheimer, and provides a sense of continuity and unity (P. 296).

Earlier, we referred to Mike's claim that his father's "contribution to psychology is, and will continue to be, far greater than mine." (p. 229) Michael, however, partly because of his prolific industry and creativity and partly because of his longevity has done more than his father to flesh out, define, and extend the *territories* claimed by the Gestalt school. For example, more than any other, Michael (1983) clarified and extended the Gestalt position on the radical nature of wholistic thinking by pointing out in a very ingenious passage that "*the whole is psychologically, logically, epistemologically, and ontologically prior to its parts: A whole is not only more than the sum of its parts, it is entirely different from a sum of its parts: thinking in terms of a sum does violence to the very nature of the dynamics of genuine wholes*" (p. 43). An additional elaboration of Max Wertheimer's work and thought is encountered in edited and enlarged editions of Max Wertheimer's book *Productive Thinking*. (Michael Wertheimer, 1959, 1978, 1982) This book along with an earlier edition helped introduce Max Wertheimer and his thoughts to non-German speaking audiences. Most of Max Wertheimer's works had been published in German, but a careful examination of Michael's vitae reveals numerous ways (e.g., translations, encyclopedia articles, journal articles, books, etc.) he introduced his father's thought to non-German speaking audiences, but Michael was no plodding imitator or epigone. As a student, he grew up with the major systematic orientations to psychology taught by leading figures in the field, but this resulted in an uncomfortable eclecticism and a "hefty dose of Gestalt thought" (p. 230). Later, he referred to himself as a

cognitive psychologist because “It seemed – and seems – to include almost all of what I believed myself in my version of eclecticism” (p. 230)

### *Epilogue*

Life for Michael Wertheimer is a continuing quest enjoyable in its own right, but often beset by metaphysical dislocations and suffering that result when any question on any topic is pursued honestly, vigorously, and in sufficient depth. The quest is illustrated in extensive world travels, numerous ascents to the summit of Long’s Peak and other Colorado fourteeners, the joys and vicissitudes of relations with others, and in extensive and bold adventures in the worlds of ideas and the arts. We may ask whether the quest has resulted in any foundational discoveries, durable answers, or useful generalizations. The answer is affirmative and manifested epistemologically in his firm commitment to facticity and, as stated earlier, his belief in the values of “empiricism, experimentalism, objectivity, and a respect for convincing evidence and rational argument” (p. 230). Caring and loving relations are also a foundational value and nowhere better illustrated than in Wertheimer’s continued references to family members and friends and most of all his marriage to Marilyn Lou Schuman, a marriage he described as “a heaven-sent blessing” (p. 172). Commitment to a rigorous work ethic is also a value that surfaces on almost every page of the memoirs including a reference to E. G. Boring’s comment that aspiring graduate students should be prepared for eighty-four hour workweeks (p. 99). Michael Wertheimer doesn’t measure things in terms of mere hours or the punching of clocks. He doesn’t simply put in time; he lives, eats, loves, breaths, thinks, and dreams, psychology, science, and philosophy, but also prioritizes his relations with family and

friends. It has been said that a successful life is found in the capacity to love and to work (*Lieben und Arbeiten*). Michael Wertheimer excels in both.

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