Introduction

THE PROMISE OF TIME: SUBJECTIVITY IN HUSSERL’S TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY

There are times when I entertain the thought that Edmund Husserl’s life possessed a secret affinity with Raymond Queneau’s fictional character Valentin Brû. In *Le Dimanche de la vie*, Private Brû spends his afternoons tracking the hands of a clock, working hard to keep his mind “clear of the pictures that everyday life deposits in it” in an effort to think, with his eyes open, of nothing. Yet, Monsieur Brû’s effort to catch sight of time repeatedly fails, as he is hopelessly distracted by events taking shape in time: “clusters of commonplace words go crackling through a wasteland of automatic movements or of colorless objects.”¹ Brû’s gaze continually falls short of time: “for the moment, he doesn’t notice anything at all. He stares at a branch, or a pebble, but he loses sight of time. Time has pushed the hand on ten minutes farther and Valentin hasn’t caught it at it. And since the branch and the pebble, *nothing* has happened.”² Time stares him in the face, yet occurs behind his back, catching him by surprise; he is too late for time’s passage, always failing to see time on time.

I imagine Husserl also spending his afternoons in the pursuit of time, waiting to catch time in the act. But Husserl did not watch time in the Sunday of Life. In the fall of 1917 and spring of 1918, Husserl, with one son dead and the second grievously wounded in the war to end all wars, vacationed twice in Bernau (Germany) to pursue his phenomenological analysis of the constitution of time, “the most difficult of all problems confronting the human mind” (Hua XXIV, 255). In some of Husserl’s most challenging writings, commonly known as the “Bernau Manuscripts,” the inexpressibly familiar consciousness

of time’s passage is meticulously described as centered on the axis of the unceasing renewal of the now. The emergence of each now takes the form of a primordial hope, waiting for another now yet to come in the wake of a now already past. And yet, the novelty of each now is never entirely expected or identical with the now just past; each now is never entirely caught by the passage of time. We repeatedly expect another now, but its arrival always surpasses our expectation, catching us, so to speak, from behind. In such a description, Husserl comes to see consciousness repeatedly arising in a renewed awakening of time itself. This seeing of time brings together the consciousness of time with the time of consciousness under the heading of “inner or original time-consciousness,” which Husserl discovers as the constitutive foundation for the possibility of an intelligible, and thereby meaningful, world of human experience.

This interplay of renewal and reflection permeates Husserl’s entire phenomenological enterprise. A few years after the First World War, in 1923 and 1924, Husserl published, in the Japanese journal Kaizo, three essays on the theme of renewal. In these essays, Husserl calls for the renewal of European culture through the advent of philosophy as a rigorous science, envisioned as the project of transcendental phenomenology. The themes of these essays point forward to the Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, in which this call to awakening, this coming to one’s senses, or reason (Husserl’s preferred term for philosophical reflection from these later years – Besinnung – contains these various shades of meaning), becomes once again repeated, this time with greater urgency, conviction and breadth of philosophical comprehension. But these essays also point back to the Logical Investigations, and in particular to the Prologemena, where this call for the renewal of thinking already signals, in a less pronounced tone than either in the Kaizo essays or in the Crisis, Husserl’s entrance into philosophy. “The philosopher is the man who wakes up and speaks,” as Merleau-Ponty, undoubtedly thinking of Husserl, among others, once eloquently stated.

3 Hua XXVII.
The apparent distance between Husserl’s macroscopic vision of his transcendental enterprise and Husserl’s microscopic vision of time-consciousness, patiently pursued in research manuscripts that remained largely unpublished during his lifetime, could not be greater—how does the question of time-consciousness become, through the enterprise of Husserlian phenomenology, the question of philosophy itself? How does the awakening of phenomenology to time-consciousness encapsulate the promise of phenomenological philosophy? In *The Promise of Time: Subjectivity in Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology* I propose an answer to these questions in trying to understand how and why Husserl considered the question of time-consciousness to be the most difficult, yet also the most central, of all the challenges facing his unique philosophical enterprise.

Despite the unquestionable importance of Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness for transcendental phenomenology and its far-reaching significance for the development of philosophy, Husserl’s historically unparalleled undertaking to fathom the enigma of time-consciousness still lacks the critical and detailed treatment that it deserves. More than one hundred years after Husserl’s 1905 lectures on the phenomenology of inner time-consciousness, our understanding of Husserl’s investigation resembles the paradox it was meant to clarify: we understand it as long as we are not asked to say exactly what we understand of it.

As Husserl often remarked, Augustine first uncovered the profound difficulties posed by the question “What is time?” in discovering its entanglement with the question “Who am I?” As Augustine famously asked, “What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am perplexed.” Augustine’s dilemma suggests that in failing to articulate what I take for granted in my experience of time, there is a failure to understand in both a specific and fundamental sense. Specifically, I am unable to explain how I perceive the passage of time, even though I implicitly grasp time’s passage as self-evident, and without question, in the course of my ordinary existence. Yet I also fail to understand what is fundamental about myself in so far as I am subject to the passage of time. My own presence in time becomes

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implicated – open to question in an unexpected manner – in failing to illuminate the presence of time; time eludes me, much as I elude myself. As Augustine remarks elsewhere in the *Confessions*, I have become a question for myself, unknown to myself in light of the questionability of time. Augustinian formulation of the question “What is time” constitutes in fact a double question: how is the consciousness of time’s passage – the puzzling perception of a time that is, that is no longer, that is yet to come – possible? What am I to understand of myself as a being for whom time is at all in question?

Despite important contributions towards our understanding of Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness, a principal reason for our less than adequate comprehension of its argument and significance stems from a failure to recognize, and thus explore, the dual significance, comparable to Augustine’s, of the problem of time-consciousness for transcendental phenomenology. As I argue in this book, understanding what is specific about the importance of time-consciousness for Husserl’s phenomenology reveals what is fundamental about subjectivity for Husserl’s philosophical project; understanding what is fundamental for transcendental subjectivity – its temporality – reveals what is specific to Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.

A phenomenological investigation of transcendental subjectivity is meant to usher a general reformation of modern philosophy. As Husserl once expressed his ambition, the goal of transcendental phenomenology was to fulfill “the secret longing of Western philosophy.” This historically unprecedented demonstration of how (transcendental) subjectivity represents the fundamental problem of philosophy characterizes the unique promise of Husserl’s phenomenological enterprise. As Husserl stated, “my calling is the study of pure subjectivity.” Indeed, Husserlian phenomenology is arguably the last concerted attempt of modern philosophy to lay systematic claim to the centrality of subjectivity for philosophical reflection. Whether such a claim represents a decisive ending or a renewed beginning is, as this book hopes to suggest, yet to be definitively resolved, despite vigorous pronouncements of the “death of subjectivity” during the later half of the twentieth century. The question of subjectivity remains unavoidable as long as our puzzlement with time remains inescapable; indeed, the evasion of subjectivity is the evasion of time itself.

Husserl never wrote a complete presentation of his phenomenology of time-consciousness. Even a cursory assessment of his writings on this subject matter reveals a complicated patchwork of different
strata of analysis, composed at different stages in the development of
his phenomenological philosophy and for different purposes, but
mainly for the purpose of private reflection. Aside from occasional
side-glances thrown in the direction of time-consciousness in his
published writings and university lectures, the bulk of Husserl’s
writings on time-consciousness are in the form of research manu-
scripts. Consisting mostly of notes, condensed reflections and frag-
mentary lines of analyses, none of which were immediately intended
for publication, these writings present a distinct set of problems for
any reconstruction and critical engagement with Husserl’s pheno-
menology of time-consciousness. The experimental, fluid character
of Husserl’s infinite task of phenomenological clarification is nowhere
more pronounced than in his repeated efforts at providing an analysis
of time-consciousness. Indeed, it is significant that Husserl never
considered himself to be in a position to undertake its definitive
elaboration; it is as if the extant writings on time-consciousness func-
tioned as placeholders, intricate promissory notes, for a more complete
engagement to come. Seen in this light, it is therefore not inappropri-
te to compare these writings, and the type of thinking they contain,
to an artist’s compositional sketchbooks, albeit of a peculiar kind of
artist engaging in peculiar form of intellectual creation. In these
writings, a basic conceptual framework becomes delineated and solu-
tions to individual problems begin to take shape; multiple drafts of
specific insights, detailed studies of particular phenomenon, and an
array of conceptual devices are developed in view of a final composi-
tion, painstakingly brought into greater relief, that never fully came
to light. To adopt Paul Klee’s formula about painting, in Husserl’s
writings on time-consciousness, the aim is not “to render the visible,
but to render visible.”

An interpretation of Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness must
remain mindful of this fact that Husserl never produced a complete
presentation of his phenomenology of time-consciousness nor did
he ever sanction any stage in the development of his analysis as defini-
tive. Given the scope of Husserl’s thinking and the corresponding
vastness of his literary production, this book offers an interpretation
of Husserl’s analysis and its philosophical significance rather than an
encyclopedic presentation or a survey of the historical development of
Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness, even if the parameters of its
chronological unfolding must nonetheless contextualize our discus-
sion and debate. For reasons explained separately, this book does not
provide a comprehensive account of all three *Husserliana* collections of writings on time-consciousness.\(^7\)

Any study specific to Husserlian phenomenology written in English must take into consideration the limited availability of Husserl’s thinking in English translations, the continued expansion of the *Husserliana* (currently at 37 volumes), supplementary volumes of manuscript material, and the wealth of still unpublished manuscripts in the Husserl Archives, all of which create a textual and interpretative labyrinth of daunting complexity. An interpretation cannot restrict itself, as Paul Ricoeur once argued, to those texts prepared by Husserl for publication, since these writings, despite enjoying authorial approval, often understate the originality and breadth of Husserl’s thinking. Equally, the temptation should be avoided to over-compensate the patent disparity between Husserl’s published and unpublished writings by relying too heavily on the embarrassment of riches to be found in the unpublished and, more significantly, largely unedited materials in the Husserl Archives. Evidence for any number of readings can be found in Husserl’s literary remains; like other philosophers of enduring significance, Husserl was a thinker of many lives and after-lives. While attempting to strike a balance between relying on published and unpublished texts, this book takes its cardinal points of reference from either principal publications or lecture courses that exist in English translation. An exception is the Bernau Manuscripts that are discussed in chapter 5, and which have yet to appear in English. In choosing to engage Husserl’s thinking in this way, my aim is to offer an interpretation in light of which readers can return to Husserl’s writings. I have always considered these writings as providing a space and a vocabulary in which, and with which, to think; hence, Husserl’s strange openness, despite a technical jargon – his infamous “phenomenological” – that causes much frustration for novices and adepts alike.

*The Promise of Time* is divided into three sections. In the first section (chapters 1 and 2), I frame Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness as both a specific problem about the consciousness of temporal passage and as a fundamental problem for a phenomenological understanding of transcendental subjectivity. In chapter 1, “The ritual of clarification,” Husserl’s framework of transcendental

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\(^7\) Cf. Appendix “Note on textual sources.”
phenomenology is introduced, with an emphasis on the centrality of intentionality for Husserl’s understanding of subjectivity in its “world-constituting” function. This chapter paints a general portrait of Husserl’s transcendental project, as it took shape in its literary expressions in Ideen I and the Cartesian Meditations, while also presenting, in quick strokes, the details of a phenomenological conception of transcendental subjectivity in light of which the theme of time-consciousness ascends to its transcendental significance. Chapter 2, “A rehearsal of difficulties,” examines what Husserl understood as the problem of time-consciousness, prior to its transcendental inflection, by investigating Brentano’s theory of “original association,” which served as the point of departure for Husserl’s phenomenological analysis. Chapter 2 reconstructs Brentano’s theory of original association on its own terms, primarily on the basis of his lecture-courses on descriptive psychology from the 1880s, and examines its relationship to other key concepts in Brentano’s descriptive psychology (e.g., intentional relation and inner consciousness). In addition to understanding Brentano’s struggle with the perception of time, chapter 2 stresses the role of Stern’s concept of “mental presence-time” and his critique of “momentary consciousness” for the formation of Husserl’s thinking, especially in shaping the sense in which time-consciousness becomes a problem for phenomenological reflection. Whereas chapter 1 moves from the problem of phenomenology to the problem of time-consciousness, chapter 2 moves from the problem of time-consciousness to the problem of phenomenology.

In section two, I explore in detail what Husserl identified as “the great problem” of phenomenological or inner time-consciousness (the temporality of the stream of consciousness) and the self-constitution of absolute time-consciousness. Section two (chapters 3, 4, and 5) examines Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of time-consciousness in On the Phenomenology of Inner Time-Consciousness (1893–1917) (chapters 3 and 4) and Die Bernauer Manuskripte über das Zeitbewußtsein (1917/18) (chapter 5). I propose to read these two volumes together, not as separate sets of documents but as forming a constellation of texts exhibiting the multi-faceted development of Husserl’s analysis. Chapter 3, “The ghosts of Brentano” enters into the 1905 lectures On the Phenomenology of Inner Time-Consciousness by taking up the two issues first rehearsed in Husserl’s critique of Brentano: the perception of time and the time of perception. In addition to tracking the sophisticated translation of the problem of the perception of time into a framework of
phenomenological reflection, I discuss in detail Husserl’s meticulous descriptions of the consciousness of temporal passage, as primarily focused on the “running-off” or “flowing-away” of the now. Husserl’s earliest efforts to provide a phenomenological clarification of time-consciousness is pursued to its aporetic conclusion in which the ghosts of Brentano’s previous failures in the face of time resurface within Husserl’s own thinking. Chapter 4, “The retention of time past,” continues along the tracks established in chapter 4, yet expands the scope of inquiry. In this chapter, I explore Husserl’s phenomenological analyses of the imagination and remembrance, and argue for their significance in relation to the problem of time-consciousness. Indeed, I suggest that Husserl’s discovery of the “double-intentionality” of time-consciousness, as first discovered in its retentional form, is motivated by his earlier discovery of the double-constitution of the imagination and remembrance. Through his reflections on the imagination and remembrance, Husserl comes to recognize the myriad senses in which different forms of consciousness, along with their intentional correlates, are constituted in absolute time-consciousness. With this insight, Husserl is able to progress beyond the impasse of his earlier analysis of time-consciousness to the mature framework of the three-fold declension (original presentation, retention, protention) of absolute time-consciousness. Chapter 5, “The impossible puzzle,” turns to the “Bernau Manuscripts” and continues to develop Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness. In the Bernau writings, the transcendental landscape of time-consciousness is fully mapped, yet not explored. Chapter 5 focuses on the formulation of the distinction between “near” and “far” retentions, Husserl’s increased attentiveness to protention and the reshaping of his basic conception of original time-consciousness, as exemplified in a startling reconfiguration of his time-diagram. Chapter 5 ends with a reflection on the impossible puzzle of absolute self-constituting time-consciousness.

In section three (chapters 6 and 7), I expand the reach of my interpretations of time-consciousness developed in section two. Chapter 6, “The lives of Others,” considers Husserl’s refutation of transcendental solipsism as the formulation of his refutation of idealism as well as the constitution of the Other as an alter-ego, as developed in the Cartesian Meditations. I argue for a significant correction in Husserl’s phenomenology of the Other that brings to bear insights gained from the reflections on time-consciousness developed in the Bernau Manuscripts. Chapter 7, “The life of consciousness,” serves as both a continuation of developing the ramifications of
Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness for his genetic conception of subjectivity and as a concluding discussion of the specific interpretation developed in *The Promise of Time*. The tone and style of discussion in this chapter is suggestive, not conclusive; the pace of discussion quicker, the arc of reflection more open. From this vantage-point at the end, looking back to the course of the preceding chapters while also looking beyond the scope of this book, the point of this book crystallizes Husserl’s remark that, “an authentic analysis of consciousness is, so to speak, a hermeneutics of the life of consciousness.” And in understanding this remark as encapsulating the argument of this book, with transcendental phenomenology, “the Delphic expression γνῶθι σεβασμόν has acquired new meaning.”

*The Promise of Time* presents an interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology; as such, I allow myself to be led as much as I allow myself to lead. As with any interpretation, I am deliberately selective and critically self-serving; selective since my aim is not to deliver a comprehensive treatment, but to plot a course through Husserl’s thinking; self-serving since my trajectory reflects the choices of paths taken, or not-taken. Throughout the writing of this book, I have been mindful of my conviction that a philosopher should neither over-simplify the complexity of a problem nor over-complicate the economy of its solution. The relentless and restless character of Husserl’s thinking exacerbates this challenge of striking a balance between attending to the richness of a problem and heeding a sought-after clarity of what constitutes an understanding. Any serious engagement with Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology cannot avoid this tension; it is the very life of his thinking. My hope is to have struck a balance between both poles without compromising or mistaking one for the other.
THE RITUAL OF CLARIFICATION

Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time?

— David Hume

An untimely provocation

Husserl was a philosopher who believed that the course of Western history could never forsake the idea of philosophy first ushered into the world with Greek thinking, even as he recognized that he came to philosophy in an historical epoch in which that unique window of human possibility was rapidly, and perhaps entirely, coming to a close. From the seminal *Logical Investigations* to the unprecedented *Crisis of the European Sciences*, Husserlian phenomenology struggled to define itself against the current of an age that unthinkingly abdicated a responsibility towards the highest perfection of reason in the name of a reason paradoxically called modern. Husserlian phenomenology is therefore best approached as an untimely provocation, the thrust of which is encapsulated in the charge that “the spirit of radicalism has been lost under the title of philosophy” (Hua VIII, 10). This call to radicalism takes on different forms. Its most visible banner is the motto “back to the things themselves” that commonly informs our view of Husserl’s enterprise, to the extent that the generalized term “phenomenology” is often taken as synonymous with any invocation of lived experience and the “first person point of view” in contemporary philosophical discourse. The primary concern, however, that animates Husserlian phenomenology is neither “lived experience” nor “consciousness” as such, but a problem first broached in the *Logical Investigations* that continually defined, with increased sophistication and breadth, the center of Husserl’s gravity, and to which he untiringly