

Husserl on the Fundamentals and Modes of Attention

By Jason M. Gross

Summer 2020

In *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge: Lectures 1906/07*¹, Edmund

Husserl discusses effectively two forms of consciousness: that of position taking and that of attention. The former is *added* to that of the latter, although attention (and for that matter, position-taking) does *generally* presuppose a broader intentionality for all perceptions and objective apprehension, thus constituting the general structure of consciousness.² For both position-taking and attention to occur, there must first be an object which is given and perceived, the consciousness of which is intentional. While this base level of intentionality is a precursor to attention, attention does serve as a modification *of* intention. This means that a grasping, whether it be of the appearance of an external object or idea (transcendental perception), or of a grasping itself (immanent perception), is undertaken in a certain attentive way or mode. Furthermore, there are a multitude of modifications of attention that can condition intentional acts. What this paper will explore is the following elements both directly and indirectly related to attention discussed by Husserl: I) Its definition and relation to apperception; II) The different kinds of perceptions which attention modifies, in a noetic (νόησις) and noematic (νόημα) context; III) Attention's

¹ Husserl, Edmund and Claire Ortiz Hill. *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge: Lectures 1906/07*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2008. Print.

² Husserl, Edmund and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014. Print. §36. "All experiences are also called 'intentional experiences'. Insofar as they are consciousness of something, they are said to be 'intentionally related' to this something." Two exceptions to this, as we will see, are bare attention and the raw sense or hyletic data.

modes of actualization; IV) Theme and its relation with attention; V) How attention serves as the lynchpin to taking a stance; and VI) Concluding thoughts.

I. Defining Attention and its Relation to Apperception

In both *Introduction to Logic* and *Ideas I*, Husserl ascribes a chief role to certain phenomena within the sphere of attention. In the former, there is mention of “directedness,” different degrees of “noticing something,” “especially [heeding],” and “beholding.”³ While Husserl dubs the analogy “inadequate,” he still sees some significance to the notion of comparing attention to a “light that illuminates things”⁴ since there are alterations in an object’s manner of appearance. There exists the possibility of different degrees of shadowing and even, complete darkness, as Husserl maintains inattention is actually an attentional form.⁵ This latter possibility is described as dead consciousness [*Bewußthabens*]⁶. These degrees of shadowing can also be thought of as levels of actualization with regard to attention. That what is attended is actual (and degrees therein of actuality) or inactual in the case of dead consciousness. In *Ideas*, Husserl also discusses shifts in attention when there is a “mental focus” or “radiating focus” “turning toward [or away from something]”⁷. Certainly, what is actual can *become* inactual, and vice-versa. Prior to there being any kind of position-taking, there must be an “object consciousness”⁸, Husserl tells us. There is first, an underlying apperception, which serves to “constitute an

³ Ibid., p. 247, 248, 249

⁴ Ibid., “ ”

⁵ Ibid., p. 249

⁶ *Ideas*, §92, p. 183

⁷ *Ideas*, §92, p. 182

⁸ *Introduction to Logic*, p. 247

objective appearance”⁹. Husserl cites the case of receiving news about the occurrence of an event, for instance the outcome of an election. There, the phenomenon of the statement apperceptively constitutes reference to a fact.

We “live” in this perceptual apperception “attentively”¹⁰, Husserl explains. This apperception can also be thought of as a presentation, which makes its objectivity “presentational,” bringing it to consciousness.¹¹ The sum total of these apperceptive experiences constitutes the objective background. Husserl surmises that it is “probable”¹² that some determination of attention belongs to every apperception. Furthermore, a “full, concrete apperception” *includes* some attentional form. Thus, attentional consciousness *and* apperception together serve as the foundation of higher forms of consciousness, such as acts of judgment and positings. As mentioned, Husserl also describes attention as a modification of intention, and as a “moment that [varies] independently [of it]”.¹³ Later on in the paper, we will discuss possible configurations of these two moments.

II. Immanent and Transcendent Essences and Perceptions

Attention is evident alongside perception, which itself merits a more detailed analysis. Husserl of course draws an essential distinction between the object itself and the “sense of [the] perception,”¹⁴ for example that of a tree, and moreover indicates this sense is inherent to the essence of the tree. Husserl delineates two different kinds of essences, which in turn correspond to perceptions: immanent and transcendent. The former refer to

⁹ Ibid., “ ”

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 246

¹¹ Ibid., p. 247

¹² Ibid., p. 248

¹³ Ibid., p. 247

¹⁴ *Ideas*, §89, p. 177

“configurations of consciousness itself” and the latter to essences or perceptions of individual occurrences that transcend consciousness, those that are “constituted” in consciousness through sensory appearances”.¹⁵

Where we discuss perception there is part and parcel to it both noetic and noematic aspects, which together constitute the structure of intentionality as a whole. The noetic aspect of an experience includes focusing on what the “sense of the object entails”¹⁶ and includes various forms of apprehending it. The noema, which is inextricably linked to a given noesis, means the “sense” of the experience, as the object presents itself to us¹⁷.

Given that the act of perception is a kind of noesis, we can refer back to the transcendent and immanent categories. With transcendent perception¹⁸ we have a grasping (noesis) of a transcendent object that is not a part of the stream of consciousness, which can include references to either physical objects or ideas, such as love or freedom. In other words, the transcendent perception (its sense, the noema) is one that is presented immanently inside consciousness but refers to a transcendent object, yielding what Husserl calls *transcendence within the immanence*. In the case of immanent perceptions¹⁹, they are of an immanent object, or an object that *is* a part of the stream of consciousness, such as the *perception* of a physical object or the *thinking* of an idea. Any “grasping of a grasping” (noesis *as* noema) qualifies as an immanent perception.

¹⁵ *Ideas*, §61, p. 112

¹⁶ *Ideas*, §88, p. 174

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, “ ”

¹⁸ In *Ideas*, Husserl refers to this kind as “outer perceptions” (§113, p. 220). He also discusses them as “acts directed at essences or at intentional experiences of other egos with other streams of experiences” (§38, p. 66)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, called “exceptional reflections” (§113, p. 220). Earlier on in the text, he describes them as experiences “in which it is essential that their intentional objects, if they exist at all, belong to the same stream of experience as they do” (§38, p. 66).

As we have seen, Husserl describes attention as a modification of intention. It “[mixes] together” with the entire field of potential noeses but it itself is neither a noesis, nor noema for that matter²⁰. Higher levels of intention do presuppose *some form* of attention as has been discussed, but attention *modifies* these intentions insofar as there are *different forms* of it that can be attached to them. These possible shifts in attention in turn display variations in the entire experience, from both the noetic and noematic sides.²¹

III. Attention’s Modes of Actualization (and Inactualization)

Now that we have defined attention both intrinsically and relatively speaking (insofar as how it relates to lower and higher forms of consciousness), we must delineate attention’s different modes of actualization in this world as well as in those of memory and phantasy. First, we will describe attention’s modifications as outlined by Husserl. As the subject’s focus passes through different noetic layers and noema, there is a range of gradations of “noticing” or “looking toward.” Here, I am referring to “primary looking toward,” “preferentially-noticing-something-apperceived”²², and on the other hand different modes of secondary attentiveness, such as “including-too-besides”, and “just noticed along with [something else]”²³. One can also notice parts of an object, either in a polymorphic context or process, or not.²⁴ There are in addition the modes of “looking-especially-at”, “immersing-oneself into-what-was-beheld”²⁵. These modes can either be

²⁰ Ibid., §92, p. 182

²¹ “ ”

²² *Introduction to Logic*, p. 247

²³ *Ideas*, §92, p. 183

²⁴ “ ”, p. 182

²⁵ *Introduction to Logic*, p. 249. This will also count as being in the category of immanent perception as we will see.

employed as the subject “[attends] to along the way”²⁶ or in a more fixed fashion, what Husserl calls the “fastening” on a thing consciously perceived²⁷.

Husserl explains that attentiveness passes through objects of perception “sometimes directly, sometimes by reflecting.”²⁸ This refers to attending to either transcendent perceptions (directly) involving an external object or idea, or alternatively, an immanent perception *of* a perception (grasping), which would refer to the reflective possibility. All of these different modifications of attention can take hold in this world as well as in memory and phantasy. In this world, it is easiest to see how attention fastens onto transcendent perceptions since we are continuously being struck by an “appearing world of things.”²⁹ The experience of fastening onto these perceptions can vary according to the aforementioned levels of attentiveness. These differences affect the noetic composition as well as the noemata of an experience.

Within memories and phantasies, we can readily see the centrality of immanent perceptions. We can also move into “as if” mode such that we perceive primarily (and attend to primarily) a marginal attentiveness from our memory or just as easily within a phantasy world. Husserl presents a hypothetical experience of having walked through the Dresden Gallery to illustrate the noetic reflective possibilities of both phantasy and memory, where “we can live in the contemplation of the pictures and find ourselves in the worlds of the pictures.”³⁰ In this example, clearly Husserl is not referring to a pure beholding but rather to a set of emotive and intellectual acts, meaning any feelings of joy or

²⁶ *Ideas*, §35, p. 61

²⁷ *Ideas*, §92, p. 183

²⁸ “ ”, p. 182

²⁹ “ ”, p. 182

³⁰ *Ideas*, §101, p. 204

sadness, or judgments directed towards the pictures of the Gallery. Nonetheless, as we have seen, these intentionalities belonging to higher levels of consciousness presuppose an attentive consciousness.

The connection with attention is two-fold: 1) One can grasp a grasping that must include alongside it a given (e.g., marginal) level of attentiveness; or 2) One can say, marginally attend to a grasping of a grasping (e.g., an act). In the former case, for instance, within a phantasy world one constructs, the subject in question is playing in the Final match of the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament and the fans are cheering him on to win a decisive point. He can grasp, while perceiving that scene in his phantasy world, his marginal attentiveness to the cool breeze passing through the stadium. In the latter scenario, the subject could be driving home from the cinema and while primarily focusing on the police car in his rearview mirror, become marginally attentive towards the feeling of joy he experienced when the protagonist of the film he watched eluded his would-be captors.

IV. Theme and its Relation with Attention

We have already seen how attention is attached to different kinds of perception. There is then a “fastening” that takes place – but upon what content? In *The Sphere of Attention: Context and Margin*, P. Sven Arvidson deals with this question through the theories on attention put forth by a number of psychologists, thinkers, and phenomenologists, including Husserl. The *theme* is the focus of attention and it is “segregated from the background”, Arvidson explains using an example of a dog playing in

a yard³¹. In that case, the dog would be the theme since it represents an object that endures for the subject.

Under what conditions does an object *become* a theme? In considering Husserl's work entitled *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, Arvidson cites Husserl's stance that a particularly noticeable part or element can bring to one's attention a larger whole³². For example, an "especially mellifluous sound" could bring to my attention the entire melody, Husserl explains in that text. In *Ideas*, he outlines how a theme is implemented and established. There is a "point of engagement" which originates a thesis (what is in effect, a theme) followed by a "taking hold of it," which then changes to "having it in one's grip."³³

While Husserl suggests that in many cases, there is only one theme had in one's grip at a time, there is also the possibility for simultaneous themes potentially "infiltrating and disturbing one another."³⁴ Equally if not more likely, however, is a persisting theme amidst a shift or shifts in attention. For example, if the dog playing in the yard is the theme, and the subject's cell phone rings prompting him to answer it, his primary attention would be temporarily diverted to the phone conversation, thus leading him to only secondarily attend to the dog in the yard, if at all. Nonetheless, the dog playing in the yard would continue to serve as the theme. Husserl explains a similar possibility within the context of what he calls an "implemented" act, which could constitute a theme:

³¹ Arvidson, P. Sven. *The Sphere of Attention: Context and Margin*. Vol. 54. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006. 87. Print. Contributions to Phenomenology.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 110

³³ *Ideas*, §122, p. 242

³⁴ *Ibid.*, §122, p. 244

The experience of an implemented perception, an implemented judgment, feeling, willing does not vanish if the attention turns “exclusively” to something new, entailing that the ego “lives” in a new cogito exclusively. The earlier cogito “fades away,” sinks into the “darkness,” but still it always has an existence as an experience, even if a modified existence.³⁵

Here, we have a case where a prior held judgment and experience is retained, even if in an inattentive form (still a form of attention). It should also be noted that in the case of the dog above, if the subject returns to the theme of his pet playing in the yard after finishing the phone conversation, he is still conscious of the call secondarily. Husserl walks us through an analogous example of being distracted by a sound, prompting him to attend to it:

I focus for a moment on the [whistle], but then quickly return to the old theme. My apprehension of the sound is not erased, I am still conscious of the whistle in a modified way, but it is no longer in my mental grip. It does not belong to the theme – not even to a parallel theme.³⁶

In this case, we have the sound, which is a kind of affection-based attention that is involuntary; and on the other hand, we have the thematic interest, which is attended to alongside a certain intentional nature. The key point is that attention and theme, which serves as a kind of proxy for intention, vary independently of each other. While on many occasions they do converge, they *can* and *do diverge* at other times.

V. Attention as Lynchpin in Process Moving To Judgment

Husserl indicates that pure attentional beholding is possible³⁷ without any intention, but that the reverse does not hold. “Acts are totally, without a doubt,

³⁵ Ibid., §115, p. 226

³⁶ Ibid., §122, p. 243

³⁷ *Introduction to Logic*, p. 249. “Pure beholding is possible and can also be shown without any position-taking, a merely attentional beholding, without any intention.” Here, Husserl seems to be referring to the pure act of attending or bare attention where there is no content towards which the attention is directed. It is

inconceivable without attentional consciousness and apperception as foundation,” the German philosopher and phenomenologist declared in a lecture included in *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge*³⁸. In order to take a position, for example, such that “the dog playing in the yard is enjoying himself,” one has to first attend to the dog playing in the yard. We can see how attention is both separate from taking a position, but also how it is essential for the latter since as in this example, the subject must attend to “the enjoying” before placing it in the context of the entire scene. In Husserl’s words, implementing acts such as this “presupposes focusing attention positively on that toward which the ego takes a position.”³⁹ The different modes of attentiveness, which have already been discussed, “condition”⁴⁰ the noeses in question. The noematic content changes in terms of its manner of appearance, however it is the noetic side, which is in fact conditioned by these different attentional modes, according to Husserl.

The subject *freely chooses*⁴¹ all positing acts or acts of judgment. With attention, a lower form of consciousness, there is not this same degree of freedom. And yet, according to Husserl, there are still traces of the self when one attends. “In their modes of actualization, the configurations of attention have the *character of subjectivity* in a pre-eminent manner,”⁴² he explains. When “the ego” takes a stance, as we have seen, it “lives”

therefore a “form of consciousness”, but not a “consciousness of something.” Nonetheless, it seems that something has to be perceptually given, if not in the full objective sense, even in this bare attentive mode.

³⁸ Ibid., “In a footnote, Husserl indicates if not an actual position taking, an “imagination” must be given alongside the attentional form.

³⁹ *Ideas*, §92, p. 184

⁴⁰ “ ”

⁴¹ In *Ideas*, Husserl cites the ego’s positing something as being the work of “its free spontaneity [*freie Spontaneität*] and activity” (§122, p. 242). “Spontaneität” given its Latin etymology (*sua sponte*), and its “freie” modifier, indicates a course of action that is unplanned and also of one’s own free will.

⁴² “ ”

in such acts attentively. It is in the way in which it lives where we can glean what Husserl meant by the term subjectivity. This living means a “manifold of describable manners” with respect to how the “free entity” might live in intentional experiences.⁴³ Thus, the modes of attention that we have discussed constitute a range of *potentialities* for the subject to modify its intentional acts.⁴⁴ As attention can be of an involuntary nature but also serves as a prerequisite for and modifier of higher forms of consciousness, it truly is the interface of passivity on the one hand, and the spontaneously and freely choosing subject, on the other.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

How Husserl defines attention and its modes eidetically, and its relation to other necessary and auxiliary forms of consciousness, such as apperception and acts of judgment, have constituted the themes of this paper. It behooves us, however, to place this discussion of attention within the context of the larger project at work in *Ideas* and elsewhere in the German thinker’s oeuvre. In the Editorial Introduction to *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch*, an anthology of texts produced by a phenomenologist who was once a student of Husserl’s, Richard Zaner pinpoints the thrust of the latter’s theorizing as setting out to “determine what we do experience, and thence to account for the relation of that to what ‘truly exists.’”⁴⁵ Husserl reconciles the difference between the object of object consciousness and the objective thing by way of attention and intentional acts that are

43 “ ”

44 Furthermore, we can think about how voluntary or not the *control* of attention is. Attention itself is not intention but we can think about how the degree to which one attends could in certain cases be controlled. Indeed with that intentional act, as with any other, there would have to be some founding form of attentiveness.

45 Gurwitsch, Aron. *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973): Theme, Thematic Field, and Margin*. Ed. Richard M. Zaner. Vol. III. Dordrecht: Springer, 2010. Print. p. xviii

essential to the process by which “objects are made to present themselves to consciousness.”⁴⁶ In a text inside the anthology, Gurwitsch explains we can come to appreciate this since nothing in the raw sense data (ϕύλη), according to Husserl, “unambiguously determines their objective reference.”⁴⁷ The same complex of hyletic data “may receive various apperceptions and interpretations so that different objects may present themselves through acts of perception all containing the same sense-data.”⁴⁸ These sense impressions are animated and acted upon by perceptions and noeses, or what Husserl calls the intentional μορφή, to grasp and realize meaning.

The noeses give a form to the hyletic data, from which a “noematic sense” emerges, and with the tying together of the noeses with the noemas, both give meaning, whether there is indeed an external world or not.⁴⁹ As we have seen, however, it is the multitude of attentive modes that found and condition these intentional acts, and thus it is that lower form of consciousness that helps to make meaning possible in the first place.

⁴⁶ Gurwitsch, Aron. *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*. Northwestern UP, 1966. Print. p. 219

⁴⁷ *The Collected Works*, p. 261

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, “ ”

⁴⁹ Husserl suspends judgment on the external world’s existence. He exercises the phenomenological ἐποχή that “utterly closes off for me every judgment about spatiotemporal existence” (§32, p. 56)