

THE CONSTITUTION OF TIME IN HUSSERL*

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ABSTRACT. The Constitution of Time in Husserl. One of Husserl's fundamental idea is that time is not an object and is not given to knowledge as a simple object. Being involved in the constitution of the flow of consciousness, time cannot be analysed like other objects of knowledge. Consciousness itself is structured in a temporal way. In the absolute flow of consciousness, this temporality has a synthetic unity with the rest of the intentional features of consciousness. It represents for Husserl a passive synthesis that characterizes the intentional life of the transcendental subjectivity.¹ This specific form of temporality that characterizes the transcendental life of the subject has a constitutive dimension that we will discuss.

Keywords: *time, constitution, consciousness, intentionality, retention, protention, transcendental phenomenology, Husserl*

Introduction

The husserlian perspective on time, consciousness and the relation between them has been for the first time presented in his lectures from 1904/1905 (*Courses on the internal consciousness of time*), being later further developed and explained at different levels and in different stages in other texts, reaching an almost definite form in his *Manuscripts from Bernau* (1917/1918) and *Manuscripts C lectures*.

Transcendental phenomenology studies the relation between pure consciousness and her noematic correlations, the objects that our intentionality addresses and the modality in which they appear to consciousness and give themselves through the acts of consciousness. Even though they are linked to acts of consciousness, they still keep

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¹ Cf. Al. Schnell, *Husserl et les fondaments de la phénoménologie constructive*, col. Krisis, Ed. Milon, 2005.

their transcendental character. This is shown by the fact that one objects it is still the same in the diverse succession of the acts of consciousness that are reported to it. This succession introduces the problem of temporality, where temporality is the temporal character in which the objects are given to consciousness.

Consciousness manifests itself as a continuous stream of intentional acts that are succeeding one after the other but remaining closely related due to the fact that what is now present passes in the next immediate moment (as a form of the past) and its immediately anticipated as a form of the future. Thus, the consciousness of the present, of the past and of the future is in a state of interdependence. For Husserl, time is not something that comes from outside and joins consciousness, rather is something that belongs to the most intimate relation that consciousness has with the objects. The transcendental consciousness is through his given nature a temporal one: it is permanently temporalizing itself. That is why objects are always giving themselves in a temporal manner to consciousness.

In Husserl, the problem of time will follow two different directions, even though both of them are targeting consciousness. One will focus on how the objective time is constituted through consciousness and also the modality in which objects are temporally constituted. The second one is preoccupied with the origin of time, localized in what Husserl calls absolute consciousness: the internal consciousness accompanying the temporal fulfilment of the intentional acts.

This consciousness corresponds to a form of temporality that is different from the first one, a temporality that is specific to the immanent components of consciousness. Regarding the first direction of analysis that Husserl proposes, we have to notice that also with the constitutive analysis of the temporal determinations of the objects it is also discussed their identity. We arrived at their identity by relating this objects to objects that are apperceived in the same time, simultaneously, or successively (before or after), meaning a temporal identity. In the analyses that Husserl dedicated to the constitution of temporality at the immanent level of consciousness, we have learned that immanent temporality is constituted also at the pre-immanent level of consciousness, in a pre-immanent temporality.

The necessity to arrive at a different level of the transcendental consciousness in order to explain temporality shows the impossibility to give an account on how immanent time (in which temporal objects are constituted (*zeitliche Objekte*) is constituted at the level of immanent consciousness. But we cannot avoid the necessity to explain the temporal character of the components of the immanent sphere (original impression, retention and protention). In order to do this, it is necessary to overpass a simple description of the immanent consciousness of time in terms of retention, original impression, and protention. Even though this sort of description shows a specific

intentionality, this is not sufficient to demonstrate the temporal character of the immanent components in which temporal objects are constituted. Husserl speaks of a phenomenological time in which a different meaning and a different temporality are constituted. Furthermore, Husserl introduces the concept of *Zeitobjekte* (object-time or time-objects) that he opposes to the concept of temporal objects (*zeitliche Objekte* sau *zeitliche Gegenstände*). In his writings about the internal consciousness of time, Husserl defines objects-time as objects that contain in themselves temporal extension.

If the temporal objects (*zeitliche Objekte*) are supposing the temporal change and can be defined only through transformation, change or movement, objects-time contain in themselves a temporal extension, which is nothing else than the temporal duration (*zeitliche Dauer*) of the temporal objects themselves. Through the idea of object-time, Husserl tries to reveal the original dimension of the transcendental consciousness of time, the pre-immanent dimension that is beyond any split between subjective time and objective time. This dimension is the condition of possibility for both versions of time. These objects-time are not objects in the common sense of objects, because they suppose only a strict temporal dimension and not a spatial one. For Schnell, the original process and his structure is developed through what he calls “constructive processes”. In consequence, we are dealing here with a constructive side of phenomenology, generated by the incapacity that the descriptive method has in order to explain the origin of time. Only this pre-immanent level of the constitution of time can make possible the distinction between subjective and objective time. At this pre-immanent level, we are dealing with a new noetico-noematic correlation, different from the one that is presented at the immanent level of consciousness. When he is analysing the noetic part of this correlation, Husserl appeals to constructive processes. By appealing to these processes in order to explain the temporal character of the immanent temporal objects, meaning their temporal duration, Husserl gives up on using the apperception-content of apperception schema.

At this pre-immanent level of consciousness, we are dealing with an original process, which is a continuum of phases named *Grundreihe*, fundamental series, each series supposing a retentive and a protentive continuum. The phases of the fundamental series are constituted from an unmodified nucleus, which is fulfilled at his maximum and other modified kernels, where the fulfilment degree varies. The unmodified nucleus, being fulfilled at his maximum, is also named by Husserl “saturated consciousness” and the modified nucleus that is characterized by a lower degree of fulfilment is named lessen phenomena. Those phenomenon suppose noetico-noematic correlations: in their cases, we can analytically attach two characteristics, one noetic and one noematic that correspond to shape and to content. The shape that remains identical addresses the shape of *now* and the content that permanently changes addresses the

sense and the degree of fulfilment of this sense. The degree of fulfilment can permanently change, but he can never reach a null point, because then the temporality that is specific to these phenomena can never be perceived.

The idea of the double intentionality that characterizes the stream of consciousness is connected with the problem of the absolute flux, the manner in which it appears to itself. The double intentionality of the stream of consciousness regards two types of objects. Husserl calls them primary objects (*primäre Gegenstände*) and secondary objects (*sekundäre Gegenstände*). The manner in which the first donate themselves supposes the fulfilment modes and the rest of them supposes the modalities in which consciousness appears to itself. A first intentionality orients itself to the primary objects, the second different intentionality considers the secondary objects and corresponds to a consciousness that is becoming more and more aware of her own intentional process. This double intentionality that overcomes any objective intentionality, this double continuum of intentions is what makes the original process to appear and to become aware of itself. This is generated inside the absolute flux through the way in which the retentive and protentive nucleus of this flux are manifesting. This self-appearance is possible because the original process is a double retentive and protentive continuum, which has his own consciousness, but in the mean time being is also aware of the object-time that it is instituting. Regarding the noematic aspect of the original process, we have to underline two important aspects. First, we have to be aware of the fact that for the pre-immanent sphere of consciousness, Husserl introduces a new meaning to the concept of noema. Secondly, what Husserl names form of a phase that belongs to the original process and the content that corresponds to it is establishing a new relation, which differs from that existing between noema and noema at the immanent level of consciousness.

This relation is different because the content of the original phase that belongs to the original process is not a noematic content in the sense of the noema at the immanent level, but an intentional character (*ein intentionaler Charakter*), that he makes possible through a special process of fulfilment (*Erfüllen*) and emptiness (*Entleeren*) any type of approach to a common content. This intentional character corresponds to the unity between what is given in an original manner and the manner in which this content presents itself. This intentional character corresponds to the nucleus which are given in the "original experiences".² At the level of this analyses Husserl talks about the noematic forms (*noematische Formen*) and the noematic forms of sense (*noematische Sinnes-Formen*). This concept of noematic forms has an important role in overcoming the duality between the noetic part (the subjective one) and the noematic part (the objective content) regarding the original process itself.

² *Ibid*, ed. cit. p. 176.

What is specific to the noetic side of the original process it's his structure in nucleus and degree of fulfilment (*Erfüllen*) and drain (*Entleeren*), regarding the noematic side of the original process, Husserl uses different terms: growing, lifting, descend (*graduelle Steigung, graduelle Minderung* or *Sinken*). Those terms are referring to the phenomenon of between retention and protention, at the pre-immanent level, phenomenon that becomes constitutive for the immanent sphere of temporality inside consciousness and that is conceived by Husserl under the character of modification.³ At this pre-immanent level of consciousness separating the two parts, the noetic and the noematic, it's just an analytic procedure and we have to remember that the two of them are always colliding but also the fact that the consciousness of phases its one. What is specific to both the original process and the noematic movements it's a certain identical nucleus of sense (*Sinneskern*). This remains identical no matter how the object-time gives him. A sense-nucleus it's actually the time-noema, the noema considered from the phenomenological point of view of time. The time-noema corresponds to the content of the intentional nucleus and to the temporal modalities. The phenomena that ultimately constitute the immanent temporality are presenting a certain hyletic character that does not belong to the object as such but to the intentional consciousness, that is originally constitutive of object-time. This means that we are dealing with some sort of disconnection between objectification and temporalization, specific to both noematic and noetic level of the original process.

The constitution of time is a spontaneous process in which the central role is played by the continuous self-temporalization of the stream of consciousness. The main characteristic of the constitution of time in Husserl is the fact that it overcomes the diachrony between objective and subjective. Time is not subjective or objective in a traditional sense; it is constituted at a pre-immanent level. At this level, he is continuously self-generating as a perpetual movement of the absolute consciousness. We leave aside here the question if this consciousness is subjective consciousness and in what sense it can be independent from what constitutes remains an open question as it is not the place here to discuss it.

In Husserl, a specific pre-immanent temporality characterizes the consciousness of time. In the 6th *Logical Investigation*, Husserl describes the perception of the transcendent object. First, for Husserl, we should ignore what is temporal in perception, meaning we should eliminate everything that transcends the sphere of the actual donation. Secondly, Husserl eliminates also the rapport with the ego, because he always remains the same, either in perception or phantasy. In the first case, we are talking about the rapport between perception and the intentional object. What is characteristic for this rapport it is what Husserl calls *selbs da*, the fact that the object is being given in person. In order to understand this original rapport, Husserl distinguishes between the real

³ Cf. Ed. Husserl, *Leçons pour une phénoménologie de la conscience intime du temps*. PUF, 1996.

content of perception (*Abschattung*) and the intentional content. He will consider as phenomenological donation only the immanent content of perception. As we shall see the constitutive phenomena of time brings new conclusion regarding the structure of intentionality. Husserl introduces the notion of nucleus or kern in order to show that the specific character of the constitution of time is a direct characteristic of the fact that the constitutive phenomena of time has a formal status as a result of the distinction between a phenomenology of temporal objects *zeitliche Objekte* and of a phenomenology of time-object *Zeitobjekte*.

This formal character requires going beyond the sphere of temporal objects in order to arrive to the last constitutive structure of the immanent temporality and also to the last structure of intentionality. This type of phenomena, time-phenomena, that are different from immanent temporal objects, have also a temporal status. In order for them to be described, Husserl introduces the concept of *original process*. This descent in the pre-immanent sphere reveals the fact that the constitutive consciousness of time is a stream. The original process appears for Husserl as the flow in which the immanent temporality is constituted. In this case in Husserl, the pre-immanent sphere represents the flow in which the immanent temporality is constituted. This original process is formed of an infinite flow of intuition and filling. Regarding this process, the fundamental thesis of Husserl is that the last constitutive level of the consciousness of time is characterized by a type of intentionality that is no longer characterized by retention or protention, this being specific to an act that belongs to the immanent sphere. This type of intentionality makes the pre-immanent temporality possible.

The problem of time in *Ideas I*

The internal consciousness of time (*das innere Zeitbewusstsein*) is the general structure of the transcendental consciousness.⁴ In *Ideen 1*, Husserl claims that there is an original generation (*Erzeugung*) of what we call *Erlebnis* and that it represents a continuum stream of retentions and protentions that are mediated by a process of originality. We have to ask ourselves if this original generation (*ursprüngliche Erzeugung*) is triggered by something that is exterior to consciousness, by all the events that are coming from outside and are affecting consciousness in a manner that we can no more speak about self-generation. A critique addressed to this husserlian perspective is that the whole process of retentions and protentions is activated by something that is beyond itself, by an event that comes unexpectedly and is independent of consciousness as such.

⁴ Cf. Ed., Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy I, General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983.

I can analyse the stream of consciousness or every single experience that I have and the manner in which it appears to me through the retentive or protentive process, this reflexive act is a self-generated one, an act that I'm aware of. The question here is how this stream of consciousness and the temporal process itself (based on retention-original impression-retention schema) is self-generating and how the consciousness is involved. We ask ourselves if this generation is created by something that belongs to unintentional transcendence, that type of transcendence that is still not an object of my own consciousness. An event that affects consciousness is not taken into account, in a primary moment, as a noema. We have to clearly understand here that the problem of the origin of time is not the modality in which the constitution of time is described, in and through consciousness, but rather the fact that Husserl identifies this origin of time *only* at the level of consciousness.

In *Ideas I*, Husserl stresses the fact that time belongs to the stream of consciousness and that there exists a difference between cosmic or subjective time and phenomenological time. As the general characteristic of the stream of consciousness, phenomenological time results after epoch, after separating consciousness from the natural.⁵ Only after applying reduction, consciousness is no longer marked by *mundane* temporality (*das Weltzeitliche*) or cosmic time and no longer understood as simultaneity and succession. At this point, we have to ask ourselves if there is any difference at an ontological level between phenomenological time and cosmic time or are the two only perceived different by us. *Ideen I* it's not offering a clarification on this matter. According to Husserl, time is more than the essential characteristic of any *Erlebnis*, it's a necessary form that binds two experiences between them.⁶ Every single experience that belongs to consciousness has a corresponding duration in time. Through this duration, experiences can be connected one with the other. This makes that all the experiences are interconnected and inscribed in a continuous flow of consciousness. Every single experience that the ego has appears in a temporal way. This temporal way in which it appears constitutes a new experience. When the ego reflects on the manner in which this experience appears he observes that every single experience is followed by a new one.⁷ This is the way in which time is perceived from a phenomenological point of view at an immanent level, based on the retention-original impression-protention schema. Every single experience of the ego supposes a triple horizon that corresponds to the known temporal *ecstasies* (present, past and future). For Husserl, the actual now of every single experience represents a form through which a new content manifests itself.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ed. cit., p. 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

The formation of temporality at an immanent level

1.1 Retention and retentional intentionality

The idea of retention knows in Husserl different meanings along the years. In the lectures given in 1904/1905, analysing the relationship between apperception and the content of apperception, Husserl said that the constitution of time is created by a difference that exists in the acts of perception and a special type of intentionality that this acts develops. This intentionality corresponds to a non-objective intention and is meant to explain how we can pass from perception to a special type of memory, named primary memory. There are two clearly differences between the two terms, retention and self-differentiation of an act of apperception: regarding retention, there are the successive phases of the retentional consciousness (the retention of retention) and then the synthetic character of the retentional intentionality.

We already know that all the husserlian theory of retention comes as a critic answer to the idea that the past is given to consciousness through imagination. The past arises from an alteration of the original impression given in perception. Thus, every perception undergoes modification, a modification later called perception. Every single retentional modification is a retentional consciousness of the previous retention. By distinguishing retention from original impression, a succession of retentional phases are created. In retention, the original impression it's not present, because the original impression was already given in the past. Because retention is the immediate consciousness of something that had just passed, it remains that only retentional intentionality can create an original relation with the past, a relation that is not realized through imagination or representation.

This type of intentionality actually represents the consciousness of what had passed in the manner of not being present.⁸ Retention, as a way of presenting the past, it's based on perception. If we analyse the problem of perception regarding the relationship between original impression and what has just passed, retention, we will observe that we are dealing with two types of consciousness: the impressional consciousness and the retentional one. However, because what is essential to the perceived moment is being temporal, precisely passing into retention, then we must admit as Husserl does, that the moment of perception that we refer to when we speak of impression is somehow an ideal limit.⁹ Every single original impression will become equivalent with his own passing, that belongs to retention. We see now that retention and protention are two faces of the same monad, they always give

⁸ Cf. Barbaras Renaud, *Introduction a la philosophie de Husserl*, Vrin, 2003.

⁹ Cf. Ed. Husserl, *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of Internal time*, Kluwer, 2010.

themselves together, forming an unity: there is a pure *now* only at an abstract level, because the initial *now* gives himself as a temporal *now* in his immediate passing in a “just passed” or just-finished. Those two forms or the retentional phase cannot be given without an initial moment, in the absence of a pure now, even if this is conceived as an ideal limit of a content that permanently changes. If what is perceived at the retentional phase level has the character of a presence, then, when it becomes retention, what was initially present will develop the character of something non-present.

This character of non-presence still supposes perception, the perception of the past. This is how we can demonstrate the connection between perception and the temporal object. As Husserl says, we might conclude that originality cannot be distinguished from non-originality and because of this what is perceived now remains only as an ideal limit. We can see now that Urimpression is not a content or something that we can associate with experience, but rather an event that occurs and that makes possible the apparition and manifestation of both being and consciousness. Original impression is also the moment of a spontaneous and continue occurrence of a new *now*, a moment that reveals to us the constitutive consciousness of time. This constitutive consciousness that Husserl refers to as “the constitutive stream of time” (*der zeitkonstituierende Fluss*), which does not have the same temporal dimension as the temporal object, it’s a unity of passivity and activity, because we can’t speak of consciousness without speaking of an Urimpression that affects consciousness and through which consciousness becomes aware of itself. Also, we cannot speak of an original impression as something that continuously gives itself as new, without speaking of the consciousness of this original impression: only by affecting consciousness, Urimpression can be perceived as impression.

A characteristic of this absolute stream of consciousness is the fact that it is not a constituted temporal object; but it does fit the temporal schema of simultaneity and succession (retention-original impression-protention). Because the original impression is the birth of something always new, we can conclude that the original impression it is itself its own overtaking. On the other hand, because it is always given with retention, is in the same time also withdrawing in herself; she presupposes already that something that precedes her. The impressional consciousness that corresponds to it, it’s a consciousness of her own trace, thus a consciousness of her own past: that is why she withdraws in itself, because she is her own excess. Thus being her own past, she is a consciousness of the past.¹⁰ The idea of a retentional intentionality is strictly connected with the idea of pre-immanent level of temporality, as we will see in the second part of our essay.

¹⁰ Cf. Barbaras, ed.cit, p. 80.

1.2 Protention and protentional intentionality

Alongside with the retentional modification of the original impression, we are dealing also, at the level of immanent temporality, with a protentional modification, a modification of what is still to come. The protentional intentionality supposes a horizon in which successive phases can be fulfilled by an original datum without this exhausting the horizon as such. Because it realizes an intentional continuity, protention never reaches a full fulfilment, that sort of fulfilment without rest. We remember that such an intentional continuity was realized by retention also, but not from the original impression to what will manifest itself, but from original impression to what was already manifested, to the past. Even though there is symmetry between retention and protention, as we have showed, there are also some asymmetries between them.

One of the most important points is that in the case of protention, we can speak of a different type of fulfilment than in the case of retention. In the case of protention, the posterior protentions are the ones who are fulfilling the anterior ones, which is not also valuable for retention. In the case of retention, to be able to speak of a fulfilment realized by the posterior retentions for the anterior retentions, we have to be aware of the difference between presentation and presentification (*Gegenwärtigung* și *Vergegenwärtigung*). Only through an act of presentification, the posterior retentions can fulfil the anterior retentions, this recollection (*Wiedererinnerung*) leads to a disconnection regarding how the consciousness of the past is given. This is not happening in the case of protentional modification. After showing this important difference between retention and protention, Husserl moves on and shows the importance that protentional intentionality has in constituting the consciousness of time. In the case of protention, we are dealing also not only with a protentional modification of the original impression, but also of the retentions. In the end, this will lead to a mixing of the two of them.

Husserl has reached the conclusion that the immanent temporality is constituted in a different form of consciousness, more original than the immanent one and revealed by the schema retention-original impression-protention. This is what Husserl calls the pre-immanent consciousness or absolute-consciousness. At first, Husserl introduced this term in order to explain how the stream of consciousness becomes aware of itself. Another reason is the desire to show more clearly the difference between perception and recollection (and then between perception and phantasy). Yet another reason is the fact that the immanent temporality itself, in which the empirical or objective time is constituted, needs also to be constituted. The original stream of consciousness has a phase-based structure that forms an intentional

field within which this process becomes aware of itself without this necessitating a distancing of consciousness to itself. We have to ask ourselves here, if at this level of pre-immanent temporality, we can still apply a descriptive analyse of we need another process to understand how time is constituted and to understand the auto-constitution of the stream of the absolute consciousness. For Al Schnell,¹¹ at this level, we are dealing more with a constructive phenomenological process than with a descriptive analysis. The phenomenological or descriptive method leaves the problem of the constitution of time to a standstill. That is why the husserlian analysis proceeds to some techniques that bear on what some commentators called a constructive phenomenology.¹²

Conclusion

The question of time in Husserl reveals two central characteristics of the pure transcendental consciousness: intentionality and internal time consciousness, where time defines all inner experiences that characterize consciousness.

In Husserl's phenomenology, a fundamental idea is that consciousness represents the origin of time, depicted and explained by following only a descriptive line of analysis. The specific structure of internal time consciousness makes it a condition for the constitution of the objectivity of the world. A complete intentional analyse cannot be operated without taking into account the dimension of time. Because time is given in an immanent form, Husserl will use the method of epoch like a reductive method in order to describe it (*Ausschaltung*). At this level we will leave aside the manner in which we commonly speak about time and also time understood in the sense of nature science.

The phenomenological analyses will focus on the subjective dimension of time, as it appears and manifests itself at the level of our consciousness (*als solche*). We leave aside the objective time that can be measurable and quantified and focus only on the time that appears, the duration taken as absolute datum. We do not talk here about the world of experience but rather we focus on the specific temporality that characterizes the stream of consciousness.

¹¹ Cf. Al. Schnell, *Le temps*, Vrin, 2007.

¹² R. Bernet, *Conscience et existence. Perspectives phénoménologiques*, Paris, PUF, 2004.

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