Chapter 9

The Structure of Context and Context Awareness

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Abstract

The role of context in cognition or intentionality has been studied in disciplines ranging from phenomenology to philosophy of mind and language to cognitive science. Here I propose to appropriate and adapt parts of Aron Gurwitsch’s analysis of “marginal” and “thematic” consciousness. Gurwitsch factored the “field of consciousness” into Theme, Thematic Field, and Margin, and he distinguished three “orders of existence” in Stream of Consciousness, Embodied Existence, and Perceptual World. I propose to rebuild these distinctions as linked structures of intentionality: formal meaning (nematic) structures defining focus of attention, and formal objective structures defining context of experience. The analysis will clarify results in cognitive science concerning “inattention blindness.” My larger aim is how to analyze intentionality as a “formal” ontological structure within a framework of formal ontology.

I. Contextual Consciousness

As Edmund Husserl launched phenomenology in his Logical Investigations (1900-01) and Ideas I (1913), a crucial part of his analysis of intentionality was an account of the “horizon” of the object of experience. Husserl’s results were extended and modified by Aron Gurwitsch in The Field of Consciousness (1964) and Marginal Consciousness (1985). Gurwitsch’s analysis of “marginal” consciousness sharply refined elements in Husserl’s analysis of horizon, and his results prompt the present study.

In “marginal” consciousness we are aware of things in the larger context of experience, things outside the focus of attention. Our present concern is the structure of the context of experience and our awareness of the context of our experience.

As we proceed, we shall find ourselves leapfrogging over Gurwitsch as Gurwitsch leapfrogged over Husserl.1

II. The Role of Context in Intentionality

A large bird circles overhead, shifting its balance on the wind currents. My perception *cum* judgment of the bird aloft has a phenomenological structure that we may begin to articulate in the following phenomenological description:

In this experience I see that bird and judge that it is a turkey vulture. The *indexical* content or sense “that,” or “that bird,” in my visual experience intentionally prescribes the object actually now there visually before me and affecting my eyes, that is, in the present *context* of experience (See Smith 1989 for details of this analysis).

An instructive model of indexical intentionality is that of linguistic indexical reference. When I say, “That is a turkey vulture,” my speech act, using the *indexical* term “that,” depends on my perceptual act of seeing what I am referring to, and forming a judgment about it. Thus, the object of reference is an object in the context of my perception. Indeed, Husserl and Gurwitsch both addressed the relation between the “occasional expression,” “this” or “that,” and visual awareness of the object referred to on the given occasion. Our concern here, however, lies with the form of indexical awareness rather than indexical language.2

The structure of *indexical awareness* in perception—of intentionality via *indexical sense* invoking context—I have appraised elsewhere (Smith 1989), drawing on the phenomenology of perception and the semantics of indexical expressions. Here, drawing on Gurwitsch’s results, I want to develop a closer account of the structure of context and contextual awareness in vision, articulating the *form* of perceptual consciousness of environment, specifying just how the content of perception calls on the context of perception. The model we will

Gurwitsch and to put them to work within a particular framework for synthesizing phenomenology, ontology, and cognitive science. This approach will call for modifying some of the broad “transcendental” themes dear to the hearts of Husserl and Gurwitsch in their era. My basic interpretation of Husserl on intentionality, noema, and horizon is that in Smith and McIntyre 1982. My analysis of indexical awareness and the role of context and indexical content therein is that in Smith 1989. My take on formal ontology and its role in phenomenology is that of Smith 1995. My approach to naturalism in contemporary philosophy of mind *cum* cognitive science (we need a wider conception of “nature” that accommodates consciousness, intentionality, meaning, and culture) is that of Smith 1999. Relevant background discussions are found in two collections that address phenomenology and cognitive science (at two times in the evolution of “cognitive science”): Dreyfus (ed.) 1982 and Petitot et al. (eds.) 1999.

2 During the 1970s David Kaplan developed a well-known model of the logic of demonstratives and other indexical expressions, published in his “Demonstratives” (1989). Husserl had sketched a similar model already in *Logical Investigations*, I, §26, VI, §5. Gurwitsch addressed Husserl’s model in an appendix to *Marginal Consciousness*. Kaplan’s and Husserl’s accounts of demonstratives, and the related issues of intentionality, are studied in Smith 1982.