

# THE MODES OF ATTENTION

---

## Los modos de la atención

DANIEL EDUARDO CHAVES PEÑA\*

Caro y Cuervo Institute, Bogota, Colombia

daniel.chaves@caroycuervo.gov.co

Orcid code: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0912-5542>

JAIME YÁÑEZ CANAL\*\*

National University of Colombia, Bogota, Colombia

jyanezc@unal.edu.co

Orcid code: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9839-1123>

---

### Abstract

In this text, it is claimed that a phenomenological approach to attention could provide important distinctions concerning different levels of consciousness. After criticizing some classical ideas about attention, the phenomenological ideas are introduced pointing how relevant they are for conceiving key aspects of attention that are usually overlooked in other theories. By revisiting seminal ideas from Husserl, Gurwitsch, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between the workings of attention and the modes of consciousness explored by phenomenology is underscored. From this point of view, two basic modes of attention are distinguished: a passive form which is involved in the forms of synthesis responsible for the structure of the immediate contents of experience, and an active mode, characterized by the sense of agency which allows the subject to make distinctions, individuate and highlight different aspects from the structure of experience. There is a dynamic relation between these two forms of attention and how they can be identified with two modes of consciousness: while the passive form corresponds to pre-reflective consciousness, the active form is equivalent to the more reflective ways of directing the attention. The pre-reflective mode of consciousness characterizes the continuous forms of being related with the world without exerting meta-cognitive monitoring over our experiences. The active mode attention can only operate on the basis of pre-reflective consciousness.

---

### Keywords

Attention, consciousness, phenomenology, pre-reflective, active, passive.

**Suggested citation:** Chaves, Daniel & Yáñez, Jaime (2021). The modes of attention. *Sophia, colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, 30, pp. 217-235.

---

\* Researcher at the Caro y Cuervo Institute. Teacher of the Master in Linguistics.

\*\* Professor Department of Psychology, National University of Colombia. Director of the Research Group “Studies on Socio-Moral Development”.

### Resumen

En este texto se analizan algunas concepciones clásicas y alternativas del fenómeno de la atención. Luego de revisar algunos de los planteamientos tradicionales a la hora de concebir este proceso cognitivo, se defiende la importancia de una perspectiva fenomenológica de la atención. En este sentido se retoman las ideas de fenomenólogos como Husserl, Sartre y Merleau-Ponty con el objeto de establecer una distinción de niveles en el proceso atencional. Específicamente, se distingue entre las formas pasivas y activas de la atención. La separación y caracterización de niveles es fundamental, pues permite establecer estratos del fenómeno que a menudo se pasan por alto en las teorías de la atención. La concepción fenomenológica de la atención postula distintos niveles de consciencia que ponen en evidencia las formas de significación de las que dispone el sujeto en su relación con el mundo: la forma pasiva se corresponde con la consciencia prerreflexiva, mientras que la activa puede vincularse a las formas reflexivas de dirigir la atención. En cuanto a las formas pasivas, se enfatiza en las formas de la organización de los contenidos de la experiencia, y en lo que concierne a las formas activas, se resalta cómo el sentido de agencia es fundamental en la determinación de la corriente de experiencias. Tales distinciones son fundamentales para una caracterización apropiada del campo de atención.

218



### Palabras clave

Atención, consciencia, fenomenología, prerreflexiva, activa, pasiva

## Introduction

Attention is understood in traditional postures as a charge of energy that is deposited in certain events according to the intensity, strangeness, or novelty of these events. The subject under this gaze is subjected to the fluctuations of world events and his perception and consciousness are reactively understood. The conceptualization and debate on this concept of attention go hand in hand with new approaches to the problem of consciousness. Consciousness is the problem that allows us to consider the human being as an active being that establishes parameters to organize and select the information he receives and the ways in which he interacts with his environment.

A consistent theory of consciousness must include as a fundamental component of its explanation a thorough analysis of its relationships with attention. In the phenomenon of attention, an essential aspect of conscious life is manifested: the active dimension of the mind in the capacity of organization, selection, and differentiation of the contents of experience. In order to present these dimensions of conscious experience, it is necessary to criticize that classical conception of attention that reduces it to a psychological faculty that is in charge of housing the phenomena that link the subject with the environment, that is, the capture of sensations in function of the intensity or qualitative contrasts of external stimuli.

Consciousness is the “hard problem”, the most relevant problem in current research in cognitive sciences since it brings to the fore the sense

of unity of experiences and the sense of agency. The approach to the phenomenon of attention will allow us to understand some of the debates on the conceptualization around consciousness and the contribution of phenomenological perspectives to the question.

This article focuses on one of the fundamental aspects of attention, that is, the phenomenon of salience or prominence of the content above others. By analyzing this phenomenon, the article attempts to answer the following questions: What element is in charge of the organization and selection of the content of experience that is focused by the attention? Is it a reflective or implicit process of consciousness? Why does conscious experience not exhaust itself in the focused object, but rather seems to encompass the other potential contents of attention? In the text, these questions are approached from different perspectives, positioning ourselves with the phenomenological proposal, which makes it possible to highlight the active role of subjectivity and the ways in which the subjects consistently perceive their experience.



## Critique of the classical conception

Why is the characterization of the classical model insufficient? The type of cases that one has in mind when thinking of attention as the merely passive capture of sensations are rather simple and extreme cases: for example, the circumstance is often cited in which an unusual phenomenon suddenly breaks into consciousness by virtue of its sheer intensity (i.e., the collision of a car that produces a loud noise that demands attention be directed to perceive such an event). Considering this type of phenomena, we can mention the psycho-physical investigations of Hardy Leahey (1994) and Fechner (1966) and some versions of cognitive psychology with the works of Broadbent (1954; 1958), Conway et al. (2001), and Driver (2001), who were aimed at establishing the relationships between the intensity of the stimuli and the moment or threshold of ‘consciousness’. According to what was stated, consciousness in these perspectives was directly associated with the phenomenon of attention, understood as the psychic energy that reacts to the intensity of a stimulus. Consciousness operates in these cases as an “awareness” of the occurrence of an event. On the basis of these phenomena, attention is understood as a psychological faculty that is limited to the purely receptive capture of sensations that constitute the raw material on which certain representations of the world are made.

In opposition to these classical views that saw attention as the light of a flashlight that was directed by the salience of certain stimuli from the world, other views have been proposed in psychology that establish an internal mechanism for the orientation of attention. Obviously, it cannot be ignored that there is this automatic and quite simple way of operating attention, which allows organisms to react to variations in the surrounding world. In the animal world and in the most elementary forms of cognitive functioning there are certain stimuli that awaken a certain energy charge and that quickly generate reactive behaviors or automatic responses. These types of reactions, which can be called expressions of passive attention, are not the only ways in which attention is expressed. To forms of passive attention that act as forces determined by the surrounding world, or as causal events in the outside world, active attention originating from within psychic life is often opposed.

220



The second group includes the most common phenomenon of attention, namely, cases in which attention is deliberately directed towards phenomena that are of interest to the cognitive agent. If, for example, in an outdoor drawing class the representation of a tree is requested with a model present, the attention will capture its shape, its colors, the type of leaves, etc., in such a detailed way that it would not have a place if not for the perceptual project that the draftsman has voluntarily drawn. It is clear that without the participation of a deliberate project of active attention, all these characteristics and aspects would go unnoticed; but at the moment in which one actively attends, consciousness establishes a horizon of significance (in this case, the qualitative and morphological properties of the percept) where it is possible to make cognitive discoveries, or by fine-tuning perception, to articulate what is known about the tree with what is currently contemplated.

However, this way of posing the difference between reactive or passive attention and an active mode cannot be the starting point for the analysis. First, because not even in the case of passive forms does attention operate reactively; the point is that the car crash has no value per se, by virtue of its intensity, to reach consciousness. The fact that it is noticed as something that attracts attention depends on the situation in which the subject is: thus, for example, when being at a NASCAR or Monster Trucks exhibition, the crash of the cars may no longer be an impression that demands an automatic reaction of attention. Therefore, it is not the sensory properties of the stimulus that guarantee its conscious uptake, but the situation or context in which consciousness establishes a field of experience in which it is possible to become more sensitive to surroun-

ding phenomena. Now, this clarification does not imply that the intuitive distinction between a passive and an active mode of attention is abandoned, since such a difference concerns the fact that some phenomena simply burst into consciousness without there being an intention drawn beforehand that points to grasp it, while others, on the other hand, are discovered or recognized because a volitional intention directed at them precedes them. If then, one wants to understand this fundamental difference in modes of attention, their specific characteristics, and functions, it is necessary to explore in what sense these modes of attention unfold in a field of consciousness.

## Attention and the field of consciousness

By saying that consciousness operates from a field or horizon of significance where attention is expressed, it seeks to highlight the volatility and dynamics of psychic operation and the presence of dimensions that can constantly vary as the subject unfolds in his world. This becomes evident when we start from the fact that attention runs continuously and discontinuously between the multiple contents of experience: attention can be directed to an event in the external world; and at the same time consider the activities that must be developed during the day, however, if something unusual happens in the street and I can then highlight in my consciousness what happens in the perceptual field. More than a cognitive function, attention refers to the mode of existence of experiences in the stream of consciousness. Thus, the ways in which attention is distributed in the course of experiences determine the way of being conscious.

This fact had already been highlighted by W. James (1989; 2000), and constitutes the basis for the identification of attention with the dynamics and structure of the 'field of consciousness'. The structure of the field of consciousness designates precisely the minimum organization that makes the attention flow between the focused content of experience and the contents that correlatively move towards the margin. The focus of attention on some of the contents and their different properties has the effect that the other contents momentarily recede towards the margins of the field, without disappearing and without their presence being fully determinable.

If a momentary cut is made on the stream of consciousness, it can be noticed that, simultaneously, there are multiple contents competing for attention: this is what is kept in mind when you say, for example, 'I could not hear what you were saying because I was concentrating on



reading.' Depending on the interests and intentions of the moment, a sort of hierarchical distribution of attention is generated between the different experiences: that is, the modes of the margin and the focus of attention correspond, respectively, to a lesser or greater degree of determination in the contents of the experience. In this regard, an example provided by Sartre (2006) is illustrative to point out the global nature of consciousness that is not exhausted by focused content: after having been reading all day, already at night, when one begins to experience some distraction, the images currently represented do not articulate with the past, although one does not feel tired; but it turns out that due to the long day of reading, it is finally discovered that our eyes are irritated. The pain had remained on the fringes of the field of consciousness, but nonetheless, this experience was shaping the overall content of consciousness at that moment. The point that Sartre wants to highlight is that the experience of pain, despite not being focused, configures the global consciousness of the moment.

222



Returning to the image that awakens a horizon of perception, it is clear that events compete to attract the subject's attention according to what motivates his experience at a given moment, without consciousness being understood as the pilot that by predetermined manner accompanies the variable performance of attention. Nor is consciousness to be understood as a rider that operates reflexively on automatic acts of perception. This idea is emphasized since, from the phenomenological perspective, consciousness is not identified with an explicit reflection process that controls all cognitive processes. Rather, consciousness is understood as a constant presence that operates from pre-reflexive ways and that in a particular way determines the direction of attention and the processes of reflection and explicit reporting. This position, clearly phenomenological in orientation, demands more space for its clarification.

## Pre-reflective consciousness as a basic form of consciousness

Phenomenological positions do not understand consciousness according to reflection processes, nor as forms of monitoring of a higher or meta-cognitive level, nor as the expression of acts of introspection. Contrary to this, consciousness is understood as part of a primary experience<sup>1</sup>.

For Sartre (2006) reflection is a kind of derived consciousness, that is, it is the process when consciousness takes itself as an object. This consideration of consciousness implies a differentiation between subject

and object, which means that the subject distances himself from himself to analyze himself from a third-person perspective. For Sartre, this fragmentation of the consciousness would lead to a regression to infinity, since the consciousness that analyzes itself needs to reflect on that same process indefinitely, or, to avoid the above, it should suppose an initial unconscious process<sup>2</sup> that would make the self-reflection loop possible. For these reasons, consciousness must involve several levels and a primary consciousness, of a pre-reflective nature.

For the subject to be able to reflect on his experience, he must have a feeling of unity, a feeling that he is the subject of the experience. This is pre-reflective awareness, a sense of self-presence with oneself in all our experiences. Zahavi (2005) illustrates this idea by referring to a situation described by Sartre himself in which the subject is completely absorbed in reading a novel. If the novel succeeds in capturing his full attention, the subject may even forget himself and many other things in the outside world. The reading of the novel is carried out without the need to reflect on this process, or the activity we are doing. But if suddenly someone appears and interrupts the subject by asking the subject what he has been doing for the last few hours, he will have no difficulty in reporting that he has been reading a novel. With this situation, it can be understood that despite not reflecting on the act of reading, or what reading produces, the subject can always know that it is always present in their experience. Our self has been in the present experience without having to see itself as an object of reflection from a third-person perspective.

Based on this example, one can understand Sartre's differentiation between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness<sup>3</sup>. The first is that self-knowledge in which the subject is always immersed. The second, reflective consciousness, is that process of reflection where the subject can refer to himself in the same way that he can refer to objects in the world.

Of course, pre-reflective consciousness, being primary, is always present and can manifest itself without there being a second-order process of reflection or monitoring. Instead, this last metacognitive capacity always demands the presence of a subject that is perceived as an always present unit. For Sartre "there is a pre-reflective cogito that is the condition of the Cartesian cogito" (quoted by Zahavi, 2005, p. 30).

The concept of attention must be understood closely with this characterization of the levels of consciousness. Normally, the subject can attend to an infinity of events without having to reflect on their value or meaning, much less consider something explicitly that ensures the coherence or the linking of his experiences. Of course, if this pre-reflective flow is altered



by some unexpected or unanticipated event, the reflective attitude takes command of our actions to focus and reorganize our behavior.

## Origin and organizational factors of perceptual experience

So far it has been shown how the experiences that occupy the stream of consciousness require a certain degree of attention to exist as such. Similarly, it was emphasized that experiences take place in the field of consciousness in the primordial mode of prereflexivity, since a subsequent act of reflection is not required to be aware of experiences; indeed, pre-reflective consciousness conditions and motivates acts of reflection. However, these approaches still fail to provide the key to one of the functional aspects of attention; they only indicate in what sense experiences exist with a certain degree of attention. The basic function of attention consists in making prominent or separating from the flow of consciousness one of the contents that thusly becomes the 'subject' of our interest. What makes it possible for one of the contents of the stream of consciousness to stand out among the others? The phenomenological treatment of the prominence of a piece of content will allow a better delimitation of what has previously been called the passive and active modes of attention.

The phenomenon of the prominence of content in the flow of consciousness concerns the problem of the organization of sensory experience. According to Carpintero (1996) and Driver (2001), in the psychophysical theories of the 19th century, it was sought to account for this phenomenon by pointing out the quantitative differences, contrast, and similarity between sensation data. One of the basic assumptions of this theory consisted of what Gestalt theorists would later call the 'constancy hypothesis', which proposes that there is a one-to-one correspondence between physical stimuli and sensations: to the extent in which the stimuli exceed a certain threshold of intensity, they will be able to be noticed in the conscious level. Already in the first section, some of the difficulties of this theory were shown; at this point, it is possible to summarize the problem as follows: There are phenomena of perceptual experience that do not have a direct corresponding in the level of intensity or salience of the stimuli, and that therefore require the acceptance of an instance or organizational form. This is what happens, for example, in the *phi* phenomenon, where an apparent movement can be perceived between two lights that remain objectively separated. It is also what is present in am-

224



biguous images (the duck-rabbit or the image that can show two faces or a glass), where the configuration of the perceptual phenomenon depends on the choice of the contour that delimits one or another figure.

As a reaction to the atomistic assumptions of English empiricism that explained the organization of experience as the mere addition of atoms of sensation, the approaches of James (1989), the phenomenology of Husserl (1986, 2001), the school of Graz (Meinong, 1981), and Gestalt theory (Koffka, 1967; 1979) sought to establish the organizing principles of experience in different factors of subjectivity. In a quick way it can be said that despite the coincidences in their criticism of associationism and the positions of psychophysics, they present radical differences among themselves. The position of James (1989) and that of the Graz school (Meinong, 1981) can be grouped in the same trend since they argue that the organization and differentiation of experience is something imposed extrinsically to the stream of consciousness, either by virtue of active attention (James) or by a higher-order act of the intellect (Graz school). For its part, the position of Husserlian phenomenology together with Gestalt theory make up another group insofar as they consider that the organization of experience is an immanent aspect of sensitivity or of the stream of experiences itself. The differences between these postures can be overlooked and instead expanded on some ideas about attention. Since the text is aimed at examining the value and scope of active attention and the process of differentiation and organization of the content of experience, some ideas of the cited authors will be highlighted to clarify the central points in the clarification of some aspects of consciousness.

At this point, we resort to the characterization that Gurwitsch (1979; 2009) performs on James and the functions that he attributes to attention. The relevance of this characterization lies in pointing out a certain explanatory impasse that James's theory faces when it assumes the selective function of attention as a principle of the organization of the stream of experiences. In this regard, says Gurwitsch (1979):

According to James, even when the 'field of consciousness' is organized, it should not be considered as a primary, authentic, and original characteristic of experience. And this is because the organization would be given, superimposed on consciousness. James stayed true to this thesis throughout his career' (p. 37).

Against the atomism of the empiricist explanation, James (1989) considers that the most basic components of experience are not the atoms of sensation but the so-called 'sensible wholes'. Sensible wholes designate the



temporal flow of experiences prior to any act of conceptualization; heavily influenced by Bergson (2006)<sup>4</sup>, James characterizes the stream of consciousness as an undifferentiated whole of ‘fused’ states. Thus, the problem for James is not how disjointed parts come together in the mind to configure a coherent object (which would be the problem of consciousness for English empiricism), but rather how consciousness is capable of to dissociate or separate the aspects relevant to the cognitive agent from the formless mass of the sensible wholes. The function that James assigns to active attention is thus understood: the organization and differentiation of the field of consciousness is the effect of the selective activity of attention that, in the continuum of sensible wholes, introduces segmentations and differentiation of content.

What is the difficulty facing James’s theory of active attention? The central point of Gurwitsch’s critique is formulated in the following way: it is not possible for attention to separate and differentiate the contents of experience if it does not possess in advance an image of what it is seeking to separate; in other words, the organization of the contents of consciousness must precede the processes of attention and differentiation of information. Trying to overcome this difficulty, James proposes that attention has acted haphazardly in the first encounters with objects. He seems to assume this, even going against his thesis on the volitional nature of the mind, that the random functioning of attention, together with the repetition of experience, would bring about the phenomenon of separation on the stream of consciousness. By accepting this explanation, it is not understood how prior knowledge that has been haphazardly isolated by attention can be brought to the fore again by a random mechanism. This is highly unlikely. Once it is accepted that selective attention operates randomly, then it must operate in the same way in all cases. Similarly, if two things are initially presented at random and are grouped in a certain way, it is because in the subject there must be a prior form of organization that gives them meaning, or at least groups them under particular schemes.

Furthermore, according to what Köhler (1959; 1967) argues, the influence of past experience on the current one is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon of prominence. The camouflage structures that Köhler has analyzed are relevant in this case. Certain figures (see figure A) objectively contain others (see figure a) that are familiar from past experiences. In the first group of figures presented below, you can see how a certain element is hidden in another image. The E in figure a is hidden in the first figure (A). On the other hand, in the other group of figures (on the right), the presence of figure a in A becomes evident. The 4 (from a) is easily observed in the first figure of this group (A).



Figure 1  
Camouflage structures



Source: Gurwitsch (1979, p. 43).

The fact that figure *a* is hidden or made manifest does not, therefore, depend on whether the figures are familiar, since both E and 4 are equally familiar. What is presented in the perceptual field depends rather on the fact that the lines that trace the gestalt physiognomy of figure *a* maintain their structure and do not merge with those of figure A. In this way, Gurwitsch's point (1979) is understood:

... It is quite impossible that the mere repetition and accumulation of experiences result in the very separation of the units in question. In order for these to serve as a vehicle for growth through experience, it is first necessary that they separate; In other words, they must first emerge from the bosom of the field and detach themselves from each other (p. 48).

Now, this does not mean that previous experience does not play an essential role in the phenomenon of the prominence of certain contents of consciousness. Gurwitsch's reply to James points out that previous experience, by sedimenting significant sets, participates in what he calls the 'exploratory phase' of the constitution of prominence, that is, the active search for a configuration usually invokes the function of memory insofar as the subject tests different configurations that have already been consolidated, trying to find a resonance with what is given in the perceptual field. The 'exploratory phase' is distinguished from the 'achievement phase', which designates the highlighting of one configuration above others, that is, the moment when the figure finally stands out against the background. According to Gurwitsch, this process of prominence operates at the most basic level of the sentient organization, and it is the phenomenon that precedes the capture carried out by selective attention. Said in the terms of the previous section, the organization and differentiation of the perceptual field takes place at the most basic level of the pre-reflective experience.



Taking into account these difficulties of James's theory, Gurwitsch (2009) tries to account for what would be the origin and the organizational factors immanent to the current of consciousness through a recourse to Gestalt theory and Husserlian phenomenology. In the study of more complex configurations of points, lines, curves, and figures, Gestalt theorists proposed four factors that contribute to the phenomenon of the organization of parts into unitary sets: 1) Proximity; 2) Equality; 3) The enclosure and 4) The appropriate continuation. As Merleau-Ponty (1984) has pointed out, although these factors have been interpreted within Gestalt theory as the objective conditions of the organization of stimuli, they nevertheless admit a phenomenological reading, that is, as aspects structural structures that are intrinsic to the perceptual structures experienced<sup>5</sup>.

228



## Attention and passive syntheses

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the phenomena of 'closure' and of 'appropriate continuation'. Although these factors were established especially in the field of visual experience, their importance goes beyond this area. The importance of the 'appropriate continuation' factor becomes evident in the cases of temporal structures of experience, that is, structures that require a conclusive unfolding (i.e., a conversation or a melody). In Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl, 1986; Zahavi, 2005), temporality constitutes the fundamental passive<sup>6</sup> synthesis of all experience. This is evident in the case of the melody, whose unified experience would not be possible if the consciousness were set on to capturing the present notes. Indeed, to have the experience of the unfolding of a melody, it is necessary that the consciousness not only retain the previous notes, but also, based on the notes heard, anticipate and foreshadow a possible outcome that characterizes the very texture of the melody. Retention, understood as an awareness of the recent past, the moment of present impression, and a certain measure of anticipation constitute the time horizon that guarantees the experience of a unitary phenomenon of meaning.

These are passive syntheses because the unification occurs at the level of pre-reflective experience, without having to participate in an act of a higher order that operates the unification of the notes: the synthesis unfolds on the level of pure sensitivity. It should be noted that temporality, while essential, is not the only passive synthesis. Husserl works in a similar way the syntheses of homogeneity, heterogeneity, contrast, similarity, and order, which constitute the terrain of phenomenological inves-

tigations of sensible content; they are what makes possible in the field of pre-reflective affectivity the thematizations of explicit consciousness, also known as active synthesis of consciousness.

In this way, by not accepting that there are processes of prominence and differentiation that arise from experience itself, James' theory closes itself off to an explanation of the origin of the organization and is forced to impose extrinsically what is an immanent aspect of the stream of experience: its proto-differentiated character as a function of passive syntheses of sensibility that prepare the ground for 'selective attention' activities.

Thus, consciousness expresses itself through different states or levels within a horizon that flows and that is expressed in all experiences. The most basic form or level of consciousness is the pre-reflective mode that determines everything and that always accompanies all experience. This pre-reflective awareness is the first way in which the notions of passive and active attention are understood, but this, in turn, demands greater specificities. Let's go back to certain phenomena already exposed.

It is an almost common event that in the midst of a more or less homogeneous stream of experiences (i.e., a conversation), something calls for attention (a melody) without having been aware of what was happening around. Or the cocktail phenomenon, of which perception scholars speak (Driver, 2001), which consists of shifting the focus of attention from a conversation with an interlocutor to another conversation that develops a topic of ours for the subject, or that names just a character related to our sympathies. Can something be heard without having the intention to listen to it? Or, in other words, how do you hear something that was not paying attention to? How does something attract attention, without having been part of our attention focus? In accordance with what we have stated above, it is true to say that objects call our attention without a prior deliberate act of attention. The direction of attention is not random in these cases but obeys organizational and selective forms that operate at the level of pre-reflective experience. That which suddenly calls our attention is subject to a stream of experiences that act as a unified and coherent horizon (the melody, or the theme treated by a couple of neighboring companions, becomes the focus of attention since the part that currently unfolds is linked to affective interests and the history of experiences of the subject in question). At this point the consciousness turns towards the melodious part that currently floods the field of consciousness, but, as we have already pointed out, this awareness is not reduced to the level of the present moment; the melodious part reactivates the parts that had not been attended before and that were nonetheless



present at the level of the pre-reflective experience. Thus, the phenomenon appears before consciousness as a unitary phenomenon of meaning.

The case presented is an example of the sudden realization of experienced content that is not preceded by a voluntary search project. In this case, it is possible to affirm that, to the extent that attention is directed elsewhere, the unheard conversation only reaches the status of white noise for consciousness. However, at the moment in which a sequence of sounds, by virtue of mechanisms and operations that escape explicit consciousness, makes the attention turn on what was heard as white noise, and now, by the passively motivated act, it becomes a unified sequence whose meaning is directly accessible. It is in this sense that, at the level of pre-reflective experience, passive forms of unity and synthesis operate that prepare the ground for explicit choices or thematizations of consciousness.

230



## The place of active attention in experience

In the previous section, the importance of passive syntheses in the organization and differentiation of sensitive content was highlighted. But this is only one component of the investigation, namely, what makes an involuntary mode of attention possible. It is time to show the role of the active dimension of consciousness in the synthesis of perceptual phenomena, that is, when a perceptual project is deliberately outlined. At this point, it is worth highlighting the degree of control and self-determination that active attention introduces in the stream of experiences. Faced with the continuous bombardment of sensory data on the senses, active attention has the power to invoke, on the basis of a sedimented experience, an internal object, which creates a kind of attractive emptiness, on which the object or the desired aspect differentiate. But this process of selective attention does not only consist in selecting certain events that are offered to perception but in organizing and accounting for certain details according to the knowledge and experience of them. This becomes evident if two people, with different musical abilities and training, are confronted with a certain melody. It is obvious that only the expert will discover in the melody the harmonic components, rhythm, the musical figures that it describes, and the octave range in which it develops, while the inexperienced subject will hardly distinguish the sequence of notes that characterizes the melody. In this case, attention operates as a kind of differentiating and organizing grid of sensations.

The last two examples allow us to formulate two ways in which attention is presented and the ways in which acquired knowledge and

previous experience can guide action in ways that we would relate to the active dimension of the mind. These two examples can be differentiated according to the degree to which the subject directs his processes of perception and the explicit ways in which he guides his action. Following O'Shaughnessy (2002) at this point, the properties introduced by the active dimension of consciousness in the organization of perceptual experience are the following: i) spatial-temporal structuring of phenomena, (ii) individuation of aspects or objects of the perceptual content, (iii) intelligibility of the individuated contents of experience.

The properties of active attention in the case of visual experience are presented below: (i) when it is said that active attention prints a Spatial-temporal structuring to the phenomena that it takes as its object, it is meant that the content in question is provided with a Spatial-temporal anchoring framework in which it unfolds as a unitary phenomenon of meaning. In contrast to the passive attitude of the visual experience, active attention introduces a differentiation and a spatio-temporal organization that the phenomenon would not have had, had it not been for the voluntary intention of looking at the visual spectacle. In the active attitude of the visual experience, the contents of the visual field acquire a characteristic degree of differentiation and spatial determination: for example, when one made a car tour in a little-known part of the city, a representation tends to be configured of the distance or size relationships of the buildings that will serve the purpose of a future orientation in that space.

Property (ii) is derived in a sense from the first. The 'individuation' of perceptual properties and objects is made possible because a global perceptual intention (wanting to listen to a melody as melody) introduces a framework of synthesis of the temporal phases of the object in question. It is necessary that the attention, as it follows the unfolding of the melody, retains the past phases and anticipates in some way the following notes, and only in this way can we say that we are listening to a melody.

Property (iii) of 'intelligibility' indicates that the implementation of an intentional perceptual activity gives rise to reason and understanding acting together with the acquired knowledge, to guarantee the recognition, over time, of a uniform perceptual object.

It is in the execution of an intentional perceptual project that the properties of active attention become present in the configuration of perceptual contents. The global perceptual intention puts into play a capacity for synthesis of what is given in perception; Without that intention, there would be no individualized contents in space and time, since every perceptual phenomenon requires a synthesis of its past, current, and future pha-



ses. Precisely in the case of perception, attention has the function of anchoring the subject in perceptual projects that delimit space-time horizons in which an expansion of the cognitive map of reality can be carried out since attention enables the individuation of content to the extent to which what is given in perception is articulated with previously acquired knowledge.

If you are engaged in an active perceptual project (i.e., looking at and detailing the monument), it is clear that the intention acts in the manner of an agent that synthesizes the different profiles of the monument as belonging to a single object. Thus, it is possible to get to know what its shape and its different appearances are depending on the orientation and movements around it. Similarly, the intentional project of active attention introduces a specification of the spatial properties of the object and the relationships it maintains with the place and the other objects that surround it; it is these structuring and differentiation characteristics provided by active attention that guarantee the intelligibility of the phenomenon not only as an event belonging to a stream of consciousness but also as an object that belongs to a certain general type of objects (monuments) that present such or which shape, that is, as an object that can be recognized and identified in different situations.

Only an active attention project provides a firm basis for the constitution of lasting knowledge in memory, in such a way that, if a detailed report of the visited monument is requested, the cognitive agent would be able to report with a sufficiency of details. the characteristics of the phenomenon in question. This is the measure of order and meaning that active attention introduces into perceptual experience.

## Conclusions

This discussion on some of the modalities and properties of attention is justified by the lack of a clarification of the active and passive dimensions it. The use of the terms active and passive to characterize the modes of attention is inappropriate if, in the first place, passivity is conceived as a mere reaction to variations in the intensity of the stimuli, since according to what has been proposed, the most basic phenomenon of attention, namely, the prominence of one content above others, obeys or becomes possible as a function of a set of organizational structures of consciousness. In this way, the phenomenological clarification of the passive dimension teaches that attention operates by virtue of the organization and differentiation of the contents of the pre-reflective experience.



By clarifying the limits of what has been called ‘passive attention’, the way is open to characterize its active mode. The structures of consciousness of passive attention provide the subsoil for potential individuation of content, but it is only at the level of the activity of consciousness that the possibility of differentiating a content is currently exercised insofar as it is articulated with intentions of the subject and the knowledge system has already been acquired. Likewise, it is on the active plane that the subject’s capacity for agency and control in choosing content is staged. A way of advancing in the investigation of the sense of agency that characterizes a good part of the subjective experience would, then, have to delve into the ways in which active attention operates, the way in which attention is articulated with the subject’s knowledge system as a function of an intention drawn beforehand. In the same way, the study of the agency must contemplate the different moments of the child’s development to be able to delimit the multiple relationships that are established between the different forms of knowledge and the qualitative changes in the intentional processes.

## Notes

- 1 In contrast, for higher-order theories, or meta-cognitive stances within information processing and traditional developmental psychology (Carruthers, 2005; Lycan, 1995; Piaget, 1976; Vygotsky, 2000), which makes a mental state a conscious state consists of the act of being taken as an object by a second act (introspection or reflection); thus, for example, we would not be aware of what we perceive until a meta-cognitive process takes as its object the primary state (in this case, perception). In this context, the meaning of reflection is taken in its literal sense, as the reflection of an image in the mirror. Content is “reflected” on a higher plane which in turn is served. In this way, what makes a conscious state is an act of linking between a meta-cognitive state and a primary state.
- 2 Phenomenologists (Husserl, 1986; Sartre, 2006) oppose the idea that consciousness emerges from a reflective process or higher-level monitoring, as this inevitably leads to a return to infinity: if mental states are conscious in the sense of being taken as intentional objects by a second mental state, then these higher-order mental states, if they are to be conscious, must also be taken as objects by a third state, and so on ad infinitum. Proponents of higher-order theory have responded with the non-conscious mental states approach (Carruthers, 1994, Lycan, 1995). According to these authors, by accepting the existence of non-conscious mental states the regression stops. In this way, perception or second-order thinking would be non-conscious. However, phenomenologists consider that this solution, by appealing to non-conscious mental states, leaves us with an explanatory gap, because effectively, how is it possible that two non-conscious mental states can make one of them become conscious? Without a doubt, it is difficult to conceive that the phenomenal qualities of experience emerge from this meta-cognitive relationship.

- 3 In phenomenology, Husserl's work had several changes and various reactions according to its period of conceptual development. Husserl's early works generated reactions from Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, and other authors. These argued the need to postulate a prereflective instance as the central aspect of consciousness. How this pre-reflective instance was understood would be what would differentiate the different positions. For Heidegger, acting in an already constituted world is the prereflective and the foundation of all human operations. Merleau-Ponty locates this prereflective operation in the body and Sartre in that feeling of unity that always gives us the feeling of presence. These debates will be overlooked in this text since we are interested in highlighting some common ideas in order to understand consciousness in a certain way.
- 4 In Bergson's philosophy (2006), the life of consciousness is characterized according to two modes in which it can operate: on the one hand there is the purely qualitative flow of the states of consciousness; In this plane of the temporal flow, the states are fused with each other, and there is no differentiation between before and after; these differentiations are what the second main mode of consciousness introduces, that is, the mode of reflective thought, which establishes those discrete aspects of experience by dissecting and spatializing the flow of consciousness, allowing one content to be differentiated from another. The sensible wholes to which James refers point to the purely qualitative dimension of temporal flow, prior to the operation of the differentiating activity of attention.
- 5 It is known that Köhler and Koffka were students of Husserl, and that many of his views were influenced by the father of phenomenology. However, the influence was mutual, since Husserl himself, and some followers of the phenomenological movement (especially Merleau-Ponty), incorporated some of the theses of the Gestalt school.
- 6 The subject of passive syntheses of consciousness concerns, according to Husserl, the phenomenological study of the 'unconscious'. Of course, it is not about the Freudian unconscious, but rather it could be equated with what Freud called the sphere of the pre-conscious, namely, the domain of the mental that prepares the ground for that of which we can have an explicit awareness. For a clarification of the concept and history of the unconscious.

234



## Bibliography

- BERGSON, Henry  
2006 *Ensayo sobre los datos inmediatos de la consciencia*. Madrid: Sígueme.
- BROADBENT, Donald  
1954 The role of auditory localization in attention and memory span. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 47, 191-196. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054182>  
1958 *Perception and communication*. London: Pergamon Press.
- CARPINTERO, Helio  
1996 *Historia de las ideas psicológicas*. Madrid: Pirámide.
- CONWAY, Andrew R.A., COWAN, Nelson & BUNTING, Michael F.  
2001 The cocktail party phenomenon revisited: The importance of working memory capacity. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 8, 331-335. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03196169>
- CARRUTHERS, Peter  
2005 *Consciousness: essays from a higher-order perspective*. New York: Oxford.

- DRIVER, John  
2001 A selective review of selective attention research from the past century. *British Journal of Psychology*, 92, 53-78. Recuperado de: <https://bit.ly/3rytA1y>
- JAMES, William  
1989 *Principios de Psicología*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.  
2000 *Pragmatismo: un nuevo nombre para viejas formas de pensar*. Madrid: Alianza.
- FECHNER, Gustav Theodore  
1966 *Elements of psychophysics*. New York: Rinehart and Winston
- GURWITSCH, Aron  
1979 *El campo de la consciencia: un análisis fenomenológico*. Madrid: Alianza  
2009 *The selected Works of Aron Gurwitsch: Studies in phenomenology and psychology (1901-1973)*. New York: Springer.
- HARDY LEAHEY, Tomas  
1994 *A history of modern psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- HUSSERL, Edmund  
1986 *Ideas relativas a una fenomenología pura y una filosofía fenomenológica*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.  
2001 *Analyses concerning passive and active synthesis: lectures on transcendental logic*. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- KÖHLER, Wolfgang  
1929a/1959 *Gestalt psychology: an introduction to new concepts in modern psychology*. New York: A Mentor Book.  
1929b/1967 *Psicología de la configuración*. Madrid: Morata.
- LYCAN, William  
1995 *Consciousness and experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- MEINONG, Alexius  
1981 *Teoría del objeto*. México: UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice  
1984 *Fenomenología de la oercepción*. Barcelona: Planeta de Agostini.
- O'SHAUGHNESSY, Brian  
2002 *Consciousness and the World*. New York: Oxford University press.
- PIAGET, Jean  
1976 *La toma de conciencia*. Madrid: Eds. Morata.
- SARTRE, Jean Paul  
2006 *El ser y la nada*. Buenos Aires: Losada.
- VYGOTSKY, Lev  
2000 *El desarrollo de los procesos psicológicos superiores*. Barcelona: Crítica.
- ZAHAVI, Dan  
2005 *Subjectivity and selfhood*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.



Document reception date: July 15, 2020  
Document review date: September 15, 2020  
Document approval date: November 15, 2020  
Document publication date: January 15, 2021