

Gurwitsch's Phenomenal Holism

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Abstract Aron Gurwitsch made two main contributions to phenomenology. He showed how to import Gestalt theoretical ideas into Husserl's framework of constitutive phenomenology. And he explored the light this move sheds on both the overall structure of experience and on particular kinds of experience, especially perceptual experiences and conscious shifts in attention. The primary focus of this paper is the overall structure of experience. I show how Gurwitsch's Gestalt theoretically informed phenomenological investigations provide a basis for defending what I will call Phenomenal Holism, the view that all the parts of a total phenomenal state metaphysically depend on it. To illustrate how the ideas developed along the way can be used in advancing work on the phenomenology of particular kinds of experience, I draw on them in defending Husserl's view that we can be aware of abstract objects against a phenomenological objection.

Keywords Gestalt theory · Phenomenal holism · Cognitive phenomenology

In the introduction to his dissertation, *Phenomenology of Thematics and of the Pure Ego: Studies of the Relation between Gestalt Theory and Phenomenology*, Gurwitsch writes:

The goal of our study is to further certain phenomenological problems with the help of Gestalt-theoretical theses, to supplement Husserl's analyses by insights arrived at in Gestalt theory, as well as to correct some of his tenets, and in general to advance phenomenology along these lines beyond the stage reached

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by Husserl's *Ideen*. All this is accomplished, however, essentially in the spirit of the *Ideen*.¹

This statement proved prescient: It does not just describe the goals Gurwitsch pursued in his dissertation but those that dominated his work throughout his career.² Gurwitsch never abandoned the “spirit of the *Ideen*”: He continued to accept the basic framework of constitutive phenomenology Husserl set out in that book. But Gurwitsch's importation of Gestalt theoretical ideas into that basic framework resulted in a number of far-reaching, and in my view theoretically fruitful, revisions to Husserlian doctrine—e.g., to Husserl's views on self-awareness, attention, and non-intentional qualia.³

The main idea of Gestalt theory is that in the realm of experience wholes explain their parts. Gurwitsch applied this idea to total phenomenal states. He argued that partial phenomenal states depend for their existence on the totality of phenomenal states to which they belong. There are two ways of understanding this claim. On one understanding, it is a form of what I will call Phenomenal Holism. On another understanding, it is a form of what I will call Phenomenal Monism. I explain the difference in the first section.

A useful way to present the Gestalt theoretical insights that Gurwitsch took to have the most important bearing on phenomenology is to set them out as steps in an argument for Phenomenal Holism. This is what I do in the second and third sections. In the fourth section, I also consider how the [Argument for Phenomenal Holism](#) might be extended into an argument for Phenomenal Monism. As we'll see, the extension requires assumptions that are difficult to support.

Phenomenal Holism is a thesis about the *structure* of total phenomenal states. In arguing for it, however, we will develop a number of ideas that can be drawn on in thinking about the *constituents* of total phenomenal states, i.e., the specific experiences that occur within them. In the fifth section, I take up some issues about the scope of awareness. According to Husserl, we can be aware of abstract objects. There are both metaphysical and phenomenological objections to this claim. Here, I set out a phenomenological objection. Then I show how Gurwitsch's ideas about the structure of total phenomenal states can be drawn on in meeting it.

Phenomenal holism and phenomenal monism

Take the claim that partial phenomenal states depend for their existence on the totality of phenomenal states to which they belong. The aim of this section is to distinguish two ways of understanding this claim—a Holist way and Monist way. I begin with the Monist way.

As Jonathan Schaffer has pointed out, monist theses should be relativized in two ways.⁴ First, they should be relativized to a target domain. Second, they should be

¹ (Gurwitsch 1979), p. 177. The dissertation was first published in 1929.

² See, for example, the introduction to (Gurwitsch 1964).

³ What Husserl called “hyletic data.”

⁴ (Schaffer 2007).

relativized to a unit of counting. Thus: “monism for target t counted by unit u is the thesis that t counted by u is one.”⁵ To say what Phenomenal Monism is, then, we must specify a target and a unit.

Phenomenal Monism is a thesis about experiences, or phenomenal states. For the purposes of this paper, I do not distinguish between these. By an experience I just mean an instantiation of a determinate phenomenal property.⁶ I assume the notion of a phenomenal property is familiar and clear enough to use without further ado. Some phenomenal properties, such as the phenomenal property of visually representing red, are determinable. We can talk about instantiations of these. But when I talk about experiences, I mean instantiations of phenomenal properties that are not determinable.

Given that Phenomenal Monism is a thesis about experiences, we still have to make a choice about which experiences. We have to choose, for example, among these options:

- All experiences
- All experiences of a subject
- All experiences of a subject at a time

Here I stipulate that our target is all experiences of a subject at a time. This stipulation brackets issues about the temporal character of experience. These are important issues, but I cannot deal with them adequately here.

Now we have to choose a unit by which we will count the experiences of a subject at a time. One unit is just experience of a subject at a time. To say that there is only one of these is to say that each subject has only one experience at a time. Michael Tye has recently defended this view.⁷ Another unit is *basic* experience of a subject at a time. To say that there is only one of these is to say that each subject has only one basic experience at a time. Here I stipulate that our unit is basic experience of a subject at a time.

The property of being basic is related to the relation of dependence. The relevant notion of dependence is metaphysical dependence, not causal dependence. Consider some examples:

- This statue will melt at temperatures above 32°F because it is made out of ice and ice will melt at temperatures above 32°F.
- This car is illegally parked because it is parked next to a fire hydrant, and it is illegal to park next to a fire hydrant.

These explanations do not tell you what brought it about that the statue has its melting point (maybe my decision to make it out of ice) or what brought it about that the car is illegally parked (maybe my carelessness in parking it). Rather, they tell you

⁵ (Schaffer 2007).

⁶ Here I am using “determinate” and “determinable” in senses that W. E Johnson introduced. Being red is a way of being colored; being a square is a way of being a polygon. So being red and being a square are determinate properties relative to the determinable properties of being colored and being a polygon. See Sanford (2011) for further discussion.

⁷ (Tye 2003). In fact, Tye defends a stronger view about a larger target domain: all experiences of a subject between one period of unconsciousness and another. So his view is that each subject has only one experience between one period of unconsciousness and another.

what it is in virtue of which the statue has a melting point of 32°F and what it is in virtue of which the car is illegally parked. Similarly, in the case of phenomenal states, I will not be concerned with what brings it about that they exist, but with what it is in virtue of which they exist.

Something is basic in a domain just in case there is nothing in that domain on which it metaphysically depends. A basic phenomenal state of a subject at a time, then, is a phenomenal state of a subject at a time that does not metaphysically depend on any other phenomenal states of that subject at that time. Note that it might depend on non-phenomenal states, e.g., brain states, of that subject at that time.

As characterized so far, Phenomenal Monism is the view that among the experiences of a subject at a time there is only one that is basic. This leaves open a crucial question: which one? Phenomenal Monism should say. Here I stipulate that Phenomenal Monism is the view that among the experiences of a subject at a time there is only one that is basic *and it is the subject's total phenomenal state at that time*.

By a subject's total phenomenal state at a time I mean the phenomenally unified totality to which that subject's partial phenomenal states at that time belong. Consider yourself as an example. Right now you are having a visual experience: You see some things in your environment. Right now you are also having an auditory experience: You hear some noises in your environment. Your visual experience is a partial phenomenal state, since there is also your auditory experience. Your auditory experience is a partial phenomenal state, since there is also your visual experience. Furthermore, these partial phenomenal states are unified. Your visual experience, for example, is unified with your auditory experience in a way that it is not unified with the auditory experience of, say, your neighbor. Your total phenomenal state right now is the phenomenally unified totality to which all your partial phenomenal states right now belong.⁸

So Phenomenal Monism is the view that among a subject's experiences at a time there is one that is basic, and it is the subject's total phenomenal state at that time. We can put it as follows:

Phenomenal Monism: All partial phenomenal states of a subject at a time metaphysically depend on the subject's total phenomenal state at that time and the subject's total phenomenal state at that time is basic.

Notice that this is a conjunctive claim. If we drop the second conjunct this yields Phenomenal Holism:

Phenomenal Holism: All partial phenomenal states of a subject at a time metaphysically depend on the subject's total phenomenal state at that time.

According to Phenomenal Monism, there is always a single basic experience, and it is the total phenomenal state. Phenomenal Holism is compatible with Phenomenal Monism, but it leaves open the possibility that there are no basic experiences, that the total phenomenal state also metaphysically depends on its parts.

⁸ Worry: what if some of a subject's partial phenomenal states at a time fail to be unified with other of that subject's partial phenomenal states at that time? Then we can assign one subject two or more totality of phenomenal states at that time. Here I will assume that this is not possible. See (Bayne 2010) for extended discussion.

Gestalts

Gestalts are wholes that explain their parts. We can distinguish between different types of gestalt along three dimensions:

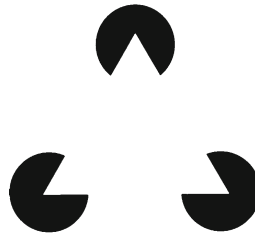
What kinds of thing the whole and its parts are

What explanatory relations the whole bears to its parts

Which properties of its parts the whole determines

One way to argue for Phenomenal Holism is to argue that a subject's total phenomenal state at a time is a gestalt. The success of this strategy depends, however, on the type of gestalt a subject's total phenomenal state at a time is supposed to be. The aim of this section is to fix on a type of gestalt adequate for our purposes.

Consider the following figure:



We can distinguish between two different wholes and associated parts. First, there is the whole physical figure. Its parts are the pies that make it up. Second, there is your whole visual experience that represents the figure. Its parts include your partial visual experiences that represent the pies in the figure. Plausibly, another of its parts is your partial visual experience that represents a triangle in the middle of the figure. No such triangle is part of the physical figure.⁹

For each of the wholes distinguished, we can formulate a gestalt thesis:

Gestalt Object Thesis: The physical figure is a gestalt.

Gestalt Experience Thesis: The visual experience of the figure is a gestalt.

The two theses are logically independent. The first is implausible: It is doubtful that the whole physical figure explains its parts. The second is more defensible. To see why, though, we must pick out the right explanatory relation.

One explanatory relation is causation. If this is the relevant explanatory relation, then the Gestalt Experience Thesis implies that your whole visual experience of the

⁹ Worry: Does your visual experience of the three pies really divide into three visual experiences of pies? Here is a reason for thinking the answer is yes. Experiences are instantiations of determinate phenomenal properties. By instantiating the phenomenal property of visually representing three pies just so, you also instantiate three phenomenal properties each of which consists of visually representing a pie just so. Therefore, in having the one experience, you also have the three. Of course this shouldn't be taken to imply that the three are *separable*. This is a different claim, one I believe to be false.

figure is a cause of your partial visual experience of, say, the bottom left pie. Perhaps this is possible. But it does not seem to me to make the Gestalt Experience Thesis out to be very plausible.

Another explanatory relation is metaphysical dependence. This is the relation introduced above in formulating Phenomenal Holism and Phenomenal Monism. Recall one of the examples illustrating it: This car is illegally parked because it is parked next to a fire hydrant, and it is illegal to park next to a fire hydrant. Say, I arrive at my car just as an officer is writing me a ticket. I ask “Why is my car illegally parked?” and he might answer “Because you are careless,” but a better answer is “Because it is parked next to a fire hydrant, and it is illegal to park next to a fire hydrant.” That’s the kind of explanation I want—a metaphysical one, not a causal one. Suppose metaphysical dependence is the relevant explanatory relation between whole and part. Then the Gestalt Experience Thesis implies that your partial visual experience of, say, the bottom left pie metaphysically depends on your whole visual experience of the figure. And this, it seems to me, is plausible. Here is why.

Contrast your visual experience of the bottom left pie in the figure with your experience of the following isolated pie:

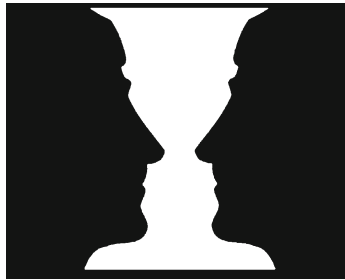


There is a phenomenal difference between these two visual experiences. The difference is in their phenomenal content. Your visual experience of the bottom left pie represents it as a disc with a wedge that is occluded by a white triangle. Your visual experience of the isolated pie represents it as a disc with a wedge that is cut out. So your visual experience of the bottom left pie has a phenomenal character that distinguishes it from your visual experience of the isolated pie. Now consider: Could your visual experience of the bottom left pie have that very phenomenal character were you to have it independently of your visual experiences of the top and bottom right pies? The answer seems to be that it could not. So this visual experience depends for its phenomenal character on its occurrence within a whole visual experience that includes visual experiences of the top and bottom right pies. Experiences have their phenomenal characters essentially, however. So we can conclude that your visual experience of the bottom left pie depends for its existence on the whole visual experience of which it is a part. That is, your visual experience of the bottom left pie metaphysically depends on the whole visual experience of which it is a part.

If it could be shown that total phenomenal states at a time are gestalts in the way that your whole visual experience of the three pies is a gestalt, this would establish Phenomenal Holism. But the claim that total phenomenal states at a time are gestalts in this way is implausible. To make clear why, we need to consider the third dimension along which types of gestalt differ—i.e. the properties of its parts that the whole gestalt determines.

Section 6 of Gurwitsch’s dissertation is titled “Two Types of Gestalt Connection.” The relationship between your whole visual experience of the three pies and your partial visual experience of the bottom left pie illustrates the first type of gestalt

connection. We can illustrate the second type of gestalt connection by reference to Rubin's Vase:



The physical image that constitutes Rubin's Vase gives rise to two different whole experiences. Both experiences have two parts: one part represents something as figure and the other part represents something as ground. The experiences differ in what is represented as figure and what is represented as ground. In one, the figure part of your experience represents two black faces and the ground part of your experience represents a white expanse. In the other, the figure part of your experience represents one white vase, and the ground part of your experience represents a black expanse. There is reason to think that both experiences are gestalts. Take, for example, the experience in which a vase appears as figure. The figure part of this experience depends for its phenomenal character on its occurring within a whole experience that includes the ground part.¹⁰ So far, then, this experience seems rather like the experience of the three pies. But there is a difference.

The difference is that you could have a visual experience that represents just the same type of vase but against a different background. Here is how Gurwitsch puts it in his later work, *The Field of Consciousness*:

Rubin's figures are independent of the ground, in that their actual location appears as contingent and extrinsic. Every such figure appears as displaceable on the ground from which it actually emerges and also as transferable from one ground to another (in the case of a black figure form a white ground to a red one), without any impairment of its phenomenal identity.¹¹

This can seem puzzling. How can it be true that (a) the figure experience representing a white vase can be re-combined with different ground experiences representing different backgrounds "without any impairment of its phenomenal identity," and (b) the whole experience of which the figure experience is a part is a gestalt? The answer is that by "phenomenal identity" Gurwitsch does not mean entire phenomenal character. He means something different, a partial determinant of phenomenal character.

Let us distinguish between two kinds of phenomenal property.¹² The first is the property of having a certain phenomenal content. This is the property of representing

¹⁰ See (Koffka 1935), p. 184–185 for a fuller discussion of this point.

¹¹ (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 357.

¹² This distinction is adapted from Chalmers' distinction between pure and impure representational properties in (Chalmers 2004).

things as being a certain way in virtue of phenomenology. An example is the property your visual experience of the bottom left pie has of representing a disc with a wedge that is occluded. The second kind of phenomenal property is the property of having a certain phenomenal content in a certain phenomenal manner. This is the property of representing things as being a certain way in a certain manner in virtue of phenomenology. An example is the property your visual experience of the bottom left pie has of representing a disc with a wedge that is occluded in the manner characteristic of vision as opposed to the manner characteristic of touch or thought.

The phenomenal character of an experience includes both sorts of phenomenal property.¹³ What Gurwitsch has in mind when he talks about “phenomenal identity” is the phenomenal content of an experience, not the entire phenomenal character of an experience, which includes both its phenomenal content and the manner in which that phenomenal content is represented.¹⁴ So Gurwitsch’s point about the Rubin Vase can be put like this. Two figure experiences representing a white vase combined with different ground experiences representing different backgrounds can have the same phenomenal content. But the whole experiences of which the figure experiences are parts are still gestalts because the figure experiences depend for their exact phenomenal manners on the whole experiences of which they are parts. The idea is that the figure experience representing a white vase represents a white vase in a distinctive manner, fixed by the distinctive background against which the vase stands in relief.¹⁵

Now we can say what the two types of gestalt connection Gurwitsch distinguishes are. In one type, a partial experience depends on the whole experience of which it is a part for its phenomenal content. In the other type, a partial experience depends on the whole experience of which it is a part for its phenomenal manner. In both types, a partial experience depends on the whole experience of which it is a part for its phenomenal character—the difference is in the relevant determinant of phenomenal character. So this difference in gestalt connection is a difference along the third dimension identified above, along the dimension of which properties of its parts the whole gestalt determines.

Let us return to the issue of total phenomenal states at a time. Now we can make clear why if total phenomenal states at a time are gestalts, they are not of the same type as your visual experience of the three pies. The difference is that many partial phenomenal states do not depend for their phenomenal content on the total phenomenal state of which they are part. Suppose some random thought consciously occurs

¹³ Some philosophers deny this. They argue that the phenomenal character of an experience is exhausted by its having a certain intentional content. Suppose this content is a Russellian proposition composed of objects and properties. Then Gurwitsch would reject this view, and I am inclined to agree with him. Suppose, however, the content is a Fregean proposition composed of modes of presentation of objects and properties. Gurwitsch’s commitments here are less clear, and I am also uncertain about what to say. It could be that the work of phenomenal manners can be done by Fregean modes of presentation. If so, the terminology of the present discussion would require adjustment, but the main points should survive these adjustments. See (Chalmers 2004) for further discussion.

¹⁴ See, for example, (Gurwitsch 1964) p. 456 where he distinguishes between “*the proposition which is apprehended* and *the proposition taken as it is apprehended.*” Italics in the original.

¹⁵ Cf. (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 327, 359, and 363. In these discussions, Gurwitsch draws the same distinction between content and manner I have drawn except he uses Husserlian jargon, and he applies it in the same way I have applied it, except he does so to the more general case of theme and thematic field, about which see below.

to you. It is implausible that it depends for its phenomenal content on the total phenomenal state within which it occurs. So let us assume that it does not. Still, it might depend for its phenomenal manner on the total phenomenal state within which it occurs. This is an idea we pursue in the next section.

The field of consciousness

Gurwitsch's book *The Field of Consciousness* is largely about the structure of total phenomenal states at a time. According to the view he develops, total phenomenal states at a time are gestalts somewhat analogous to figure/ground experiences. The aim of this section is to elaborate and motivate Gurwitsch's view. I will break it down into four theses.

- A. Total phenomenal states at a time divide into theme, thematic field, and margin. The plausibility of (A) depends on what we mean by theme, thematic field, and margin. Here is how Gurwitsch first introduces (A):

We shall establish and substantiate the thesis that every total field of consciousness consists of three domains, each domain exhibiting a specific type of organization of its own. The first domain is the *theme*, that which engrosses the mind of the experiencing subject, or as it is often expressed, which stands in the 'focus of his attention.' Second is the *thematic field*, defined as the totality of those data, co-present with the theme, which are experienced as materially relevant or pertinent to the theme and form the background or horizon out of which the theme emerges as center. The third includes data which, though co-present with, have no relevancy to, the theme and comprise in their totality what we propose to call the *margin*.¹⁶

I will understand theme, thematic field, and margin as consisting of experiences. Some experiences are parts of the theme: They represent the subject's focus. Some experiences are parts of the thematic field: They represent items as more or less relevant to the subject's focus. And some experiences are parts of the margin: They represent items as being irrelevant to the subject's focus.

This division of experiences possesses some *prima facie* legitimacy. The extent to which it is theoretically useful, however, depends on how it is further elaborated. The remaining theses provide this elaboration.

- B. The relation of theme to thematic field generalizes the relation of figure to ground.

This is something Gurwitsch repeats often.¹⁷ There are two distinct lines of generalization.

The first has to do with phenomenal content. The phenomenal contents of figure experiences and ground experiences exhibit some distinctive features. Recall the Rubin Vase. When the white part of the physical image appears as figure it seems to have a contour. When it appears as ground, it seems to lack a contour; in this case,

¹⁶ (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 4.

¹⁷ See, for example, Gurwitsch (1964), p. 113, 320–321, and 356–357.

the two black faces seem to have a contour. The same white patch appears in both experiences, but it appears differently when it appears as figure than when it appears as ground. In general, figures experiences represent contours, and ground experiences do not.

This difference in phenomenal content can be generalized. When something appears to have a contour, it appears as a cohesive individual. But something can appear as a cohesive individual but not in virtue of appearing to have a contour, for it might not be the sort of thing that could have a contour. Consider, for example, a musical note. When something appears to lack a contour, it appears as some indefinite stuff. But something can appear as some indefinite stuff but not in virtue of appearing to lack a contour, for it might not be the sort of thing that could have a contour. Consider, for example, the sounds that form the always present but seldom noticed auditory background within which we live.

So the first way the relation of theme to thematic field generalizes the relation of figure to ground is this. Theme experiences represent things as cohesive individuals. Field experiences represent things as indefinite stuff. This last point should be qualified. It is not as if what appears in a thematic field appears as homogenous. Suppose your auditory background includes the sound of your air conditioner and the sound of your neighbors' dog barking. These appear as different sounds. But they also appear as belonging to an ill-defined grouping of sounds. This ill-defined grouping is the indefinite stuff of your auditory background. Suppose you are attending to the news. You hear a grouping of sounds. But it is no longer ill-defined. The sounds you hear belong together and form a cohesive individual—the news report.

The second line of generalization has to do with phenomenal manner. Figure experiences and ground experiences depend on each other for their phenomenal character. As discussed above, they do not depend on each other for their phenomenal content. Rather, they depend on each other for the manner in which they present their phenomenal content. The figure experience you have when you represent a white vase represents that white vase in a manner that is fixed by its standing out from a specific background, which is represented by your ground experience. Similarly, the ground experience you have when you represent a black background represents that black background in a manner that is fixed by its standing behind a specific figure, which is represented by your figure experience.

These dependencies in phenomenal manner can be generalized. Here is how we might put the generalizations:

Your theme experiences represent their contents in phenomenal manners fixed by those contents appearing in a specific context, which is represented by your field experiences.¹⁸

¹⁸ Cf. (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 319: “The *appearance of a theme* must be described as *emergence from a field* in which the theme is located occupying the center so that the field forms a background with respect to the theme. The theme carries a field along with it so as not to appear and be present to consciousness except as being in, and pointing to, the field.” Italics in original.

Your field experiences represent their contents in phenomenal manners fixed by those contents forming the context of a specific focus, which is represented by your theme experiences.¹⁹

Here, I am using the term “context” to pick out the contents of field experiences. It generalizes the notion of background.

The motivation for making these generalizations comes from reflection on examples. Gurwitsch describes one involving thought.²⁰ Here are two different experiences you might have. You might consciously entertain the thought that Columbus discovered America in 1492 in the context of thinking about great geographical discoveries in the age of exploration. Or you might consciously entertain the same thought in the context of thinking about the growth of Spanish power in the sixteenth century. In each case, the thought that Columbus discovered America in 1492 is your theme. What differs is the thematic field. In the first, it is constituted by thoughts about the growth of geographical knowledge. In the second, it is constituted by thoughts about sixteenth-century politics. There is a felt difference between the two overall experiences. But this felt difference does not seem to be exhausted by the difference between your thoughts about the growth of geographical knowledge and your thoughts about sixteenth-century politics. Rather, there is a felt difference in your thought about Columbus. Following Gurwitsch, we might say that it appears to you in a different perspective, light, or orientation depending on which thematic field it occurs in. Note that the content of the thought remains the same. What differs is the manner in which you represent that content. So this is a case that illustrates how the phenomenal manner of a theme experience might depend on the contents of the field experiences that make up the context in which it occurs.²¹ I discuss how the phenomenal manner of field experiences might depend on the contents of theme experiences below.

C. Experiences in the thematic field are experienced as comparatively more or less central to the theme.²²

Thesis (C) tells us two things. First, it tells us how the phenomenal manners of field experiences depend on the contents of theme experiences. The manners in which field experiences represent their contents are fixed by how central those contents are experienced as being to the contents of theme experiences. Here is how Gurwitsch puts the idea in his dissertation:

The ground (thematic field) is organized around the figure (theme). There is always given a thematic field organized and oriented with respect to this theme.

¹⁹ Cf. (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 340: “Dealing with a scientific theorem, we have a more or less explicit and clear consciousness of what leads to that theorem, of consequences of this theorem, of other theorems compatible or incompatible with it, of facts somehow related to those to which our theorem refers...the data falling in [this] class [i.e. the field] appear, moreover, as *being of a certain concern* to the theme.” Italics in original.

²⁰ See (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 359.

²¹ In Author (2012a), I describe cases in which visual experiences of diagrams and thoughts depend for their phenomenal character on their occurring within the context of grasping a proof of a mathematical theorem. I presented these as cases of *gestalts* of the sort that your visual experience of the three pies is. But, if we vary them so that your thoughts about the proof recede into the thematic field, then they become cases of *gestalts* of the sort under discussion.

²² Gurwitsch uses the term “relevance” for what I am calling centrality. See, for example, Gurwitsch (1964), p. 340–341.

Whatever is experienced as pertaining to the thematic field has “directedness to the center.”²³

The second thing thesis (C) tells us is that experiences in the thematic field can be *ordered* by experienced comparative centrality:

Not all items pertaining to the ground have the same relationship to the figure. Material relations may differ from one another: they may, for example, be more or less close. Along with them there is variation in the position which the components of the thematic field occupy with respect to the theme...In such ways nearer and further zones are delimited within the thematic field, according to the closer and looser material relations between its items and the theme.²⁴

How comparatively central a field experience seems to the theme can be fixed in different ways.

One way is by the spatial relations that appear to hold between the theme experience's focus and items in the field. Suppose you examine a house. It stands out from its surroundings. Your experience of the house is your theme experience. Your experiences of its surroundings are your field experiences. The surroundings can be ordered by their proximity to the house. And this ordering is one way to induce an ordering of comparative centrality on the field experiences: One field experience is more central to the theme than another field experience just in case what it represents appears to be in greater spatial proximity to the house than does what the other represents.

Apparent spatial relations do not provide the only way to induce an ordering of comparative centrality on field experiences. Take events in a narrative, such as *Hamlet*. Suppose you consider Claudius's departure during the murder scene of *The Murder of Gonzago*. This is the event you focus on. You also have other events in mind—for example, the events leading up to the staging of the play, such as Hamlet's conversation with the ghost of his father, and the events that ensue after Hamlet observes Claudius's departure. These events form the background out of which Claudius's departure emerges. They stand in relations of more or less narrative relevance to Claudius's departure. And this relation of narrative relevance might induce a relation of comparative centrality on the field experiences in virtue of which you represent them.

Field experiences can be ordered by comparative centrality to the theme even in the absence of any spatial, temporal, or causal structure. Suppose you are working through a proof. As you focus on one step in the proof, it will stand out from a background consisting of other steps in the proof. These steps appear as more or less immediate premises in the establishment of or consequences of the step you focus on. The field experiences in virtue of which you represent them can be ordered by the relation of comparative centrality to the theme in a way that respects this order of apparent inferential relations.

In addition to theme experience and field experiences, there are marginal experiences. The need for these should be clear. Suppose you are looking at a house. It

²³ (Gurwitsch 1979), pg 204.

²⁴ (Gurwitsch 1979), p. 205.

emerges from a background that your field experiences represent. Now suppose some random thought about recent politics occurs to you. This thought has no relevance to the house. It is in the margin. This example might not work for everyone. If you are passionate about recent politics, thoughts about it might in fact color your other experiences, no matter what their contents. Perhaps this is because thoughts about recent politics influence your mood and moods somehow color all experiences. Even if this example does not work to introduce the notion of a marginal experience for you, however, I will assume that some example or other will.

D. Experiences in the margin are experienced as comparatively least central to the theme.

Gurwitsch says that experiences in the margin are “characterized by their *irrelevancy* to both the theme and the thematic field with which they are co-present.”²⁵ This can be interpreted in two ways. On one interpretation, experiences in the margin do not stand in a relation of comparative centrality to the theme. It is undefined for them; marginal experiences are not in its domain or range—not in its field. On another interpretation, experiences in the margin do stand in a relation of comparative centrality to the theme. What distinguishes them is that they are comparatively least central to the theme: Marginal experiences are those that are no more central to the theme than any other experience is.

I favor the second interpretation. There are two reasons why. First, it tells us what positive property endows marginal experiences with their distinctively marginal character. Just saying that they lack a certain property possessed by other experiences does not do this. Second, it allows us to define the field of consciousness. The field of consciousness is just the field of the comparative centrality relation. We can do more. Taking the relation of comparative centrality to the theme as our single primitive, we can give rigorous characterization of the structure of the field of consciousness.

Here is how.²⁶ Let us call the comparative-centrality-to-the-theme relation centrality for short, and when an experience X bears it to Y, we will say “X is more central than Y.” We can assume that it is a strict partial ordering. Taking it as our primitive we can define theme, field, and margin:

- X is in the theme=df for all Y, Y is not more central than X (i.e., X is a minimal element of the centrality ordering).
- X is in the margin=df for all Y, X is not more central than Y (i.e., X is a maximal element of the centrality ordering).
- X is in the field=df for some Y and some Z, Y is more central than X, and X is more general than Z (i.e., X is neither minimal nor maximal).

We can distill much of the import of theses (A) through (D) into two claims. The first tells us about the field of the centrality relation:

- Every field includes a theme, field, and margin

The second thesis tells us about the phenomenal significance of the centrality relation:

²⁵ (Gurwitsch 1964), p. 344.

²⁶ Cf. Watzl (2011); for more on which see footnote 38 below.

- For all X and Y, if X is more central than Y, then this makes a difference to the phenomenal manners of X and Y.

These two claims do not contain all of the content of theses (A) through (D). They contain that content which is required for the argument for Phenomenal Holism, to which I now turn.

An argument for phenomenal holism

In order to set out the argument for Phenomenal Holism, we need to introduce a new relation, which can be defined in terms of the centrality relation introduced in the last section. That relation is taken as primitive. The new relation is best defined in two stages. Here they are:

- Centrality-related: X is centrality related to Y=df, X is more central than Y, or Y is more central than X.
- Centrality-connected: X is centrality-connected to Y=df, there is a sequence of experiences X, e_1, \dots, e_N, Y whose first member is X and whose last member is Y and is such that adjacent experiences are centrality related—in brief: There is a path from X to Y through centrality-related experiences.

We can argue for Phenomenal Holism as follows:

- (1) An experience has its location in the centrality ordering because of its centrality connections to other experiences. [Premise]
- (2) Every experience is centrality connected to every other experience—i.e., given any two experiences, X and Y in a total phenomenal state at a time, X and Y are centrality connected. [Premise]
- (3) An experience has its location in the centrality ordering because of its centrality connections to every other experience. [From (1) and (2)]
- (4) An experience has its phenomenal character in part because of its location in the centrality ordering (e.g., whether it is in the theme, field, or margin). [Premise]
- (5) An experience has its phenomenal character in part because of its centrality connections to every other experience. [From (3) and (4)]
- (6) An experience has its phenomenal character essentially. [Premise]
- (7) An experience depends for its existence on its centrality connections to every other experience in the total phenomenal state to which it belongs. [From (5) and (6)]
- (8) If an experience depends for its existence on its centrality connections to every other experience in the total phenomenal state to which it belongs, then it depends for its existence on the total phenomenal state to which it belongs. [Premise]
- (9) So, an experience depends for its existence on the total phenomenal state to which it belongs. [From (7) and (8)]

Since (9) is about an arbitrary experience, it implies Phenomenal Holism—that all partial phenomenal states of a subject at a time metaphysically depend on the subject's total phenomenal state at that time.

Premises (1), (2), (4), (6), and (8) are the independent premises. I will assume (6) and (8). Both seem plausible to me. Premise (1) is motivated by the thought that there is nothing else to account for an experience's location in the centrality ordering.

The usefulness of introducing the relation of centrality connectedness is precisely its role in motivating (2). Notice that similar claims about centrality or centrality relatedness are not necessarily true. You might have two field experiences each of which is more or less central to the theme, but neither of which is more or less central than the other to the theme. But given that every experience in the field of consciousness is in the field of the centrality relation and given that the centrality relation has minimal and maximal elements—i.e., the experiences in the theme and the experiences in the margin—it follows that there is always a path from any one experience to another through centrality related experiences. Premise (4) is motivated by our discussion in the previous section.

So that is the argument for Phenomenal Holism.

The argument can be extended into one for Phenomenal Monism as follows.²⁷ First note that (7) in the argument for Phenomenal Holism implies the following:

Global Inter-dependence: All experiences in a total phenomenal state are metaphysically inter-dependent.

Second, grant the following two supplementary premises:

Premise 1. Every total phenomenal state at a time includes a basic experience.

Premise 2. Any basic experience will be metaphysically independent of any experience it does not overlap.

Suppose a partial experience is basic and call it *e*. Since *e* is partial, there is another experience *e** that *e* does not overlap. So by Premise 2, *e* and *e** are metaphysically independent. But by Global Inter-dependence, *e* and *e** are metaphysically inter-dependent. So the assumption that a partial experience is basic leads to a contradiction. So if there is a basic experience, it is the total phenomenal state. Premise 1 tells us there is one. Thus, we can conclude that Phenomenal Monism is true: All partial phenomenal states of a subject at a time metaphysically depend on the subject's total phenomenal state at that time, and the subject's total phenomenal state at that time is basic.

The problem with the argument for Phenomenal Monism is Premise 1.²⁸ It is not clear why it should be true. There is no phenomenological motivation for it. If phenomenal states didn't metaphysically depend on anything else, then perhaps there would be some metaphysical motivation for it. But plausibly, they are metaphysically dependent on non-phenomenal states, such as brain states. So even if no phenomenal state is metaphysically basic, this does not imply anything strange about the groundlessness of reality since phenomenal states might metaphysically depend on non-phenomenal states, some of which are basic.

²⁷ This part of the argument is adapted from Schaffer (2010).

²⁸ I thank Emmanuel Baierlé for helping me to see this.

Total phenomenal states and the scope of awareness

The aim of this section is to show how Gurwitsch's ideas about the structure of total phenomenal states can be drawn on in advancing phenomenological work on the constituents of total phenomenal states and, in particular, work on the scope of awareness. First, I will present Husserl's thesis that we can be aware of abstract objects in addition to concrete objects. Second, I will develop a phenomenological objection to this view. Third, I will draw on Gurwitsch's ideas about the structure of total phenomenal states in meeting this objection.

Consider the following passages from *Ideas I*:

We can assert "blindly" that two plus one is equal to one plus two; but we can also make the same judgment in the manner peculiar to intellectual seeing...²⁹ Empirical intuition or, specifically, experience, is consciousness of an individual object; and as an intuitive consciousness it "makes this object given," as a perception it makes an individual object given originally in the consciousness of seizing upon this object "originarily," in its "personal" selfhood. In quite the same manner intuition of an essence is consciousness of something, an "object," a Something to which the intuitional regard is directed and which is "itself given" in the intuition...³⁰

This is not Husserl at his stylistic best, but the point he is making can be simply put. Contrast two cases: Someone tells you that there is a seahorse in the aquarium versus you see for yourself that there is a seahorse in the aquarium. In both cases, let us suppose, you judge that there is a seahorse in the aquarium. Notice that, in the first case, the basis of your judgment is one a blind person can share. But, in the second, it is not. In the second case, you judge that there is a seahorse in the aquarium because you are visually aware of the seahorse there. Now contrast two other cases: Someone tells you that $a+b=b+a$ versus you "see" for yourself that $a+b=b+a$. In both cases, let us suppose, you judge that $a+b=b+a$. Notice that, in the first case, the basis of your judgment is one a mathematically "blind" person can share. It is difficult to imagine someone so mathematically challenged, but you can get the idea if instead you imagine receiving the result of a long computation from a calculator. In the second case, things are different. The difference, according to Husserl, is again a matter of awareness: In this case, you judge that $a+b=b+a$ because you are aware of the commutative property of addition. The awareness does not come from sensory experience. It comes from thought. So we can call it cognitive awareness. Husserl's thesis is that abstract objects and states of affairs—e.g., the addition operation and its possession of the commutative property—can be objects of cognitive awareness.

To assess Husserl's thesis, we need to say something about awareness. Awareness is a certain two-place determinable relation between a subject and an object. It is determinable because there are different ways a subject can be aware of an object. Two examples are seeing and hearing. Seeing and hearing have their distinctive features, but they are both forms of awareness. What makes them so? The answer to this question that I will assume is that they are both forms of awareness because

²⁹ (Husserl 1983), p. 327.

³⁰ (Husserl 1983), p. 9–10.

they have two related properties: They have a phenomenal character; they enable demonstrative thought; and the first property partly explains the second property. The second property should be qualified in two ways. First, they enable demonstrative thought in creatures that have the capacity to entertain demonstrative thoughts. Second, they are enablers of original demonstrative thought—they do not enable demonstrative thought just by transmitting this capacity from another time, as might memory, or from another subject, as might testimony. I say that the first property partly not wholly explains the second property because I assume that a hallucination of an F can have the same phenomenology as a perception of an F, though there is no F about which the hallucination enables original demonstrative thought.³¹ So we can say: Awareness is that two-place determinable relation a subject stands in to an object whenever that subject is in a phenomenally conscious state that enables original demonstrative thought about that object in creatures that can entertain demonstrative thoughts, and does so at least partly because of its phenomenology.³²

Given this conception of awareness, what constraints are there on the relation? One idea is that there are causal constraints: If S is aware of o by having experience e, then o causes e. If this is a genuine constraint, then it provides a basis for mounting a metaphysical challenge to Husserl's thesis since abstract objects do not stand causal relations. I believe this challenge can be met, but I leave the task of doing so for another occasion.³³

Here I want to consider a challenge based on a phenomenological constraint. The idea is this: If S is aware of o by having experience e, then e's phenomenology differentiates o from its background.³⁴ Here is some intuitive motivation for this assumption. Suppose e's phenomenology didn't differentiate o from its background. Then o would phenomenally blend into its background—that is, o would be phenomenally camouflaged.³⁵ I am inclined to think that if e leaves o phenomenally camouflaged, then e cannot enable demonstrative thought about o. But all we need is a weaker claim: If e leaves o phenomenally camouflaged, then even if e does enable demonstrative thought about o, e's phenomenology is not part of the explanation of why e enables demonstrative thought about o. The idea is that, when the phenomenology of an experience partly explains how that experience enables demonstrative thought about an object, its explanatory role essentially depends on its differentiating that object from its background. So there is reason to think that if e's phenomenology doesn't differentiate o from its background, it does not make its subject, S, aware of o. The difficulty with cognitive awareness of abstract objects that I want to focus on becomes apparent when we consider what determines the background of an object.

³¹ Relationalists about phenomenology would deny this claim. It will not play an important role in what follows. Since a partial explanation claim is weaker than a total explanation claim, if you accept the latter, then you can accept the points I make that are motivated by the former.

³² See Snowdon and Robinson (1990) and Siegel (2006) for similar characterizations of seeing, and (Tye 2010) for a similar characterization of what he calls "consciousness of things," which I take to be the same as awareness.

³³ I take it up in Author (2012b).

³⁴ Cf. Dretske (1969), Siegel (2006), and Tye (2010).

³⁵ I add the qualifiers "phenomenally" to acknowledge a possibility that Uriah Kriegel pointed out to me: e might have non-phenomenal properties that differentiate o from its background. For example, e might cause S to engage in selective behavior toward o.

Consider sensory awareness of concrete objects first. When you look at a sea horse in an aquarium the background consists of some coral, some plant life, other sea creatures, maybe some bubbles. Why these things? The most natural and plausible view is that they are in your visual field when you look at the sea horse. The visual field is a just a volume of space. It contains some stuff in addition to the sea horse. In order to be visually aware of the sea horse, it has to look different from this other stuff. We can make similar remarks about touch, smell, hearing, and taste. In general, when you are sensorily aware of some concrete object, the background from which your sensory experience must differentiate that object consists of the occupants of a volume of space determined in some modality specific way.³⁶

Now consider cognitive awareness of abstract objects. For you to be cognitively aware of *o* is for you to be aware of *o* by thinking. Thinking about an object, however, does not determine some volume of space the occupants of which make up that object's background. So this raises a challenge to Husserl's thesis. The challenge is not that we can't think about abstract objects. The challenge is that mere thinking cannot make us aware of abstract objects in the way that Husserl suggests it does when you judge that $a+b=b+a$ in a non-blind fashion. Consideration of thought about concrete objects might lend some credibility to this challenge. I can think about the center of the sun all I want, but no amount of thinking about it will make me aware of it. For that, I would have to perceive it somehow, maybe indirectly through the use of special instruments.

So the challenge is this: How does thinking about an object and, in particular, an abstract object, determine a background for it? The suggestion I want to make is that if thinking about an object determines a background for it, it does so by imposing a centrality ordering on your total phenomenal state, with your thoughts about the object as minimal elements, i.e., as parts of the theme. The object's background will consist of those items represented by experiences in the resulting thematic field.

Here are two points we can make in favor of this proposal. First, it is non-arbitrarily discriminating. Suppose your thoughts about the addition operation make you aware of it. What items constitute the background from which you differentiate it? Plausibly, other mathematical entities, such as numbers and operations. You might have all sorts of other things in mind, such as the moon. But these are not part of the background. The proposal provides us with a non-arbitrary way to draw this distinction: The experiences in virtue of which you have the moon in mind are marginal, and the experiences in virtue of which other mathematical entities in mind are comparatively more central. A second reason the proposal seems attractive to me is that it is phenomenologically plausible. There is a felt difference between merely thinking about something and thinking about something in a way that makes you aware of it. In all the cases I imagine, this difference is associated with how central my thoughts are in my total phenomenal state. Some random thought about the addition operations

³⁶ There might be special cases in which the background of an object you sense does not just include items in the volume of space that constitutes that sense's field on that occasion. Suppose, for example, your visual field is filled up by a uniformly colored expanse. You see the expanse but do not differentiate it from anything else in your visual field, since there is nothing else in your visual field. This case suggests that we need a more comprehensive account of backgrounds even if we stay focused on giving an account of sensory awareness.

does not make me aware of it. But a thought that occupies the center stage around which the other experiences in my total phenomenal state pivot just might.

A consequence of this proposal is that though both are forms of awareness sensory awareness and cognitive awareness are significantly different in how they occur in total phenomenal states. It follows from the proposal that if S is cognitively aware of o, then S represents o by theme experiences. But, plausibly, S might be sensorily aware of o without representing o by theme experiences. One reason why this is plausible is that sensory experiences determine backgrounds independently of the centrality ordering on the total phenomenal state to which they belong. Another reason why is that reflection on examples suggests it is false. Suppose S thematically represents the sea horse, not the sea anemone behind it. Still, S has a visual experience of the sea anemone. Furthermore, this visual experience seems to make S aware of the sea anemone: On the face of it, S's visual experience enables demonstrative thought about the sea anemone, even if S does not exercise this ability and actually entertain demonstrative thoughts about it. According to Gurwitsch, for S to attend to o is for S to represent o by theme experiences.³⁷ If this is so, then one way to put the difference between sensory awareness and cognitive awareness is that they differ in how they stand vis à vis attention. Cognitive awareness requires attention; sensory awareness does not.

We still have much to learn from Gurwitsch. His departures from Husserl were more conservative than those pursued by some of his contemporaries such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. But in my view, this is a virtue. He hangs on to what is right in Husserl and provides us with theoretical resources that can be drawn on in elaborating a more defensible version of Husserlian phenomenology.

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³⁷ Gurwitsch makes this identification and appeals to it in exploring the phenomenology of various types of *shift* in attention in his dissertation; see Gurwitsch (1979), p. 175–286. Watzl (2011) defends a similar view about attention, which he calls structuralism. He also introduces a strict partial ordering which he calls peripherality, and he argues that attention consists in making some experiences such that they are not peripheral to any others. Watzl does not assume that total phenomenal states have the additional structure that I've been considering (such as a unique center), though he leaves it as an open possibility. There are other points of contact between Watzl's paper and this one. For example, he shows how any two experiences might be peripherally connected even if it is not the case that for any two experiences one is peripheral to the other, and he considers how this might bear on holistic theses about consciousness.

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