

## Beyond the Fringe: James, Gurwitsch, and the Conscious Horizon

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All our conscious experiences, linguistic and nonlinguistic, are bound up with and dependent on a background that is vague, unexpressed, and sometimes unconscious. The combination of William James's concept of "fringes" coupled with Aaron Gurwitsch's analysis of the field of consciousness provides a general structure in which to embed phenomenal descriptions, enabling fringe phenomena to be understood, in part, relative to other experiences. I will argue, drawing on examples from Drew Leder's book, *The Absent Body*, that specific and detailed phenomena can and should be interrelated through James's and Gurwitsch's analyses. I am proposing first that phenomenological descriptions in general could benefit from explicit consideration of the context of the phenomena within the totality of the field of consciousness, and second, that establishing that context requires a general structural model of that field, similar to that provided by Gurwitsch.

In this essay, I will propose that phenomenological descriptions, e.g., explanations of and abstractions from the details of mental contents, such as those given by Leder (1990), could benefit from explicit acknowledgments of phenomenal interrelationships within the totality of the field of consciousness, in the following regard. I will claim that there are no individual mental contents that can be experienced in isolation: that, following Gurwitsch (1964), consciousness is a field in which every specific phenomena is embedded, and that there are, therefore, no specific mental contents which are not affected by their relationships to other specifics and to the field as a whole. More explicitly, Gurwitsch defines the "field of consciousness" as "the totality of co-present data" (p. 2). With respect to the term "data," Gurwitsch states, "Every material thing is perceived amidst other things which form a back-

ground for its appearance. Correspondingly, the same is true with regard to thinking" (p. 1); and, "co-presence is understood in a broad sense so as to comprise not only data which are experienced as simultaneous but also those which are simultaneously experienced" (p. 2). Phenomenal descriptions, then, are incomplete without some means of characterizing the embedding of experiences within this phenomenal field. As Gurwitsch puts it, "For a field-theory of consciousness there arises the task of investigating the articulation of the total field of consciousness" (p. 2). I will then argue that the particular approach taken by Gurwitsch in his analysis of the field of consciousness, coupled with James's (1890/1950) concept of fringes ("the penumbral nascent . . . unarticulated affinities" [pp. 258–259]) — perhaps the phenomena that best typify the experiences of relatedness — will provide a specific structure through which phenomenologists' descriptions might be informed by the continuum of relationships in the field of consciousness. When conceived within the general structure of consciousness proposed by Gurwitsch, specific phenomena may be understood, for the most part, as implying both dynamic and atemporal transitions to other areas and structures within the field of consciousness.

The domain of interest in this essay is the description of the transition between an experience and its disappearance. Since the fringes are, I maintain, normally experienced as vague, transitory, faint, even mostly hidden aspects of the field of consciousness, fringes typify the "edges" of experiences. Fringe experiences tend to be relational, as we shall see below, and that relational character tends to unify rather than separate experiences. That is, they are not merely describable as "penumbras" but as aspects of the relationships of phenomena to each other, and these relationships (e.g., transitions, perspectives, even modes of apprehension) may radically change even though the phenomena themselves may remain largely unaltered. As phenomena appear and disappear, however, the description of their disappearance and absence lends itself, as I shall illustrate below, to the analysis of such penumbral relationships and thus to the continuities between phenomena. Considered in this light, fringes may be the aspects of the field of consciousness best suited to emphasizing the unity of that field. In summary, I am proposing that phenomenological descriptions in general must not only be located, so to speak, relative to other specific descriptions, but could benefit from explicit portrayals of the interrelationships between phenomena which take into account the totality of the field of consciousness.

I am, then, going to concern myself with an aspect of experience which, on the face of it, seems extremely difficult to analyze: the absence of, or background to, experience, particularly of certain aspects of the body, and how this absence, as experienced, must be situated within the larger structure of the field of consciousness. This is an area of phenomenology just begin-

ning to be explored in depth. I am, however, able to draw on the work of William James, Merleau-Ponty, David Galin, Michael Polanyi, Aaron Gurwitsch, and Drew Leder, whose book, *The Absent Body*, explicates many instances of this experience.

### James and Fringes

James's concept of fringes, coupled with Gurwitsch's structural analysis of the field of consciousness, will serve to indicate how Leder's and others' descriptions of experienced phenomena could be more informed by a continuum of relationships. James (1890/1950) describes "fringes" in the following passage:

Let us use the words psychic overtone, suffusion, or fringe, to designate the influence of a faint brain-process upon our thought, as it makes it aware of relations and objects but dimly perceived . . . the fringe . . . is part of the object cognized, substantive qualities and things appearing to the mind in a fringe of relations . . . Knowledge about a thing is knowledge of its relations . . . Of most of its relation we are only aware in the penumbral nascent way of a "fringe" of unarticulated affinities about it. (pp. 258-259)

For James, consciousness consists of "substantive parts," which "can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing" (p. 243), and "transitive parts," "thoughts of relations, static or dynamic" (p. 243), that obtain between the substantive parts. It is those latter parts, or similar ones, which I will be concerned with in this essay. The reason I say "similar" is that James refers to another class of states, "other unnamed states or qualities of states that are just as important" (pp. 249-250). He describes these latter states with examples such as, "What is the strange difference between an experience tasted for the first time and the same experience recognized as familiar . . . though we cannot name all its shadings?" (p. 252). Yet further, James again seems to characterize these states as transitive parts: "These base images of logical movement . . . are psychic transitions . . . Their function is to lead from one set of images to another" (p. 253). I will take all the above states, however, as possible examples of fringe experiences.

James later provides us with several concrete instances of fringes. For example,

Thus when I say: "What a wonderful man Jones is!" I am perfectly aware that I mean by man to exclude Napoleon Bonaparte or Smith. But when I say: "What a wonderful thing Man is!" I am equally well aware that I mean to include not only Jones, but Napoleon and Smith as well. (p. 472)

An additional point, and one that James emphasizes, is that "vague" experiences are real, and essential, not just glossed-over "clear" experiences. His

position is that one's "penumbral" experiences are in fact central to the determination of "the significance, the value . . . the 'form'" (pp. 254–255) of an experience.

These passages are of primary importance in elucidating both the nature and the significance of the fringes. Fringes must contain features — images — because how else could one conceptualize the form of an opera, for example, and know that it is not only an opera, but some particular opera? Similarly, how could one know that the word "man," above, excludes Smith, while "Man" does not? Although these may be examples of specific contents of fringes, in general those contents are difficult to explicate, necessarily so, since, as they principally function to modify a theme and to bridge a gap between distinct elements ("substantive parts"), the fringes cannot be the primary focus of our attention. The fringe does not necessarily involve temporal relationships, but may involve the experience of characteristics (e.g., "the form of an opera") co-present with other experiences (e.g., sounds and/or images of the opera). As Gurwitsch states, "James also traces the difference between 'knowledge about' and 'acquaintance' to the presence or absence of fringes" (1964, p. 309). As such, they are also transitive states. "Every topic or theme is surrounded by fringes, a halo of relations, references, and pointings of which we have only an inarticulate and vague awareness" (p. 309). There is evidence, then, that for James fringes both possess specific content and serve as relational or transitional elements in consciousness.

However, James does not treat those relations as other than specifics. A relationship between two experiences consists of a specific kind of transition or bridging, e.g., an "attitude of expectancy," or a feeling of "logical movement," as we have seen. On the other hand, if there is in James's work concepts of universal dimensions of experience, dimensions that are themselves part of experiences, he treats them minimally. In other words, although James does invoke aspects of consciousness that may be considered general or universal, he does so without any systematic attempt to utilize these universal characteristics as organizing features.

Galin (1994) extends the analysis of specific fringe experiences to six categories: feelings of familiarity, feelings of knowing, feelings of relation, feelings of action tendency, feelings of expectancy, and feelings of "rightness" (p. 379). He suggests that the fringes are experiences which do not contain "topic-relevant features" (p. 391), but instead can be divided into three evaluative categories. The first category may be exemplified by "feelings of source which tell us vividly whether current feature awareness is derived from current perception or from memory" (p. 391). This relationship may be between "current feature awareness" and "current perception." The second, "our experience of an object's global meaning" (p. 391); and the third, relate to "non-conscious knowledge related to other topics . . . . One example is the feeling

of having left something undone" (p. 392). Since, as I argue, a particular fringe experience must possess features that at the very least enable one to relate it to particular experiences, I do not fully agree with Galin's conclusions concerning the absence of topic-relevant features. However, I believe that his analysis is helpful in emphasizing and clarifying the relational aspects of the fringe's functioning. More importantly, following the major thrust of this essay, while Galin's study provides valuable insights into the contents of fringes, similar to James's analysis, it does not explicitly characterize fringes as functioning between areas of the field of consciousness. I will argue that one of the features usually characterizing a fringe is its function as a relational element between experiences in the various areas of consciousness, particularly between the theme and the horizon, as explicated by Gurwitsch (see below). That is, the fringe usually has a particular structural relationship within the field, as well as particular contents, and I maintain that this structural relationship is the fringe's primary distinguishing characteristic, responsible for much (but not all) of its experienced vagueness.

### Gurwitsch's Structural Analysis

For Gurwitsch, not only are individual experiences *gestalts*, but the field of consciousness as a whole is also one *gestalt*, i.e., there is "a universal, formal pattern of organization, realized in every field of consciousness" (1964, p. 55). *Gestalts* are classically defined as "extended events which distribute and regulate themselves as functional wholes" (Köhler, 1962, p. 105); alternatively, a *gestalt* is an "organized, unified whole within our experience and understanding that manifests a repeatable pattern or structure" (Johnson, 1987, p. 44). *Gestalts* — and the field of consciousness: the unity of the totality of experienced *gestalts*, within which individual *gestalts* are embedded — thus have a property that might be termed "wholeness" or "integrity." That is, although it is usually obvious that a given *gestalt* (e.g., a chair, a triangle) has internal structure, containing what I will call aspects (e.g., a chair has legs, a triangle has sides), it is usually the case that if a *gestalt* is analyzed into its aspects such that they are experienced as, or function as, separate and separable parts, the *gestalt's* integrity is destroyed: it is no longer experienced as, nor does it function as, a unified entity. Perceptual examples of this phenomenon are numerous and well documented (e.g., Koffka [1963], pp. 156, 157). To examine any given experience as an isolated structure, then, without explicitly situating that experience within the whole of the field of consciousness, necessarily results, through this act of isolation, in altering the structure and content of that experience. At the very least, the explicit relationships embedding it within its context in the field of experiences have been lost. Just as altering any element in a *gestalt* alters the character of that entire

entity, altering one's perspective within the field of consciousness alters that field as a whole.

To take a simple phenomenological example, the experience of pain is extremely situation-dependent. If that experience can become insignificant or even transformed into pleasure in some instances, due to the context within the field of consciousness in which the pain is felt, then that context does not merely attach relationships to an experience, it alters that experience as a consequence of those relationships. Through changes in salience and intensity in relation to other aspects of the field of consciousness, any given experience can restructure the field, reverse foreground and background, and draw out hidden depths. The general organization of the field of consciousness, refined by Gurwitsch's structural analysis, provides us with those very specific dimensions to organize and place the fringes within this structure. In employing the concepts of saliency and intensity as structural organizers, Gurwitsch is at least potentially able to render explicit descriptions of transitions and relationships between the contents of the field of consciousness. It is this treatment of experiences as situated within these dimensions, enabling specific descriptions of consciousness as an interacting dynamic system, which is, I believe, the strength of his model.

Gurwitsch (1964), in his seminal book, *The Field of Consciousness*, explicitly introduces the notion of uniform dimensions across experiences, dimensions which are themselves felt as aspects of those experiences. Thus, he presents us with a systematic structural analysis of the totality of the field of consciousness. He partitions consciousness into three domains, or phenomenal areas:

The first domain is the *theme* [my italics], that which engrosses the mind of the experiencing subject, or as it is often expressed, which stands in the "focus of his attention." Second is the *thematic field*, defined as the totality of those data, co-present with the theme, which are experienced as materially relevant or pertinent to the theme and form the background or horizon out of which the theme emerges as the center. The third includes data which, though co-present with, have no relevancy to, the theme and comprise in their totality what we propose to call the *margin*. (p. 4)

The theme and in fact all the aspects of the field of consciousness possess the wholistic qualities described earlier. As Gurwitsch states, "The unity of the theme thus proves unity by Gestalt-coherence throughout." (p. 139), including the properties and implications of the figure-ground phenomena (e.g., segregation, foreground/background reversal). Gurwitsch proposes a model of the general structure of experiences in terms of fields organized first by salience: "Saliency of a group of data so that this group emerges and segregates itself from the [experiential] stream is a feature not introduced into the stream, but yielded by the stream itself" (p. 31), and second by experienced intensity, building on and incorporating James's ideas. In summary,

Gurwitsch argues for the unity and interrelatedness of our experiences by attempting to show that these experiences possess an overall gestalt structure. Second, that unity is structured very explicitly, by salience and intensity, into the three general areas described above. Third, "groups of data" within those areas are differentiated by their possession of, and position within, those basic structural organizers of consciousness. In other words, it is just the characteristics of saliency and intensity that give rise to the three major divisions of the field of consciousness: theme, thematic field, and margin, and to the positioning of specific experiences within those divisions.

We have, then, one of the first, and perhaps still the most explicitly phenomenologically oriented "searchlight" model of consciousness, whose structure, nonetheless, is in part derived from what can only be termed cognitive considerations. There are other models employing the searchlight metaphor — Baars (1988), for example, writes of a "theater of the mind," but his model proposes no experiential organization leading to focusing, rather a competition between "pre-conscious" processes, as a result of which one wins a place on "center-stage." In contrast, Gurwitsch does not merely place an experience at the center, but proposes that the very dimensions structuring consciousness necessarily lead to our experience of focus. Thus, according to Gurwitsch, the field of consciousness possesses a center (which might be compared to the perceptual "noema" [1964, p. 179]) or focus of attention: the theme. Co-present with the theme are experiences relevant to it ("noemata" [p. 179]), which contain James's "halo of felt relations" (i.e., Gurwitsch's "background or horizon"): the fringes, pointing toward other experiences. The fringes usually fade into vagueness toward the "margin," those experiences which have minimal relevancy in relation to the current theme.

In essence, then, one can employ three levels of description to characterize fringes. First, a general structural description, by which the fringes are understood as being particularly situated, in effect, in the field of consciousness. They are usually (but not necessarily) on the horizon (that is, as part of the less salient aspects) of our experiencings, perhaps vaguely or faintly, and stand in some relationship to the theme, a relationship that fades as the transition is made to non-thematic areas.

Second, the fringes contain (as aspects) a variety of types of contents: various relationships, and specific features that both specify the content of the fringes and establish their connections to other experiences. These latter features may refer to the present theme and to other past or possible themes, establishing the transitions to and from these and the present theme. Thus, the fringes may function as connectives between experiences, and perhaps initiate, among other relations, figure-ground phenomena. Third, we may describe the specific contents of particular fringes: the specification of the meaning and the relation, for example, of "source" (e.g., Galin, 1994, p. 391).

The fringes then present an opportunity to structure the study and explication of transitions to other experiences, that is, of transitions to or aspects of experiences present but only distantly related to the theme. As Leder's examples (below) illustrate, aspects of our bodily experiences may move into the fringes and perhaps finally disappear, or may appear from the fringes and move into the theme as we experience them more clearly.

### **Leder's Categories of Disappearances: Focal Disappearance**

Leder (1990), a physician, provides very detailed descriptions of the body and of the experiential and physical arenas in which the body exhibits what he terms "disappearance" (p. 26). He has several reasons for focusing on what he terms the "absent body," having to do with his aversion to the concept of a disembodied mind. By illustrating that our lived experiences are utterly dependent on our bodies, Leder presents a case against what he terms the "persuasiveness" of "Cartesian-style dualism" (pp. 1-2). Leder classifies bodily absence into three overall categories. The first, "focal disappearance . . . the self-effacement of bodily organs when they form the focal origin of a perceptual or actional field" (p. 26), relates to the difference between perceiving a sensory organ and perceiving through that organ. As one shifts from the awareness of one's eyes or ears as body parts to the awareness of one's visual and auditory fields, the eyes and ears become "an absence or nullity in the midst of the perceived" (p. 13). He states, "It is thus possible to state a general principle: insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it discloses" (p. 14).

He also speaks of another type of disappearance of the body: "background disappearance." In part because of the physical support that the body provides for the sensorium, the "whole body provides the background that . . . enables the point of corporeal focus" (p. 24). The body then literally becomes the ground against which we perceive the world, and in fact he characterizes this type of experience as a "figure-ground gestalt" (p. 25).

Leder explicates yet a third type of absence, "depth disappearance," which he employs to characterize the experience of the interior of our bodies as a kind of subterranean landscape. Thus, "the viscera . . . that part of the body which we do not use to perceive or act upon the world in a direct sense . . . falls back into unexperienceable depths" (p. 53). He uses the term "interoception" (p. 39) to designate this mode of perception. These three types of disappearance: focal, background, and depth, then, are for Leder the general modes of the experienced absence of the lived body. In Gurwitsch's terms, these might be characterized as different kinds of examples of the phenomenon of the recession of experiences from the theme through the fringes to the margins of the field of consciousness.



The first type of disappearance that Leder analyzes, focal disappearance, is characterized by the often unperceived absence of the sensory organ. We are not normally aware of our eyes, although ongoing vision is a virtual necessity for normal living, and similarly for the other senses. Leder's point is that as the sensorium is accessed, the means of access must disappear or be rendered as background. This even makes a kind of logical sense — it is, after all, the world that we are concerned with, not primarily our means of access to it. Awareness of the means of vision, for example, could distract us at a critical moment from vision itself. Thus, as he states above, the “perceptual organ remains an absence or nullity.” Leder mentions hand-held tool usage as an example of “bodily disappearance closing over the incorporated instrument” (p. 33). The now classic example of the blind person's stick, cited by both Polanyi (1966) and Merleau-Ponty (1970), is employed by Leder to illustrate this phenomenon. Leder notes that as one employs such an apparatus, it disappears from the focus of consciousness and becomes perceived as part of the body, literally incorporated into one's body image. As such, it retains the “marginal presence characteristic of background disappearance” (p. 33). Similarly, Polanyi (1966) states that the feelings in our hand from the stick or probe we hold are interpreted “in terms of their meaning located at the tip [of the probe]” (p. 13).

We may study, from James's viewpoint, the similar experience (with which we can all experiment) of closing one's eyes, taking a pen, and running the pen over the objects on one's desk. As we move the pen around, we find that in order to feel the objects as objects and not as responses (i.e., vibrations, bumps, twitches, quiverings) of the pen, we must actively ignore the pen. This ignoring becomes automatic with experience, but initially it can be deliberate. When we are able to do this, we find that we can switch back and forth, and sense (through the pen), for example, the surface of the desk — as a surface, then shift our focus to the pen, and note that what was experienced as the surface is now experienced as vibrations in the pen. When our attention is focused on the desk solely as a surface, “through” the pen, the experience of the pen is replaced by a direct awareness of the surface of the desk. Yet during the moments of transition from pen as foreground (theme) and desk as background (fringe), to desk as foreground, we can have, if briefly, both of those experiences, to an extent. If we make the effort, we can hold to this intermediate, dual experiencing, feeling both the desk as desk and the pen as pen, although neither is as complete, as rich, as when the other fully recedes.

Note also that our normal experience of the surface of the desk as hard, bumpy, and so forth is just the experience of the pen's response, in the sense that we employ the physical vibrations of the pen to create the experience of the desk. That is, there is a sense, especially if we have no other mode of

experiencing the desk (we are born blind, for example), in which the desk, as an experienced phenomenon, is quite literally constituted by the experiences we have of it through our instrumentation. The bumpiness of the pen, a temporal and spatial gestalt, is appropriated into the experience of the desk. Note also that we fuse and harmonize (as with a melody) the flow of bumps, the shape and totality of the temporality of the bumps, into a static experience of the desk surface. The surface is a spatial bumpiness, synthesized (it "emerges and segregates itself" [Gurwitsch, 1964, p. 31]) through the temporal bumpiness: its up and down motions. Through this fusion, the pen/desk field of experience necessarily possesses gestalt characteristics: for example, as the desk becomes the foreground, the pen must recede toward the background. The synthetic process has two poles and a direction of flow between them; the pen does not emerge from the desk. Even normally sighted people, attending to experiences of this sort, will find this synthesis occurring.

We must recognize that no matter how far the pen recedes, we are always aware of it as a pen (blind people are always aware that they are using canes), yet we are also aware of the environment (the desk, in this case) through the pen. The pen is in a transitive relationship with the desk: we orient through the instrument toward the environment. Thus, it satisfies the conditions of fringes: it has receded to the horizon of the field of consciousness, and functions primarily as a relating experience. Notice, however, that we know it is, specifically, a pen (or cane). That is, even as fringe and relationship, the pointing device retains its individuality, and thus must possess specific qualities. We can also reverse the above structure. When we focus on the pen qua pen, it becomes the theme and the desk qua desk recedes toward the horizon. In Gurwitsch's terms, we have changed, at the least, thematic field to theme and vice versa, and have perhaps gone as far as changing margin to theme. But we still know that the bumps we feel with the pen are due to the desk, even if at that moment they merely feel like bumps. The desk is present, as horizon — we know it is there — yet it is also present in relationship to us and to the pen, since we do experience the bumpiness of the pen traversing the desk.

I have performed this analysis utilizing not only the descriptions of the individual experiences and their relationships, but by taking into account the overall structure of the field of consciousness. It is not enough, then, solely to analyze the phenomenon of the pen as pointer, nor even to indicate the possibility of the above figure-ground reversal, although the latter might usefully emphasize the gestalt nature of the experience. If we in addition place these experiences within the field of consciousness relative to each other, we are better able to grasp not only their interrelationships but also the structure of the field as a whole. We are then able to place the individual aspects of these experiences, for example, the fringes, in clear relationship to the rest of the phenomena.

Let us consider these experiences in more detail, in terms of Gurwitsch's analysis of the structure of the field of consciousness. While the pen is the foreground, it is the most salient and intense aspect of the field of consciousness: the central noema. The phenomena "in" the noema, those most present to us, are, in this instance, aspects of the pen, as instrument: for example, its hardness, length, and rigidity, the size of it between our fingers. All of these individual phenomena, in turn, are complex experiences themselves: the hardness of the pen is also sensed as a plastic or perhaps a metallic hardness, with a particular weight and momentum, for example. Outside of the noema, less salient experiences may consist of the feel of our hand or arm, the sound the pen makes, the rigidity of the surface of the desk. And each of those, in turn, are complexes of experiences: we are aware that our fingers, as aspects of our hand, are tensed on the pen, that the sounds are soft and continuous, perhaps. Thus, each of the "areas" of the field of consciousness is internally structured into experiences that are interrelated in fluid wholes: sometimes they merge, as when we experience our hand as a whole, fairly dimly, tensed. Sometimes they can split, as when we focus on our fingers' positions on the pen. Further, our consciousness is situated within an area of time encompassing the past and anticipating the future. Given Gurwitsch's model, since our experiences arise from our ongoing phenomenal flow, this flow is understood to be a flow of a singular event: one phenomenal entity. Thus, the flux of the sensations of the pen is united into a spatial/temporal pattern, which defines the surface and texture of the desk.

One consequence of this phenomenological analysis is cautionary: while it is of course possible to devise experiments testing aspects of sensory experiences, memories of those experiences, or thoughts about them, one must be aware of their richness and fluidity, and thus how context-determined such experiences are, and how pervasive individual differences may be. One might contrast the emphasis on idiosyncrasy here with the necessity in cognitive science, for example, of generalization, and complement that science's categorizations with phenomenology's in-depth analyses of individuals. The usual criticism of this approach, of course, is that generalizations are the essence of science, and the description of differences the province of art, or at best case studies. However, while this criticism may be leveled at the description of specifics, i.e., the idiosyncratic nature of the individual contents of consciousness, the organization of the field of consciousness as a whole is very well structured. Gurwitsch's model, where conscious contents are organized along universal dimensions of salience and intensity (see above) is one example of such an organization. Baar's (1988) "theater of the mind," a model in which the "staging" of mental contents is related to the attention paid them, is another example.

Thus, despite the individuality of specific phenomena, experiences are interrelated not merely through the relative ephemerality of common con-

tent, but are constrained to interrelate through the organizing dimensions of the field. The phenomenal flow is structured, even at this approximate and superficial level of analysis, by the relative salience and intensity of phenomena. The contents of consciousness, usually characterized by James's well-known phrase, "blooming and buzzing confusion," are not actually as chaotic as that phrase seems to imply. Phenomenal experience is in fact well organized overall, just as the flow of water in a pipe or stream is rigidly constrained, although variable on a fine scale.

### Background Disappearance

Leder terms a second class of bodily disappearance "background" disappearance. Here, he explicitly compares the body to the ground in the figure-ground gestalt phenomena. Thus, he states, "My whole body provides the background . . . We can thus employ the notion of the figure-ground gestalt to characterize . . . the structure of the experiencing body" (1990, p. 24). This class of disappearance or absence is in some sense the most expected and yet the most elusive. In contrast to either of the other varieties of disappearance, the focal, described above, or depth disappearance, characterized below, there is little opportunity to observe the transition between the presence and absence of the body. Yet the body as background, as a category of phenomena, is ubiquitous enough that it virtually subsumes both focal and visceral disappearances. The similarities to the other types of disappearance are marked enough that Leder explicitly contrasts them (e.g., pp. 54-55). Thus, in background disappearance, in contrast to depth disappearance, the body retains its potential as focal arena. Although the body can recede into the background, that recession is usually voluntarily reversible, and the body can become foreground at will, in a process analogous to figure-ground reversal. One of Leder's examples is that of the body as structural support: "my back muscles hold my spine erect . . . my feet, my legs, my arms, all lend their support" (p. 24). It is more difficult, perhaps, to contrast background and focal disappearances.

Taking the previous example, when we hold a pen and run it over the surface of our desk, not only does the pen disappear, but so does most of the body holding it. We may have explicit awareness of our arm as it traverses above the surface of the desk, holding the pen (which has been incorporated as an aspect of our arm), but not of our legs and back, although they are both implicit in this action. It is our back that braces and supports our arm, that constrains its movements, that shifts as our arm shifts. To claim that it is the background to our arm's movements, however, is not actually to claim that it has disappeared, but that it is in fact present in the experience of sensing our arm and the pen. The similarity to focal disappearance is striking. As Leder

states, describing focal disappearance, "The apparatus yet retains the marginal presence characteristic of background disappearance" (p. 33). However, in focal disappearance the theme, in Gurwitsch's terms, remains the same. That is, when one runs a pen over one's desk, that action is taken and experienced as such whether one focuses on the pen or the hand holding it. In background disappearance, in contrast, the theme radically shifts. If one causes the bodily background to emerge as theme, the experienced action alters. Whether we are primarily aware of our hand or of the pen, as the pen traverses the desk, it is that action and the desk upon which we are focused, whereas when we reverse background and foreground, so that we are primarily aware of our back, it is with great difficulty that we remain aware of the desk as the pen traverses it. The action, the theme of the field of consciousness, has become the tensions and shifts of the posture of our back, and the desk, as felt through the pen, becomes a barely sensed horizon. Thus, this type of disappearance does seem to characterize the reversibility of and contrast between foreground and background to a greater degree than the other types of disappearances.

However, insofar as the foreground implies a background, the background disappearance of the body is meaningless without considering the totality of the field of consciousness. Our experiences of watching a movie, standing and looking at the street, or other situations in which our bodies disappear, imply that one's normal sensory and cognitive experiences, as foregrounds, must contain the body as background. But to contain the body as background implies that, since these experiences and the field of consciousness are singular entities, these experiences are not merely of the environment, or purely cognitive, but are in addition experiences of the body. That is, these two very general considerations, first, that the field of consciousness has gestalt nature, and second, that all our experiences involve the "backgrounding" (or "foregrounding") of our body, imply that our experiences are colored, shaped, nuanced, in some sense, by our bodies. One is then, I maintain, obligated, in phenomenological analyses, to inquire as to how this takes place and to characterize this nuancing.

### Depth Disappearance

Let us turn to another example from Leder, involving "visceral withdrawal" or "depth disappearance" (Leder, p. 53): eating an apple. Leder's phenomenological analysis of the associated experiences is, in part, as follows:

I have a slight sense of the apple piece sliding down the back of my throat. Past a certain point this fades away. That bit is simply gone . . . Throughout most of this time my awareness of the digestive process has been virtually nonexistent. (pp. 38–39)

Moments of discomfort are noted while the baseline of ordinary functioning is largely invisible . . . *This darkness is never absolute* [my italics] . . . And this vague aura is not devoid of meaning. (pp. 42–43)

This type of experience is not one in which an instrument disappears as a function of its incorporation into the body image, as the pen, above, was incorporated as an extension of our hand. In this case, we do incorporate the apple in some sense, but not as an extension of our body. Almost the opposite, in fact. Our body encloses the apple, which gradually disappears, unless there are digestive problems. The apple disappears into the visceral recesses of our body, and in fact these recesses are never quite invisible. Leder states that we always have some “vestigial sense” of our viscera, but seems to think that this has to do mainly with dysfunction. In contrast, I think that much of Damasio’s (1994) work (e.g., pp. 233–237) may support the idea that partial rather than total disappearance of the viscera is the norm. The problems with people with anosognosia (“the inability to acknowledge disease in oneself” [p. 62]) are very interesting in this regard. Contrary to Leder, the “backgrounding” (to coin a term) of our body seems absolutely necessary for optimal function; and in fact Leder does hint at this in the passage above (e.g., “even at the quieter times I still find some vestigial sense of my midsection”).

From James’s viewpoint, it would be surprising indeed if the apple, and our viscera, were entirely absent. Although there are certainly aspects of our body which do not seem to manifest themselves except when injured (“The parenchyma of the liver, the alveolar tissue of the lung, are virtually without sensation . . . while I may feel pain once damage to the liver has progressed to the point of affecting its membranous capsule . . .” [Leder, p. 43]), the body, as Damasio does indicate, constantly monitors itself and maintains a continuously updated image of itself. In Gurwitsch’s terms, the image (“feel”) of the viscera is usually low in both salience and intensity. After being noticeable, when we eat the apple, it recedes from noema through noemata to the horizon, and remains as a fringe, unless it departs too much from the image to which we are used: a “baseline” image. We expect, then, given this viewpoint, that an experiencing of the body will remain background — part of our horizon — until we actually focus on our body in use. When we contemplate eating the apple, our mouth — including tongue, teeth, and throat, which have become joined through habitual relationships to apples as food — emerges from the horizon, because the apple, as focus, entails as aspects of its theme, in the context of being eaten, these body parts.

Apples are implicitly related to our body because we identify them as food. The apple, after being swallowed, is experienced as receding into our body, and it gradually disappears into the horizon of our field of consciousness. The apple and our body have become part of the background against which we experience whatever is next: the conversation around us, for example. We

may feel a lingering taste, fullness, and pleasure, but the apple, qua apple, has disappeared. As a result of Gurwitsch's formulation, we expect saliences to be preserved, on the whole, since they are aspects of the phenomenal entities described above. If we subsequently have some sort of digestive upset, and our body has deviated from the ongoing and remembered background, the baseline of normality (per Damasio), we become conscious of our body again as foreground, and perhaps blame the upset on the apple. In that case, we find that our body and the apple have reemerged from the horizon, interrelated much as before, still connected with the remembered normal body through fringe relationships.

Of the three types of disappearances, I believe that focal disappearance, although it emphasizes the contrast between the focal point of one's consciousness and the focal instrument, is more problematic as a category than is depth disappearance, for the following reasons. When one compares Leder's categories of disappearance according to Gurwitsch's structural considerations, one finds a clear contrast between focal and depth disappearance, in that the viscera are first, almost never one's initial or primary focus: they are not considered a sensorium. Second, the viscera are never clearly in focus, in the same sense that one can be aware of the details, not necessarily of the sensory organs, but of the fields of sensations which they enable us to access under normal circumstances. In a sense, the viscera are perpetually fringe phenomena. We do not, when seeing or hearing, for example, experience the same sort of blurred impressions that we do when focusing on our viscera. Either the viscera are always a horizon or, when focused on, a blurred (even when extremely painful) presence, just as are one's fringe experiences. In contrast, background disappearance involves the accession and recession of parts of the body that one is able to focus on, although one normally may not, such as the back. Thus, when the back is irritated, or when it is being stroked, it may be brought precisely into focus as both theme and central noema of the field of consciousness. At that point it is the focal point of one's sensorium, and one's hands, for example, may have receded to the horizon. In these circumstances, the distinction between focal and background disappearance becomes, in my opinion, dubious.

There are then two levels on which Gurwitsch's structural analysis may be brought to bear on Leder. On the one level, that of specific experiences, I am claiming that Leder's (and similar) analyses can be enriched through consideration of the structural context, that is, the context within the whole field of consciousness in which a particular experience is embedded. Second, Leder's categories themselves can be critiqued and analyzed based on this structural context. The distinctions between focal, background, and depth disappearances are clarified, I maintain, when put in terms of this general structure.

### Conclusions

James's conceptions of the stream of consciousness and its constituents lay the groundwork for much of Gurwitsch's work. Whether James takes explicit account of the types of general structural considerations on which Gurwitsch elaborates, his expositions of such phenomena as fringes presage and inform Gurwitsch's ideas. The importance of the latter, I claim, lies in the explication of structure of the field of consciousness as a whole. It is because this field has a general, fixed structure, describable through parameters or characteristics shared between all conscious phenomena, and because, as a gestalt, the interrelationships of its components are an essential part of its content, that Gurwitsch's work has implications for virtually all phenomenological analyses.

The above brief explication of Leder's accounts, for example, analyzing his narratives from this structural point of view, enables one, as we have seen, to render a critique of Leder's phenomenal descriptions in terms that elucidate the interrelationships of their constituents. In addition, one may be able to make inferences: to predict, in effect, what kind of phenomena will appear, how they are interrelated, and how, roughly, the temporal course of the phenomena will proceed. For example, given the experiences, above, of running the pen over the desk, and the nature of the fringes as constituting the "form" (i.e., James, above) of experiences, would one not predict something like the synthesis that takes place, in which the desk is constituted, like a melody from notes, as the form of that experience? I will present a brief outline below of one means by which this synthesis might be realized and systematically investigated.

One might inquire, for example, as to why phenomena in fringes are experienced as constituting the "form" of an experience, analogous to a melody. Based on the above considerations, one could speculate that the answer might have to do with the effects of the variation of the dimension of intensity on the experiences. In the focus, since the experienced intensity is greatest, one might expect that phenomena experienced more intensely are "seen" more clearly, in more detail. Given this expectation, one would hypothesize difficulty experiencing the "forest for the trees" in the focus of the field, so that although the overall shape, the "forest," might be present, one would predict that it would be experienced as secondary to the details of the phenomenon. At the margin, on the other hand, where phenomena are experienced as less intense, detail — the "trees" — might be lost, so that the experience of the whole, the "forest," would, in contrast, stand out. Specifically, in the case of the pen and the desk, one's hypothesis might be that as one concentrated on the desk rather than on the pen, the recession of the pen toward the fringes would imply that the bumpiness of the pen's



motion would not be experienced in detail but that the totality of the bumpy surface would become, in effect, one's primary experience of the pen. Testing this hypothesis which related the experiencing of gestalt quality to intensity, difficult as that would be, would still, I think, be enormously easier than testing a hypothesis involving the details of the changes of the pen's relationships with the desk and one's body in order to ascertain how the bumpy surface was constituted from the individual aspects of those phenomena.

In general, an analysis of experienced phenomena, especially an analysis which does not place these phenomena in a general structural context, must rely on specific internal and external relationships — within and between the phenomena — to create predictable structures. This kind of relationship is usually specific to particular phenomena in singular contexts. This is one of the reasons, I believe, that phenomenology is not usually regarded as a valid experimental practice. However, a universal structural context such as Gurwitsch's provides the investigator with types of relationships independent of particular phenomena and contexts. The structural parameters of intensity/focus and salience are variables which extend over multiple phenomena, as we have seen, and which thus may, to some extent, be manipulated independently (e.g., through differential attention) of the phenomena under their purview. Previous to Gurwitsch's model, a question such as the effect of recession of the pen, above, into the fringes from the focus might have been answered in terms of specific changes of the pen's relationships to other phenomena, changes which could only with difficulty, if at all, be generalized to other experiences.

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