GESTALT THEORY AND MERLEAU-PONTY'S CONCEPT OF INTENTIONALITY

1. BACKGROUND

The thesis of the intentionality of consciousness — all consciousness is consciousness of something — was first stated in its modern form by Franz Brentano. Husserl appropriated the term, but gave it a considerably revised interpretation: Brentano conceived intentions as psychical phenomena, as real events or natural processes occurring within the psyche; Husserl, on the other hand, speaks of intentional acts by means of which the transcendental ego instantiates “irreal” meanings and constitutes the objects of which it is conscious. Thus, Husserl replaces Brentano’s naturalistic (or psychologistic) conception of intentionality with his own transcendental constitutive model. Subsequently, the thesis of intentionality has played a fundamental role in the thought of most phenomenologists following the Husserlian tradition. It has, needless to say, suffered some transfiguration, but the original Husserlian conception is readily discernible in the more contemporary reformulations.

Merleau-Ponty is among the recent phenomenologists who make use of the notion of intentionality; however, his interpretation differs from Husserl’s just as the latter’s differed from that of Brentano. The heart of the difference is that Merleau-Ponty construes intentionality along Gestalt-theoretical lines. Specifically, he interprets the intentional object as a kind of Gestalt-contexture (although he explicitly repudiates the naturalism typically espoused by traditional Gestalt psychology). My intent here is to show the influence of Gestalt theory upon Merleau-Ponty’s conception of intentionality, to point out some instances in which the Gestalt-theoretical concepts he assimilated led Merleau-Ponty to depart from Husserl’s notion of intentionality, and to defend the view that his departures are warranted, indeed are needful, corrections. In order, however, to appreciate the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s transformation of it, some of the basic features of the Husserlian conception of the thesis of intentionality must be explicated.
One feature of intentionality that seems to be generally agreed upon is that of object-directedness: “In every wakeful cogito a ‘glancing’ ray from the pure Ego is directed upon the ‘object’ of the correlate of consciousness for the time being, the thing, the fact, and so forth, and enjoys the typically varied consciousness of it.” A “Object” is to be understood here in a maximally broad sense: it excludes nothing that can be thought of. Husserl makes it clear (in the sentences following the passage quoted) that intentionality, in this sense of object-directedness, is a universal aspect of consciousness: thus, for instance, he does not limit it to thematic modes, but rather regards the distinction between thematic consciousness and non-thematic consciousness as a distinction of modalities both of which fall under the general category of intentionality.

Intentionality refers also, in Husserl, to the act-character of consciousness’ references to its objects: when consciousness intends an object, it acts, it does something. This act-character of intentionality received stronger emphasis in Husserl’s earlier works (e.g., Logische Untersuchungen) than it did in his later writings, but although it incurred criticism, a fact which he acknowledges in the later Ideas I, he never gave it up. Instead, he introduced the terms “noesis” and “noema” in order to distinguish between the act of intending (noesis) and the meaning (noema) of the object thereby constituted. The noetic act is real in the sense that it is a temporal event in which hyletic data (or “sensory contents”) are synthesized and apprehended by consciousness as an intentional object. The noema, on the other hand, is not real: it conveys the atemporal meaning which provides the form (morphé) according to which consciousness synthesizes the material data (hyle). Husserl regards noesis and noema as inseparable correlates, both of which are necessarily included within any intentional act. He found the distinction needful in order to deal with the problem of identity, that is, to explain how we can refer to the same object (i.e., objects having the same noematic meaning content) on numerically different occasions (i.e., in noetic acts taking place at different times). The fact that Husserl was mindful of the problem of identity in setting forth his doctrine of consciousness as intentionality is evident in his Cartesian Meditations (sects. 17-18) where he describes “synthesis as the primal form belonging to [intentionality or] consciousness” and “identification as the fundamental form of synthesis.”