

## “The Most Difficult of all Phenomenological Problems”

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**Abstract** I argue in this essay that Edmund Husserl distinguishes three levels within time-consciousness: an absolute time-constituting flow of consciousness, the immanent acts of consciousness the flow constitutes, and the transcendent objects the acts intend. The immediate occasion for this claim is Neal DeRoo’s discussion of Dan Zahavi’s reservations about the notion of an absolute flow and DeRoo’s own efforts to mediate between Zahavi’s view and the position Robert Sokolowski and I have advanced. I argue that the flow and the tripartite distinction it introduces into consciousness is firmly grounded in Husserl’s texts and is philosophically defensible. The absolute flow is distinct but inseparable from what it constitutes. It is intentional in a nonobjectivating way, and accounts for the awareness I have of my individual acts of consciousness and of the unity and continuity of my conscious life. In its absence, consciousness would become an incoherent stream of episodic acts. There is nothing mysterious about the flow. What would be mysterious is consciousness without the flow.

Neal DeRoo sets forth with clarity and fairness the terms of the debate between Dan Zahavi’s interpretation of Husserl’s account of the levels of time-consciousness—that “most difficult” and yet “most important” of all phenomenological problems—and the interpretation Zahavi attributes to me and to Robert Sokolowski. He sheds light on the key issues and offers a deepened understanding of Husserl’s position.<sup>1</sup>

The debate gets its start from Husserl’s assertion that time-consciousness involves three levels. The Brough/Sokolowski interpretation, which Zahavi calls “established”—no doubt giving it more currency than it actually enjoys—takes two

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of my own views see Brough (2010).

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of these levels to belong to consciousness itself and to be in some way distinct. Husserl first clearly broached the conception of connected “levels of constitution” at work in time-consciousness in the text written around 1909 that DeRoo cites early in his essay. There Husserl distinguishes:

1. the things of empirical experience in objective time...;
2. the constituting multiplicities of appearance..., the immanent unities in pre-empirical time;
3. the absolute time-constituting flow of consciousness (Hua X, p. 73/77).

The consciousness of time is, most obviously, the consciousness of objects such as melodies and houses, which appear to us in a succession of phases or that endure. Such objects are given in the temporal modes of now, past, and future, and are the objects of intentional acts or experiences (*Erlebnisse*) such as perception or memory. A house is perceived at a certain time and in a particular place, and then remembered later. But one can ask whether the act that perceives the house is also something of which one is aware, and whether it too is a temporal object or unity. Husserl’s response is that there is indeed an awareness of acts or *Erlebnisse* as temporal unities. They are, in his technical language, “*erlebt*,” “experienced.” *Erleben*, or “experiencing,” is the nonobjectivating awareness of intentional experiences, which in turn are objectivating acts directed toward objects such as houses and symphonies. We are conscious of both intentional acts and their objects, then, but we are not aware of them in the same way. The experiencing of an act is not a reflective act. Reflective acts are intentional experiences that objectivate what they reflect upon. If experiencing were itself a reflective act, it could become conscious only through another reflective act, which would lead to an infinite regress. Experiencing is a primitive, nonthematizing form of self-awareness, not an act that has a thematized intentional object. Reflection, as a higher-level form of self-awareness, presupposes it.

According to the “established” interpretation, level one is the region of transcendent temporal objects such as houses and musical performances. Levels two and three are levels of consciousness. Level two embraces the experiences, which include the intentional acts aimed at the objects on level one. Level three, the absolute flow, is the experiencing (*Erleben*) of the unities on level two. The latter are experienced as immanent temporal unities or objects, that is, as beginning, lasting for awhile, and then ending, and as now, past, and future. The absolute flow of level three not only “constitutes” or experiences the immanent unities on level two, but also manifests itself. The flow is at once consciousness of the immanent contents on level two and consciousness of itself: “There is one, unique flow of consciousness,” Husserl writes, “in which both the unity of the tone in immanent time and the unity of the flow of consciousness itself become constituted at once” (Hua X, p. 80/84). This constitution occurs through the absolute flow’s double intentionality, its *Querintentionalität* (the experiencing of the temporal objects on level two) and its *Längsintentionalität* (awareness reaching along the flow itself), and the structure of primal impression, retention, and protention that makes both directions of intentionality possible. Thanks to its structure, and particularly the *Längsintentionalität*, the flow reveals itself precisely in its flowing: “The flow of the

consciousness that constitutes immanent time not only *exists* but is so remarkably and yet intelligibly fashioned that a self-appearance of the flow necessarily exists in it, and therefore the flow itself must be apprehensible in the flowing.” The flow does not require a second flow in order to appear; “on the contrary, it constitutes itself as a phenomenon in itself” (Hua X, p. 83/88). Since the awareness here is prereflective, it does not fall prey to what Zahavi describes as the “reflection theory” of self-awareness.

It is important to note that Husserl’s threefold distinction with its indication that there are two distinct levels within consciousness is not an anomalous claim or thought experiment that he later discards. On the contrary, although the terminology may change and the position evolve in certain respects, the divisions remain essentially constant over the next quarter century. Whatever Husserl may have meant by them, he took the distinctions seriously and thought that they were fundamental to understanding the “wonder” of time-consciousness. A brief review of Husserl’s texts will reveal just how entrenched the distinctions became in his thought.

Around 1912, for example, he offered a division similar to the one from 1909, though with different wording and in reversed order:

- (1) the internal consciousness, the *experiencing*,
- (2) the *experience*,
- (3) the intentional *object* of the experience (Hua XXIII, p. 326/397).

Husserl made no such tripartite distinction in the lectures on time-consciousness from 1905, in which his investigations focused exclusively on constituted experiences, such as acts and sensory contents, which have their place on the second level. The absolute flow never enters the discussion, presumably because Husserl had not found it yet. The narrow focus of the 1905 lectures, Husserl wrote in retrospect (Hua X, p. 127/131), conformed to his procedure in the *Logical Investigations*, in which he makes no distinction between the experiencing or internal consciousness of immanent contents and the contents themselves (Hua XIX/1, p. 362/541). When Husserl discovered the absolute flow shortly after 1905, however, it became clear that a complete account of time-consciousness would have to include the flow itself and the role it plays in the constitution of experiences in immanent time.

Of course, Husserl could still choose to ignore the issue of time-consciousness and restrict his investigations to the closed field of intentional experiences, which is his procedure in *Ideen I* (1913). Even there, however, he alludes cryptically to the absolute flow when he refers to the “primal source” of experiences in “what is ultimately and truly absolute” (Hua III, p. 198/193).

The “truly absolute” comes back to the fore in Husserl’s second major set of texts devoted to temporality, the “Bernauer” manuscripts from 1917 and 1918. “Primal process” replaces “absolute flow” in these texts, but it is clear that Husserl continues to maintain the distinctions he made earlier. He distinguishes “the ‘external’ object,” a house, for example, from “the immanent object,” the act of perceiving the house, and the latter from “the primally constituting process” that constitutes the act (Hua XXXIII, p. 191). Referring to levels two and three, he writes

that “immanent temporal objectivity [the act in its temporality] is itself constituted and refers us back to the internal consciousness and its primal process.” He adds that “here we surely have a radical demarcation. This primal process is process, but no longer constituted in the same way as the objects belonging to immanent time” (Hua XXXIII, p. 122). He observes in another Bernauer text that in the phenomenological reduction one can go back to the level of immanent being with its form of immanent time (level 2), and from there “regress still further...to the original consciousness constituting immanent temporal objectivity” (Hua XXXIII, p. 281).

In Husserl’s final reflections on time-consciousness, the “C-Manuscripts” from 1929 to 1934, the levels maintain a prominent place and receive a variety of formulations. In a text from 1930, for example, Husserl develops the distinctions in terms of three senses of flowing. There is “(1) the experiencing flow, the pretemporalizing flow; (2) the flow of immanent ‘experiences’ constituted as hyletic unities and as acts...; (3) the world-time in which everything real ‘flows’—the flow of time, becoming, etc.” (Hua XXXIV, p. 180, note 1). Husserl claims that the “experiencing flow” represents “a deeper constitution” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 297), “a flowing underlying basis” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 47) with respect to the other levels. Of particular importance is the variety of terms Husserl uses in the C-Manuscripts to describe the absolute flow. The “living present,” “*nunc stans*,” “primordium” are all names for the “primal level,...the primal ground on which all higher levels are founded” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 4).

There is abundant evidence, then, that for almost 30 years Husserl distinguished three levels in time-consciousness. That the distinctions are present in the text, however, does not mean that their relationships to one another or their philosophical significance is always clear, either to the reader or to Husserl himself. This is especially true with respect to the absolute flow and its relation to the level of constituted experiences or acts. It is this relationship that the established view and Zahavi’s new interpretation attempt to clarify.

## 1 Reservations about the Established Interpretation

Zahavi takes Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness to be primarily an account of self-awareness, of the self-manifestation of consciousness. The “decisive problem,” he writes, is how “to clarify the relation between the absolute flow or flowing experiencing..., on the one hand, and the constituted act on the other.”<sup>2</sup> Zahavi thinks the established interpretation fails to get the relationship right.

The core of Zahavi’s objection, as I understand it, is that in distinguishing the constituting and constituted levels within consciousness, the established interpretation takes the absolute flow to be a kind of intentional consciousness that makes us aware of the acts or *Erlebnisse* as temporal *objects* in subjective time. The model at work here is the distinction and relation between intentional act and intended object, now pushed down into consciousness and played out in terms of a relation between

<sup>2</sup> Zahavi (1999, p. 69). Hereafter cited in the text as SA.

two levels of consciousness. In effect, the absolute flow's experiencing of the temporal object in immanent time does precisely what an objectivating intentional act would do: it constitutes an object. The fact that the object is an act and immanent to consciousness makes it no less objective. It appears as an identity in temporal modes just as a transcendent object would appear. In this sense, the established interpretation undercuts itself as an interpretation of prereflective self-awareness: it assumes the subject/object model and turns the original awareness of our experiences into object-consciousness. "To say that the acts are originally given as *objects* for inner consciousness...leads us right back into a version of the reflection theory," Zahavi writes (SA, p. 70). On this view, the act itself is not self-aware but must be brought to givenness by a different level of consciousness, the absolute flow. This does not explain self-awareness, but only "defers the problem" (SA, p. 70), for one must ask whether the flow is aware of itself. If it is not, no account of self-awareness will be forthcoming; furthermore, whatever awareness of the flow we do enjoy will have to occur through a still deeper level, and so on *in infinitum*. On the other hand, if the flow is self-aware, thus blocking an infinite regress, we are still left with the problem of what seems to be an unnecessary and excessive multiplication of levels of awareness.

It is important to note here that the established interpretation does not claim that the two levels it distinguishes within consciousness are separate, in the way, say, that the transcendent temporal objects of level one are separate from the acts intending them. It does not hold that the absolute flow's self-awareness is "something apart from and beyond the givenness of the acts" (SA, p. 70). It does claim that there is a distinction between the flow and what it constitutes, but it insists that the consciousness of immanent temporal unities is inseparable from the flow's consciousness of itself. Husserl tries to strike a delicate balance between, on the one hand, the "radical demarcation" (Hua XXXIII, p. 122) he finds between the absolute flow and the experiences it constitutes in immanent time and, on the other hand, the essential unity of consciousness. That there is a demarcation between levels does not mean that consciousness is split into two separate pieces. The established interpretation takes seriously Husserl's claim that there is a single flow of consciousness in which experiences become constituted as unities in immanent time and the unity of the flow itself becomes constituted. On this view, the distinct levels in consciousness are not two separate tracks, each with its own and isolated self-manifestation. Rather, the one consciousness possesses two distinct but inseparable moments through which it is aware of its unity and also of its multiplicity in the form of its acts. Consciousness is one and many, and the awareness it has of itself as both is the achievement of two "levels" of consciousness functioning in flowing unity.

But even if Zahavi were to grant that point, he would still argue that the notion of two distinct dimensions within consciousness, both manifesting themselves, is unnecessary and even unintelligible, for there is no reason why a deeper flow of consciousness is required to account for the awareness we have of experiences. Why, Zahavi asks, could this type of self-awareness "not be a feature of the act itself"? (SA, p. 70). This question points to what I take to be the core of Zahavi's interpretation.

## 2 Zahavi's Interpretation of Inner Time-Consciousness as Self-Awareness

Zahavi's new reading claims, in effect, that the prereflective self-manifestation of the acts and the prereflective self-manifestation of the ultimate flow are one and the same: "The absolute flow has no self-manifestation of its own, but *is* the very self-manifestation of the experiences" (SA, p. 80). From the act's perspective, self-awareness is a "feature of the act itself" (SA, p. 70). There is no dimensional difference, and perhaps no difference at all, between the *Erlebnis* or *experienced* act and the *Erleben* or *experiencing* of the act. At the least, Zahavi puts *Erlebnisse* and *Erleben* on the same level: "...To say that the act is constituted in inner time-consciousness simply means that it is brought to givenness thanks to itself. It is called *inner* consciousness because it belongs *intrinsically* to the very structure of the act itself" (SA, p. 71). The act is aware of itself in and through itself, not through any other dimension of consciousness. The "inner" of "inner time-consciousness" thus refers to a consciousness *within* the act, the act's *self-awareness* in the strictest sense, not consciousness of the act as an internal temporal unity somehow distinct from the consciousness of it. It would follow that the "absolute" in Husserl's "absolute time-constituting flow of consciousness" refers to the transcendental fact that the act constitutes its own self-manifestation. There is no threat of an infinite regress here, since the departure from the subject/object model is complete. We have shed the excess baggage of a second level of self-awareness. There is only one level of consciousness, the level of acts that constitute their own prereflective self-givenness. Intentional acts permit heteromanifestation of objects, and also manifest themselves prereflectively.

This reading may not always be a snug fit for Husserl's texts, but it has the virtue of simplicity, and is compelling for other reasons as well.

## 3 Some Observations and Questions

We noted earlier that Zahavi understands the established interpretation to take the absolute flow to be, in effect, a species of objectivating consciousness. But this is not the case: On the established view, experiencing, which is what the flow is and does, is nonobjectivating awareness of the act and of itself. It is true that Husserl's frequent description of experienced acts as "objects" is not felicitous, but it is usually quite clear that when he applies the term he does not mean that acts appear to the flow as "full-blown inner objects." He is simply indicating that there is consciousness of the act, that the act is experienced (*erlebt*). Husserl does not have a univocal sense of intentionality. "We have consciousness-of in different senses and in different founding levels," he writes (Hua Mat VIII, p. 112). Thus intentionality can be objectivating, as it is in perception or reflection, but it can also function as nonobjectivating experiencing. This helps explain why Husserl sometimes says that retention, as a moment of the absolute flow, is not intentional (Hua Mat VIII, p. 113), evidently meaning that it is not objectivating, while at other times saying that it is (Hua X, p. 118/122), indicating that it is consciousness of something, but not as an object of "act-consciousness" (Hua XXXIV, p. 179).

Fortunately, “object” is not the only term Husserl employs for the act experienced in immanent time. He also uses “unity,” which has the advantage of keeping intact certain features of acts that “object” suggests, while avoiding its liabilities. One such feature is that we experience, simultaneously or successively, a plurality of acts. At a given moment I may be paging through a magazine and listening to music on the radio while remembering hearing the sound of popcorn popping in the kitchen. These would not all be attentive acts at once, but they would be “doings” of consciousness, and I would have a prereflective awareness of them in their multiplicity. Another feature is that I am aware of these experiences as beginning, enduring for a time, and ending. The beginnings and endings might not be as crisp as they are when a loud sound intrudes on my daydreaming, but I am nonetheless aware of them prereflectively. Another feature of experiences is that we are conscious of them as in some sense distinct from or demarcated from one another. Consciousness is not a blender reducing acts to a homogeneous gruel in which nothing stands out. On the contrary, consciousness lives in its differences. I am prereflectively aware that my act of recollecting is different from the perceptual act I am experiencing along with it.

I find Zahavi’s account to be somewhat ambivalent about these features of our prereflectively given experiences. He writes, for example, that “I do deny that the acts are prereflectively given as distinct enduring objects, as objects that arise, endure, and perish” (SA, p. 79). One might reasonably assume, then, that acts are not prereflectively discriminated from one another in any sense, an assumption that Zahavi confirms: “Our original prereflective awareness of the stream of consciousness,” he says, “is an experience of a unity, and it is only reflectively that we discriminate the different moments of the stream. Originally, consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up into bits. It is nothing jointed; it simply flows” (SA, p. 77).

Even if it is true that consciousness is not a string of disconnected bits, there are good grounds for saying that it is jointed, even in prereflective experience. If it were not, what would guide acts of reflection in making their objectifying cuts? In the absence of joints, the reflective discrimination between my current act of thinking about time-consciousness and my simultaneous act of hearing an airplane passing overhead would seem to be arbitrary. Furthermore, if the consciousness of an act as a unity depends, as Zahavi argues, on having two acts—the original prereflective act and an act of reflection directed toward it—one would have to be aware of the act of reflection as distinct from the act that is the reflection’s target, and that awareness would be prereflective.

But this is not Zahavi’s last word on the matter. As he develops his position, he seems to allow some degree of distinction—some “joints”—among acts on the prereflective level. Thus he cites a passage from Husserl’s manuscripts (L I 15 2b) stating that “an act is nothing independent; it is a wave in the stream of consciousness” (SA, p. 77). In a later text, not cited by Zahavi, Husserl again finds waves, or multiple flows, in consciousness: “there is constantly a flow, which contains in itself all these particular flows as, so speak, its waves” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 362–363). Acts are not like flotsam bobbing on the waves of consciousness; they *are* the waves of consciousness. The analogy between acts and waves is instructive.

Sitting on the beach, we experience waves as beginning, rolling along for awhile, and then subsiding or breaking on the shore. Each is an individual, and, thanks to its individuality, stands out, however briefly, from the waves behind and in front of it. Waves enjoy a fleeting unity and integrity. If acts are like waves, they too would be distinct unities with their own duration, their own beginning and ending. Furthermore, just as waves are perceived in temporal modes, acts would be *experienced* in temporal modes. I am prereflectively aware of my *act of perceiving* as now or as just past. If the act were not given in temporal modes, we could not experience it as a unity, as “an experience,” even in the sense of a wave.

There are other interesting, and perhaps troublesome, implications that one might draw from the new interpretation’s insistence that “the absolute flow...is the very self-manifestation of the experiences” (SA, p. 80). The unqualified identification of the flow with the act’s self-manifestation, for example, suggests that the fundamental time-constituting structure of primal impression, retention, and protention would belong exclusively to the individual act. Indeed, each act would apparently have its own impressional, retentional, and protentional moments. This follows from Zahavi’s claim that inner time-consciousness is internal to the act. In that case, the act would not only be retained, it would retain itself. Presumably it would also retain elapsed acts, since, on Zahavi’s view, there is no more ultimate dimension to retain them. Hence my present act of hearing the telephone ring, or perhaps *all* of the acts I am presently experiencing, would somehow retain my just past act of seeing a deer drink out of the bird bath in the garden and would also “protend” my act of putting a book back on the shelf. This would be an odd claim, I think, and I doubt that Zahavi wants to make it. Indeed, his admission that “there are good reasons for insisting upon the *difference* between our singular and transitory acts and the abiding dimension of experiencing, between *die Erlebnisse* and *das Erleben*” (SA, p. 80), despite his insistence on the identity of the givenness of the act and the self-manifestation of the flow, may represent an effort to avoid claiming that acts retain and “protend” other acts. But this would seem either to restore the distinction made in the established view or to leave us without an account of how, in the present moment of consciousness, we are able to experience multiple acts as now and retain other acts as just past, unless we are prepared to grant that acts can retain or protend each other. The “established” interpretation may have offered an excessive number of levels of consciousness, but the new reading seems to burden its single level with an excessive number of tasks, without making it altogether clear how they will be accomplished.

#### 4 Difficulties with the Phenomena

To this point I have discussed differences between the established view and Zahavi’s rich and challenging alternative. I have also pointed to what I take to be some difficulties with Zahavi’s position. If one asks where this discussion leaves us, an honest reply might be that neither side seems to have managed to develop an altogether satisfying interpretation. The established view, thanks to its formulations, however close they may be to Husserl’s own, appears to introduce an unneeded



divide into consciousness that experience will not support. Zahavi's interpretation, in its exclusive focus on the stream of acts, risks becoming an act-phenomenalism, reducing consciousness to a succession of psychic events that somehow form a unitary flow of self-awareness.

A footnote to *Self-Awareness and Alterity* suggests that there might be some hope of getting beyond these differences to a common ground, or at least something close to it: "To a certain extent," Zahavi writes, "but only to a certain extent, the difference between my interpretation and Brough's and Sokolowski's interpretations might simply be a question of different accentuation and terminology" (SA, p. 234, note 28). Both positions are in agreement that consciousness is one, a unity. Zahavi's interpretation accentuates the unity; the established view, with DeRoos, emphasizes that the unity is internally complex, shows different aspects, and can therefore be taken from two different but related perspectives, reflecting what Husserl refers to as "the distinction between my pure subjectivity taken simply and my pure experience flow" (Hua Mat VIII, p. 244).

If we are to make the progress that Zahavi's note implies might be possible, the first thing we should do is appreciate Husserl's own struggles with these themes, and particularly his statements about how difficult and perhaps impossible it is to bring them to final clarity. In fact, it is not farfetched to say that the apparent differences between the two interpretations are rooted much more in the recalcitrance of the phenomena than in any stubbornness on the part of the champions of the competing views. Husserl was well aware of the difficulties in talking about the absolute flow from the moment he introduced it. In 1911, he wrote with respect to the flow and its *Querintentionalität* and *Längsintentionalität* that "for all of this, we have no names" (Hua X, p. 371/382). He had already used up his stock of temporal terms in his discussion of immanent and transcendent time; and even if they were still available, they would not apply to the absolute flow, which, as the source of time, is not itself in time. If the flow could be said to have temporality at all, it would have to be "pre-phenomenal or pre-immanent" temporality (Hua X, p. 381/393). Twenty years later, in 1932, still struggling with time-consciousness, Husserl announces that he is plunging "into the phenomenological depths" in search of the "deeper constitution" (Hua Mat VIII, p. 297) that accounts for the experiencing of acts in immanent time. He adds that this is new territory, which "has never before been exhibited, much less systematically explicated" (Hua VIII, p. 145). Here the problem is more profound than just finding the right words for the phenomenon. Husserl writes that "as pre-being, [the flow] is inexperienceable [*unerfahrbar*], unsayable; as soon as the unsayable and inexperienceable is displayed, hence experienced [*erfahren*] and made into the theme of a statement, it is precisely ontified" (Hua Mat VIII, p. 269). The pre-temporal flow is not being in time. To display it, to "say" it, is to "ontify" it, thus making it an object in time and in that sense falsifying it. This poses obvious difficulties for anyone who would reflect on the flow philosophically and attempt to catch it in words.

One might go still further and claim that the real source of the difficulty is that we have no original awareness of the absolute flow at all. Should that prove to be true, the flow would have no place in phenomenology. We would have no choice but to take it as a some kind of construction, or at best the product of a transcendental

argument. Now it may be the case that the phenomenologist should not advance transcendental arguments for the conditions of experience when those conditions are never themselves experienced. It is significant, however, that when Husserl says that the flow is “inexperienceable,” he uses “*unerfahrbar*,” which, in this context, seems to refer to objectifying consciousness. He does not say that the flow cannot be “*erlebt*,” that is, be experienced prereflectively. This suggests the possibility of a *phenomenological* transcendental argument that points to “conditions” that are indeed experienced, even if only in an irreducibly pre-reflective and shadowy way, and never independently of other phenomena they may accompany. The “argument” would spell out what the minimally experienced conditions involve. Thus we have prereflective awareness of the diverse acts we experience, but also of the abiding continuity in our conscious lives. The awareness of the latter gives us a glimpse of that “deeper constitution” for which Husserl was searching. We have more than a mere clue here: we have the flow as a phenomenon, just not as a full-blown object. We have a sense of its presence, a subtle manifestation, but there nonetheless. This is perhaps what Husserl had in mind when he wrote in 1911, in a statement cited earlier, that “a self-appearance of the flow necessarily exists” in the flow (Hua X, p. 83/88; cf. Hua XXXIII, p. 117), and that “it constitutes itself as a phenomenon in itself” (Hua X, p. 83/88).

Husserl’s point in stressing the difficulty of experiencing and speaking about the flow, then, is not that we have no experience of it whatsoever, but that the flow always escapes the light of objective reflection. This suggests that the phenomenologist must approach the flow obliquely, with no illusion that it can be captured in a tidy and exhaustive formulation. Trying to catch the flow is like trying to catch a bird in flight; the flow is and must be intrinsically elusive if it is to do its job. If the flow were situated on the same level as the experiences it constitutes, it would simply be one more experience among many, like one more bird perched on a telephone wire. “‘Experience’ [*Erlebnis*],” Husserl writes, “is everything enduring in immanent temporality and enduring in its particularity, that is, everything that stands out, whether originating from reflection or not” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 194). The absolute flow, on the other hand, is precisely what never stands out; it must remain in the background, like the wire supporting the birds or the sea that underlies the waves. It cannot “stand out,” as itself, and carry on its constitutional work. The flow is “deeper” because it is the constitutive “background” always there as the presupposition of the acts in the “foreground,” but is never in the foreground itself.

What is left of the established view in the light of these observations? It agrees with Zahavi’s interpretation that consciousness *is* its acts and is aware of its acts and, through them, of their objects. It also takes consciousness to be aware of itself in its flowing, and hence of its elapsed and prospective acts. It insists, however, that Husserl does not see consciousness as simply a bundle of acts, no matter how tightly bound together. I doubt that Zahavi would want to embrace a bundle view, but I am not sure that he is willing to emphasize as strongly as the established view does that while consciousness may be its acts, it is also more than its acts. The flow is that dimension of my conscious being that is irreducible to my acts. To be aware of myself as something more than my particular acts, more even than the total flow of acts, is, according to the established view, to be aware of the flow. Again, that

awareness is not of the flow as an object that is or could be isolated from its acts. The awareness of the flow is a kind of constant presence attending my acts, or, better, haunting them. It shows itself in my awareness of the continuity of my ongoing conscious life. I do not experience my flowing consciousness as exhausted by the acts that now fill it or have filled it or will fill it. The flow is no more the sum of its acts than the sea is the sum of its waves; and just as there are no waves without the sea, there are no acts without the flow. In that sense the flow is absolute.

An important consequence of the irreducibility of consciousness to its acts is that consciousness can transcend itself toward the future. “The transcendental, flowing present,” Husserl writes, “has of apodictic necessity in every phase the invariable form: the presumption of the future” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 97 note 1). Consciousness has a future because, while it is its acts, it is also an unceasing flow, transcending whatever it now is and whatever it has been toward the future. This division between the absolute flow and the acts it constitutes does not violate the unity of consciousness. It is simply a way of expressing what that complex unity is and does.

## 5 Phenomena, Language, and Neal DeRoo

What was said in the last section suggests that we would do well to drop the talk of “levels” with its suggestion of a stratified consciousness and all the problems for the unity of consciousness it entails, and speak instead of “dimensions,” “aspects,” or “functions” of consciousness. In that case, we would understand the distinctions Husserl makes to be more functional than substantial.<sup>3</sup> “Absolute flow” would signify one of the two fundamental functional dimensions of conscious life. The other would be the flow of acts. With his introduction of the absolute flow and the complexity it seems to bring into consciousness, Husserl would then be seen, not as engaging in architectonic construction, but as responding to phenomena whose functions he finds to be essential to conscious life. Without denying their elusiveness, he attempts to name these phenomena, for which he said he had no names, in terms of the roles they play.

A fundamental aspect of the flow is that it is “standing and flowing” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 347), which is to say that we experience consciousness as at once constant and ceaselessly streaming. There are various ways in which to approach the phenomenon of standing and flowing. One of these is in terms of form and content. The flow as standing has an “as absolutely identical abiding form.” Each phase of the flow has impressional, retentional, and protentional moments, which, in being filled, constitute “immanent time with immanent temporal ‘experiences’ as unities existing in time” (HUA XXXIV, p. 386). It is here that Neal DeRoo makes a particularly valuable contribution.

DeRoo reminds us that time-consciousness and its standing forms of primal impression, retention, and protention are, considered by themselves, empty. More

<sup>3</sup> A phrase Derrida (1973, p. 20) uses with respect to Husserl’s distinction between indication and expression.

strongly, they are nothing at all without being filled. What fills them are the experiences that we undergo. Retention, impression, and protention, as forms, do not determine the particular experiences that do the filling, even though they do constitute the experiences as immanent temporal objects. It is thanks to association, DeRoo argues, that particular experiences—the perception of this house, the memory of another house, the expectation of seeing a room inside the house—come forward as contents to fill the forms: “Association is needed to ‘awaken’ the associated objects, as retention and (especially) protention are empty. Without association, Husserl claims, internal time-consciousness would be ‘meaningless’ (Hua XI, p. 125/170) because it abstracts from content.” Passive synthesis plays the key associative role in providing the content that gives time-consciousness meaning. It is important to note that DeRoo does not identify passive association with the absolute flow. He acknowledges that association “must be kept distinct from internal time-consciousness,” and that without internal time-consciousness, association, whether active or passive, “would be impossible. Hence, association is founded upon, but distinct from, internal time-consciousness.” Associative syntheses presuppose the absolute flow and its impressional, retentional, and protentional functions. That DeRoo affirms a distinction between the flow as form and the associative contents does not mean that he takes form and content to be separate strata of consciousness, with time-consciousness on the lower level shining an intentional spotlight on the achievements of passive syntheses on the second level. On the contrary, he is making a point about the unity of consciousness and the distinctions within that unity. Neither flow nor content can exist independently. There can be no flow as pure form; it exists, which is to say that it functions, only when it is filled. On the other hand, there can be no experienced contents without the flow. When it “enters” the form of time-consciousness, the content is temporalized, which makes possible the reference to past and future built into the notion of passive association. The absolute flow becomes the medium in which the “immanent” contents achieve temporalized self-awareness. The flow, for its part, can only be aware of itself, which includes being aware of itself as irreducible to its acts, if it has contents. This does not reduce the form to its contents, which would yield a false unity between flow and experiences, but instead affirms their inseparability. “...The filled form, that is, the primal phenomenon, is flowing” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 58), and in it both the fleeting experiences and the ongoing flow achieve self-awareness, doing so through one another. DeRoo advances and enriches the debate by showing a fundamental way in which the distinctions Husserl makes within consciousness reflect the “deeper” phenomena of conscious life, elusive but phenomenal nonetheless.

There are other ways in which Husserl attempts to name these phenomena, each aimed at describing one or several of their facets. I will discuss a few of these briefly.

One can argue that Husserl introduces the notion of the absolute flow for logical reasons: to avoid an infinite regress, for example. Husserl’s texts, however, indicate that his real concerns lie elsewhere. Thus “absolute flow” and its cognates serve as names for consciousness as one, continuous, constant, identical, and as the origin of conscious life, “the ‘primal phenomenon’...in which everything...has its source”

(Hua Mat VIII, p. 145). Phenomenally, we carry with us the awareness of ourselves as generating ever new experiences—perceptions, memories, expectations, emotions, judgments, associations, and so on. Husserl calls this generative dimension of the flow the “primordium” of consciousness (Hua Mat VIII, p. 131), a kind of cornucopia in which “times, objects, worlds of every sense ultimately have their origin in the primal flowing of the living present” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 4).

We also have an implicit awareness of the continuity and constancy of our conscious lives. Episodic acts of perception, memory, and expectation make us explicitly conscious of our being in time, but they depend on the primal form of self-temporalization, which is nonepisodic and continuous. If acts are like waves, then just as the sea is the source of waves, the flowing primal consciousness is the source of acts; and if waves come and go and the sea abides, so acts come and go and the primal flow abides. It is permanent, constant, identical. It is not, however, static: the flow’s “‘standing’ signifies being constant as ‘process’—the process of primal temporalization” (Hua XXXIV, p. 385).

As constant or standing, the flow can also be said to form a steady center from which we can survey past and future. What Husserl calls the *nunc stans* lets us journey in time, backward in memory to what we have lived through and forward in expectation to what we anticipate as coming. If consciousness did not flow, there would be nothing to remember or expect; but if it were not constant, if it did not “stand,” there could be no remembering or expecting.

“Absolute flow,” “living present,” “*nunc stans*,” and “primordium” are all names for the basis on and through which we experience acts and their objects as temporal unities. “The beginning of every act,” Husserl writes, “already presupposes the flowing underlying basis and what is already constituted in it as a unity” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 47). The flow is also the underlying basis for the experienced cessation of every act. As such, the flow itself can neither begin nor end. It cannot even be conceived of as commencing or as ceasing, for it is the condition of the awareness of the beginning and ending of acts. “It is evident that the concrete ceasing, the natural ceasing of the vitally flowing present, is not conceivable as a fact,...as something that could be experienced.” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 96). To experience it as ceasing would require its presence. The notion of the absolute flow, then, is a way of saying that there is a kind of immortality built into my self-awareness: It is simply “‘inconceivable’ for me that I should cease transcendently” (Hua Mat VIII, p. 97). The presumption of the future, Husserl said, is embedded in every phase of my transcendental flowing present.

I suggested earlier that the contending views discussed in the essays collected here have their origin in the sheer difficulty of the phenomena they are intended to explain. If we remove the interpretations from the disputatious context in which we have placed them and take them for what they are, that is, as efforts to get a grip on the most difficult of all phenomenological problems, I think we might make better progress. It may, of course, remain the case that, as Husserl wrote early in the last century, “the Parnassus, alas, is still in the mist” (Hua X, p. 293/304). But it may also be the case that these efforts (or, if one insists, all sides of the “debate”) have in fact made some progress in dispersing the mist.

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