Chapter Three

Transformations in Attending

For psychologists or philosophers of attention, the fun begins in the moment that we realize attention is essentially dynamic. Attention is not as clear and distinct as the example of the dog in the garden may lead one to believe. Although the structure of the sphere of attention outlined above is invariant, the shape and contents are dynamic. For example, was I not thematically attending to something else before the dog? And after?

Suppose I fall into reverie and detach from thematically attending to the dog, and instead start attending to the history of scholarship on René Descartes’ cogito argument. The dog is certainly not presented as context for this history, and so consciousness of the dog is marginal, if the dog is still presented at all. Suppose I then revert back to thematic attention to the dog, but now I attend to the dog as a robot, playfully trying to see if Descartes is right in what he says about animals such as dogs. This context replacement, and the previous reverie, and the transformations between them are marvelously complex reorganizations in the sphere of attention in all dimensions, and they happen with incredible rapidity, usually easily and seamlessly. Still, there are certain organizational principles in the sphere of attention that apply to the theme in distinction from those that apply to the thematic context, and again in distinction from the margin, and these organizational principles obtain no matter the clarity or shiftiness of the content in these three dimensions. In addition to these unique organizational principles within each dimension which have already been discussed in the chapters above, we will see that there are common transformation principles between the dimensions. The initial point here is that the sphere of attention is a dynamic tension.

Although there is always thematic attention, contextual consciousness, and marginal consciousness, the shape of each of these dimensions and the connections between their contents can change substantially and radically in the process of attending. So in answer to what some have argued (e.g., Strawson 1997), there is no holiday in attention whereby there are more or less long periods of “non-consciousness” or theme-less existence (Arvidson 2000). Adopting, expanding, and recontextualizing what Gurwitsch called “thematic modifications” (1966, 223–267), I will delineate a number of ways in which the sphere of attention is a process involving typical and regulated transformations of presentation. Gurwitsch does not always neatly distinguish and sufficiently amplify these types, but I do so to align Gurwitsch’s work with current research on attention and with the hopes of sparking new research paradigms as discussed
later, I will outline ten transformations in the sphere of attention falling within four general types. I do not believe these are exhaustive but they should make a good start for investigation by psychologists and philosophers. Of course, some of these are already being researched. But the theoretical framework of a sphere of attention enables useful interpretations of these findings. Proceeding through each type of transformation, in the following I discuss how empirical research might establish this taxonomy of transformations in attending and I stress some practical possibilities associated with doing so.

By typical transformation I mean that there are certain distinguishable directional and dimensional changes in the process of attending. What follows are typical also in the sense that they are some of the less subtle transformations in attending; many of them already have been studied explicitly or implicitly by psychologists and cognitive scientists. But there are almost certainly more types possible than I articulate. There is not one type of attention transformation. I emphasize this because current scholarship often does not. This means that when one says “thematic attention” and “contextual consciousness” and “marginal consciousness” these locutions are very generic ways of referring to how items or content in each dimension of the sphere are processed. But they do not fully capture the process of the attending process. The four general types of transformation described here are: contextual shifts (specifically enlargement, contraction, elucidation, obscuration, and context replacement), simple thematic shifts, radical thematic shifts (specifically restructuring, singling out, and synthesis), and margin to theme capture.

By regulated transformation I mean that a gestalt may admit transformations of a specific type or types. Gurwitsch (1966, 248; see Husserl 1970, 166–167) puts forward the general transformation law—“To every phenomenal datum there correspond others into which the former can be ‘transformed’.” If as Gurwitsch argues, the “field of consciousness” is structured by gestalt-connections, it makes sense that shifts or transformations in the “field” should be law-like. The idea of rule-bound transformations in attending is not unprecedented, and is found in psychoanalysis, Kantian transcendentalism, and Cartesian Regulae. Gurwitsch’s approach to the lawfulness in attending is different since his focus is on the theme and its context. Gurwitsch (1966, 223) states, “[D]efinite essential possibilities for thematic modifications are pre-traced by the peculiar nature of the theme and the structural organization of its constituents, by the place which the theme has in its field, by the specific structure of the field, and its distinctiveness within the domain of the co-given. The possibility of thematic modifications is grounded in the essential situation