The Work of Aron Gurwitsch

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The philosophical movement originated by Edmund Husserl has taken on various shapes during the past seventy-five years. One of these has been the intense concern with perception found in French writers like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre; in their adaptation of phenomenology, they define themselves against Husserl’s “intellectualism”. Aron Gurwitsch, as teacher and writer, played a strategic role in this French development of phenomenology, which has found wide acceptance in the United States, but he would not endorse it without qualification, for in his own thought we find, besides a strong interest in perception, an equally strong emphasis on the conceptual and rational. This is expressed in his interest in logic, mathematics, and the physical sciences, as well as in his long study of Leibniz. He explores the conceptual, however, in vivid, concrete way. He implicates it with the perceptual and uses, with good stylistic effect, experimental studies of the presence or the absence of conceptual thinking. In his interpretation of the Gelb-Goldstein studies, and in his exposition of Gestalt psychology, we get a sense of mind not as separate intellect, but as a power of thinking while we perceive and react to things. His resistance to the “constancy hypothesis” is another case of involving reason in the concreteness of life: thinking is not imposing categories on what is given, but allowing the given to shape itself in perception and then permit categorial formations to arise on the basis of what has been perceived.

The concreteness of the style and substance of Gurwitsch’s thinking appears again in his approach to what seems to be the least concrete of all phenomenological themes, the transcendental reduction. He explains the reduction in terms of the constancy hypothesis and its overthrow. In the
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natural attitude we consider both things and our selves as existent in the same way. We know that things respond to causation exercised by other things. We then try to account for knowledge and perception as a kind of causality exercised by things on our selves. The core of this causation is a psychological effect produced in our sense organs and sensibility by the thing. The effect is called the sense datum, and our response to the sense datum is a form or meaning that we impose upon it. This is how the problem of perception and knowledge is handled when we examine it while remaining in the natural attitude. Gurwitsch examines the concept of an invariant, constant sense datum and finds it philosophically unjustified. The principles of Gestalt psychology, and his own reflection, help him conclude that an invariant sense datum, isolated or even distinguishable from the organization it undergoes, is never found in the field of perception. He then says we must become accustomed to thinking in a new way about what we perceive: not as effect in the network of causes in the world, but simply as itself, as a new beginning and first principle of a science. We must consider the perceived as perceived. When we do this, we drastically change our natural way of thinking about things. We begin to think and talk not about things simply, but about things as given and meant. If we do this systematically we will be doing phenomenology and not psychology. We consider things and the world not as having effects upon us, but as being present and absent to us. Gurwitsch’s attempt to lead us to this new way of thinking is, once again, as concrete as his exploration of conceptual thinking generally; rhetorically it is more effective than the Cartesian way to reduction used by Husserl.

The word “noema,” of course, begins to be used only after we have made the transcendental turn. The noema is the perceived taken as perceived, the remembered taken as remembered, the emptily meant taken as emptily meant, the anticipated taken as anticipated, the judged taken as judged. We never use the word “noema” in the natural attitude because in the natural attitude we never consider any of these—the perceived, remembered, emptily meant, anticipated or judged—in this detached sort of way. The noema should not be confused with our meanings, for we can reflect on our meanings or on what we say while we are in the natural attitude, but we could not reflect on the noema in the natural attitude. To reflect on the noema is to leave the natural attitude.

Gurwitsch has explored this meaning of noema in his commentary on Husserl, in his own description of experience, and in taking issue with classical philosophers like Hume. In doing so he has not only defined a