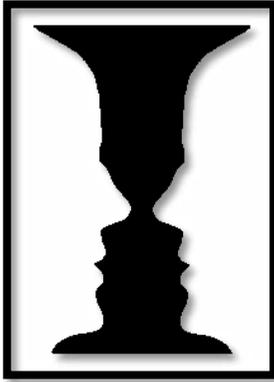


## Gestalt Psychology

The core idea of Gestalt psychology is that a whole or 'gestalt' is *perceptually primary* rather than a secondary quality that emerges from its parts. This 'whole' seems to represent the innate way in which we experience things. Related to our Course and to my approach to psychology generally is the idea that phenomena or objects as perceived can be broken down into 'figure' and 'ground'. Hence the classic illustration:



Which do you see first, the vase or the faces?

This is a similar principle to that of Foreground & Background that we use to illuminate the overt and covert elements of everyday consciousness in our practice and Courses. The important thing for us is that Background and Foreground do not exist independently of each other. They are in constant relationship and together form what the Gestaltists called a 'Weltanschauung' or world-view. This 'Weltanschauung' forms the blueprint for our actions.

You can see immediately that any inquiry hoping to lead to an understanding or prediction of our actions – if it fails to account for the existence of Foreground and Background – and their interplay – is likely to be inaccurate and unreliable, simply because it fails to apprehend the reality of the way we experience the world.

So, creating process that allows the *emergence* of Foreground & Background is crucial. Next, we need to check the *prominence* of various aspects of the field – we need to ask which are critical in driving behaviour? This notion of prominence bears relation to the Behavioural Economists' idea of Choice Architecture: the similarity is the idea of a way in which possibilities are arranged that leads to preferences.

The 'Gestalt' is not an easy thing to explain: everyone experiences the beauty of a summer evening, or the wonder of winter snow. But these things are not easy to take notes on. Sometimes you can give a sense of something by comparing it with what it is not: there is a famous joke made in earlier days by psychoanalysts: it goes: "If you're too early, you're anxious; if you are on time, you are *obsessional*; and if you're late, you're *hostile*."

It is easy to sneer at these generalisations, but most of our attempts to classify run the risk of making too literal associations between things that are related in a complex manner. Starting with the whole rather than the parts leads to a more realistic solution.

