Aron Gurwitsch's Non-Egological Conception of Consciousness

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Aron Gurwitsch published "A Non-Egological Conception of Consciousness" in 1941. This essay should be understood in continuity with his dissertation *Phenomenology of Thematics and of the Pure Ego* of 1929, and his (as yet unpublished) *Die mitmenschlichen Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt* of 1931. The development of Gurwitsch's thinking within this general framework went from an incomplete and dualistic to a more rigorous and unitary doctrine of consciousness. Let us see what this development is, and then examine some of its philosophic implications.

The position one takes with respect to the problem of the ego is relevant not only for epistemology, but also for some rather important issues in social philosophy. Every statement meant to express an objective

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2 Gurwitsch, Studies, pp. 175–286. The German original was published under the title "Phänomenologie der Thematik und des reinen Ich" (cited hereafter as Phänomenologie) in Psychologische Forschung, Vol. XII (1929) pp. 279–381.

3 This text will be edited, together with a substantial historical and systematical introduction, in volume 16 of Phänomenologisch-psychologische Forschungen (eds. C. F. Graumann and A. Metraux).

4 For Gurwitsch's own evaluation of this development, see Studies, pp. XXIII–XXIV.
and true piece of knowledge presupposes in fact not merely a theorizing subject, but—in addition—an indefinitely large community of scientists in which each participates as a speaking and acting person among others. Thus, any epistemological question, broadly conceived, leads more or less directly into the sphere of sociality. Hence, it becomes clear from a retrospective survey of the history of philosophy that most theories of intersubjectivity are firmly rooted in, and derive from, a conception of monadic consciousness. This, too, seems to explain to some extent the difficulties which such theories encounter. Many philosophers try to reach the Other (the other person, the Thou, etc.) beginning from an evident self (or I) which possesses in its own being a clear, distinct, and immediate perception of itself. The general problem concerning the epistemological as well as the social realm of consciousness can be summed up as an alternative: either the subject is shut up in such a way that a philosophy which rests on it alone is rigidly a-social (at least to begin with), or the subject is from the outset a social being amidst other social beings, which would imply that a philosophy grounded on the sociability of this being is necessarily a philosophy which embraces the social order. We will consider now which choice Gurwitsch made, and what theoretical insights his choice was based on.

As early as in his dissertation of 1929, Gurwitsch argued for the position of the first edition of Husserl's Logical Investigations (1900) and against the egological change of orientation of the Ideas (1913) which was influenced by Natorp. Yet, Gurwitsch's statement of his conception of consciousness was then not without ambiguity:

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5 Th. J. Owens remarks in his book Phenomenology and Intersubjectivity (The Hague: 1970, p. 1) that intersubjectivity as a problem or as a topic of analytical studies is a "relative newcomer to philosophy." This statement is misleading, for Plato already presupposed—as we can gather from the dialogic setting of his writings—an active community of communicating (i.e. thinking and speaking) subjects. The Galilean philosophy of nature also rests on a community of scientists; cf. A. Koyré, *Etudes Galiléennes*, Paris: 1966 (2nd edition), p. 13. We also draw attention to C. S. Pierce's investigations into the community of scientists.

6 Among these philosophers, Gurwitsch names Erdmann, Becher, Lipps, but also Descartes and Hume: see Die mitmenschlichen Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt, Sect. 1.

7 We are using here, with slight modifications, a subtle argument set forth by J. J. Kockelmans during the Colloquium on Merleau-Ponty and the Concept of Structure in the Social Sciences, held at Constance in July 1973.

8 Cf. Gurwitsch, Studies, pp. 217 sq.