Outline of a project entitled “Phenomenology of Perception”

Aron Gurwitsch
The purpose of this book is to provide a phenomenological inquiry into those acts and processes of consciousness that constitute the perceptual world in which we live,—the real world familiar to us in every-day life and to which the physical sciences and their theoretical explanations refer. When using the term “phenomenology”, the author always has in view the body of philosophical theories (and also methods) developed by Edmund Husserl.

The overall program of phenomenology may be said to be of accounting for objects of every kind in terms of experiences of these objects. When the objects at stake happen to be things to be perceived, the experiences to investigate are sense-perceptions and related acts of consciousness. The ultimate aim of the vast empirical tradition in philosophy, which arose with John Locke, could also be formulated in much the same terms as the program of phenomenology. Therefore, the first task of our analysis will be to determine the reasons why Husserl and his followers have been induced to abandon the way of approaching the problems as was done within the empirical tradition. Husserl’s phenomenological reduction will be taken to be a new methodological attitude, as a methodical expedient that permits to overcome the difficulties and even the intrinsic contradictions which have affected the traditional approaches to the problem at stake. As the author understands this, the phenomenological reduction provides a sound basis for a philosophy of consciousness, i.e., for the philosophical efforts of those who, following the conviction of the great empirical thinkers as well as some of Descartes’s suggestions, consider consciousness to be the primordial realm from whose investigation progress regarding the philosophical issues may be expected. Thus phenomenology turns out to be the continuation of the empirical tradition, although a continuation that rests upon an entirely new basis.

Another point of debate between phenomenology and classical empiricism concerns the general conception of consciousness. The great empiricists, Hume, e.g., held consciousness to be a unidimensional realm, a series of events that follow one another
in time. It has to be shown that one problem emerges to which no solution can be found on Hume’s assumption, viz. the problem of the identity of an object perceived, remembered, thought of, etc., as identically the same at different moments of time. This problem may find a satisfactory solution in accordance with Husserl’s conception of consciousness characterized by intentionality: every act of consciousness is an act of consciousness of something, as in an already published paper [...] the author has tried to further develop Husserl’s notion into a correlation-conception of consciousness, according to which every conscious act be considered as strict correlation between the fact of experiencing something, on the one hand, and that which is given in experience exactly as it actually stands before the experiencing subject’s mind. The latter part of this correlation is the sense or the meaning of the act, or, to recall Husserl’s technical term, the noema.

The concept of “object of thought” suggested by James closely resembles the notion of noema. In the case of perception, the correlation obtains between the fact of perceiving and that which is perceived, as it actually presents itself vividly to the perceiver’s mind.

This, however, requires a specific methodological procedure. The task is to analyse that which is perceived exactly as it is actually given. The analysis, however, will not be the traditional one, which aimed at a decomposition of what is given into real elements and then finding out the laws according to which the elements unite, as if what is given were indeed built up of real elements. The type of analysis the author intends to develop and the methodological principles (a whole chapter will be devoted to them) may be characterized as a structural one. What is given to consciousness is considered as a unitary whole, the analytical task therefore consists in disclosing the ingredients of the whole, each ingredient in its very position within the whole and according to the function assigned to it by the whole. The methodological principles of phenomenology are, thus, to be complemented by the approach elaborated by Gestalt theory.

The reference to Gestalt theory will lead the author to critically re-examine certain tenets of Husserl’s work. Husserl set forth a two-factor-theory of perception or, as it is called by Profs. Köhler and Koffka, an “interpretation”—or “meaning”—theory. This means that the two-factor theory distinguishes between sensations and other factors that interpret these sensations [on the one hand] and factors that bestow meaning upon the sensations [on the other hand]. The author aims at replacing this theory by what he considers to be an improved phenomenological approach which is more in conformity with the results of contemporary psychology.

The structural analysis of that which is perceived shows that everything perceived appears within a perceptual field. Hence, the issue of the structure of this field has to be dealt with. This issue concerns the emergence of a thing singled out from the field and made the theme of a particular perception. Which kind of relation exists between the single thing and the field as a whole? Here the author wishes to mention that he has already dealt with the relevant problems in a previously published paper (and that he will be addressing them again. He hopes to publish the results of his investigation in a paper to be entitled Outline of a field-theory of consciousness.)

Particular attention will be paid to what the author calls “implications”. By this term are meant facts which, in visual experience, impinge upon to the percept, but are not seen as such, e.g., the backside of a thing or its inside. To this context are also related phenomena of the intersensorial coordination, such as the coordination between visual and tactile spatial qualities, thanks to which a surface may be seen as rough or smooth
without being touched. Or a noise is heard as being that of an unseen car, etc. In his later writings, Husserl tackled kindred problems under the heading of the “inner horizon” that surrounds every percept. Following Husserl’s suggestions, the author aims at further developing the notion of “inner horizon”. Hence, an inquiry must be undertaken into the corresponding impact of the facts. If, according to Husserl, every perception is experienced as an incomplete apprehension of the thing perceived, then every perception, due to its implications, implies, beyond itself, other perceptions by means of which that which is presently perceived will be seen, heard, touched, etc., yet merely by way of implications.

9 These implications are at least to a certain extent acquired by experience. Hence, genetic questions must also be raised. The traditional thesis concerning learning and the hypothesis according to which single perceptions rely on the individual subject’s past experience must be discussed. The author will endeavor to integrate into phenomenology the modern theories of learning according to the Gestalt psychologists, on the one hand, and by Prof. Piaget, on the other hand. The leading idea of these theories is that learning by experience is not to be understood as a process of aggregation, the later data being added to earlier ones, but rather as a process of constant reorganization. In acquiring new knowledge by experience, something new is created in the sense that it cannot be said to contain things, data, or facts already present before the new knowledge obtained. The analysis of the role played by memory in perceptual processes will necessitate the assessment of Bergson’s distinction between two types of memory: mémoire qui répète [memory that repeats] and mémoire qui revêt [memory that revises].

10 The study of the implications ought to be complemented by the examination of the dynamics of perception or, as Husserl calls it, of the perceptual synthesis. When an object is successively perceived from different angles, at different distances, when it is touched and seen, after previously having been only touched or only seen, and so on, the observer is confronted with a plurality of percepts, all of them experienced as referring to the one and same object. These percepts are in such mutual relation that what in one of them is given merely by implication, anticipation, or expectancy, appears in direct and immediate sense-perception as contained within another aspect. In the mutual fulfilment of these aspects consists the perceptual synthesis in the first place. A detailed study of this process of synthesis will be carried out, and the results will be brought compared with Husserl’s general theory of intention and synthetic fulfilment.

11 In their mutual fulfilling, the multiple perceptions unite into a coherent and consistent system that corresponds to the real material thing. Husserl’s perspective-theory of perception is anyway close to our view; it will be discussed in detail.

12 One of the main problems arising [within the frame of the theory of perception as outlined here] concerns the structure of systems like the one at stake here. The author believes that the coherence of a perceptual system does not rest upon some external substance—some element that causes all members of the system to unite, as Husserl himself has suggested it to a certain extent. Taking over from Prof. Cassirer the idea that scientific progress has been accomplished by replacing substances by relations [sc. function], the author will endeavor to show that the coherence of a perceptual system rests entirely upon the intrinsic harmony between, and equilibrium among, the members belonging to the system. It may be permitted to mention that he suggested in
an already published paper (n 15 of the attached list) to apply this theoretical insight to a psychological problem, viz. to that of the Ego. Gestalt psychologists also have maintained the existence of systems of the type just mentioned.

Another problem which arises in this context is that of the identity of the object perceived as opposed to the multiple different perceptions that relate to it. This identity turns out to be that of the very system itself to which each perception refers back. Thus, objectivity will be shown to be not a matter of a single conscious act, but by necessity the correlate of conscious life as that unfolds in time. The author aims at developing this view within a broader frame after having examined it merely as an instance of a special case. The reality of a material thing proves to be paramount to the possibility of experiencing under determinable conditions certain perceptions that aggregate into an intrinsically harmonious and coherent system. This reality depends then upon the condition that the consistency of the system will not be undermined in the future of perceptual life.

The author will possibly and furthermore be led to offer a phenomenological interpretation of Leibniz’s concept of the vérité de faits in contradistinction to that of the vérité de raison.

The book is expected to contain an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion.

In the Introduction, the program of a philosophy of consciousness will be outlined, and the main difficulties which affect the very idea of such a philosophy and therefore require a new general methodological attitude will be addressed in detail.

The First Chapter will deal with the overall structures of the perceptual world (i.e., the life-world) and explicate the phenomenological reduction.

The topic of the Second Chapter will be the theory of the intentionality of consciousness and its application to perception.

The Third and Fourth Chapters will deal with the two-factor theory of perception, the intrinsic structure of the percept, the organization of the perceptual field, the emergence of the theme from the field, and the facts categorized as implications.

In the Fifth Chapter, genetic problems will be dealt with.

The Sixth Chapter will be devoted to methodological considerations.

In the Seventh Chapter, the dynamics of perception will be examined.

The Conclusion will contain an exposition of what Husserl calls “phenomenological idealism”.

The author furthermore intends to provide a phenomenological theory of perception, which rests upon the achievements of Husserl and his school, but moves possibly beyond these achievements. Though dealing with a particular aspect of perception, the analyses will be tightly connected to the whole body of phenomenological problems, methods, and theories. Special stress shall be laid upon those points in the theory of perception that have a general phenomenological and philosophical significance. If the phenomenological theory of perception will be furthered beyond what has been achieved thus far, this will be made possible by giving weight to the results and theories of contemporary psychology, especially Gestalt theory, while other currents [than phenomenology] in contemporary philosophy will not be neglected.

The author is convinced that it is a necessary and timely task to put the phenomenological philosophy to test by confronting it with the results of
contemporary science. He expects that, on the whole, phenomenology will stand the test, though some modifications in detail will undoubtedly prove to be required. The author may attempt to formulate the scope of his book, as the furthering of phenomenological knowledge about the constitution of the perceptual world by bringing phenomenology into touch as close as possible with Gestalt psychology. This very confronting of phenomenological doctrines with the views of Gestalt theory appears to be the characteristic feature of his project.

26 The first studies were begun in 1938-1939. In spring 1939 the author lectured in Paris on some relevant topics and has since continued to collect additional material. In summer of 1939, the Caisse Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris appointed the author as fellow in order to enable him to continue the preparatory studies and to write the book [outlined in these pages]. The outbreak of war interrupted the work in progress. After his coming to this country—in May 1940—the author again took up his studies on the book.

27 In the meantime, he has published some shorter papers in more or less close connection with the book. (n 14, 15, and 16 in the attached list.) At present, he prepares three articles on, or in close connection with William James’s theory of the “transitive” parts of the stream of consciousness. One of these studies is mentioned above and is most closely connected with the book. The American Philosophical Society has granted him a Research Fellowship for the [academic] year 1942-1943 in order to enable him to carry on his studies on William James.

28 As references for both the project and the author’s scientific achievements, the following persons are listed below:

1. Prof. Ernst Cassirer, Department of Philosophy, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
2. Prof. Marvin Farber, Department of Philosophy, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, N.Y.
3. Prof. Wolfgang Köhler, Department of Psychology and Education, Swarthmore College.
4. Prof. Alexandre Koyré, Prof. at the École libre d’Études Supérieures, 632 W. 114th Str., New York City.
5. Prof. Ralph B. Perry, Department of Philosophy, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Further information may be obtained from:

• Prof. William F. Albright, Department of Semitic Languages, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.
• Prof. Horace L. Friese, Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, New York City.
• Prof. Harlow Shapley, Observatory of Harvard College, 60 Garden Street, Cambridge, Mass.

29 To carry out the project as stated above, I shall have to resort extensively to literature both in English and in foreign languages. Therefore I should prefer to pursue my studies in Cambridge, Mass., and to use the abundant facilities which Harvard University offers, while and staying in personal contact with the Department of Philosophy.
NOTES

1. © The Alice and Aron Gurwitsch Estate and Alexandre Métraux
2. Gurwitsch referred here to an item of an appended bibliography, which has been lost. The same holds true for later and similar references in the present text.