Aron Gurwitsch (formerly Hurwitz) was born on January 17, 1901 in Wilna (Latvia), which was at that time Russian territory, and hence he could be rightly characterized as a Russian citizen of Jewish origin. Gurwitsch moved to Danzig in 1906, and undertook studies in medicine, philosophy, mathematics, and other subjects in Berlin in 1919. He continued his education from 1920 to 1928 at the University of Frankfurt, where he encountered Gestaltists Ademar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein. He passed his last oral examination in 1928 at Göttingen University under the direction of Moritz Geiger and Georg Misch. He immigrated to France in 1933 and in 1940 to the United States. He served at various universities, finishing his career at the New School for Social Research, where he had been a professor of philosophy from 1959 to 1973. He died in 1973.

Gurwitsch was so overwhelmed by Edmund Husserl's "uncompromising integrity and radical philosophical responsibility" and his "painstaking analytic work on concrete problems" (Gurwitsch 2009, xv) that he decided to devote his life and work to the continuation and expansion of Husserl's phenomenology — in a word, to remain a disciple forever" (Gurwitsch 2009, xvi–xvii). However, he also resolved that he would depart from Husserlian theories if the nature of the problems or the logic of the theoretical situation called for it. He did, in fact, differ from Husserl on his understanding of the perceptual noema, the mereology of the noema (which he explained in terms of Gestalt theory), and egology. This entry will present Gurwitsch’s approach to 1) phenomenology in general and the noema, 2) the mereology of the noema understood as a Gestalt pattern, and 3) wider philosophical discussions of consciousness, ontology, and science.

43.1. Phenomenology and the perceptual noema

Following Husserl, Gurwitsch recognized that one must start with the natural attitude in which one experiences objects as functional objects of use (Gurwitsch 2002, 74–76/84–86; 80/91); takes one’s conscious experiences as expressions, symptoms, or the causal effect of one’s engagement with the world (Gurwitsch 2002, 71/81); envisions one’s humanity as the outcome of factors described by anthropology or biology (Gurwitsch 2002, 348–349/327); and participates in the unexamined perceptual activity that lies at the root of the physical sciences (Gurwitsch 2009, 108; 134). In order to break with these many taken-for-granted suppositions of the natural attitude, one undertakes the phenomenological reduction, inhibiting (but not suppressing) the
existential character of all objects in order to be able to see how they present themselves (including as existing) and are built up (constituted) in relationship to conscious acts (Gurwitsch 2002, 88–93/100–106). The reduction brings into focus consciousness, which Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2002, 131) claims is the subject matter of phenomenology, even its exclusive subject matter, but only insofar as its importance consists in its being “the universal and only medium of access to objects” (Gurwitsch 2002, 131).

The difference between conscious acts and the objects correlative to them—a difference that emerges once one enacts the reduction—enabled Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2002, 100–114/113–130) to criticize Hume’s theory of perception, which failed to explain the identity of a perceived object insofar as Hume took that identity to consist merely in a temporal succession of (similar) facts of consciousness. By contrast, for Gurwitsch, identity is established in the interplay between the multiplicity of perspectives and acts succeeding each other temporally, but in relationship to a single object over against them. For Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2009, 154), temporality and identity are poles opposed to each other, but they do not exclude each other and, in fact, require each other, as terms of a correlation.

Once one implements the phenomenological reduction, one becomes aware of a noema that is the correlate on the objective side of an act, such as perception (one of the many possible types of act that can be oriented toward an object). The perceptual noema can be defined as the perceived thing as it stands before the experiencing subject’s consciousness through that act (Gurwitsch 2010). The perceiver does not grasp or notice the noema while directed toward the object and it only becomes visible through reflection, that is, in the phenomenological reduction (Gurwitsch 2002, 240/284), and once it becomes thematic it functions as the “sense” or “meaning,” in a broad understanding of these terms, of the thing perceived (Gurwitsch 2010, 170). Insofar as the noema is that through which an object is given and insofar as it is discovered only in reflection, it does not function as an intermediary between the act and the thing (Gurwitsch 2002, 134–135/156). As such, the noema is distinct from the act to which it is given, and this distinctiveness is reinforced insofar as the noema can be the identical object of several different perceptual acts (Gurwitsch 2010, 168); hence, one could perceive repeatedly a house given from the same angle, or the same noema could be the object of different acts such as remembering or desiring. Furthermore, the noema is not identical with the perceived real thing, which might possess properties not given in the one-sided presentation of the thing through a noema (Gurwitsch 2010, 169). Consequently, the noema can be described as an ideal unit, lacking spatial or temporal dimensions, uninvolved in causal relations, and, consequently, irreal (Gurwitsch 2002, 371; 2010, 175).

In the object as given noematically, one becomes also aware of the how of its givenness, that is “as perceived” if given to a perceptual act or “as desired” if given to a desiring act. However, it is not only the object as given that counts as part of the noematic sense. Material and practical determinations, such as “desk seen from above” or “house perceived from the front,” are also contained in the noema. Such noemata correlate with temporally extended, psychological acts (in phenomenological terms: they correspond to a noesis) of the perceiving subject. Taking perception as the starting point, the problem now becomes how the manifold sides of a perceptual object, its different noemata, are connected to one another in such a way that they constitute a single noematic system. Noetically speaking, this is to ask how it is possible that a course of perception results in a unified and interconnected psychological act in which an identical object is given and shows itself from various perspectives.

The meaning of a given noema can be first clarified only within the temporally unfolding context of further perceptions. Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2010, 270–271) noted that “the experienced one-sidedness and incompleteness of every single perception is accounted for, since
references to items not given in direct and authentic sense experience are tantamount ... to
anticipations of further perceptions by which that single perception is complemented.” As a
consequence, there is a mutual dependency between the individual noemata and the complete
noematic system. On the one hand, each individual noema has a functional significance for
the whole (one might say that it makes demands on the whole, in order to fit into the whole).
But at the same time, the complete noematic system determines the functional significance of
the parts. This is what Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2009, 390) called the “principle of conformity to
sense.” In its noematic expression the principle states that: “the total noematic system must be so
of such a kind as to be capable of receiving the present perceptual noema as a part of member of
itself” (Gurwitsch 2009, 390; 2002, 402; 2010, 205, 234–235). For Gurwitsch, the object, then, is
equivalent to the systematically organized totality of its noemata (Gurwitsch 2010, 293).

43.2. Gestalt theory and mereology

Gestalt Laws have not essentially changed since their formulation in the so-called Berlin
School of Gestalt Theory, with its representatives Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka, Lewin, and
others. Gestalt Laws account for Gestalt-formation. For the Berlin School (and Gurwitsch) a
Gestalt is defined as

an ensemble of items which mutually support and determine one another. Thus they
realize a total structure which governs them and assigns to each of them (as a part of
the whole) a function or a role to be performed as well as a determinate place in that
whole.

(Gurwitsch 2009, 26)

The notion of Gestalt was originally developed within the field of cognitive psychology, but it
was soon generalized, so that now it can (at least as a meta-concept) be applied to all branches
of science.

In general, Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2010, 112) avoided the term “Gestalt” and instead used the
concept of the structured whole, which is a gradual concept and also avoids any unwanted con-
notations like that of shape and the like. The “part-whole-relation” mentioned in the definition
is basic, and thus there is a short path from Gestalt theory to mereology—the theory of parts
and wholes in general. Within the broader framework of a general mereology, one may define
an alternative, competing concept of the whole, namely that of an “aggregate.” An aggregate,
usually understood as a mere sum of its parts, differs from a Gestalt, whose above definition
implies that the function of each part of the common Gestalt depends upon the functions of all
the other parts, and that all these functions mutually demand each other (Gurwitsch 2010, 112,
130–131). An aggregate is a whole that is only minimally affected by the modification of one
of its elements. Adding or removing a unit does not alter an aggregate in any qualitative sense.

From the point of view of Gestalt theory, an aggregate is nothing more than one limiting
case, namely that of a minimally integrated structured whole, and thus opposed to the (maxi-
mally integrated and stable) pregnant structured whole. Both concepts are contrasted to the lim-
itating case of chaos, which is devoid of all fragmentation or differentiation. Also important here
is that, at least in the perceptual field, neither the aggregate nor chaos is encountered in its pure
form, whereas the pregnant structured whole occurs frequently, particularly under experimental
conditions (Gurwitsch 2009, 27–28).

The first sentence of Husserl’s Third Logical Investigation states the importance that a
mereological theory has for the whole of phenomenology: The distinction between ‘abstract’
and ‘concrete’ contents, which is equivalent to Carl Stumpf’s distinction between dependent and independent contents, is of great importance for all phenomenological investigations (Hua XIX, 1, 227/3). Taking Stumpf’s work as his starting point, Husserl developed a mereology that encompasses mainly two concepts: whole and part. In addition, he treats two two-place relations: the part-of-relation and the relation of foundation. The concepts of Gestalt or aggregate are implicitly there already, but not clearly defined. Parts can, for Husserl, be dependent parts (“abstract contents”) or independent parts (“concrete contents”), the definition of which will soon be provided.

As early as 1929, Gurwitsch developed an informal theory of “foundation” and the mutual relationship between parts and wholes that was based on a critique of Stumpf and Husserl and that drew on the results of Gestalt Psychology in the spirit of the Berlin School (Gurwitsch 2009, 286–293). The most important criticism advanced by Gurwitsch is that the principle of contextuality, one of the most important principles of Gestalt Psychology, is not handled satisfactorily in Husserl’s Third Logical Investigation. Husserl had analyzed the separability of a part (and thereby its “independence”) by means of the concept of *eidetic variation*. In the terminology of variation, separability is so defined that the content of a representation is “separable” if it can retain its identity (Husserl also said *if it can be held in grasp*) while the other parts (of the common configuration) are altered in an unrestricted manner. The observed content would remain unaltered, even if other parts (of the common configuration) should disappear entirely (Hua XIX, 1, 238–239/9). For Gurwitsch, though, all objects, among them visually given things (a tree or a cup), but also geometrical figures or melodies with their tones, are treated as Gestalts. A part is in this sense always part of a Gestalt, so that two-sided relations of foundation are always present between the parts of a common Gestalt: that is, no part can be separated from its context and remain what it was (in a qualitative sense) (Gurwitsch 2009, 288–293).

To be sure, it might be possible for someone in imagination to remove the line forming the right side of a rectangle, separate it, consider it on its own, and then think that it is the same line as it appeared as part of the rectangle. However, this retrospective imaginative transfer of the line back into the rectangle overlooks how one first perceived that line as a component of the rectangle. In that first encounter, one perceived the line in relation to the top and bottom lines running perpendicular to it and in a relationship of parallelism to the line on the left side of the rectangle. All these relationships affect how one perceives the line forming the right side of the rectangle, and, if one remembers that original experience of the rectangle, one recognizes that the line appears very differently when isolated from the rectangle (Gurwitsch 2010, 144); in fact, it is a different line (Gurwitsch 2009, 267).

Gurwitsch, who does not criticize Husserl’s distinction between independent and non-independent parts, but rather Husserl’s interpretation of this distinction, speaks instead of “items not lending themselves to being singled out or made independent” (Husserl’s “dependent” parts) and “items susceptible of being made independent” (Husserl’s “independent” parts) (Gurwitsch 2010, 292). Of course, a Gestalt can be ruptured (as when a single line segment is removed from a rectangle), in which case we are left with an “item” in the second of Gurwitsch’s senses. Yet neither a phenomenological analysis nor experimental results offer grounds for claiming that a line remains the same after variation or removal of the rest of the figure. These principles make up the background of Gurwitsch’s understanding of intentionality.

There are two ways in which Gurwitsch integrates the Gestalt theoretical approach with phenomenology and, in particular, his discussion of the perceptual noema: his critique of the constancy hypothesis and his discussion of the noematic system. As regards the constancy hypothesis, one must start with Husserl’s idea that one can instantaneously apprehend a sensuous multiplicity (e.g. a pile of stones) as a multiplicity without first going from element to element.
and then colligating all the elements at once. Husserl (Gurwitsch 2009, 278–281; 2010, 41, 59, 62, 67–68, 81–82, 141) thought that this apprehension of the sensuous multiplicity actually constituted a sensuous quality of a second order that supervened upon the first-order sensing of the individual elements (e.g. the individual stones), and he designated such a second-order quality as a “figural factor.” In so doing, he joined the company of Ehrenfels, Meinong, Benussi, Piaget, and others, all of whom posit a dual layer of simply given first-order sensuous elements upon which a higher stratum, founded on that lower level, appears; a superius is automatically connected with founding inferioria. Indeed, a variant of this point of view appears in Husserl’s distinction between hyle and morphe, between the sensible material on which consciousness imposes the ordering that yields a perceptual experience (for instance, of a table or a stone) (Gurwitsch 2009, xxiii, 3, 261). This dual-layeredness can help explain how it is that one observing on the horizon what looks like a distant cloud can suddenly experience change and come to recognize that the cloud is actually the peaks of a mountain range. Psychologists and their dual-layer philosophical followers would explain that the lower-level sensory data were produced by regular, unvarying external stimuli, which remained constant, and that only the higher-level interpretation of sensory data was altered (Gurwitsch 2009, 209, 242). On the basis of this constancy hypothesis (Gurwitsch 2009, 3, 8–9; 2010, 88–89), one believes that external stimuli produce constant sensory data that conscious activity reconfigures on a higher level.

However, such a hypothesis violates the parameters of the phenomenological reduction, which, as mentioned above, blocks one from looking upon conscious states as the causal products of the external world. Furthermore, when one attends to the percept, one does not experience two strata, namely of constant stimuli and interpretive reconfiguration, but rather a regrouping and restructuring of the all the parts of what is perceived in their relationships to each other. The parts come to appear differently in relationship to each other, and one suddenly or gradually begins to see that what looked like a drooping cloud was actually the mountain peaks covered with snow (Gurwitsch 2002, 205–206/242; 2010, 101–102). In other words, by abandoning the constancy hypothesis and the dual-layered approach to describe the perceptual noema as it presents itself, the Gestalt account abides within the constraints of the phenomenological reduction, is already incipiently implementing the reduction, and ends up, by being faithful to what is given in experience, doing better phenomenology (Gurwitsch 2002, 122–125/141–143; 2009, 100, 101, 114, 116, 214; 2010, 49, 262).

In like manner, Gurwitsch rejects Husserl’s view, based on the relationship between the noema and the object, that the noematic sense polarizes toward a center, the central noematic point, as if there were a kind of substance sustaining the accidental features within the noema (Gurwitsch 2002, 172–175/202–205) in the same way that the object has been interpreted by philosophers like Aristotle to consist of a metaphysical substance underlying accidents. Instead, Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2002, 174–175/204) recommends not a “substantial” but a “relational” approach that would examine the interrelationships among parts within a single noema and among the many noema that constitute the noematic system that is the equivalent of the identity of the thing perceived. As a result, the material thing proves to be “the systematically organized totality of its perceptual appearances or noemata,” each referring to each other and qualifying each other, and each individual noema is a part of that whole system (Gurwitsch 2010, 215, 204, 210, 293; 2002, 379, 402; 2009, 232–233). Clearly, Gurwitsch is articulating the relationship between the complete noematic system and individual noema of perception in a manner analogous to the relationship between an encompassing Gestalt and its parts. Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2009, 30–31) further notes that Wertheimer’s law of the “continuation of the curve” can be treated as a special case of the principle of the conformity of sense in which individual parts and Gestalt whole mutually adjust to each other. Furthermore, the phenomenologically identifiable
first principles at the lowest level of intentionality can also be divided into two classes, analogous to the division of Gestalt-regularities, namely into figure-background-phenomena and basal regularities of organization in the visual field. However, one must note at the same time that the parallelism of results between Gestalt Psychology and the genetic analysis of intentionality with regard to the noetic–noematic correlation does not imply that there is no difference between Gestalt Psychology and phenomenology. The difference between them should be abundantly clear when one observes that they employ different methods: experiment in Gestalt Psychology and reflection within the parameters of the reduction in phenomenology (Gurwitsch 2009, 117–118).

43.3. Wider discussions: consciousness, ontology, science

In addition to these distinctive developments of his own phenomenological accounts, Gurwitsch staked out a position in contrast to Husserl’s in his understanding of consciousness as non-egological and structured as a field. Consistent with the Husserl of the Logical Investigations as opposed to the later Husserl from Ideas 1 onward, Gurwitsch’s first argument against the transcendental ego was an epistemological one: the ego was not phenomenologically given (Gurwitsch 2002, 240). Subsequent reflection on what acts one has been engaged in (and their objects) only turns up those acts (and their objects) (Gurwitsch 2009, 322). In addition, while reflection is capable of grasping a preceding act, which it grasps as having existed, it is incapable of bringing such acts into existence or giving rise to them, so if reflection could find no ego already there, it would not be able to conjure one up (Gurwitsch 2009, 327–328). Reflection might be able to conceive the ego as a transcendent existent, as an ideal noematic unity, but this leaves the ego as still open to doubt (Gurwitsch 2009, 333).

Even though one finds neither an ego floating above the multiplicity of one’s experiences (Gurwitsch 2009, 313) nor an underlying substance—a metaphysical concept, which Gurwitsch rejected also in connection with the central noematic point (Gurwitsch 2009, 333) and which he felt that developments in the sciences had long since surpassed—he did, nevertheless, endorse the idea of a unified non-egological consciousness. This consciousness amounts to the chain of one’s mental states, undergoing continuous transformation and internally related to each other—the synthetic unity of all consciousness’s members, that is, one’s dispositions and actions (Gurwitsch 2009, 306–317, 331). Insofar as consciousness itself appears as a whole of interrelated parts, it too appears much like a Gestalt unity, and hence Robert Sokolowski’s observation that the unity of the non-egological consciousness is analogous to that of the observed thing (Sokolowski 1975, 9).

Finally, Gurwitsch’s account of the contents, on which the acts of the non-egological consciousness focus, clearly mirrors the Gestalt paradigm. One focuses on a theme that is related to its thematic field, which, in turn, is relevant back to that theme. For example, the theme of Descartes’s body/mind theory could be situated with the differently relevant thematic fields, or contexts, of his overall philosophy or to its historical significance via a “Gestalt connection” (Gurwitsch 2009, 228). Consequently, in relation to its thematic field, the theme will be affected and appear differently (Gurwitsch 2009, 228; 2010, 331–332, 343). Finally, the margin, part of the whole context in which a theme is located, consists in events of no relevance to the theme or the thematic field in which the theme is situated, and could include such factors as the flowing of time, self-awareness, or ongoing somatic processes (Gurwitsch 2010, 334–335, 399, 462–463, 474–475, 478).

Extending his discussion of the importance of the context, such as the thematic field for the theme, Gurwitsch (Gurwitsch 2010, 352) takes up the more encompassing context of
orders of existence to which themes of all sorts pertain. He (Gurwitsch 2010, 384–393) develops his views of orders of existence by contrasting such orders with Alfred Schutz’s “multiple realities” that depend on an agent adopting the cognitive style pertinent to different realities (e.g. of dreams, phantasy, or scientific contemplation) with relevances from the noetic side playing a key role in the appearing of such finite provinces of meaning. Gurwitsch, instead, inquires what is necessary for an object to be perceived or posited as a real existent, particularly within the perceptual world of everyday life in which human beings pursue all their activities, live out their life histories, encounter others in objective space and time, and even embark upon one of Schutz’s multiple realities (Gurwitsch 2010, 372–373, 376–377, 394). For Gurwitsch, any existent becomes real once it has a place within objective spatio-temporality, which serves as “the constitutive relevancy principle” of the perceptual world and forms, as it were, the presupposition and background, developed from the noematic side, of all everyday life activities (Gurwitsch 2010, 394–395). Correlatively, the world of imagination is an order of existence in its own right, whose constitutive relevancy principle is the quasi-time of different imaginative worlds in which events and characters are located (Gurwitsch 2010, 379). Atemporal eidetic domains and mathematics also constitute distinctive orders of existence (Gurwitsch 2010, 380, 398).

As regards a theory of science, for Husserlian phenomenology, the elaboration of the theory of science proved to be tantamount to accounting for the transition from protologic, i.e. the specific logicality that pertains to the life-world and manifests itself in the typicality prevailing in the latter, to the conceptual and logical realm in the strict and proper sense. In other words, the first task of a phenomenological theory of the sciences is to develop a phenomenological theory of conceptualization, that is, a phenomenological account of the transition from type to a concept and eidos (Gurwitsch 1974, 142).

A phenomenological theory of science rests on and takes its starting point from the phenomenological theory of intentionality (i.e. the theory of objectivizing consciousness). In fact, Husserl and Gurwitsch both treated science and in particular the formal sciences on the basis of a genetic theory of intentionality, which means that scientific-theoretical problems are approached through genetic analysis: it is a question of explicating how mathematical and formal-logical concepts (e.g. number, group, set, proof, truth) originate out of perception (Gurwitsch 2002, 389–411/411–437). In other words: When scientific abstraction (i.e. idealization, generalization, or formalization) is explicated, this explication assumes the form of a detailed description of how formalizing abstraction and processes of idealization or generalization make available and found (mathematical or logical) evidence.

For both Husserl and Gurwitsch, this genetic exploration of the intentionality involved in the protologic of the life-world becomes of great importance insofar as from the time of Galileo onward, nature has been mathematized, and mathematical entities connected by exact laws have been substituted for the life-world, which itself was consigned to being merely a subjective phenomenon. In the end, physico-mathematical theories can explain away the conscious activity of human beings and even scientists themselves (Gurwitsch 2009, 462–463). Of course, recovering the life-world and its intentional activity, which science itself has forgotten, is itself part of an intellectual undertaking consistent with the aspirations of intellectual integrity of science itself. Not to examine such philosophical presuppositions, in Gurwitsch’s opinion, would be tantamount to surrendering to anti-rationalistic and anti-intellectualist tendencies and to betray the teleological destiny of humanity (Gurwitsch 2009, 500–501). Because of Gurwitsch’s commitment to this teleological destiny, he admired Husserl’s “uncompromising integrity and radical philosophical responsibility” and also did not hesitate to criticize Husserl whenever he thought Husserl had ceased being faithful to the things themselves.
Notes

1. This paper substantially develops an original draft by Olav Wiegand. The author is indebted to William Hannegan for his editorial assistance.


4. For Sokolowski, the Husserlian view that the thing and the ego consist in an identity across a manifold is preferable. John Drummond, too, has noted that Gestalt frameworks found identity in part/whole relationships instead of an identity being preserved across a manifold, in Drummond 1990, 150.

References


