



GESTALT THEORY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD IN GURWITSCH AND MERLEAU- PONTY

Teoria Gestalt e método fenomenológico em Gurwitsch e Merleau-Ponty

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Teoría de la Gestalt y método fenomenológico en Gurwitsch y Merleau-Ponty

Abstract: In this essay I examine the different views that Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty hold on the phenomenological relevance of Gestalt psychology. Against Husserl's dismissal of the latter on the grounds of its purported "naturalism," they each claim that the Gestaltist critique of psychological atomism releases a transcendental perspective in the study of perception. However, they find themselves in disagreement as to what phenomenological status should be granted the transcendental nature of the Gestalt. I argue that the central point of contention revolves around the application of the eidetic method of Husserl. Whereas for Gurwitsch investigations pursued in line with Gestalt theory turn out to be noematic analyses, confronting the subject with ideal unities disclosed in eidetic assertions, Merleau-Ponty is critical of this identification, as it seems to him to imply a form of dualism. I conclude by critically confronting Gurwitsch's reading of Gestalt theory with that of Merleau-Ponty, emphasizing the originality of the French philosopher's characterization of the Gestalt as an originary figure of preobjective being.

Keywords: Gestalt, psychology, phenomenology, Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty.

Resumen: En este ensayo examino las diferentes visiones que Gurwitsch y Merleau-Ponty mantienen sobre la relevancia fenomenológica de la psicología de la Gestalt. Frente al rechazo de Husserl de esta última por su supuesto "naturalismo," cada uno de ellos afirma que la crítica gestaltista del atomismo psicológico libera una perspectiva trascendental en el estudio de la percepción. Sin embargo, se encuentran en desacuerdo en cuanto al estatus fenomenológico que debe otorgarse a la naturaleza trascendental de la Gestalt. Sostengo que el punto central de la discordia gira en torno a la aplicación del método eidético de Husserl. Mientras que para Gurwitsch las investigaciones llevadas a cabo de acuerdo con la teoría de la Gestalt resultan ser análisis noemáticos, que confrontan al sujeto con unidades ideales reveladas en aserciones eidéticas, Merleau-Ponty es crítico de esta identificación, ya que le parece que implica una forma de dualismo. Concluyo confrontando críticamente la lectura que hace Gurwitsch de la teoría de la Gestalt con la de Merleau-Ponty, destacando la originalidad de la caracterización que hace el filósofo francés de la Gestalt como figura originaria del ser preobjetivo.

Palabras clave: Gestalt, psicología, fenomenología, Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty.

Resumo: Neste ensaio, examino as diferentes visões que Gurwitsch e Merleau-Ponty sustentam sobre a relevância fenomenológica da psicologia da Gestalt. Contra a recusa husserliana desta última em razão de seu suposto "naturalismo," ambos defendem que a crítica da Gestalt ao atomismo psicológico libera uma perspectiva transcendental no estudo da percepção. Entretanto, os dois discordam entre si no que diz respeito a qual estatuto fenomenológico deve ser concedido à natureza transcendental da Gestalt. Defendo que o ponto central da divergência gira em torno da aplicação do método eidético de Husserl. Enquanto para Gurwitsch as investigações realizadas em linha com a teoria da Gestalt se revelam análises noemáticas, confrontando o sujeito com unidades ideais expressas em asserções eidéticas, Merleau-Ponty é crítico dessa investigação, que lhe parece implicar uma forma de dualismo. Concluo com uma confrontação crítica da leitura que Gurwitsch faz da teoria da Gestalt com aquela feita por Merleau-Ponty, enfatizando a originalidade da caracterização da Gestalt pelo filósofo francês como figura originária do ser pré-objetivo.

Palavras-chave: Gestalt, psicologia, fenomenologia, Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty.

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Introduction

As is well known, Edmund Husserl criticizes naturalism and psychologism in all its different forms for aiming at establishing, through factual inquiries into the natural world, an objective foundation for knowledge and the empirical sciences. To his mind, such attempts at foundation inevitably fail because they are incapable of differentiating between empirical judgments, that carry only a factual generality, and transcendental or eidetic ones, that are universal and *a priori*. Only a phenomenological inquiry into the eidetic structures of a transcendently purified consciousness may finally provide a true foundation for the sciences. Such is indeed the task of phenomenology.

In light of this, the philosophical projects of Aron Gurwitsch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are interesting because of the different ways in which they try to reconcile phenomenology with psychology in the study of perception. In both of their approaches, Gestalt theory occupies a central role. They argue that the Gestalt, such as it is theorized by the psychologists of the Berlin School of Gestalt psychology, constitutes a comprehensive model of the functioning of perception that is not only compatible with Husserlian phenomenology, but also entails a revision of some of its fundamental tenets. Moreover, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty attentively read the works of each other and commented on them in their own writings. In their published and unpublished material many lines of agreement can be found, but also several disaccords. The notion of the Gestalt is a central point of contention in this regard.

In this article I will examine the different phenomenological readings that Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty offer of Gestalt theory in the study of perception. I begin by briefly outlining Husserl's dismissal of Gestalt psychology on account of its purported naturalism. I then examine in closer detail the ways in which Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty take to task this dismissal in investigating their common claim that Gestalt theory's critique of the so-called "constancy hypothesis" can be likened to a form of the phenomenological reduction, suggesting the possibility of reinterpreting the Gestalt nature of perception along the lines of intentionality. As will be made clear, the intentional nature of the Gestalt is a dividing line in their respective interpretations. Whereas Gurwitsch seeks to orient Gestalt theory towards the eidetic phenomenology of the early Husserl, Merleau-Ponty distances himself from the eidetic method. Keeping this in mind, the question of the mode of being of the Gestalt becomes decisive. This question will then be treated following Gurwitsch's identification of the Gestalt with the perceptual noema, and the critique that it suffers in the French philosopher's reading. I conclude by highlighting the originality of Merleau-Ponty's own interpretation of the Gestalt concept.

Gurwitsch's Defense of Gestalt theory

The fundamental idea of Husserlian phenomenology is that philosophy must be founded not upon hypothetical constructions, but upon *phenomena*, "that which shows itself," that which presents itself to intuition in the course of experience. As long as we dwell in the "naïve" attitude of natural science, the access to phenomena remains foreclosed to us. That is why it is necessary to perform the phenomenological *epoché*, a "bracketing" or "suspension" of the "general thesis" that constitutes the unquestioned validity of the world of "natural life" as well as of the positive sciences. Through the reduction, phenomenology becomes a transcendental discipline uncovering the constitutive dimension of consciousness, the latter understood as the condition of possibility of all meaning, validity, truth, and so on. Thus, the signification of a given object necessarily depends upon the meaning-bestowing acts of the transcendental consciousness.

Now, if the being of the transcendental subject resides in consciousness, as Husserl strives to show, it is only on the condition that the latter is "purified" of all objective determination, of all that which stems from causal relations inserting it in the world as a "thing among things." According to Husserl, all psychology, including Gestalt psychology, is ineluctably blind towards this transcendental dimension of consciousness, because it does not succeed in distinguishing the mode of being of consciousness from the mode of being of innerworldly objects. As he puts it in the "Epilogue" (*Nachwort*) to his *Ideas*, originally published in 1931 as a preface to its English translation:

For those who live in the habits of thought prevailing in the science of nature it seems to be quite obvious that purely psychic being, or psychic life, is to be considered a course of events similar to natural ones, occurring in the quasi-space of consciousness. Evidently and in principle, it makes no difference in this regard whether one lets the psychic data be blown into aggregates "atomistically," like shifting heaps of sand, even though in conformity with empirical laws, or whether they are considered parts of wholes which, by necessity, either empirical or a priori, can behave individually only as such parts



within a whole – at the highest level perhaps in the whole that is consciousness in its totality, which is bound to a fixed form of wholeness. In other words, atomistic psychology, as well as Gestalt psychology, both retain the sense and the principle of psychological “naturalism” [...]. (Husserl, 1989, pp. 423-424)

According to Husserl, Gestalt psychology is but one of the contemporary developments of a psychological tradition that goes back to Locke and his conception of the psyche as a *tabula rasa*, a complex of sense data susceptible of being classified according to the fundamental forms of their combination, and explained by means of causal laws regulating the formation and transformation of said data. This “naturalist” tradition – which is generally that of modern psychology, culminating with Berkeley, Hume and Mill, but persisting still in Brentano’s psychology of intentionality – only treats consciousness as a regional problem of natural reality, so that the fundamental elements of consciousness, the “sense data,” would be *a priori* susceptible of being distinguished and hierarchized as spatio-temporal beings in combinatory and causal networks or relations. In this sense, the accusation of naturalism leveled against Gestalt psychology concerns all psychology that treats the mind as a spatio-temporal object among other physical and psychical objects. Inversely, the object of phenomenological research is not, as in the natural attitude, the “human ego” posited as a “real object” in the pregiven world, but a “transcendental ego” which first discloses the meaning of the world.

In a review, published in 1932, of Husserl’s preface to his *Ideas*, entitled “Critical study of Husserl’s *Nachwort*,” Aron Gurwitsch takes to task his teacher’s declaration that Gestalt psychology shares the same naturalist or sensualist presuppositions as the Lockean tradition:

By referring Gestalt psychology to the Lockean tradition, Husserl overlooks its essential novelty. It is not a question of a new theory or description of sense data when Wertheimer opposes the “Gestalt thesis” to the “bundle thesis.” It seems that Husserl, in the statement cited above, has that opposition alone in view. This opposition acquires its full and concrete sense only in connection with the relinquishment of the constancy hypothesis. As a consequence of this relinquishment, the description and investigation of what is given to consciousness is emancipated from considerations concerning constellations of stimuli. (Gurwitsch, 2009b, 125)

To Gurwitsch’s mind, there can be no question of ascribing to the Gestaltist tradition the same ontological presuppositions as those of classical and contemporary empiricism. Indeed, that would amount to mistakenly interpreting the main innovation of Gestalt theory to be its holistic account of sensation, as opposed to the atomistic paradigm of empiricism, whereas in reality this innovation is only secondary as it results from another, more profound, theoretical insight: Gestalt psychology abandons the doctrine of sense-data because it breaks with the taken-for-granted assumption of classical psychology that the ultimate elements of conscious life depend exclusively and exhaustively on local stimulation. It is this assumption that Gurwitsch refers to as the “constancy hypothesis.”

This term (*Konstanzannahme*) was first coined in 1913 by the Gestalt theorist Wolfgang Köhler in the context of his refutation of Carl Stumpf’s theory of “unnoticed sensations” (Köhler, 1971, pp. 16-17). The hypothesis postulates a point-by-point correspondence between local peripheral stimulation (or “sense impression”) and elementary perception or sensation, a constancy in the connection between the elements of a given situation and the elements of the reaction. Or, to put it differently, it maintains that the content of perception is always determined univocally by the stimulation of the sensory organs, such that a given stimulus always gives rise to the same reaction or sensation in the subject. Psychology is thus lead back to “the famous mosaic hypothesis,” according to which “sensory experience is a mere mosaic, an entirely additive aggregation of facts” which is “just as rigid as its physiological basis” (Köhler, 1970, pp. 95; 114). This is another name for what Gurwitsch calls the “bundle thesis” in reference to Wertheimer’s critique of the Humean conception of consciousness as a “bundle of impressions,” a mosaic of sensory data and images derived from these data merely coexisting or succeeding one another without any internal connection whatsoever (Wertheimer, 1922). What the critique of the constancy hypothesis teaches us, on the other hand, is that the minimal sensible is never an isolated sensation, an atomistic content, but always and necessarily a relation. Perception is from the beginning a perception of relations, given that a relation is not necessarily the fruit of an intellectual operation, nor is it posterior to the perception of the terms that it connects. Accordingly, the task of Gestalt psychology becomes determining the conditions under which certain perceptions occur, and articulating these conditions into Gestalt laws governing the transformations of different kinds of perceptions. These laws are constants or invariants that replace the constants claimed by traditions psychology to be found in pure sensations. In other words, the constants reside in the laws and not in the data of elementary sensations.

Based on these remarks, we can give the following definition of the Gestalt: It signifies an ensemble of elements mutually supporting and determining one another, realizing a total structure or a whole which governs them, assigning to each of them a function and a determinate place in that whole. Each element owes its existence to the role that it is assigned by the whole of which it is a part. Its being resides in, depends on and is derived from its contribution to the whole into which it is integrated. In a word, Gestalt psychology advances a double theoretical postulate concerning the functioning of perception: first, it rejects the idea of sensation,



considered by traditional psychology as a necessary mediator between external stimuli and perceptual experiences; second, it affirms the fact that “forms” or *Gestalten*, that is, the unities organizing the perceptual fields, are just as immediately given as their constituent parts.¹

In his reading of Gestalt theory, Gurwitsch pursues this double postulate to its ultimate phenomenological consequences. Indeed, as he puts it in his review of Husserl’s *Nachwort*, the Gestaltist critique of the constancy hypothesis, far from being simply a holistic account of sensation pursued along the lines of naturalistic psychology, comports an incipient form of the phenomenological *epoché*. As Gurwitsch argues, the Gestalt theorists, in a way similar to Husserlian phenomenology, proceed by a suspension of all pregiven objectivities and the pregiven world, with the aim of describing perceptual experience such as it presents itself to the perceiving subject, without referring to any form of acquired experience or a purely physiological framework of explanation.

Just that in which Husserl sees the significance of the *epoché*—exclusion of all knowledge resting on everyday experience of the world and of all knowledge derived from the positive sciences, an exclusion combined with the disclosure of the “world of consciousness purely as such”—is attained by the relinquishment of the constancy hypothesis. This relinquishment has a function and significance for Gestalt theory which is similar to the transcendental phenomenological reduction within Husserl’s phenomenology. (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 126)

This view was expounded by Gurwitsch already in his doctoral thesis, *Phenomenology of Thematics and of the Pure Ego: Studies of the Relation Between Gestalt Theory and Phenomenology* (originally published in *Psychologische Forschung* in 1929). As he argues in this work, following the relinquishment of the constancy hypothesis, Gestalt psychology is exclusively concerned with what is given to consciousness just as it presents itself in its phenomenal nature, so that the data of consciousness, far from being referred beforehand to objective stimuli, come into their rights independently of any preconceived theoretical interpretation. Because it considers the objects of experience exclusively as they are experienced, the psychological inquiry, which is in reality proto-phenomenological, moves in the *noematic* rather than the *objective* realm. It is no longer a matter of speaking of objects such as they *are*, but only such as they are *given* and *how* they are given. As Gurwitsch puts it, “Precisely by abandonment of the constancy hypothesis the realm of the noematic is opened up to psychology, and psychology deals only with this noematic realm,” with the result that “all insights into affairs acquired under the guidance of the principles of Gestalt psychology are precisely insights into ‘affairs’ (in the accordingly modified noematic sense)” (Gurwitsch, 2009b, pp. 213-214). In other words,

Gestalt theory [...] has the same significance and methodical function for psychology as the transcendental reduction has for phenomenology. Objects in the normal sense of the word fall away, and noemata alone are left over; the world as it really is is bracketed, the world as it looks remains. (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 214).

From this point of view, then, Gestalt psychology aligns itself with the program of research of phenomenology.² Once psychology abandons the constancy hypothesis and with it, the ambition of relating perceptual experience back to psychophysical events and occurrences, a true psychological description of our lived encounter with the perceived world becomes possible.

We find a similar view outlined in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. Just as Gurwitsch before him, the French philosopher insists upon the philosophical consequences of Gestalt psychology’s refutation of psychological atomism, which to his mind opens a new point of departure for transcendental description. However, as we shall see, this also puts his interpretation of Gestalt psychology at odds with Gurwitsch’s, since the two philosophers disagree as to what phenomenological *status* we are to grant the nature of the perceptual field disclosed by the theory of form.

Gestalt Theory in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty

Gurwitsch’s influence on the philosophical thought of Merleau-Ponty is considerable, even though the latter only rarely refers to his works. Merleau-Ponty does, however, mention Gurwitsch’s *Phenomenology of Thematics and of the Pure Ego* in his first study project “The nature of perception” (1934), citing the declaration of the latter that “the analyses of Husserl lead to the threshold of *Gestaltpsychologie*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1980, p.

¹ Kurt Koffka was the first to conceive of these novel formulations, although he attributes them to Wertheimer. Cf. “To V. Benussi,” (1915) in (Koffka, 1938, p. 377).

² Indeed, Gurwitsch even suggests that Köhler’s work on animal behavior, Koffka’s and Lewin’s studies on child development, not to mention Gelb and Goldstein’s seminal research on brain-injured patients, might extend the field of research of phenomenology in the direction of regional investigations not pursued by Husserl (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 126). Gestalt-theoretical investigations are thus not only compatible with Husserlian phenomenology – they actually widen its application to a large number of areas that fall outside of the scope of problems treated by the latter.



12). Moreover, he followed Gurwitsch's lectures in 1937 at the Sorbonne on the phenomenology of perception and Gestalt theory, and he aided him with the preparation of an article published in 1936 entitled "Some Aspects and Developments of Gestalt Psychology."³ Nowhere is the influence of Gurwitsch more patent, however, than in the following passage of the introductory chapter to the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), where Merleau-Ponty echoes his former teacher's suggestions that the Gestaltist critique of the constancy hypothesis can be likened to an incipient form of the phenomenological reduction:

It's just that the psychologists who practice the description of phenomena are normally unaware of the philosophical weight of their method. They do not see that the return to perceptual experience, if this reformulation is consistent and radical, condemns all forms of realism, that is, all philosophies that leave consciousness behind and take as given one of its results [...], or that the critique of the constancy hypothesis, if carried to its conclusion, takes on the value of a true "phenomenological reduction." (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 48)

Like Gurwitsch before him, Merleau-Ponty stresses that Gestalt theory, in its critique of psychological atomism, releases a transcendental perspective. It offers us a view on the "phenomenon of the phenomenon, and definitively converts the phenomenal field into a transcendental field" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 65).

On the other hand, while it is undeniably true that Gestalt theory suffers from a certain form of realism, this is only because "the psychologists who practice the description of phenomena are normally unaware of the philosophical weight of their method" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 48). Indeed, in *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), he even goes so far as to claim that "the theory of form is aware of the consequences which a purely structural conception entails and seeks to expand into a philosophy of form, which would be substituted for the philosophy of substances," although he adds that "it has never pushed this work of philosophical analysis very far (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 132). That is why psychology, "once purified of all psychologism, [...] could become a philosophical method" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 64).

To understand what Merleau-Ponty has in mind here, it is necessary first to consider the highly original way in which the French philosopher conceives of the phenomenological method. Now, if Husserl for his part recognizes a certain "parallelism" between psychology and phenomenology (Husserl, 1989, p. 414), it nevertheless remains the case that he denies psychology a truly philosophical status on the pretext that it remains ignorant of the essence of consciousness. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty insists upon the homogeneity between psychology, in particular Gestalt theory, and phenomenology, a homogeneity that becomes synonymous of an impurity, or even a contamination between the empiric and eidetic order.⁴ "If the notion of Gestalt helps us to understand many facts and is fruitful in the empirical order, it must have some phenomenological truth and must have something to contribute to phenomenology" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 77). Contrary to what Husserlian phenomenology suggests, the notions of value, signification and truth would therefore be rehabilitated in Gestalt theory: "It is rather a way of showing that conscious phenomena are both temporal (for they happen in time and occur at a definite moment) and yet at the same time internally significant, so that they can support a certain kind of knowledge and truth" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 77). Indeed, the French philosopher goes as far as to claim that Husserl's "intuition of essences" (*Wesensschau*) corresponds to the notion of Gestalt, thus placing the "unthought" of his German predecessor in the field of investigations opened up by Gestalt theorists:

In other words, I believe that to give weight to his eidetic intuition and to distinguish it sharply from verbal concepts, Husserl was really seeking, largely unknown to himself, a notion like that of the Gestaltists – the notion of an order of meaning which does not result from the application of spiritual activity to an external matter. It is, rather, a spontaneous organization beyond the distinction between activity and passivity, of which the visible patterns of experience are the symbol. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 77)

In light of these remarks, we are thus in a better position to understand in what way the Gestalt psychological descriptions may access to the status of a phenomenological reduction. These descriptions, Merleau-Ponty claims, are already valid as eidetic descriptions – a validity which Husserl normally reserves to the domain of essences disclosed by the eidetic reduction.

Nevertheless, it should be added that such a claim is unacceptable from the perspective of Gurwitsch's constitutional phenomenology. Indeed, to his mind Gestalt theory remains, despite its valuable descriptive insights, an empirical science that, as such, is above all concerned with observable facts, and not with transcendental problems of constitution. It does not raise questions pertaining to the relation between the phenomenal thing (the thing such as it appears), and the real thing (that which remains identical across its manifold

³ For a critical evaluation of the influence of Gurwitsch upon the thought of Merleau-Ponty, see Maria-Luz Pintos (2005) and (2016) (as Maria-Luz Pintos-Peñaranda). Cf. also L. Embree, "Biographical Sketch of Aron Gurwitsch," in Gurwitsch (2009a), p. 41–54.

⁴ Cf. "The Philosopher and his Shadow" (1959). "What resists phenomenology within us [...] cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it," and that is why, finally, "the ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a p. 178); and the following working note: "No absolute difference, therefore, between philosophy or the transcendental and the empirical (it is better to say: the ontological and the ontic) [...]" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 266).



appearances) (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 60). The latter are exclusively the concern of transcendental consciousness such as it comes to light through the phenomenological reduction. The primary concern of phenomenology “is not with actual occurrences in their actuality but, on the contrary, with possibilities, compatibilities, incompatibilities, and necessities” (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. xvii). It concerns itself with eidetic assertions that, as such, are independent of factual matters: “Eidetic assertions neither contain nor imply any statement concerning factual matters or factual existence, but refer exclusively to ideal possibilities and compossibilities” (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 183). It is thus “exclusively as a problem and subject-matter for analysis” that Gestalt theory, and indeed any other science, may play a role in phenomenology (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 167).⁵

On the other hand, as we have just seen, it is precisely psychology, and in particular Gestalt theory, that furnishes Merleau-Ponty with the means of conceiving of a notion of essence which would not be separable from the facticity of the intentional life that brings it to light. Of course, this is only possible on the condition of reconceiving also the idea of intentionality. As will be made clear, this puts Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reading of Gestalt theory at odds with that of Gurwitsch, who follows Husserl much more closely than the French philosopher. In the following sections we offer a reading of the different views that the two philosophers have of intentionality. We will see that while Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty are in agreement that the perceived presents an autonomous and spontaneous organization or “meaning” that cannot be traced back to any meaning-bestowing activity on the part of the perceiving subject, in short that perception possesses a Gestalt unity, they nonetheless differ in their views on what phenomenological status we are to grant this unity.

The Gestaltist Recasting of Intentionality

Against Husserl’s dismissal of Gestalt psychology, Gurwitsch insists upon the transcendental realm opened up by the latter’s program of “experimental phenomenology.” As he explains in *Phenomenology of Thematics and of the Pure Ego*, just as for Kant the transcendental realm concerns problems regarding the constitution of the “unity in a multiplicity,” that is, the possibility of transcendent objects, so the Gestalt thesis takes its departure from the original structuredness and organization of the primal phenomenological material. However, whereas the Kantian transcendental evolves from the Humean doctrine of “chaotic sensuous material,” the problem of the “synthetic unity of multiplicities” is modified and renewed as a consequence of the essentially new Gestaltist conception of what constitutes the primary elements of perceptual experience (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 215). This improved conception of the intrinsic orderedness of the immediately given has repercussions also in the field of phenomenology, in particular regarding intentionality and constitutional analysis.

For Gurwitsch, it is in particular Husserl’s distinction between meaning-bestowing acts and *hyletic data* (articulated by the former) that proves to be problematic in this perspective, as it seems to imply the idea of a primary, senseless matter without any organization or structure, an idea that Gestalt theory has invalidated as a simple theoretical postulate without any justification in lived experience. As a consequence, he seeks to radicalize the phenomenological project of Husserl, criticizing and improving its concepts where he finds them to be in conflict with the experimental results of Gestalt psychology. Among these, it is above all the hylomorphic distinction which he finds to be problematic and in need of rectification:

Still, in concluding we wish to indicate some of the doctrines defended by Husserl, which seem to us to require revision or, at least, reexamination. Among those doctrines is Husserl’s dualistic theory of perception as it manifests itself in his distinction between hyletic data and apperceptive or functional characters. We have advocated that the notion of hyletic data be relinquished altogether. Its relinquishment would entail a revision of the theory of intentionality. Intentionality can no longer be *generally* defined as a bestowal of sense, for in the last analysis such a definition implies that at the basis of the structural hierarchy of intentional functions and accomplishments there is a bestowal of sense upon hyletic data which in themselves are devoid of it. (Gurwitsch, 1966, p. 726)

Gurwitsch adds that “allowance for certain trends in contemporary psychology, especially Gestalt theory, has led us to the mentioned reexaminations, revisions, and even departures” (Gurwitsch, 1966, p. 726). Husserl’s commitment to non-intentional hyletic data would thus be the consequence of his tacit acceptance of the constancy hypothesis. As Gurwitsch puts it in *The Field of Consciousness* (1957): through the distinction between hyletic data and meaning-bestowing acts, the constancy-hypothesis “subreptitiously intervenes in the phenomenological investigations,” even though the latter constitute a theoretical context that excludes it by definition (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 262–263). To claim that sense-data may be identical in the face of different

⁵ The disagreement between the two philosophers on this point may be partly retraced to their differing views of the phenomenological reduction. Indeed, according to Gurwitsch, the eidetic reduction is *a priori* separable from the transcendental reduction, whereas for Merleau-Ponty the transcendental reduction is always already and inevitably eidetic (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 123; Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 45; 2012, p. lxxviii). Whence the dissatisfaction on Gurwitsch’s part with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the reduction which, to his mind, the French philosopher only applies to the “true and exact world” of science, all the while being incapable, because of his purported “existentialism,” to apply it to the world of preobjective experience (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 165).



apperceptual situations and through varying forms of organization depending on these situations, amounts to admitting that organization is brought about in the sense-data from without, and that, consequently, the data are themselves devoid of any structure or articulation. According to Gurwitsch, Husserl's affirmation in *Ideas* of a "phenomenological residuum of what is conveyed by 'sense' in normal external perception" (Husserl, 1983, p. 204) seems to corroborate this view. Hence, Gurwitsch claims, the notion of hyletic data has to be abandoned, and this in turn leads to a modification of the theory of intentionality. If the idea of hyletic data is no longer admissible, then intentionality can no longer be conceived of as a meaning-bestowing act (in the sense of meaning being bestowed upon materials that are themselves devoid of it).

Phenomenological analysis, pursued along the lines of Gestalt theory, thus forces us to revise the Husserlian doctrine of intentionality: "The concept of intentionality, fundamental to phenomenology, must [...] undergo a reinterpretation so as to become independent of the dualistic conception of consciousness with which it appears somehow connected in Husserl's theory" (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 264). In a non-dualistic description of intentionality there can therefore be no admission of a distinction between hyletic data on the one hand, and on the other hand noetic functions which operate on the former in apperceiving, interpreting or in any other way imbuing them with meaning. The only valid distinction to be maintained is between the noetic and the noematic aspects of intentionality, between the noeses as temporal and psychological events and the noemata as atemporal, ideal and meaningful entities corresponding to the former as their intentional correlates. In addition, as Gestalt theory teaches us, organization is an "autochthonous" feature of experience, one which is not simply acquired empirically through a process of learning, but which presents itself in the most elementary form of perception. In a word, "*the object thus presents itself in sense-perception itself*, with no special organizing, assimilating, or interpreting activity intervening" (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 99).

This declaration is echoed in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Gestalt theory. Like Gurwitsch before him, he declares that Gestalt psychology is in fact, and contrary to Husserl's precocious dismissal of it, a discipline *founded* upon the idea of intentionality:

Gestalt theory is a psychology where everything has a sense. There are no psychic phenomena that are not oriented toward meaning. In this sense, it is a psychology founded on the concept of intentionality. The meaning which inhabits all psychic phenomena does not originate from a purely mental activity; it is an autochthonous meaning which constitutes itself on the basis of "elements." (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 330)

In this interpretation, the auto-constituting or "autochthonous" meaning of phenomena and their intentional nature mutually imply one another, without there being any need of posing a structural parallelism between the forms of lived experience and the external forms of the physical world. In affirming the autochthonous meaning of phenomena, however, Merleau-Ponty does not want to commit us to a form of ontological realism, because meaning is still constituted within the intentional correlation. But neither does it originate in the mental activity of the subject, since it is not the result of any meaning-bestowing act. Thus, we read in the *Phenomenology of perception*: "There is an autochthonous sense of the world that is constituted in exchange between the world and our embodied existence and that forms the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung* (sense-bestowal)" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 466).⁶ Like Gurwitsch before him, Merleau-Ponty implies that Husserl does not go far enough in his critique of intellectualist and empiricist philosophies of perception. Husserlian conceptualization would therefore not be equal to the intuitions it intends to respond to, and would continue to practice a reconstitution of them in a tacit form, threatened by a dualistic and projective scheme conveyed by the notion of sense-bestowal.

Merleau-Ponty cannot help but relate the split between sensible data and noetic acts to the eternal epistemological impasse of dualism. If we accept Husserl's suggestion that the sensory matter of consciousness (*hyle*) are synthesized in a noetic act and set over against the constituted meaning associated with an intentional, animating form (*morphé*), then the very conception of consciousness as synthesis seems to presuppose some sort of initial separation. How can one unify what one has already separated? It is at this point that Gestalt theory intervenes in a decisive manner. Indeed, the Gestalt poses the problem of the unity of perception and offers an original solution to it in affirming an intrinsic and originary structuredness or organization of the perceived world. There can be no question, then, of distinguishing between a primary senseless matter and intentional functions that would endow it with perceptual meaning, because "the matter of perception" is already "pregnant with its form" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 15). But how is it possible, phenomenologically speaking, to reconcile the affirmation of an autochthonous meaning of the phenomenon with the doctrine of intentionality? In what follows, we shall offer two different ways of responding to this question following the suggestions proposed by Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty.

The Gestalt and the Problem of Perceptual Unity

If Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty are in agreement that the phenomenal field is autochthonous from the point of view of its organization, that it *forms itself* in some way and that this auto-formation entails a revision

⁶ In a working note dated February 1959, we read, in a similar vein: "And at the same time the *perception of...* the Gestalt cannot be a centrifugal *Sinngebung*, the imposition of an essence, a *vor-stellen* [...]." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 181)



of the Husserlian theory of intentionality, it nonetheless remains the case that they imagine the phenomenological nature of this field in fundamentally different ways. For Gurwitsch, as we have already remarked, “analyses pursued along the lines of Gestalt theory prove to be noematic analyses” (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 116) meaning that “objects in the normal sense of the word fall away, and noemata alone are left over” (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. 214). As a consequence, intentionality is interpreted as an objectivizing act in which multiple perceptions of a given object “mutually confirm and corroborate one another” as “phases into the unity of one sustained perceptual process” (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 282). It follows that the noetic side of the phenomenological correlation must be understood as the temporal actualization of the “atemporal, unreal, identical ideal” signification of the noematic pole (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. xvii). Thus, it is only in reflecting upon the noematic status of the phenomenon that we exit the natural attitude of psychology in order to enter the domain of transcendental description which discloses the essential correlation between the temporality of mental processes on the one hand, and on the other the noematic atemporal unities and identities that correspond to them. It is only in this form that “the theory of intentionality receives its definite shape” (Gurwitsch, 2009b, p. xvii).

This is the point where Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the Gestalt nature of perception diverges from that of Gurwitsch. Whereas Gurwitsch phenomenologically reinterprets the Gestalt coherence of perception as a noematic unity – that is as an identity of atemporal meaning confronting the subject with an ideal unity –, Merleau-Ponty, for his part, rejects the noetico-noematic division on the grounds that it seems to him to imply a form of intellectualism which would reduce the real to a correlate of thought, perception to the thought of perceiving, and the unity of the Gestalt to a unity of signification. As he explains in “The Philosopher and his Shadow”:

There must be beings for us which are not yet kept in being by the centrifugal activity of consciousness: significations it does not spontaneously confer upon contents, and contents which participate obliquely in a meaning in the sense that they indicate a meaning which remains a distant meaning [...].

And he adds that “the series of retro-references (*Rückdeutungen*) which lead us ever deeper could not possibly reach completion in the intellectual possession of a noema” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 165). Or, to cite the *Phenomenology*: “The world has its unity without the mind having succeeded in linking its sides together and in integrating them in the conception of a geometrical plan” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 342). As it were, Merleau-Ponty turns the interpretation proposed by Gurwitsch on its head. Whereas for the latter the unity of the intended object is grounded upon the constancy of the noematic references that comprise its internal horizon, Merleau-Ponty claims that it is to the contrary the thing such as it first presents itself in sense perception that engenders this constancy: “Far from the thing reducing down to constant relations, the constancy of relations is grounded in the evidentness of the thing” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 315).

This disagreement merits further attention as it acutely puts into question the status that the Gestalt holds, at the heart of the intentional correlation, in the respective attempts of the two philosophers to integrate Gestalt theory with phenomenology. In *The Field of Consciousness*, Gurwitsch touches on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology on several occasions, noting some points of convergence but above all offering a severe critique of it.⁷ It is mainly the French philosopher’s refusal in *Phenomenology of Perception* to equate the perceived thing with the system of its concordant appearances through which it is presented that he finds problematic. Commenting on the passage that we just cited, Gurwitsch notes the following:

The reason Merleau-Ponty has persuaded himself to maintain a distinction between the thing itself and a system of concordant appearances is, we submit, his failure to discern the noematic from the noetic aspect of perception and to pursue consistent and thoroughgoing investigations of the noematic aspect. Such investigations ultimately lead to the disclosure of the noematic status of all objects, including perceivable material things. On strictly phenomenological grounds, there is no justification for distinguishing the thing itself from a systematically concatenated group of perceptual noemata, all intrinsically referring to, and by virtue of their mutual references, qualifying, one another. (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 293)

The critique that he addresses to Merleau-Ponty boils down to the fact that the French philosopher rejects distinguishing the noematic from the noetic pole of perception, thereby disregarding the essential nature of the former. In the eyes of Gurwitsch, this rejection amounts to a postulation of the being of the perceived thing beyond its noematic cohesion – a position which is not justifiable from a phenomenological point of view as it seems to imply a form of transcendental realism.

Merleau-Ponty, for his part, was aware of the critique that Gurwitsch had leveled against the *Phenomenology* in *The Field of Consciousness*, and he comments on it in a series of reading notes accompanying his lecture of the latter. It should be mentioned that in these notes, Merleau-Ponty is writing for himself and not for us. Although his notes are fragmentary and often quite enigmatic, they do however offer us some valuable insights about his philosophical disagreement with Gurwitsch. For Merleau-Ponty, the error of Gurwitsch

⁷ For an overview of Gurwitsch’s critique of Merleau-Ponty, see L. Embree (1981).



consists in reducing the mode of being of the Gestalt to that of a moment of noematic unity, that is to say, by inserting it from the beginning into the horizon of a perceptual process of which it would be the ideal term. In this context, the critique that he addresses towards Gurwitsch encompasses a wider criticism of the purported positivism of Husserl. As a matter of fact, it appears that it is in reality the eidetic method which prevents phenomenology from recognizing the peculiarity of the Gestalt nature of the phenomenal field (Merleau-Ponty refers to it as “the Gestalthafte”). To quote one of the reading notes:

Gurwitsch, like all rationalist-analytics, analyzes the *Gestalthafte* into “noematic structures,” the thing into “references to other perceptions” [where are these references? There are none: there is adumbration as cut-out from . . . as integrated to a field] (165) {FC 202–203}. The eidetic method is responsible for the intellectualism of Husserl: it is this method which causes perspectivism and the open infinite of the thing, which are the contrary of an ideal truth, to become unified. And that the problem “how can that which is open be there, crystallized?” (problem of transcendence) is masked (166) {FC 204}. (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 179)⁸

In the following two passages, he pursues his reading of Gurwitsch, this time by addressing himself directly to Husserl:

[...] the foundation of the unity is noematic: it is the noema which causes the *Einseitigkeit* of the adumbration to be “both experienced and overcome” (173) {FC 212}. [= a positive noematic ground is supposed by Husserl as condition of the consciousness of incompleteness – Positivism – I am against it, consciousness of incompleteness is not consciousness of completeness = it is *Offenheit*. Concretely, moreover, impossible to compose the thing thus: adumbrations + noema (aspect of the thing at an instant or for a sense) + the thing itself. The adumbrations already have the value of “something,” the thing remains oneiric. In a *quale*, there is as much reality as in a “thing.”] (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 180)

The “references” to other possible perceptions understood as “anticipations.” Husserl will say later *Vorhabe*. [Husserl does not see that the sensible world is movement that is congealed, crystallized, but maintained in the thickness of *Gestalthafte*.] [An organism is preserved time [*temps en conserve*].] Error of Husserl: to believe that the identity of the thing results from the *Einstimmigkeit* of the appearances (that is reflexive). It does not result from it, it precedes it. The unity of the thing is not constructed on appearances: it is implicated in each partial appearance, which would be other if it was not part of the thing (for example: a sound as temporal being). (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 180)

One could multiply the number of passages that criticize the positivism implied in the eidetic method. Several of them, including the ones we have just cited, turn around the interpretation of the theory of sketches or adumbrations (*Abschattungen*). Indeed, this descriptive procedure lies at the heart of the phenomenological approach to perception.⁹ Husserl shows with the theory of sketches that the perceived thing does not acquire its unity and identity beyond or independently of the multiplicity of its aspects. It is from within the diversity of the sketches that the unity of the perceived thing is attested. This unity is not, however, completeness, but a fullness or thickness that the perceived thing would lose were it to be observed all at once and from all sides. In fact, its consistency and unity would be diminished if the profiles it offered were not the signaling of others, latent but anticipated, forming the horizon of the former. Every object has an infinite number of horizons that may be systematically developed as prefigured possibilities belonging to the thing-noema and allowing for possible modes of noetic access to it. Therefore, in approaching an object, the subject already “possesses” it by a set of anticipations and prefigurations that make up its intentional horizon. As Husserl puts it in the *Active and Passive Syntheses Lectures*:

[...] everything that genuinely appears is an appearing thing only by virtue of being intertwined and permeated with an intentional empty horizon, that is, by virtue of being surrounded by a halo of emptiness with respect to appearance. It is an emptiness that is not a nothingness, but an emptiness to be filled out; it is a determinable indeterminacy. (Husserl, 2001, p. 42)

The horizons are not empty possibilities, but rather intentionally pre-delineated potentialities that comprise the system of noematic references by which the thing may be concretely given in its identity across each of its aspects. Gurwitsch echoes this view when he writes the following:

Every single perception proves to be a perception of the thing itself and as a whole, though from a determinate point of view. To express this in phenomenological terms, the experience of any single appearance proves tantamount to the apprehension of the entire noematic system through the apprehension

⁸ The brackets in this citation, as in the following ones that will be quoted, are those of Merleau-Ponty. The indicated pagination refers to *The Field of Consciousness* by Gurwitsch.

⁹ Cf. §§ 41-44 of *Ideen*, for example (Husserl, 1983).



[...] of one of its members. It is by virtue of such references to further noemata that the appearance presently actualized is essentially determined as appearance of the perceived thing itself. (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 211)

And he adds:

Because of the equivalence [...] between the actual existence of a material thing and the progressive actualization of a coherent noematic system, every single perceptual noema plays its specific role within the noematic system and has functional significance [...] for that system. The functional significance of any single perceptual appearance is essentially codetermined by references to other appearances. (Gurwitsch, 2010, p. 211-212)

As we have seen, it is precisely this “codetermination” of the perceptual appearance by “references” to other appearances that is problematic in Merleau-Ponty’s view. He fears that the unity of appearances, thus conceived, is still marked by a form of intellectualism, and he ends up doubting even Husserl’s own solution: “We do not have to connect a series of *Abschattungen* through an intellectual act, for they have something like a natural or primordial unity” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 442). The perceived thing is not the geometrical plan of its profiles, correlative of consciousness, but it is *there* where I reach it, without for that matter being perfectly observable. It is actually, and not possibly present in each intentional aim and in each perceptual appearance without having to be referred to the synthesizing or constituting activity of consciousness. To the contrary, perceptual identity, far from being based on a system of references congealed into the positivity of an *eidós*, is founded on a “primordial unity,” the “generality” of the “something” given prior to any thematic identification or any multiplicity requiring synthesis. In this perspective, the horizon can no longer be understood in the Husserlian sense of a “determinable indeterminacy” because determinability, understood as the ideal term indicated by the series of adumbrations, would falsify the open infinity of the perceptual process (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 180). According to Merleau-Ponty, it is therefore...

[...] absurd to want to analyze a horizon in terms of noesis and noema, consciousness of... and object. The horizon is not extension of the zone of clear vision where these structures are realized: it is the milieu of these crystallized structures, their pre-intentional *Worin*. (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 182)

The limitation of the perceptual process operated by the noema stems from a conception of intentionality which transforms the open infinity of the perceptual process into a positive finality – a finality that consists in the subordination of the indeterminate to the *a priori* possibility of determination, or to put it differently, in making of the consciousness of perceptual incompleteness a modality of the consciousness of completeness. In this perspective, the noema is the reason (*logos*) of things such as they present themselves in external perception, constituted in intentional life. It is the horizon of their fulfillment. As a consequence, the identity of the perceived thing finds itself founded upon the horizon-consciousness, the latter being itself polarized towards objectivity following an “*all-pervasive teleological structure*, a pointedness toward ‘reason’ and even a pervasive tendency towards it” as Husserl puts it (Husserl, 1969, p. 160).

But this philosophical gesture (which Merleau-Ponty does not hesitate to qualify as “positivist”) hinders the possibility of thinking the indeterminate as a *positive* phenomenon, that is, not as the internal horizon of a presumptive unity, *a priori* susceptible of explication and thematisation, but insofar as it is *transcendence*. Inversely, the reduction of transcendence to the *signification* of indetermination or incompleteness comes down to misjudging the particularity of the transcendent as such, because the consciousness of transcendence cannot be reduced to the consciousness of an essence or a thing – it is rather, as Ted Toadvine has suggested, *the essential incompleteness of consciousness itself* (Toadvine, 2001, p. 200).

In order to overcome the impasses of traditional phenomenology, and to avoid the danger of intellectualism, it is therefore necessary to redefine the horizon so as to dissociate the theory of adumbrations from its eidetic form (such as it comes to light in the noetico-noematic correlation). Once again, the notion of Gestalt intervenes at this key juncture. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we return to what he calls the *Gestalthafte*, an identity founded on the generality of “something” given before all thematic identification and more originary than any multiplicity soliciting a presumptive synthesis. Far from being reassembled in an *eidós* sustained by consciousness, the possible perceptions that the perspectivism of the perceptual process offers us can only be founded upon this first generality that founds the identity of the *Gestalthafte*: “The ‘something’ is general not in the sense of the *hen epi pollon*, but of a generality that is primary, originary, before the multiplicity” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 178).

The formula “*hen epi pollon*,” an expression of Aristotelian origin, can be found in Husserl’s Experience and Judgment where it designates the essence seized (as the unity of the identical) across the synthetic apprehension of a multiplicity of individual objects, so that a general object cannot be seized apart from the multiplicity of which it constitutes the unity – a unity which, however, transcends the multiplicity that it assembles (Husserl, 1973, p. 343). By contrast, in the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, the unity designated by the *Gestalthafte* is situated at a level below or prior to the partition of the one and the multiple: “It is the generality of *Wesen* (verbal, active), of that which *west* and acts. Like the world, this generality is before the one and the multiple” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 178-179). Indeed, the one and the multiple are in reality abstractions that



are founded in the sphere of logic, in a sphere of reality which would be *a priori* enumerable and by that very token susceptible of being cast into an eidetic form. Now, among the founding notions of traditional logic we find that of identity, a notion to which is ontologically related that of essence. Furthermore, essence, such as it is delivered to us by the method of eidetic variation governed by the principle of identity, precisely obliges us to distinguish the one from the multiple in situating them on two different planes of being: the universal and the contingent. Thus, the eidetic method, insofar as it refers us to this numerical distinction between the one and the multiple, situates us from the beginning on the categorial plane of logic – a plane that Merleau-Ponty, however, tries to surpass. Indeed, the generality which he speaks of is situated on a level more originary than that of the numerical distinction. It is a generality designated by *Wesen*, not in the sense of *eidōs* (as is the case with Husserl), but in the active sense of the term, a kind of open-ended process more apt at responding to the transcendence of the world. Otherwise put, if the cohesion of form of the organization of the phenomenal field is not that of a moment of unity, of a *hen epi pollon*, it is situated at a more originary level, pre-logical, before the distinction of the one and the multiple. It forms, we could say, the cohesion of what Bergson calls “an indistinct or qualitative multiplicity, without resemblance to the number” (Bergson, 2007, p. 78).

One could argue, then, that we witness a kind of “delogization” of the phenomenon in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, a delogization that leads him to break with the eidetic orientation of phenomenology. The mode of being of the Gestalt cannot be explicated in terms of essence and existence because it does not refer to the distinction between signification and variation of facts that is operatorial in the eidetic method. It is therefore precisely in examining the being of the Gestalt that phenomenology may arrive at a level of generality, that of the *Gestalthafte*, that precedes the bifurcation of the perceived world in terms of actuality and possibility, existence and essence, individuality and generality, and so on. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in an unpublished note, “Show [...] that one must absolutely go beyond the bifurcation essence-existence: *Wesen* (*verbal*) – Show it starting with the ‘Gestalt’”.¹⁰ Or, as he already emphasized in *The Structure of Behavior*:

What is profound in the notion of “Gestalt” from which we started is not the idea of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state. (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 206-207)

Thus conceived, the Gestalt confronts us with a phenomenality that would be indistinguishable from raw being, with a meaning retained in the thickness of matter. The problem then becomes that of thinking this “nascent intelligibility” without first submitting the phenomenon to the division of fact and essence, existence and signification. Such is indeed the challenge posed by Merleau-Ponty’s thought from its earliest developments up until his late ontology of the flesh.

Conclusion

We have shown that whereas Husserl forecloses from the beginning the possibility of entering into a philosophical dialogue with Gestalt theory, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty each consider the latter, albeit for different reasons, as a resource for phenomenological research. The two philosophers draw on the experimental results of Gestalt psychology in order to radicalize the phenomenological project of Husserl, both in criticizing it and in improving its concepts where necessary.

For Gurwitsch, it is above all the notion of “hyletic data” which needs to be abandoned, as it seems to imply the idea of a primordial senseless matter which would only come to acquire organization and structure through the meaning-bestowing activity of consciousness, an idea which is invalidated by Gestalt psychology in its critique of the constancy-hypothesis. Nonetheless, to his eyes Gestalt theory remains a natural science developed in the natural attitude and, as such, it does not raise transcendental problems of constitution. These only arise for transcendental consciousness such as it is disclosed by the phenomenological reduction. Gestalt theory, if it is to have any philosophical value, is therefore in need of being founded phenomenologically. To this end, Gurwitsch seeks to reconcile the Gestalt concept with the Husserlian theory of the perceptual noema. Gestalt theory, because it deals exclusively with perceptual identity in the phenomenal domain, cannot account for how a number of appearances become related to each other in virtue of their common reference to an identical real thing. It is only in reflecting upon the noematic status of the latter that we leave behind the natural attitude of psychology and enter the domain of transcendental description.

Merleau-Ponty does not seek to “found” Gestalt theory phenomenologically.¹¹ He instead wants to show that Gestalt theory already carries within itself a kind of phenomenology, presupposing an idea of intentiona-

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, unpublished note (I.B.N., VIII, f. 174) (my translation). The reference follows the classification of numbering of Merleau-Ponty’s manuscripts established by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

¹¹ In this sense, we do not subscribe to S. Heinämaa’s suggestion that Merleau-Ponty would have reinterpreted the results of Gestalt theory in a methodological and conceptual framework that is strictly speaking that of Husserlian phenomenology (Heinämaa, 2009). We have striven to show that this procedure is not that of Merleau-Ponty, but of Gurwitsch, the latter being more closely aligned in this respect with Husserlian orthodoxy.



lity, and even, following Gurwitsch's suggestion, an incipient form of the reduction. Whereas for Gurwitsch the Gestaltist critique of the constancy hypothesis opens up a realm of noematic investigations, Merleau-Ponty seeks to go beyond the noetic-noematic dimension which to him seems to imply a form of intellectualism. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's Gestaltist critique of phenomenology is more far-reaching than Gurwitsch's. Indeed, it entails not only the rejection of the doctrine of hylomorphism, which as we saw was the primary target of Gurwitsch's revision of intentionality, but equally the identification of Gestalt unity with the perceptual noema. Instead, he suggests that we return to what he calls the *Gestalthafte*, an identity founded upon the generality of "something," the phenomenon such as it is given before its thematic identification, at a level more fundamental than that of any multiplicity soliciting a presumptive synthesis. This generality, described as a kind of active essence (*Wesen*) preceding the bifurcation of perceived being into essence and existence, is more suited to respond to the transcendence of the world.

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