

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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The passive genesis of phenomenal reality. A cross-disciplinary approach to the study of perception, between Husserlian phenomenology and Gestalt theory

1. Introduction

The set of lectures known as *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis* is one of Edmund Husserl's (1859/1938) most renowned series of lectures, presented in the 1920s. Offered three times — winter semester 1920/21, summer semester 1923, and winter semester 1925/26 — they are contemporaneous with works devoted to the problem of “intersubjectivity” and “individuation” (1921/1927), to the reflections on the reduction from *Erste Philosophie* (1923/24), and to the considerations about cultural crises and its potential for renewal in the *Kaizo* articles (1922/24). As such, the *Analyses* occupy a sort of “middle point” of Husserl's work. Trying to get some context, they are situated between major, well-known published writings. On the one hand, they arise twenty years after the ground-breaking *Logical Investigations* (1900/01), a decade and a half after his first lectures on time- consciousness (1905), and nearly ten years following his *Ideas* (1913); on the other hand, they precede by several years his *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and his *Cartesian Meditations* (both from 1929), and they anticipate his *Crisis* (1934/37) by more than a decade.

While some of the major insights, of novel notions, as well as of the import and contribution of these lectures (especially for a Gestalt-oriented research) will be explicated below, it is possible to say provisionally that these lectures also occupy a center point conceptually.

As expressive, even exemplary, of his genetic method, they succeed Husserl's earlier phenomenology of consciousness by surpassing both the static-descriptive analysis peculiar to the *Logical Investigations* and to the *Ideas*, and they anticipate his investigations into intersubjectivity, history, and *Lebenswelt* by initiating a genetic-regressive style of inquiry into experiential origins of consciousness structures, that becomes the hallmark of Husserl's later undertakings in the *Crisis*.

In recent years, these lectures have achieved a legendary status under the shorthand rubric of “passive synthesis.” How a lecture series preoccupied with the general problem of logic did win its world-wide renown as such is soon said.

There are in fact two reasons for this, the first editorial (1), the latter philosophical (2). The first reason these lectures have come to be known as the “passive synthesis” lectures is due to the title assigned to them by the editor of *Husserliana* XI, Margot Fleischer, that is, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis* (1966) [Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis]. One could ask why this title. Indeed the original titles Husserl gave to the lectures — “Logic”, “Selected Phenomenological Problems”, and “Fundamental Problems in Logic” — she notes, were simply too broad for the collection of texts that she assembled in the *Husserliana* volume. While the title “Transcendental Logic”, which Husserl assigned to the lectures on the folders containing the manuscripts, did give them more specification, this was to her mind still too imprecise. Instead, she wished to capture the sense attributed to these investigations by Husserl himself, to wit.

But, just as anticipated, there is also a philosophical reason for the choice of the title aforementioned. In fact, in order to undertake a transcendental logic, “tremendous transcendental-phenomenological preliminary work must be accomplished” (cf. p. 7). This preliminary work implies, in part, tracing the accomplishments of thinking back to their genetic origins in those passive, pre-cognitive syntheses that are established on the empirical ground. In moving from the dimension of the constituted to the constituting, Husserl incorporates a regressive, archeological movement from the active cognitive dimensions to the passive perceptive ones. It is in this sense that this project, that actually takes shape in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, becomes an introduction to and preparatory for the *Analyses*. But equally, this beginning regressive movement also has to be understood as preparatory for the inverse direction that the *Analyses* will take for their explicative method.

In fact, once we have regressed back to the origins of the great world of constituting life, we must describe this life “by beginning from below and ascending upward, to show how genuine thinking in all its levels emerges here, how it is motivated and is built-up in its founded accomplishment” from the most basic structures of consciousness (cf. pp. 32 and 607 fn. 93), tracing the “storied structure of constitution” (cf. p. 270). As such, the *Analyses* undertake the task of a “transcendental-phenomenological aesthetic” as founding for a transcendental-phenomenological logic, thus investigating the systematic connections of sense formation in those experiential syntheses that are constituted in pure passivity. In fact, only from the sphere of passivity, contends Husserl, we can grasp the most fundamental of all shortcomings in the foundation of the logical thinking, one that concerns the validity of traditional logical entities and norms, and among these, the ultimate principles of logical norms, namely, the principle of contradiction and the law of the excluded middle (cf. pp. 143, 149, 386). A genetic method allows us to explicit (*Explizieren*) the dynamic formations of sense in

the empirical, passive, pre-predicative sphere as foundational for formal logic. For this reason, “paradoxically,” a critique of the ideal structures of logical reason which takes as its point of departure the investigations into a formal and transcendental logic cannot be limited to the sphere of logic; it exactly demands a phenomenological transcendental aesthetic.

2. The problem of association

Now, our claim is that the entire problem of passive synthesis can be directly linked and mostly reduced to that of association. This is why we want immediately to move on, as much as the limits of the present exposition allow us, providing an overview of the *Third Section* of the *Analyses*, precisely devoted to a phenomenological theory of association, that represents the center, but also the culminating point, of the problem concerning passive synthesis¹.

Historically speaking, the issue of association received particular relevance in the philosophical tradition starting from David Hume (1711/1776), in whom it is proposed the idea of associative rules as rules for the constitution of reality itself, since they are firstly and foremost fundamental rules of subjective psychic life in general. The problem in the latter form passed into psychology, which can indeed see in Hume one of its own fathers, and in particular the father of the dominant orientation in psychology in the second half of the nineteenth century, which we address to when talking about associationist psychology.

In fact, the Humean position on the problem of association appeared to be based on a particularly strong assumption – both metaphysical and epistemological – which can be summarized in the following terms: “there are no internal necessities to experience”. Every object-like formation is the result of a structuring process starting from distinct and unrelated impressions (sensory atoms or elements or stimuli), which receive consolidation through the identification, on an inductive basis, of certain regular connections between them. The identification of these regularities on the empirical level is reinforced by the formation of habits (of a mental, perceptive or behavioral kind), an idea that was inherited by associationist psychology, as well as the presuppositions of what could be qualified as an “empiricist” philosophy of experience (cf. Piana, 2013). Compared to the Humean point of view, the solution proposed by Immanuel Kant (1724/1804), who instead starts from the assumption that there are *a priori* forms of sensitivity as well as *a priori* categories of the intellect, can be understood as lying on the diametrically opposite assumption, that is, “experience has internal necessities”. To express

¹ Many of the themes of the following part of the paper are extensively discussed in the Elmar Holenstein’s “Phänomenologie der Assoziation” (1972), which is one of the most renewed contributions nowadays existing on the subject.

ourselves in Kantian terms, there are necessary and universal conditions, prior to any experience, which must be satisfied for an experience in general to be possible in principle. The problem that Kant places at the center of his critical- transcendental philosophy is in fact that of the definition of these conditions of possibility of human experience and knowledge. In Kant (and in his subsequent post-Kantian declinations), therefore, the concept of association implies in its meaning the denial of the thesis that similar conditions of possibility of experience might exist: transcendentalism and associationism are mutually opposed.

These problems also appear in the context of Edmund Husserl's (1859/1938) phenomenology, which moreover, as it will be briefly shown, presents various affinities with the original Gestaltist approach, of which it anticipates some important developments, starting from his first philosophically relevant work, the "Philosophy of Arithmetic (*Philosophie der Arithmetik*, 1891)². In fact, above the others, the notion of "figural moment" (*figuraler Moment*) is called into question here, whose discovery has informed the entire tradition of Gestalt psychology. This figural moment is that which concerns the instantaneous (intuitive) apprehension of the multiplicity (of any multiplicity: the unity of a tree-lined avenue, the starry vault of the sky, a flock of birds, etc.) without having to pass through the preliminary mediation of the summation operation of the different parts, and which therefore seems to admit some kind of "*a priori* synthesis" which allows us to grasp in an intuitive manner, "at a glance", this totality as already given and concluded in itself (cf. pp. 202-205). By figurative quality Husserl means the "global quality" of the whole, the totality, which, like the *Gestaltqualitäten* previously discovered by the Graz School (cf. Ehrenfels, 1890; Meinong, 1882) is not obtained through simple enumeration (and which, as such, does not refer to a form of psychic association), but which in some way transcends its constituent elements, although it cannot subsist separately (or independently) from them. Subsequently, since his later writings, Husserl will qualify his idea of phenomenology with the adjective of "transcendental" (completely rethought and renewed compared to the original Kantian use of the term), which therefore implies an explicit distancing from the psychologistic point of view of Humean empiricism and associationism. The use of the notion of transcendental and the detachment from the empiricist and associationist perspective entails indeed an adherence to the idea of the existence of *a priori* conditions of possibility of experience, but the underlying problem, from the Husserlian perspective, is that of defining how we have access to these conditions and what, so to speak, their nature is. Wanting to

² The forementioned affiliation between Husserlian phenomenology and the Gestaltism of the Berlin school (Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka) is clearly highlighted by Fiorenza Toccafondi in her article "Philosophy, Phenomenology and Experimental Phenomenology" (*Teorie & Modelli* XVIII, I, 77-89), as well as the theoretical influence of a key figure like Carl Stumpf (1848/1936) both on Husserl and the German Gestaltists.

get to the focal point of the issue, in Husserl the way of accessing the conditions of possibility presents itself as the task of defining the forms of concrete unification that necessarily occur in an actual experience. Consequently, their character is that of synthetic laws internal to the structure of experience itself. In other words, for Husserl the associative connections do not take place on the level of “ideas” (in the Humean sense), but on that of the units of our experience. They do not refer – as in Humean and associationist psychology – to psychic processes of unification, but to material connections, of a contentistic nature, which operate, independently of any subject’s activity, on the ground of experience itself. In this sense, it would be erroneous to reduce these connections to contingent and arbitrary laws, which means to merely empirical laws, founded, in a Humean way, on a vague notion of “human nature” or on the rule of habit. Conversely, referring to a Kantian terminology (while taking into account the necessary differences), they could be characterized as synthetic *a priori*, that is, as structures constituted on the basis of necessary connections that are established passively, not on the side of consciousness but on that of the objectualities of experience itself, and in which, as happens within the Humean empiricist and associationist perspective, any reference to empirical regularities or accidentalities of subjective psychic life is excluded.

On the other hand, the Husserlian point of view also differs from Kant’s transcendentalist stance. The Kantian problem is in fact that of an analysis of the forms of judgement, starting from a very peculiar logical analysis (from “a transcendental analytic”) that aims at grasping, describing and justifying the validity *de jure* of those *a priori* structures deduced from those defined by him as “categories”, and which according to his philosophical perspective would be projected by the subject’s mind onto the formless material offered by sensitivity. Therefore, according to Kant, the conditions of possibility would not already be present in the experiential material, but would be in a certain sense “innate” to the cognitive faculties of subjectivity itself, which is therefore a “legislating” subjectivity, which actively (spontaneously) imposes its own *a priori* rules of unification, its own forms of conceptual and predicative organization to the indeterminate “manifold of experience”. The meaning of the notion of transcendental in Kant is closely connected to such a theory of subjectivity: anything that is not part of the phenomenal material, but is a formal condition of possibility, belongs for Kant entirely to the subjectivity (to the “I-think”) as the transcendental unity of all the categorical functions. In Husserl, however, the notion of transcendental has different implications and refers to the leading idea according to which there exists (*a priori*) material conditions of possibility for the constitution of the formations of experience which are entirely immanent to the structure of

experience itself and, as such, can be elucidated (explicited) through a genetic-regressive phenomenological analysis.

3. Emergencies

We want now better characterize the Husserlian approach by introducing a first fundamental notion that continually recurs in all these lectures, but especially in the *Third Section*. We are referring to the notion of *emergency*.

When we talk about unifications and connections it seems obvious, and even logical, to question the primary “elements” (we could also say ultimate elements) which are in themselves devoid of connections and are then subjected to unification operations. This problem of the elements drags on throughout the philosophical and the psychological tradition. As soon as we ask ourselves the question of synthesis, we do not ask ourselves at all what the “prime elements” to unify are: what we ask ourselves is exclusively, given a certain phenomenological unity, what are the rules that give rise to a unitary result and what conditions must be met for these rules to be operational. When we talk about composition, synthesis, association, it has always been thought that one of the fundamental problems was that of deciding which data were not already the results of operations of composition and which provided the final or primary material. The so-called elementarism of Hume and associationist psychology moves precisely within this framework (but it must also be remembered that Kant, on this point, is no less, since the disparate sensorial data that await putting into categorical form — data that he calls the “manifold of experience” — are nothing other than the atoms-elements of Hume and associationist psychology). Now the way this same problem of the elements is addressed by Husserl is radically different. According to the approach of the German phenomenologist, every formation of our experience is normally a complex formation, and sometimes extremely complex. This complexity depends on what, following him, we would define the *stratification* of the synthetic layers. Anyway, it is true that we can analyze the complexity of a synthetic formation by genetically going back to increasingly more elementar synthetic layers, that act as a transcendental prerequisite for every possible synthesis — this is a crucial idea in the entire Husserl’s exposition. But what we could now call an element is not at all the non-compound, that which has no parts and for this reason is the prime or the ultimate element of a possible composition. In him the notion of element refers, if anything, to the idea of the elementary synthetic layer, we could say the most elementary synthetic layer of all. At this point we can introduce the phenomenological notion of emergency while also making the reasons for its introduction clear.

The German word *Abgehobenheit*, of which emergency is a possible translation, is a word with an abstract ending which refers to the character of being distinct,

differentiated, of taking prominence with respect to an undifferentiated background³. The notion of emergency can indeed be applied to anything in the surrounding environment, as it is a well-defined unit, which is grasped and identified as such, of course, within a perceptive field; but what is most interesting, for the purposes of our discussion, is that this notion can be applied to any configuration that breaks the homogeneity of a perceptive field, any of its internal differences.

Let's try to explain ourselves better. First of all, let's explain what we mean by homogeneous by providing some examples: homogeneous — of course, grossly homogeneous — is, for instance, the sheet of white paper that is in front of us on the desk; but homogeneous can be considered the desk itself if its color is uniform, if it has no ripples, cuts or cracks. The white sheet of paper considered on the brown surface of the desk is, in contrast, a configuration that breaks that homogeneity, therefore, as we would say, it has an emerging character, it is an "object that stands out" (where the word object at the end of the day is all one with "something that stands out").

There is therefore a certain mutual implication in the notion of emergency and that of homogeneity. An emergency is given only within a field. And conversely, the idea that we can form ourselves on this basis of a perfectly homogeneous perceptive field totally devoid of internal differences is a limiting idea, nothing that we could in any way concretely exemplify; in a certain sense we could say that in the presence of such a field there would be nothing to perceive, in an almost literal sense, not a distinct datum because there is nothing distinct, but neither — this is most notable and it is necessary to reflect on this point a little — the very homogeneity of the field because this homogeneity is highlighted by an internal fracture, however minimal.

In that regress we talked about before we do not arrive at anything similar to the sensory data or the impressions of which Hume spoke about, but to the more elementary concept of *unity*, which consists in the simple segregation with respect to a homogeneous background: we therefore do not reach a multiplicity disparate amount of data, but a primitive form of organization. This also denies that there is such a thing as a "manifold of experience" in Kant's sense.

Of course, an emergency is given from difference and fracture; the term itself, as we have explained, alludes to being distinct. As Husserl says, an emergency necessarily arises in virtue of a phenomenon of contrast. Now, it's just one more time a purely aggregative model of the synthesis that can prevent us from grasping, in the contrast, the action of a unifying operation. Not only because in general the contrast can be counted among the rules of the association of ideas in the

³ Recently somebody rightly drew my attention on the fact that in this case we should opt for "salience" or a more centered and updated translation of the term.

usual sense of the term, something that associationist psychology didn't certainly overlooked (i.e. a dwarf can remind me of a giant); but above all for a reason more specifically related to the notion of emergency. Little while ago we have said there is no emergency without something to emerge from. This sentence recalls our attention to the fact that an emergency needs homogeneity from which it is cut by contrast; and *vice versa* homogeneity, which as absolute homogeneity is only a limiting idea, needs of an emergency to manifest itself as a homogeneous background.

There is undoubtedly a profound affinity and even a partial coincidence between the phenomenological notion of emergency and the figure-ground Gestaltic problem. I think that the same material of Gestalt psychology can be used both illustratively and in order to enrich the phenomenological typology of the problem of emergency, and vice versa.

However, it would be a mistake to ignore the differences which are then reduced, but this is no small thing, precisely in the presence of a rather challenging philosophical framework. Gestalt psychology considers the figure-ground problem as one of many instances of perceptual organization and studies it to this extent. While in our context of discourse it receives a philosophical bent – faced with which it is very possible that the Gestalt psychologist may shake his head. After all, Gestalt psychology has also always theorized the use of elementary figural unities (*Gestalten*) such as practically motivated – they are easier to manipulate, to treat experimentally, etc., while we would tend to give a precise theoretical justification for this use.

Despite its obvious disorder, in Husserl's text it is proposed a research oriented towards the identification of elementary and "originary phenomena" (*Urphänomene*) of passive syntheses that follows a sort of a common internal thread cases.

4. Syntheses among emergencies

Once the phenomenological notion of emergency has been introduced into its most elementary form, that is, as an elementary unit distinguishing itself from a background in virtue of a phenomenon of contrast, it seems we can start an exhibition ordered towards increasingly complex cases. We can move on, for example, to the case of the multiplicity of emergencies on a unitary background, considering several exemplary and differentiated cases.

We want to provide some examples: let our emergencies be small spots, of very varied and irregular shapes, of the same color and distributed relatively uniformly on a background and possibly with the tendency not to fill the entire perceptual scene but to thin out towards the edges. Having to illustrate such a perceptive situation in words, we will talk about a "disordered multiplicity of spots", perhaps

even of a “chaotic complex”. These expressions must not at all be traced back to a pure and simple absence of links, but they themselves are indicative of a result that is obtained only by satisfying certain conditions.

More precisely: when we talk about conditions that must be satisfied in order to achieve unity, we are also talking about the opposite case – the non-satisfaction of a condition leads to the loosening of the connection, until its suppression. The perceptive field is always the result of a game of synthetic forces that are variously hindered or promoted – this is equally true in cases where we would mainly talk about order, symmetries, and relational connections (cases of *Prägnanz*), as well as in cases where we would talk inversely about disorder, of the absence of relational links, of dissymmetries, of irregularities, etc (cases of non-*Prägnanz*).

Thus there exist conditions or, as one might say, rules that underlie the perceptive result “multiplicity of spots on a white background”. By modifying these factors, the overall meaning of the perceptive situation is modified too. These rules, in turn, mainly play on two factors – as the entire Husserlian exposition demonstrates. Firstly on the factor of *similarity*, and therefore obviously also of that of *dissimilarity*: this factor is recalled, for example, for the shape of the spots, which are all different from each other, but also of the same type, due to their size; while the dissimilarity factor due to colors which could be very varied.

But there is also another factor, which is the one we mentioned when talking about the spatial distribution of the spots and therefore their distance from each other. It is completely natural for us to talk about *proximity* in relation to this factor: we have in fact referred to the distance of the spots from each other, and to the variations that would occur in the complex or in parts of the complex if this factor were varied. The term, however, is not used by Husserl in its common meaning, characteristic of ordinary language, in which it indicates close proximity or contact, but in a broader sense — indicating closeness in general; and therefore in the meaning that it already has in Hume and in associationist theory.

The old rules of associationism return here but in an entirely renewed sense: in fact they are not formulated first and foremost in relation to contents in general (mainly representational) that are associated in our mind, and therefore as rules that concern primarily “ideas” in the Humean meaning. By speaking of similarity we are alluding precisely to the similarity of color — perceived in an actual perception — as what is at the foundation of a possible synthetic formation. Similarly, speaking of proximity, we allude, as long as we remain bound to our example, not so much to a general notion of proximity, and even less to a notion of proximity in relation to which the purely temporal component is destined to prevail, as happens in the associationist theory, but as spatial proximity, since this proximity is a factor of connection (grouping) and respectively of differentiation

(segregation) between the emergencies of the perceptive field. The problem here undoubtedly maintains an affinity, but also a profound difference. And it is certain that both in the case of similarity and in that of proximity we are pointing in the same direction of Gestalt theory, a direction exactly opposite to that of Humean and associationist psychology. In fact, for the latter, the reference to association in general essentially had the character of a reference to the accidentalities of the life of consciousness.

Thus one would have observed: one thing is a real bond, which in fact binds a certain state of things to another state of things and another is the bond caused by the similarity: a kinship bond is an effective bond, for ex.: the similarity of the nose of Peter with Paul's nose is certainly not capable of making Peter and Paul relatives to each other. Indeed, this applies even more to proximity, and above all to proximity in the temporal sense — in relation to which we can say that any content can precede or succeed any other content. Our point of view has now changed entirely. What we are noticing is that if we want to account for the creation of a unitary formation, the reference to the rules of similarity and resemblance performs a determining function. They act as factors that establish, not a real bond in the previously illustrated sense of the kinship relationship, but a phenomenological bond, and this bond has its own precise phenomenological reality. It is not outside the perceptive situation — for example in subjectivity itself as in the Humean/associationist (and probably also in the Kantian perspective) — but it is internal to the perceptive situation, naturally considered as such, and therefore in its essential correlation with subjectivity. This link forms a “conscious” unity, that is, for consciousness; but to account for this unity we must refer to the structure of the perceptual situation itself, in a certain way pointing the finger at it. All this is naturally closely connected with the idea of the passivity of synthesis.

Let's suppose we were presented with two red squares and two blue circles: there is already a double force that unites the squares on one side and the circles on the other — a force coming from the similarity, or rather from the equality of the forms and from the equality of colors; and naturally these same forces tend to segregate one couple from the other. This tendency could be further strengthened by the action of proximity, through appropriate spacing and approximations. The final result — a multiplicity of emerging data divided into two couple of emergencies — is grasped by the perceiving subject precisely with this sense, independently of any explicit (active) comparison, of any comparing activity.

We would like to provide some quotes that lend themselves to making a brief summary. They are taken from § 28 of the *Analyzen*. Meanwhile, the title of this paragraph has perhaps become clearer in the light of our discussion. It speaks of a “synthesis of homogeneity in the unity of the flowing present” — and the expression compares again at the very beginning of the paragraph:

«let's focus on the continuous synthetic unity of a flowing present...» [p. 181].

What Husserl addresses as syntheses of homogeneity are nothing but the passive syntheses based on similarity. The word “homogeneity” (*Homogenität*) is here just another word to indicate the similarity, and the reference to the “unity of a flowing present” delimits the investigation to those synthetic formations that occur in the continuity of the present. So we could reformulate this title in a simpler way by talking about the unitary formations founded in the similarity that occur in a current perception (putting aside the case of remembrance). The opening of the paragraph actually says this: let's begin a closer investigation of the unitary formations that occur in a current perception, thus excluding both the remembrance functions and “the expectations that go beyond continuous protention” — retention and protection belong to the present. Let us also leave aside “every fantasizing, every act of thought, every evaluative activity without prejudging anything regarding their being or not being indispensable for a subjectivity”. Having said this, we find ourselves directly on the ground of the concept of emergency as an elementary and originary phenomenon.

«We can in fact see and grasp directly only where we have something that emerges for itself» [p. 175].

Actually, that of emergency is a reformulation itself of the notion of phenomenological datum, a reformulation that is already found within the issue of the synthesis. At this point we must consider “more general content-determined connections” that exist between emergencies, and these connections are “similarity (or equality) and non-similarity, or, in more meaningful terms: the connections of homogeneity and heterogeneity”.

The connection thus made is “an operation of conscientious syntheses”, an operation that establishes a phenomenological link between similar objects. In particular, it is observed:

«There can certainly be good reasons when we say that mere similarity does not generate any connection of a real nature between real objects. That two men are mutually similar, because for example they have similar noses, is something that does not produce any real bond between them. However, we speak of immanent data [not of pure mental contents, not of ideas and association of ideas in Hume's sense], for example of concrete chromatic data in the unity of a flowing present, of data therefore that are conscious in a coexistence immanent, for any constituent duration» [cf. p. 182].

And these data have a unity for consciousness which is an intrinsic unity, a unity that is clearly found within the perceptive situation itself:

«multiple separate color data are grouped together in the visual field and, thanks to their similarity, are united in a peculiar way» [cf. *ibid.*].

Another aspect that is important to highlight is that degrees of similarity can be distinguished, and that we can speak of equality as the maximum similarity. Correspondingly, the “strength” of the synthesis and of the connection established increases. If we take a complex of equal singularities, every singularity

«It does not remain without contact with the other singularities, but unites to form a particular group which thus becomes a unitary multiplicity, a whole (in the broad sense of the term) whose singularities are connected only by affinity» [cf. p. 182].

If the similarity weakens, the strength of the bond that connects the whole also weakens.

5. Continuity and discreteness

Through Husserl’s research and the conceptual apparatus that he gradually proposes, we can glimpse a project tending to identify an authentic typology of the possible multiplicities, of possible synthetic formations of our experience and of the laws that govern their constitution (structuring).

As it has been seen, similarity and contiguity play a particularly important role and it is worth trying to develop the discussion at least a little. First of all, taking up the issue of similarity, we must underline that the synthesis that takes place on this basis can also be, as Husserl defines that, a *synthesis at distance*.

Similarity and contiguity can strengthen unity or work against each other. Speaking of a “synthesis at distance” we are obviously referring to a tendency of similarity to counteract the segregating effect of distance; namely, similarity establishes a link between data that are “distant from each other”.

We could cite more than one exemplary situation in this regard. An example could be a set of figures from which two of them “stand out” due to the identity of their color. Another could be a double couple in which the couple effect is produced by spatial proximity, while the different color could propose a different grouping mode at distance.

When this happens we can say that the two distant data form a unitary emergency. Instead of synthesis at distance, Husserl also speaks, and more often, of “fusion at distance” (*Fernverschmelzung*), and this expression can perhaps generate a certain wonder since the word fusion alludes to a very close relationship: a content fuses into the other when it passes into the other without it being possible to make any clear distinction between one and the other. In this case we could better talk, in Gestaltist terms, of a (good) continuation (or continuity) between contents, and this means precisely: one piece of data passes into the other without solution of continuity, without intervals, without interruptions, without clearly marked

boundaries. It is therefore a terminological choice that is not too happy and, moreover, unnecessary, which we think is motivated by the intent to correlate this situation with its opposite.

In fact fusion at distance can be contrasted with *fusion at close range*, which is nothing but the internal passing of one content into another content. (cf. p. 193). There is naturally a relationship between the two cases which is given by the problem of similarity. Except that in the case of distant fusion “the data that emerged separately are unified in a discontinuous manner” (cf. p. 193) – between one and the other there is a gap, in this case a spatial gap. In place of discontinuity we could also speak of discreteness – and also, adopting the expression Husserl uses in this text – of “discretion”. The data emerging as a unit are in any case discrete data. But if we remove the distance, if we approximate these discrete data to the point of eliminating any distance, if we also remove the border demarcations, one data passes into the other as far as the chromatic aspect is concerned. And in this way we have the so-called “close-range fusion” – which is the actual fusion.

On the other hand, we contrast discretion with concretion, and the latter term is used by Husserl as it alludes to co- growing (con-cretion) as growing together (from the Latin *concrecere*), as one germinates, so to speak, from the other. The term discretion is in fact chosen precisely to be able to compare it with concreteness – and pay attention that when we talk about concrete data in this context, “concrete” has a completely different meaning from the common one, instead meaning co-grown, grown together, and therefore alludes to a unity of continuity, to the fusion of data closely.

«We could also contrast concretion and discretion, now meaning concretion in an almost literal sense. In a certain sense, the same and the very similar come together» [cf. p. 192].

Shortly afterwards, we also talk about contrast and “concrete fusion”, and so it is also said that:

«In every contrast... there is implicit... something of the fusion, something that homogeneously unifies the concrete data and at the same time disturbs their concretion, interrupting their continuity» [cf. p. 192].

The concrete data here are the data that are concrecent by virtue of some similarity, which however do not manage to truly merge into a unity of concretion.

6. Synthesis of coincidence

Husserl's entire exposition tends to propose the themes of the structuring of the perceptive field according to a dynamic orientation. This is clear in the proposed treatment of the theme of equality and similarity in § 28 and in the treatment

of the problem of perceptive orders which instead forms the main content of § 29. In relation to the synthesis based on equality we speak in particular of a “synthesis of coincidence” (*Deckung*). This term must be understood as if, in the apprehension of equality there was a sort of movement from one element to the other, in such a way that a sort of superposition takes place for the consciousness and in this superposition the contents in question turned out to be coincidental.

In fact, the same word coincidence alludes, in German, to the operation of covering (*Decken*) — and it is used in close connection with the word congruence and with a difficult-to-translate word which it was decided to translate as superposition (*Überschiebung*). Congruence (*Kongruenz*) is a term that Husserl undoubtedly uses recalling its meaning within elementary geometry: two triangles, for example, are defined as congruent, when, in an ideal superposition, without carrying out rotations, they coincide point to point. And the term literally means something like “sliding over” or “sliding over each other” (*Überschieben* or *Überschiebung*).

We could say that in the synthesis based on equality there is awareness of the congruence of emergencies and this congruence is precisely represented by a mutual tension towards the superposition, the slippage of one into the other. Here it happens as if two figures equal in shape and colour, let's say two red squares, were each drawn on a sheet of semi-transparent paper and one sheet was slid over the other until the complete coincidence.

This conception of the synthesis of equality as coincidence in the sense of superposition is perhaps better understood by thinking about the case of repetition — which in fact is a theme particularly present in § 28. The topic of repetition in turn must be addressed first of all in relation to the temporal dimension rather than the spatial one. For example, we would certainly speak of repetition in relation to a sound of the same pitch that resonates several times, indeed in this case we would speak of the same sound that is repeated several times and not of many sounds that resonate successively — this is a circumstance which is specifically noted by Husserl (p. 184).

On the other hand, faced with several squares that are all equal and arranged next to each other, we would tend to speak of a multiplicity of equal squares rather than the same square repeated several times. More precisely: we would be talking about the same square repeated several times, if in some way the temporal image of the succession was projected onto the perceptual complex, as if the squares followed one another in the same way in which sounds follow one another. So when, for example, we say in relation to a tapestry or an ornamental design that it is the same motif repeated several times, we actually envisage a way of looking at it: not in one fell swoop, but as if we were to follow it with our gaze, passing successively from a configuration to the other.

In any case, the theme of coincidence and superposition has its particular clarity precisely in the repetition considered in the temporal order — and therefore for example in relation to the same sound that is repeated. We could simply say that for there to be “consciousness of repetition” it is necessary for the current sound to reactivate the sound that has just passed, which is still present retentively, and to be perceived as a sound that presents it again and which therefore coincides with it. While the word coincidence may appear a bit forced in the case of two identical visual figures that remain two, in the case of repeated sounds, in which we are still dealing with sounds that have the same pitch, that expression undoubtedly appears more relevant.

The tendency to treat the problems of synthesis in the perceptive field in terms of movements and therefore also of dynamic forces is even more evident in the considerations on similarity, which contain some interesting ideas although only sketchy and here and there not too clear. However, the core of the problem is clear. While by equality we mean two contents that are similar in every way (equality thus becomes a particular case of similarity), when we talk about similarity we are only referring to a partial coincidence, the contents in question will have similar moments but will also be characterized by moments of dissimilarity. Husserl suggests several times that the presence of these moments of dissimilarity should be considered as an element of real conflict. This is an interesting idea but that, in my opinion, is not adequately developed and consequently remains unclear by way of example. In fact we can state in general that, following the simple example of Husserl who places a red and a blue square on the perceptual scene, the two emergencies coincide as regards the shape, but are in contrast as regards the color so that this element acts as a counter-tendency to distant unification. So far there are no problems. But it is also said that in case of partial coincidence the dissimilar contents tend to hide each other. Here we subtly play on an ambiguity that is typical of the root of the German word, which indicates on the one hand coincidence by superposition (*Deckung*), on the other to superposition as covering and hiding (*Verdeckung*). The dissimilar parts would thus tend to cancel each other out or enter into mutual conflict: Husserl actually speaks [cfr. p. 183] of removal (*Verdrängung*) of one content by the other.

«If we compare similar things [in the same place] we instead find two emerging moments: on the one hand the synthetic coincidence in a common element [in the example the square shape], therefore an identical moment, on the other the synthetic conflict of particularities [=particular differences] of this common element, which in the superposition mutually remove each other. We speak of removal because one particularity covers the other and what is covered in turn tends to reveal itself and, having opened a passage, to cover what was previously exposed. This is what happens when we superimpose a red square and a blue square»

Here, unless there is a misunderstanding behalf of me, there is evidently the emergence of a problem which is very poorly supported by the elementary example proposed. As we have already said, it is perfectly sustainable that the chromatic difference acts as a counter-tendency to the synthetic unification dependent on the form — and in this sense we can speak of conflict. While it seems evident that the example of the red square and the blue square conceived as given in the flowing present cannot really support the theme of partial coincidence and conflict as it is proposed in the text.

However, we can interpret the example crudely, so to speak - and then the calculations partly add up. If a blue square drawn on a non-transparent sheet of paper is slid onto a red square, then the blue effectively covers and hides the red, “removing” it, and vice versa. The fact that we then speak of conflict and even of the tendency of the covered property to return to the open in my opinion has its justification in the interpretative hypothesis that I put forward previously according to which Husserl believed that these analyzes on the dynamics of perception could serve as model for direct analyzes of subjective life in general. In fact, in a broader field of considerations, it is perfectly possible to think that a partial association in the sense illustrated could lead to covers or exchanges of meaning. For example, a situation experienced in the past that is similar but not identical to a situation that currently presents itself to me can invest its meaning in the current situation, preventing or hindering (and in this sense, removing) that aspect of the meaning of the current situation that differs from the previous one. A case like this, although it recalls the problematic of the present-past relationship that we have provisionally set aside, could nevertheless illustrate the problem very well and account for the way in which the problem of dissimilarity is proposed in this context.

Summary

In the years between 1920 and 1926 Husserl dedicated three university courses to the analysis of the passive structuring of experience, therefore to those syntheses among the contents of perception that are constituted before spontaneity and any categorial operation of the subject. The fundamental idea that emerges from the “Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis” (*Analyzen zur Passiven Synthesis*) is that of the presence of an internal normativity to the contents of experience which is not actively imposed on the latter by the subject but which shines *a priori* and in a completely passive way throughout those same contents. The forms found on the level of thought and judgment can already be found – pre-categorially – on the ground of empirical experience. These therefore need nothing but getting “explicitated”, going back genetically from those pre-categorial processes of passive constitution of the perceptive sphere to the higher-order cognitive-categorial operations that are typically found in discursive and scientific thought (categorization, interpretation, production of inferences, predication ecc.). In other words, for Husserl, there is a “logic of experience”, transcendental and pre-reflective, which would act as a starting point for the autonomous structuring of the subject’s cognitive processes

and thus, in a broad sense, of his experience of the world. In the present intervention I therefore propose to briefly retrace some of the main theoretical points of these husserlian lectures with the aim of showing, in particular, how the notion of 'passive genesis' of experience, as it emerges from those, is essentially compatible with the Gestaltist one of perceptual organization. Similarly to what Husserl claimed, for Gestalt psychologists perception is configured as a mechanism of "dynamic self- distribution" of segmentation processes of the perceptive field that obey precise "factors" or "laws" (Gestalt laws), that are *a priori* and immanent to the very domain of perceptual experience.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, Gestalt Theory, Psychology of Perception, Experimental phenomenology, Passive Synthesis.

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