

Eighth lesson – Philosophy of perception

Part III:

Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World

2 Temporality

1. In so far as, in the preceding pages, we have already met time on our way to subjectivity, this is primarily because all our experiences, inas much as they are ours, arrange themselves in terms of before and after, because temporality, in Kantian language, is the form taken by our inner sense, and because it is the most general characteristic of 'psychic facts'. But in reality, and without prejudging what the analysis of time will disclose, we have already discovered, between time and subjectivity, a much more intimate relationship. We have just seen that the subject, who cannot be a series of psychic events, nevertheless cannot be eternal either. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. 476)

2. If time is similar to a river, it flows from the past towards the present and the future. The present is the consequence of the past, and the future of the present. But this often repeated metaphor is in reality extremely confused. For, looking at the things themselves, the melting of the snows and what results from this are not successive events, or rather the very notion of event has no place in the objective world. When I say that the day before yesterday the glacier produced the water which is passing at this moment, I am tacitly assuming the existence of a witness tied to a certain spot in the world, and I am comparing his successive views: he was there when the snows melted and followed the water down, or else, from the edge of the river and having waited two days, he sees the pieces of wood that he threw into the water at its source. (Ibid p.477)

3. Time presupposes a view of time. It is, therefore, not like a river, not a flowing substance. The fact that the metaphor based on this comparison has persisted from the time of Heraclitus to our own day is explained by our surreptitiously putting into the river a witness of its course. We do this already when we say that the stream discharges itself, for this amounts to conceiving, where there is merely a thing entirely external to itself, an individuality or interior of the stream which manifests itself outside. Now, no sooner have I introduced an observer, whether he follows the river or whether he stands on the bank and observes its flow, than temporal relationships are reversed. In the latter case, the volume of water already carried by is not moving towards the future, but sinking into the past; what is to come is on the side of the source, for time does not come from the past. It is not the past that pushes the present, nor the present that pushes the future, into being; the future is not prepared behind the observer, it is a brooding presence moving to meet him, like a storm on the horizon. If the observer sits in a boat and is carried by the current, we may say that he is moving downstream towards his future, but the future lies in the new landscapes which await him at the estuary, and the course of time is no longer the stream itself: it is the landscape as it rolls by for the moving observer. Time is, therefore, not a real process, not an actual succession that I am content to

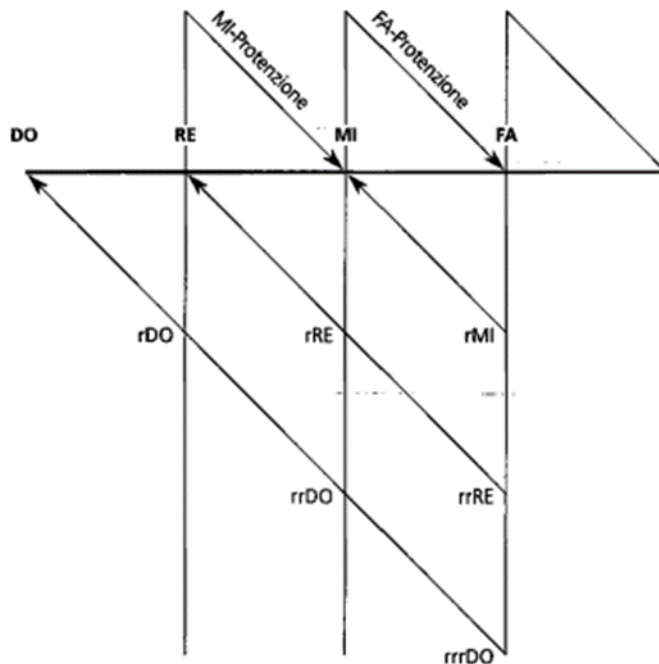
record. It arises from my relation to things. Within things themselves, the future and the past are in a kind of eternal state of pre-existence and survival; the water which will flow by tomorrow is at this moment at its source, the water which has just passed is now a little further downstream in the valley. What is past or future for me is present in the world. It is often said that, within things themselves, the future is not yet, the past is no longer, while the present, strictly speaking, is infinitesimal, so that time collapses. (Ibid p. 477-478)

4. The past and the future cannot be mere concepts abstracted by us from our perceptions and recollections, mere denominations for the actual series of 'psychic facts'. Time is thought of by us before its parts, and temporal relations make possible the events in time. Correspondingly, therefore, the subject must not be himself situated in it, in order to be able to be present in intention to the past as to the future. Let us no longer say that time is a 'datum of consciousness'; let us be more precise and say that consciousness deploys or constitutes time. Through the ideal nature of time, it ceases to be imprisoned in the present. But does it enjoy an opening on to a past and a future? It is no longer beset by the present and by 'contents' it travels freely from a past and a future which are not far removed from it, since it constitutes them as past and future, and since they are its immanent objects, to a present which is not near to it, since it is present only in virtue of the relations which consciousness establishes between past, present and future. But then has not a consciousness thus freed lost all notion of what future, past and even present can possibly be? Is not the time that it constitutes similar in every detail to the real time the impossibility of which we have demonstrated; is it not a series of instances of 'now', which are presented to nobody, since nobody is involved in them? Are we not still just as far away from understanding what the future, the past and the present, and the passage between them, can possibly be? (Ibid p.481)

5. There must be another true time, in which I learn the nature of flux and transience itself. It is indeed true that I should be incapable of perceiving any point in time without a before and an after, and that, in order to be aware of the relationship between the three terms, I must not be absorbed into any one of them: that time, in short, needs a synthesis. But it is equally true that this synthesis must always be undertaken afresh, and that any supposition that it can be anywhere brought to completion involves the negation of time. It is indeed the dream of philosophers to be able to conceive an 'eternity of life', lying beyond permanence and change, in which time's productivity is pre eminently contained, and yet athetic consciousness of time which stands above it and embraces it merely destroys the phenomenon of time. If we are in fact destined to make contact with a sort of eternity, it will be at the core of our experience of time, and not in some non temporal subject whose function it is to conceive and posit it. (Ibid p.482)

6. Husserl uses the terms protections and retentions for the intentionalities which anchor me to an environment. They do not run from a central I, but from my perceptual field itself, so to speak, which draws along in its wake its own horizon of retentions, and bites into the future with its protections. I do not pass through a series of instances of now, the images of which I preserve and which, placed end to end, make a line. With the arrival of every moment, its predecessor undergoes a change: I still have it in hand and it is still there, but already it is sinking away below the level of presents; in order to retain it, I need to reach through a thin layer of time. It is still the preceding moment, and I have the power to rejoin it as it was just now; I am not cut off from it, but still it

would not belong to the past unless something had altered, unless it were beginning to outline itself against, or project itself upon, my present, whereas a moment ago it was my present. When a third moment arrives, the second undergoes a new modification; from being a retention it becomes the retention of a retention, and the layer of time between it and me thickens. One can, as Husserl does, represent this phenomenon diagrammatically. In order to make it complete, the symmetrical perspective of protections would have to be added. Time is not a line, but a network of intentionalities. (Ibid. p.483-484)



(This figure is a modified version of a diagram found in one of Husserl's manuscripts on time, proposed by Zahavi and Gallagher. It allows us to fully grasp the example of melody and how we perceive a temporally extended object. The horizontal line represents the sequence of played notes (C, D, E, F); the vertical lines indicate the phases of consciousness, where we find: above the horizontal line, the protentions; the various original impressions are located at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines; while the retentions are below the horizontal line. The diagonal line (for example, rC, rrC, rrrC) illustrates how a specific note (C) remains the same within an increasingly retentional trajectory.)

7. Husserl introduced the notion of retention, and held that I still have the immediate past in hand, precisely for the purpose of conveying that I do not posit the past, or construct it from an *Abschattung* really distinct from it and by means of an express act; but that I reach it in its recent, yet already elapsed, thisness. (Ibid p.485)

8. Bergson was wrong in explaining the unity of time in terms of its continuity, since that amounts to confusing past, present and future on the excuse that we pass from one to the other by imperceptible transitions; in short, it amounts to denying time altogether. But he was right to stick to the continuity of time as an essential phenomenon. It is simply a matter of elucidating this. (Ibid p.488)

9. The past, therefore, is not past, nor the future future. It exists only when a subjectivity is there to disrupt the plenitude of being in itself, to adumbrate a perspective, and introduce non-being into it. A past and a future spring forth when I reach out towards them. I am not, for myself, at this very moment, I am also at this morning or at the night which will soon be here, and though my present is, if we wish so to consider it, this instant, it is equally this day, this year or my whole life. There is no need for a synthesis externally binding together the tempora into one single time, because each one of the tempora was already inclusive, beyond itself, of the whole open series of other tempora, being in internal communication with them, and because the 'cohesion of a life' is given with its ekstase. The passage of one present to the next is not a thing which I conceive, nor do I see it as an onlooker, I effect it; I am already at the impending present as my gesture is already at its goal, I am myself time, a time which 'abides' and does not 'flow' or 'change', which is what Kant says in various places.¹⁰ This idea of a time which anticipates itself is perceived by common sense in its way. (Ibid p.489)

10. We are not saying that time is for someone, which would once more be a case of arraying it out, and immobilizing it. We are saying that time is someone, or that temporal dimensions, in so far as they perpetually overlap, bear each other out and ever confine themselves to making explicit what was implied in each, being collectively expressive of that one single explosion or thrust which is subjectivity itself. We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time. What is perfectly clear, is that this primordial temporality is not a juxtaposition of external events, since it is the power which holds them together while keeping them apart. Ultimate subjectivity is not temporal in the empirical sense of the term: if consciousness of time were made up of successive states of consciousness, there would be needed a new consciousness to be conscious of that succession and so on to infinity. (Ibid p.490)

11. Time exists for me only because I am situated in it, that is, because I become aware of myself as already committed to it, because the whole of being is not given to me incarnate, and finally because one sector of being is so close to me that it does not even make up a picture before me—I cannot see it, just as I cannot see my face. Time exists for me because I have a present. It is by coming into the present that a moment of time acquires that indestructible individuality, that 'once and for all' quality, which subsequently enables it to make its way through time and produce in us the illusion of eternity. No one of time's dimensions can be deduced from the rest. But the present (in the wide sense, along with its horizons of primary past and future), nevertheless enjoys a privilege because it is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide. (Ibid p.492)

12. In the last analysis, in so far as I know that the for-itself is the culmination of a body, this can be only through the experience of my one body and one for-itself, or through the experience of my presence in the world. It will be objected that I might have nails, ears or lungs of some other kind which would involve no change in my existence. But then my nails, ears and lungs taken separately have no existence. It is science which has accustomed us to regard the body as a collection of parts, and also the experience of its disintegration at death. But the fact is that a decomposed body is no longer a body. When I restore my ears, nails and lungs to my living body, they no longer appear in the light of contingent details. They are not indifferent to the idea that others form of me,

contributing as they do to my physiognomy or my general bearing, and it is not impossible that science may tomorrow express in the form of objective correlations precisely how necessary it was that I should have that kind of ears, nails and lungs, and whether, moreover, I was destined to be dexterous or clumsy, placid or highly strung, intelligent or stupid, if I was destined to be me. In other words, as we have shown elsewhere, the objective body is not the true version of the phenomenal body, that is, the true version of the body that we live by: it is indeed no more than the latter's impoverished image, so that the problem of the relation of soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body. What is true, however, is that our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence. But it could not be otherwise, if we are temporality, since the dialectic of acquisition and future is what constitutes time. (Ibid p.501-502)

13. At all events, the critic may continue, the world will outlast me, and other men will perceive it when I am no longer here. Now is it not impossible for me to conceive, either after me, or even during my lifetime, other men in the world, if indeed my presence in the world is the condition of the world's possibility? In the perspective of temporalization, light is thrown on the remarks made above about the problem of the other. We said that in the perception of the other I cover in intention the infinite distance which always stands between my subjectivity and another, I overcome the impossibility of conceiving another for-himself for me, because I witness another behaviour, another presence in the world. Now that we have more effectively analysed the notion of presence, linked together presence to oneself and presence in the world, and identified the cogito with involvement in the world, we are in a better position to understand how we can find others at the intentional origin of their visible behaviour. It is true that the other will never exist for us as we exist ourselves; he is always a lesser figure, and we never feel in him as we do in ourselves the thrust of temporalization. But two temporalities are not mutually exclusive as are two consciousnesses, because each one knows itself only by projecting itself into the present where they can interweave. As my living present opens upon a past which I nevertheless am no longer living through, and on a future which I do not yet live, and perhaps never shall, it can also open on to temporalities outside my living experience and acquire a social horizon, with the result that my world is expanded to the dimensions of that collective history which my private existence takes up and carries forward. The solution of all problems of transcendence is to be sought in the thickness of the pre-objective present, in which we find our bodily being, our social being, and the pre-existence of the world, that is, the starting point of 'explanations', in so far as they are legitimate—and at the same time the basis of our freedom. (Ibid p. 502-503)