

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ARON GURWITSCH (1901–1973)

*Volume III: The Field of Consciousness: Phenomenology of Theme,
Thematic Field, and Marginal Consciousness*

PHAENOMENOLOGICA

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Volume III: The Field of Consciousness: Phenomenology of
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THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
ARON GURWITSCH (1901–1973)

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Volume III

*The Field of Consciousness: Phenomenology of Theme,
Thematic Field, and Marginal Consciousness*

Edited by

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In memory of
Alfred Schutz
the nobleman, scholar, and friend

PREFACE

The French version of this book, *Théorie du champ de la conscience* (1957), appeared under the auspices of the *International Phenomenological Society*. This present version appears through the collaboration of the staff of the *Duquesne Studies, Psychological Series*.

In writing this book, I wanted to make it a phenomenological study, not a book about phenomenology. The intention was to advance certain phenomenological problems rather than to present a survey of or a report on phenomenology. My point of view is that of the phenomenologist at work, not of an observer of a methodology from without. While it appeared desirable to expound in a detailed manner some of Husserl's notions and theories which have importance for phenomenology as a whole, I have confined my treatment to those which have direct and immediate reference to the problems treated in this study.

The manuscript of this book was completed in 1953 before the appearance of several volumes of *Husserliana* among which vol. VI, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1954), and vol. IX, *Phänomenologische Psychologie* (1962), have particular bearing upon the problems dealt with in this book. Also the most recent presentation of Gestalt theory by W. Metzger, *Psychologie* (1st ed. 1940, 2nd ed. 1954) did not come to my attention before the completion of the manuscript. Allowance for these publications and also for those of some contemporary phenomenologists and writers on phenomenology, which appeared since 1953, would not have necessitated substantial modifications or revisions of the theses here advocated. On the contrary, I found them confirmed. However, it would have entailed lengthy additions and elaborations and would thus have meant much time-consuming work. So as not to delay its publication, and also because in the meantime I have embarked upon other work, I decided to publish the present book in its initial form as of 1953.

I wish to acknowledge my obligation to some organizations for their help during a most difficult period of my life. While I was living in France, the *Comité Pour les savants étrangers* (founded and presided over by Sylvain Lévy), the *Comité d'accueil et d'organisation de travail pour les savants étrangers résidant en France* (whose president was Paul Langevin), and the *Caisse nationale de la recherche scientifique* made it possible for me to continue my studies, parts of which resulted in the present book. In the United States, I received generous assistance from the *American Philosophical Society (Penrose Fund)* and the *American Council for Émigrés in the Professions* to whose Executive Director, Mrs. Else Staudinger, I express my gratitude.

I wish to thank my friend and colleague, Dr. Dorion Cairns for his kind help in rendering into English passages of Husserl from writings other than *Cartesianische Meditationen* of which he has published an excellent translation (*Cartesian Meditations*, 1960).

Author and readers are indebted to Dr. Edward W. Hogan of Duquesne University for his painstaking care in revising my manuscript.

New York, November 15, 1962

Aron Gurwitsch

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
----------------	------------

THE FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION	xv
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	1

PART ONE GENERAL PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZATION IN CONSCIOUSNESS

CHAPTER I. THE PROBLEM OF DIMENSIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CONJUNCTIONS OF PHASES OF EXPERIENCE	13
§ I. Serial and Dimensional Differences	13
§ II. The Problem of Dimensional Differences and the Philosophy of Radical Empiricism	15
§ III. James's Description of the Field of Consciousness	19
CHAPTER II. ORIGIN OF ORGANIZATION	23
§ I. James's "Sensible Totals" and Their Dissociation	23
§ II. Organization as an Autochthonous Feature of Experience	28
§ III. The Problem of Organization in Piaget's Psychology	34
§ IV. Reformulation of the Problem of Organization	49
CHAPTER III. GROUPING AND ORGANIZATION OF SENSE-DATA	55
§ I. von Ehrenfels's Concept of Form-Qualities	55
§ II. Theories of the School of Graz	58
§ III. Sensuous Qualities of a Higher Order	68

PART TWO SOME PRINCIPLES OF GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY

CHAPTER I. SOME PRINCIPLES OF GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY	85
§ I. The Constancy-Hypothesis and Its Abandonment	85
§ II. Dependence of Perception on External and Internal Conditions	90
§ III. On Acquisition by Experience	94
§ IV. Reformulation of the Problem of Gestalt (Form) Qualities	102
§ V. Types of Gestalt-Contextures	103
§ VI. Functional Significance	111
§ VII. On Successive Comparison	120
§ VIII. Gestalt-Coherence	128
§ IX. Bergson's Concept of "Qualitative Multiplicities"	135
§ X. Wholes and Parts	139
§ XI. The Law of Good Continuation	145

PART THREE SOME FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF CONSTITUTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

CHAPTER I. SOME FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF CONSTITUTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY	151
§ I. The Psychological and the Phenomenological Approach to Consciousness	151
§ II. The Root of The Constancy-Hypothesis	155
§ III. The Phenomenological Reduction	158
§ IV. Phenomenological Interpretation of the Dismissal of the Constancy-Hypothesis	162
§ V. The Perceptual Noema	167
§ VI. James's Concept of "Object" of Thought and Husserl's Concept of Noema	178
§ VII. Problems of Ideation	183

PART FOUR PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORY OF PERCEPTION

CHAPTER I. THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS	195
§ I. Perceptual Adumbration	195
§ II. Essential Insufficiency of Every Single Perception	197
§ III. The Condition of the Unity of the Perceptual Process	200
§ IV. Open Infinity of the Perceptual Process	206
§ V. Characterization of the Perceptual Process in Terms of Gestalt Theory	209
§ VI. Some Principles of Transcendental Phenomenology	212

CHAPTER II. ANALYSIS OF THE PERCEPTUAL NOEMA	221
§ I. Sense-Experience and Perception	221
§ II. Descriptive Orientation of Phenomenological Analyses	224
§ III. The Inner Horizon	227
§ IV. Open Possibilities	237
§ V. The Theories of J. Ward and G. F. Stout	239
§ VI. Husserl's Dualistic Theory of Perception	257
§ VII. Gestalt Theoretical Account of the Perceptual Noema	264
CHAPTER III. NOETIC ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTION	273
§ I. Anticipations and Expectancies	273
§ II. Husserl's Concept of Potentialities of Consciousness	278
§ III. Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of the Perceptual Process	280
§ IV. On Intentional Analysis	285
§ V. Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Perceptual Organization	287

PART FIVE THE THEMATIC FIELD

CHAPTER I. THE THEMATIC FIELD	301
§ I. James's Concept of "Fringes"	301
§ II. Distinction and Connection Between Topic and Object of Thought According to James	305
§ III. The Phenomenon of Context	310
§ IV. Context in Logic	316
§ V. Indeterminateness of the Thematic Field	327
§ VI. Relevancy and Irrelevancy	331
§ VII. Relative Independence of the Theme with Regard to the Thematic Field	344
§ VIII. The Positional Index	348
§ IX. Field Potentialities	355

PART SIX ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

CHAPTER I. ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEMS	369
§ I. Indefinite Continuation of Context	369
§ II. Orders of Existence	372
§ III. Relevancy-Principles Constitutive of Orders of Existence	381
§ IV. Schutz's Theory of "Finite Provinces of Meaning"	384
§ V. On the Concept of Existence	393

CONCLUSION

MARGINAL CONSCIOUSNESS

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION	413
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION: THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MARGINAL CONSCIOUSNESS	447
CHAPTER I. THE SELF-AWARENESS OF CONSCIOUSNESS	451
CHAPTER II. THE EMPIRICAL PSYCHIC EGO	465
CHAPTER III. THE AWARENESS OF EMBODIED EXISTENCE	477
CHAPTER IV. AWARENESS OF THE PERCEPTUAL WORLD	493
CHAPTER V. THE [SOMATIC] EGO IN THE PERCEPTUAL WORLD	507
APPENDIX: OUTLINES OF A THEORY OF "ESSENTIALLY OCCASIONAL EXPRESSIONS"	519
WORKS CITED IN THIS VOLUME	539
INDEX OF NAMES	545
INDEX OF TOPICS	549

THE FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Richard M. Zaner

§I. BRIEF BACKGROUND

Aron Gurwitsch was born in 1901 in Vilna, Lithuania.¹ In order to escape the 1905–1906 pogroms there, Gurwitsch's father moved the family to Danzig, where Aron finished gymnasium. After completing that level, he then began his advanced studies at the University of Berlin in 1918. There he became a protégée of Carl Stumpf who sent him to Edmund Husserl at Göttingen with whom he quickly became deeply impressed. Unhappily, the bureaucracy somehow did not permit him, as a stateless alien, to study there. Instead, he had to go to Frankfurt where, significantly for his later work, especially the present book, Gurwitsch worked with Adhemar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein on brain injured persons, which was very suggestive for Gurwitsch's persistent interest in the problem of abstraction.

He knew the famous patient Schneider, whom some call the hero of Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) and worked up the well-known case of Hans. Gurwitsch finally defended his dissertation, *Phänomenologie der Thematik und des reinen Ich*, in 1928. After its acceptance, it was sent to Husserl with whom Gurwitsch subsequently met regularly until he was obliged to leave Germany.

¹ Greater detail can be found in the biographical sketch placed as an Introduction to volume I of the present edition of Gurwitsch's works. Cf. my Gurwitsch Memorial Lecture, October 21, 2005, cosponsored by The Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Salt Lake City, Utah, "The Phenomenon of Vulnerability in Clinical Encounters." See also my earlier lecture (1978), "The Field-Theory of Experiential Organization: A Critical Appreciation of Aron Gurwitsch," *The British Journal for Phenomenology* 10: 3 (October 1979), pp. 141–152.

After defending his dissertation, Gurwitsch married Alice Stern, whom he had met at a congress in Frankfurt, and moved back to Berlin where he had a stipend on which to write his *Habilitationschrift*. But, when this stipend was cancelled in early 1933 by the new government, he and Alice fled to Paris—he had read *Mein Kampf* and was clear about what was shortly to occur. They were without passports and he was again a stateless alien. He knew only Alexandre Koyré, whom he had met at the famous Davos meeting where Cassirer and Heidegger debated (Gurwitsch reported that Goldstein took him there to fatten him up!). He was able to give courses of lectures at the *Institutut d'Histoire des Sciences et des Techniques* at the Sorbonne, which were attended by Merleau-Ponty.

Earlier, while visiting Husserl at his home, Gurwitsch had met Dorion Cairns, Eugen Fink, and Ludwig Landgrebe. Alfred Schutz, who was later to become Gurwitsch's closest friend, began to visit with Husserl only after Gurwitsch had already gone to Paris. It was only after Husserl encouraged the two to meet² that the first and unfortunately undocumented phase of their long and deep friendship began.

Schutz immigrated to the United States first and later helped bring the Gurwitschs to the US. During the war, while his wife worked in a factory, Gurwitsch managed to obtain various short term teaching positions, most often in mathematics and physics, first at Johns Hopkins University, then at Harvard, and later at Wheaton College. Eventually, he became an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Brandeis University (1948–1951), and was later promoted to Associate Professor of Philosophy (1951–1959). He finally became a professor on the Graduate Faculty of the New

² As Schutz wrote to Kurt Riezler, Dean of the Graduate Faculty of the New School, on November 12, 1948, “It was Edmund Husserl who urged me in 1935 to meet during my forthcoming trip to Paris Dr. Gurwitsch, whom he considered to be one of his most promising students. I was immediately fascinated by his personality, his erudition and the originality of his philosophical thought. Since then I have had the privilege to follow the development of his work. I read great parts of his forthcoming book [i.e. *Field of Consciousness*] and am deeply convinced that his theory of the field of consciousness is one of the few genuine achievements in the realm of phenomenological philosophy which continues Husserl's work.” Alfred Schutz to Kurt Riezler. *Philosophers in Exile: The Correspondence of Alfred Schutz and Aron Gurwitsch, 1939–1959* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 106.

School for Social Research in New York City in Fall 1959, replacing his friend, Schutz, who had died that Spring.

Alfred Schutz had joined the Graduate Faculty in 1943 and eventually became a professor of philosophy as well as sociology. He had the idea of making the philosophy department a center for phenomenology. Dorion Cairns was added to the department in 1954, and plans were well-advanced to add a chair in 1960 for Gurwitsch, but it was finally Schutz's death that brought Gurwitsch there as his replacement. The last part of Alfred Schutz's plan for philosophy there was not realized until 1969 when the Husserl Archive at the New School was established in Schutz's memory, with Gurwitsch serving as chairman of its board of directors. He taught with the Graduate Faculty regularly for the next twelve years,³ and came to be known as both a great scholar and a great mentor for many students, myself among them.

§II. THE MODERN "THEORY OF IDEAS"

Gurwitsch emphasized many times his conviction, following Husserl, that the study of consciousness is basic to all his work. And, since consciousness, he wrote in one place, is essentially "linked to a nervous system and, hence, placed in relation to the external world," this relation is "tantamount to dependence."⁴ As he will stress in *Field* (pp. 30–36), the organization of experience is an *autochthonous, objective* feature of

³ Many of his students believe that this was where Gurwitsch truly belonged. When he arrived in 1959, I was already a student—working with Schutz, Werner Marx, Dorion Cairns, and Hans Jonas, among others. Schutz had twice tried to bring Gurwitsch to the New School. The first time was in 1948 when he had already gained the support of Riezler and Horace Kallen, but the faculty chose Karl Löwith instead. The second was in January 1954, but as it happened, different factions in the faculty led to a vote over whom to invite to the Faculty and Hans Jonas won by nine votes to seven for Gurwitsch. So, it was not until 1959 that he finally was able to join that Faculty—where, together with Cairns and Werner Marx, it finally became the place for the serious pursuit of phenomenology, but, most sadly, without his dear friend, Alfred Schutz.

⁴ See his *Constitutive Phenomenology in Historical Perspective*, Gurwitsch, *Collected Works*, vol. I, p. 67.

it; in phenomenological terms, it is strictly noematic. The study of consciousness, therefore, takes the form of research about this “relation” of interdependence and interaction.

Within that thematic, moreover, the heart of this study of the “field of consciousness” is focused on the problem of whole/part relations, specifically, to give an account of the organization of experience. Although mainly concerned with sensory experience in this remarkable volume, Gurwitsch does not take his analysis to be restricted to that sphere. Indeed, he understands that his phenomenological delineation pertains to the “phenomenon of context in general, as well as upon the eventual disclosure of different types of contexts.”⁵ It is the phenomenon of context, then, that lies at the center of his concerns.

Gurwitsch believed that the failure to recognize the significance of this theme was the necessary consequence of the failure of a central effort of modern times since Galileo and Descartes. To understand what he has to say on the matter, thus, requires at least a brief rehearsal of his thinking of the themes inherent to modern thought.

Clearly, some of the most persistent problems of modern psychology and philosophy arose from attempts to account for the recognizable organization of the world experienced by means of our sensory apparatus. Most modern theories since the seventeenth century began with a central assumption: the natural world is fundamentally other than our perceptual experiences of it; hence, whatever order the latter displays must find its explanation in subjective sources. “Nature” consists of a system of particles in motion, definable solely by mathematical formulas. However, we do not experience such a mathematical system: in other words, as Gurwitsch frequently expressed, we do not experience what we would experience, were we to experience what “nature” really “is.” What therefore had to be accounted for, Husserl showed,⁶ is why our sensory experiences do not deliver that true “nature” to us. One central theme of modern thought is thus set out: to determine what we do experience, and thence to account for the relation of that to what “truly exists.”

⁵ See the main text of the present volume below, pp. 2–3; see also pp. 348–365.

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970, pp. 21–100.

It was precisely that theme which led to the fabulous “theory of ideas” of modern times. It has several roots: first, the potent assumption that Nature is as it is posited by physical science (extension and motion, mathematically understood); and, second, that sensory perception is essentially incapable of truth, of delivering what truly exists. Franz Brentano’s remark—in a sense, marking the end of modern thought—is apropos: *Wahrnehmung* (perception, literally “truth-taking”) is actually *Falschnehmung* (literally, “false-taking-in”).⁷ What is truly “taken in” (*aesthesis*) by the senses are sensations or impressions (some form of “sense data” or sensory content), which were thought to be intrinsically unconnected and unrelated to one another (as Hume put it). These rather form the initial and fundamental material ingredients of all worldly (sensory) experience. Percepts grow out of these, thanks solely to the operation on them of *non*-sensory processes belonging strictly to the mind, to subjectivity. Perception is, then (*pace* Kant), the passive reception (*Receptivität*) of material data plus the mental activities which then put them together (i.e., form them) in specific ways according to what were variously conceived to be either subjective leanings or habits (empiricism) or categorial laws and rules of cognition (rationalism).

§III. THE DISTRUST OF PERCEPTUAL LIFE

Because sensory data were thus defined strictly by physical impressions imprinted on the senses produced by causally efficacious and external sources, they “*depend entirely upon,*” Gurwitsch emphasizes “*and are determined exclusively by, the corresponding physical stimuli.*” It follows that *whenever the same physical events stimulate the same elements of the nervous system, the same sensations cannot fail to appear.*⁸ Committed on the one hand to that “constancy-hypothesis” and on the other to the assumption of supervenient, non-sensory processes that work on and thus organize the “constantly” delivered data, modern thought clearly involves

⁷ Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, Bd. I, hrsg. U. einl. O. Kraus, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1955 (from the 1874 edition), pp. 28, 100, 129.

⁸ See the main text below, p. 88. Emphasis in original.

an uncritical *trust* in (mathematical) cognition, and an equally uncritical and most fateful *mistrust* of sensory life (it is, recall, conceived as “*Falschnehmung*,” in Brentano’s term).

Thereby is the fundamental, and ultimately insuperable, problem set out: How is the recognizable *organization* of sensory life to be accounted for? The assumption that there are *non*-sensory processes (for instance, production, projection, judgment, association, synthesis, memory) which are supposedly responsible for organizing the otherwise unordered data of sensation, cannot avoid a vicious circle. For, as Gurwitsch takes pains to point out, such a conception necessarily requires but cannot provide some sort of clue to guide the organizing processes in their work. Not only must there be some, however minimal, form of connection *in the data themselves* in the first place, but even more obviously it is a question of accounting for stabilized, actually achieved organizations of data. This is insuperable for, as Gurwitsch demonstrates, “as there is no clue to guide the organizing activity when a certain organizational form results for the first time, so none exists on further occasions.” Accordingly, no amount of repeated and accumulated experience (whether of atomistic sensations, or what William James termed units of the pre-existing stream of experience) can account for the organization and stabilization, since the very notions of “repeated” and “accumulated” experience *presuppose* connection, regularity, and order. Such a theory presupposes as already accomplished precisely what is to be accounted for—the cardinal sin of philosophical theory for Gurwitsch.⁹ Organization in such theories is necessarily ephemeral, a mere removable and fictional patina put on the intrinsically unorganized stuff of experience; that is, there really is no organization at all.

We may then say that the crucial negative evidence for this result stems from every attempt in modern times to make subjectivity the sole source of order (whether by way of Hume’s contingently functioning “custom and habit,” Kant’s necessary categories of cognition, or any other form of cognitive synthesis appealed to in order to account for the organization of experience). Every such attempt involves the same vicious circle. That,

⁹ See his essay, “An Apparent Paradox in Leibnizianism,” *Social Research*, 33: 1 (Spring, 1966), pp. 47–64; esp. pp. 47–48.

along with the *positive* evidence derived from his phenomenological interpretation of Gestalt psychology (as well as his direct phenomenological explication of sensory experience), led Gurwitsch to the opposite view: organization is an *autochthonous, objective* feature of the field of experience; in phenomenological terms, it is strictly noematic. The specific problem Gurwitsch thus faced was to delineate the *kind* of order intrinsic to that field.

As indicated, the crucial issue for that task is the phenomenon of Gestalt—for, he contends, along with the major Gestalt psychologists, direct and un-biased attention to what is perceived, strictly as it is perceived, shows that the perceptual object always stands out from a coperceived background. Perceptual experience is at the very least always an experience of a “figure-ground” complex. Careful study of that complex objectivity, furthermore, shows that there are determinable principles governing it: Gurwitsch’s task thus becomes that of explicating those principles of organization in finer detail.

§IV. THE FLAWED EPISTEMIC MOVE

Before indicating what that effort is all about, it is well to bring out several considerations vital to Gurwitsch’s position.

- a. In the first place, it might be mentioned that the traditional *Vorstellungstheorie* (which pervaded modern thought) certainly recognized that each of us in our “vulgar,” that is commonsense, lives does indeed experience full-fledged objects in the world. When Berkeley’s Philonous chides Hylas the “materialist,” for instance, for being the actual skeptic as regards sensory perception, and not himself, we should surely understand that he is anxious to preserve the veracity of perceptual life. And, again, for all the infelicities of Hume’s analysis, it is for him unmistakable that we customarily believe that we perceptually experience real, live worldly things. For Locke, too, is it the case that the end-products of all those physical “forces” (primary qualities) and their causal results (secondary qualities), along with those non-sensory associative processes, are the self-same, full-blown objects of so-called vulgar life.

That is, on one level, descriptions of commonsense experience of objects in the world do not differ all that much from what most modern thinkers assumed. The major difficulties emerge only when those descriptions are not taken for themselves but are instead thought to be in need of explanations which postulate a *source other than* commonsense life itself. One dimension of experience is systematically—albeit in a taken for granted manner—referred to another, receives its presumable “explanation” elsewhere, and is thus assumed to be deceptive in itself; it is a mere appearance. That *epistemic* move, initiated already in classical Greek philosophy, sometimes given a metaphysical interpretation as well (as with Plato or Descartes), is the real culprit, for it effectively necessitates that the recognizable and regularly acknowledged organization of the objective field of perceptual experience must be imported from one or another “elsewhere” (from “Forms,” material world, or subjective mental life), and *that* move, Gurwitsch insists, renders organization and thus perceptual life completely unintelligible.

Because of that, but also, it may be added, because it *commences* with a crucial and ultimately indefensible degradation of daily life and the realm of daily experience, that epistemic (and sometimes metaphysical) move invariably carries with it a fundamental *alienation* between thought and the world of action. Hence, Gurwitsch’s critique may be seen as having a significant and positively practical thrust as well. To critique such traditional theories in that way is to reclaim our essential mode of encounter with the world, in bodily and perceptual life.

- b. Nor was Husserl silent on such issues, especially on the problem of explicating the structure of the noematic-objective correlate of sensory experience. In parts of the first book of his *Ideas*,¹⁰ but as well in his early *Logical Investigations*, he recognizes the very point Gurwitsch

¹⁰ Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch. Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* [1913]. Ed. Karl Schuhmann. *Husserliana* 3/1. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. Fred Kersten. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982.

emphasizes: that the perceptual object is a *figure/ground* phenomenon and displays as well a *part/whole*, i.e. Gestalt, form of organization. Careful attention to what is actually experienced shows that it is inescapably presented “in a context, the content stands out saliently from an objective background that appears with it, it is inseparably presented with many other contents, and is also in a way united to them.”¹¹

Gurwitsch is fully aware of Husserl’s analyses, but he gives one of the most sensitive and searching criticisms of it, precisely on the point at issue here. Although it would go too far afield to explore these in depth, some of the argument must be given, for it is therein that Gurwitsch’s central point becomes clearest.

§V. HUSSERL’S VIEW OF WHOLE-PART RELATIONS: GURWITSCH’S CRITIQUE

In his important “Investigation III: On the Theory of Wholes and Parts,” Husserl sets out the main lines of his conception, as regards Gurwitsch’s thematic. Unlike the traditional view and following on the work of von Ehrenfels and Stumpf, Husserl does not appeal to non-sensory processes to account for the perceptual experience of pluralities (organized as a “group,” a “melody,” a “heap,” a “swarm,” etc.). While certain kinds of wholes, he contends, do present an internal stratification between *inferiora* and *superius*, Husserl openly endorses Stumpf’s concept of “fusion” (*Verschmelzung*) to account for such organized perceptual fields. Wholes such as “melody,” for instance, consist of parts (the notes) which can exist *both* as “parts of a whole” *and* in isolation—which he terms “self-sufficient parts.” There are other wholes, however, whose parts cannot exist otherwise than as parts of the whole; the color and extension of a table, for instance—which he terms “nonself-sufficient parts.” Wholes of the latter type, he contends, do not present the higher-lower stratification.

¹¹ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. 2 vols. Trans. J. N. Finlay. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, pp. 442–443.

Husserl maintains that even in cases of stratified wholes experienced in sensory perception, their stratification is still sensory. To account for the specific perceptual differences manifestly evident in the case of a note sounded in isolation and then when it is grouped with other notes into a melody or chord, Husserl is obliged to call on a noetic-subjective principle of unification; Stumpf's notion of "fusion" comes into play just here. But, Gurwitsch insists, such a principle is either nonsensory—and the problem which it is supposed to solve is simply repeated—or it is somehow sensory. But even if the latter is attempted, Gurwitsch's point is that even such a principle is *extraneous* to the perceptual situation; it is postulated as having to be present even while it is admittedly not itself perceptually apprehended within the apprehension of a chord or melody. What Husserl, with Stumpf, calls "fusion" (or, sometimes, "figural factor" or "moment of unity") is operative in such a way that the elements unified (the notes) are said to preserve their identity even when thus grouped.

But this means that the principle of unity, even though supposedly sensory, is nonetheless a *superius* which leaves the *inferiora* unaffected. Hence, Gurwitsch argues, "order" for such wholes is quite as ephemeral and taken for granted as it is in the traditional theory of ideas. Wholes whose parts are nonself-sufficient, however, require no such principle, since their organization is *intrinsic* to them—which Husserl terms "mutual foundedness" and Gurwitsch "coherence"—and are perceptually apprehended precisely as such with no need to appeal to a source extraneous to them. Gurwitsch concludes here that it is only these latter perceptual wholes that have been correctly analyzed by Husserl; wholes that are said to consist of nonself-sufficient parts, on the other hand, have not been correctly analyzed, and for several crucial reasons.

- a. First, Husserl's distinction stems from a decisive confusion. Recognizing that the "self-sufficient" parts are *in fact* inseparable, Husserl contends that they are nonetheless *in essence* separable. He apparently reasons that this is because, even if only given as inseparable, we are always able to think or imagine them as given in isolation (here, his famous example of the head of a horse: seen as part of the horse, then imagined as in isolation). But here, Gurwitsch points out, Husserl has in truth focused on the following:

The content *as already singled out* and made into a theme “in itself,” not however, a phenomenological description of a constituent *susceptible* of being singled out *actually*. Failing to differentiate between the two means to overlook the fact that by being actually singled out, the content in question [e.g. “head of a horse”] undergoes a qualitative change and is, phenomenally speaking, no longer “the same.”¹²

There is a crucial difference between seeing an item as so integrated into a whole that it comes to our awareness only as being within that whole, and seeing that item as already singled out: for instance, a straight line given by itself on an otherwise blank paper, as opposed to being given as one side of a triangle. Starting with the latter, Husserl thematically alters the situation, attending now to the former (line given by itself), and then concludes that because the line “can” be given by itself it is therefore “the same” line even when given as part of a triangle. This “can,” in other words, glosses the *already altered* presentational context. The idea of “self-sufficient” parts simply does not hold up to careful analysis.

- b. Second, by appealing to “laws of essence” as necessary to define self-sufficiency, Husserl effectively confuses two very different kinds of dependency: that exhibited by “parts” which are only “parts of a whole,” and that holding between examples of species or between the instances of one species taken as “parts” of a more inclusive whole (the “kind” of which the instances are examples). Thus, Husserl considers the nonself-sufficiency of certain parts as due to a law of essence pertaining to the more inclusive “kind”; so-called self-sufficient parts or pieces (*Stücke*) are those with respect to which such a law of essence is lacking, and thus they *may* but *need not* become parts of a more inclusive whole.¹³

Here again, however, Husserl glosses the crucial point, for when one perceives so-called self-sufficient parts (“notes”) as in fact parts

¹² Aron Gurwitsch, “Phenomenology of Thematics and of the Pure Ego: Studies of the Relation Between Gestalt Theory and Phenomenology,” in *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966, pp. 261–262; Volume II of the *Aron Gurwitsch Collected Works*, Chapter X. Hereafter, *SPP*.

¹³ See Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, op. cit., p. 447.

of a whole (“melody,” “chord”), this “being-in-a-whole” exhibits a key dependency of its own kind, quite as essential as that shown by nonself-sufficient parts. And, neither presentational situation exhibits or requires any additional factor, moment, or principle, sensory or non-sensory.

- c. Husserl’s distinction, then, must be reinterpreted. What Gurwitsch contests, in other words, is the following thesis:

We deny that an item which is susceptible of being singled out remains phenomenally the same when it is singled out. This is the central point in our divergence from Stumpf and Husserl, who maintain that an item can merely be isolated and otherwise remain what it is, whereas according to our analyses a *materially* different way, a new theme, results from such isolation.¹⁴

These considerations substantially advance Gurwitsch’s thesis that Husserl’s delineation of inner-time consciousness *cannot* be the sole principle of organization of experience. It is one principle, but it pertains solely to the noetic-subjective nexus of consciousness. It cannot account for the organization and stabilization of the noematic-objective field. For the latter, we are obliged to recognize that it is at once autochthonous and is organized precisely as a “field.” More accurately, the *sui generis* organization of the noematic sphere has three basic components: a central “theme,” a background “field,” and a surrounding “margin.”

Gurwitsch’s positive analysis is conducted mainly by way of critical modifications of James’s theory of “focus” (“topic” or “substantive” part of the stream of experience) and “margin” (“object” or “transitive” part of the stream),¹⁵ and of the Gestalt notions of “figure,” “ground,” and “coherence.”¹⁶ To James, he insists that the “margin” itself shows a further distinction: between “thematic field” and “margin” proper. To the Gestaltists, he adds not only the “margin” but also a far richer delineation

¹⁴ Gurwitsch, “Thematics,” *SPP*, p. 293.

¹⁵ *FC*, Part one.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–150.

of the “figure” and its relations with the “ground”—“coherence” becomes systematically clarified.

§VI. THEMATIC ORGANIZATION

The latter analyses are central for understanding Gurwitsch’s notion of “field,” or “context,” for which his notion of “pointing references” is decisive.¹⁷ Whatever may be focally attended to (the “theme”) necessarily appears “*from a field* in which the theme is . . . the center so that the field forms a background with respect to the theme,”¹⁸ and thus essentially *refers to* the theme and vice versa. The thematic field is the *context* from which the theme is set out and in which it appears as such: these “references” are thus relations of *material relevancy*. Accordingly, while the background field can shift and alter while the theme remains the same (seeing a person now in his house, now in the backyard, etc.), giving the theme as a whole a certain independence relative to the field, this alteration is not extraneous to the theme. “The perspective under which the theme [appears], its organization along determinate and specific lines of relevancy, depend upon the thematic field or context within which it appears.”¹⁹

Inherent in the theme is this phenomenon of perspective or orientation: the theme, he shows, has a “positional index” thanks to its always appearing in a specific context of some sort, and this index can and will vary as the field itself varies, and is more or less structurally articulated.²⁰ Therefore, the perspective or position of the theme is strictly noematic-objective; it concerns *what* is experienced rather than the fact of its being experienced. To be sure, a given theme cannot appear in just any context (Napoleon cannot be given in just any context: in the palm of one’s hand, for instance), and accordingly “the relationship of relevancy must obtain between the context and the theme.”²¹ The loss of this relevancy

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 312–319.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 311.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 349.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 350–355.

²¹ Ibid., p. 354.

is thus equivalent to the theme's now receding into the margin; it then becomes part of the sphere now *irrelevant* to what has in the meantime become thematically focused. The "margin," that is, is the sphere of what is merely "copresent" but "irrelevant." For instance, while paying attention to Napoleon (theme) as the victor at the battle of Jena (field), there is a host of "fringe" affairs having no relevance to either: noises in the room, feelings of hunger, recollections of things once seen, etc. Even so, as he carefully pointed out in his various reflections, the "margin" is by no means unorganized; although whatever is currently marginal is as such not pertinent to whatever is thematic at that moment, it is not nothing. Indeed, the items that lie in the margin of the moment, may themselves at some point become thematic; these items are structured and unified and could become themes—a point he goes to some lengths to emphasize in *Field of Consciousness* as well.²²

All of this is in the service of delineating the organization of the theme—and herein lies Gurwitsch's truly seminal achievement, as I see it. What is marginal is so in respect of some theme; what is field (context) is so in respect of some theme. It is this, the theme—or, equivalently for him, *contexture*—which is of greatest concern.

Even before turning to the theme, we can already pin down more precisely where Husserl's analysis went awry: he confused "theme/field" relations with intra-thematic relations. For, whereas there is a certain independence of the theme (which is a kind of "part") as regards the field (a kind of "whole"), the items comprising the theme are strictly bound together as constituents of a Gestalt, the theme itself. To "context," then, Gurwitsch contrasts "contexture": the intrathematic organization, within which "parts" (constituents) have no independence from their "wholes" (contexture) and must not be confused with theme/field relations defined by material relevancy, which does permit a certain positional independence of the theme as a whole.

Precisely because "the theme must present itself as a consolidated and intrinsically coherent unit"²³ in order for it to be a center of reference

²² See the text of *Marginal Consciousness* included below and also the main text of the present volume below, p. 134.

²³ See the main text of the present volume below, p. 348.

with respect to which the field is at all organized, Gurwitsch emphasizes, *Unity by Gestalt-coherence underlies and renders possible unity by relevancy.*²⁴ Relationships of material relevancy are not possible except between units having that intrinsic structure.

§VII. THE PHENOMENON OF CONTEXT

Four main points are necessary to understand his analysis of the phenomenon of context: (a) functional significance, (b) functional weight, (c) Gestalt-coherence, and (d) good continuation and closure.

- a. Every phenomenon that displays a contextural character is an intrinsically articulated whole having some degree of detail, by virtue of which it stand out from the field. Specifically, a contexture includes constituents which have their systematic placement within a whole. To be a constituent (a “part of a whole”) thus *means* to occupy a certain locus or place defined only in reference to the topography of the whole. This, as it may be said, absorption into the whole gives each constituent a specific *functional significance* for that contexture: for instance, “being the right-hand member of a pair.” Hence, “the functional significance of each constituent derives from the total structure of the Gestalt, and by virtue of its functional significance, each constituent contributes towards this total structure and organization.”²⁵ Only as thus integrated along with other constituents into the whole, and systematically related to the others as also related to one another and to the first, is a “part” a constituent of a contexture.

Should one remove a constituent from its contextural placement, situating it within another, one cannot speak of “the same constituent being integrated into different contextures.”²⁶ For example, if one hears a C-major chord and then a C-minor one, the note “G” constituent to the first is not “the same as” the note “G” constituent to the second. Even

²⁴ Ibid., p. 348.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 112–113.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

though Gurwitsch admits that there is a sense in which “the same” objective state of affairs obtains, this is not the case for phenomenal experience, which is precisely why we experience these two notes as different from each other. It would be a grievous error, then, to confuse the two. What is at issue is the functional significance, and in the example give just this alters. “It is the functional significance of any part of a Gestalt-contexture that makes this part that which it is.”²⁷

- b. An example will be helpful to clarifying Gurwitsch’s analysis. Consider the way a red stoplight appears when seen during an urgent drive to take one’s child to a hospital. Clearly, not every “part” of this scenario has the same significance. The light has great functional “weight” in this example than does, say, whether I am driving a car colored metallic blue or dull green. What is “significant,” that is, is to get my boy to medical help and, in reference to that, as to the other constituents of the context, the light stands out as “emphasized,” “weighted”—a veritable obstacle. Such “weight,” of course, is relative: that is, relative to the functional significances defining the other constituents. “This import,” in Gurwitsch’s words, “is in proportion to the contribution which, by virtue of its functional significance, a part makes to the contexture,”²⁸ and in reference to the contributions of the other constituents.
- c. It then becomes evident that the context or “whole” is neither the additive sum of its parts, nor is it reducible to its parts, nor for that matter is it somehow “more” than its parts. A context in this sense requires

No unifying principle or agency over and above the arts or constituents which co-exist in the relationship of mutually demanding and supporting each other. The Gestalt . . . is the system, having internal unification of the functional significances of its constituents; it is the balanced and equilibrated belonging and functioning together of the parts, the functional tissue which the parts form . . . in which they exist in their interdependence and interdetermination.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 129.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

Every constituent thus not only refers to every other one, but to the totality formed by that system of references. The “whole” is precisely the system of mutually interdependent and cross-referential “parts”; it is the whole of these complex references or functional significances. Not only does every part refer to every other part, but the whole is itself inherent to every constituent; each part, precisely in virtue of its specific functional significance, “realizes” in its own specific way the whole contexture. Just this system of articulated, mutually referential constituents is the meaning of Gestalt-coherence, and just this is what Husserl’s analysis of “self-sufficiency” failed to apprehend. Furthermore, just because there cannot be any question of priority between “part” and “whole,” there cannot be any defensible dualistic account (whether Cartesian, or one involving non-sensory processes, or one invoking Stumpf’s idea of “fusion” as a higher-level, though still sensory process).

- d. It was already mentioned that it is the contexture (theme) which makes possible the organization of the context (field) as materially relevant and as background. But what makes the theme itself possible? Several conditions have already become apparent.
- (i) Although the theme makes possible the organization of the field, it is reciprocally the case that every theme appears within and as standing out from its specific field. Thus, Gurwitsch points out (here, following Husserl) that in the case of perception, “*percipere* may be characterized as *ex-cipere*”;³⁰ it is a “singling-out” of the theme from the field. Thus, “ground” can never be absent from perceptual “figure.”³¹
 - (ii) The theme does not merge into, but emerges from, the field. Not to be absorbed into the field *means* that the specific kind of “coherence” displayed contextures does not hold among items in the field, or between the field and the theme. Thus, the segregation of themes from the field follows the lines of that coherence: “Gestalt-coherence is a condition of segregation.”³²

³⁰ Ibid., p. 312.

³¹ Ibid., p. 110.

³² Ibid., p. 134.

- (iii) Every theme has a certain “positional index:” an orientation, position, or perspective within the field. For instance, a particular proposition may be apprehended as the conclusion of an argument. Its positional index consists of what Gurwitsch calls “contextual characters:” e.g., “referring back” to premises as “derived form” them, and “referring forward” to other propositions, etc. The theme appears within the field, then, but more specifically it has a certain “position” within the field and thus “orients” the field.
- (iv) The field is far from undifferentiated. Simply focusing on one thing (a house, a proposition, etc.) does not render the field of other items into an amorphous vagueness. These other items in the field remain relatively distinct and definite, differentiated from still other items, even though not now thematized. In brief, it is part of the organization of the field that each of its items is itself a potential theme—which is part of the meaning of material relevancy. Thus, when thematized, the item retains its sense of having been materially relevant in the sense of having been potential. The central conclusion follows: the organization of the field into theme/thematic-field/margin is not derived from anything else, but is rather autochthonous.³³

Wertheimer had already delineated four factors as determining the organization of Gestalten. In ascending order of import, these are: proximity, equality, closure, and good continuation. Although first established as regards only visual wholes, Gurwitsch shows that these factors have significance far beyond that. The first two (proximity and equality), he says, are ingredient in functional significance and coherency. Gurwitsch then turns to the latter two: beyond significance, weight, and coherence are good continuation and closure.

What he means can best be elucidated in cases of incomplete contexts: e.g. a melody broken off before completion, a sentence left dangling, a face incompletely drawn, and the like. In each case there is an

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–33.