



Temporality and History

Temporality and Existence

Merleau-Ponty between Husserl and Heidegger

In the chapter “Temporality,” found in the third part of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty recalls that starting in his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, his concern is specifically to understand the relation between consciousness and nature and to link together the realist and idealist perspectives—that is, to link the point of view of a consciousness *constituting* the object to the point of view of a consciousness *constituted* by the objective world and inserted into it.¹ Consciousness and the world, the inside and the outside, sense and nonsense, had for him never been separate beings that required an external philosophical reflection to be reunited, but instead are interdependent beings. This interdependence became legible in the phenomenon of embodiment and of perception, wherein the paradoxical relation of spontaneity to receptivity, of activity to passivity, is announced. But as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, the analysis of time is not only an occasion to repeat what had already been discovered at other levels, but also to clarify the total project of a phenomenology of perception “by making the subject and object appear as two abstract moments of the unique structure that is presence.”²

For Merleau-Ponty, the problem of time is the problem of the subject’s *relation* to time; that is, it is not derived from the principal problem, that of subjectivity (the analysis of which would require “drawing out the consequences of a pre-established conception of subjectivity”), but is instead the problem of the *tension* between the subject’s presence to itself and its transcendence beyond itself toward the world. Like corporeity, sexuality, and spatiality, temporality is not a contingent attribute of existence. If, according to Merleau-Ponty, “there are no principal and subordinate problems,” but rather “all problems are concentric”³—that is because, for him, there is only one unique problem, which includes within itself all other problems (of the body, the other, space, and time) —namely, the problem of subjectivity, of the subject’s transcendence—a subject that by virtue of living *in* the world is consequently unable to reduce the world to the status of a mere object. All problems of transcendence (whether it be the problem of the body, the other, space, or time) pose the same question of knowing “how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me and which exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them, *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions all alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Entgegenwärtigung) and throws me outside of myself.*”⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, the subject’s relation to time is even more intimate than the relation described by Kant, for whom time is the form of inner sense and the most general character of mental facts. Now, the analysis of time comes after the analyses of the body and the perceived world (which constitute the first two parts of *Phenomenology of Perception*), and after the analysis of the cogito (the first chapter of the third part, “Being-for-self and Being-in-the-world”), and will subsequently serve as the ground of freedom in the very last chapter of the book. This is because time alone provides us access to the “concrete” structure of the subject; for Merleau-Ponty, the subject is neither “in” time in the manner that spatial things and mental events are, nor is it eternal, nor can it be identified in any way with the absolute spirit, whose gaze is born from out of nowhere and dominates and embraces the totality of all objects. The subject’s temporality comes from an “inner necessity” of the human condition that makes the subject and time “communicate from within”: it is ultimately *time* that is “the meaning of life,” as Claudel claims in *Art poétique* in a turn of phrase that

Merleau-Ponty borrows as an exergue for the chapter on temporality, adding to it a complementary sentence from Heidegger.⁵ Neither is Time *in* the subject, nor the subject *outside* of time; we must instead say that “we *are* temporality”⁶—that is, that existence is the dialectic of past and future, which alone makes us *present* to the world and allows us to inhabit it.

For Merleau-Ponty, the object of the analysis of time is thus the embodied subject’s simultaneous self-presence and presence to the world. This new conception of the subject allowed him to leave behind the abstract intellectualism of a cogito or a subject without world;⁷ instead, he identifies the subject with engagement in the world, as Sartre had already done.⁸ Merleau-Ponty abandons an analysis of subjectivity’s pure form in favor of showing the function assigned to time in every intellectual act, a path in inquiry initially opened but not pursued by Kant in his theory of the schematism.⁹ This consequently requires a descent into the “hyletic” depths of consciousness, as Husserl had done in his *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*; or, put differently, starting from time itself, we must proceed to concrete subjectivity. “To analyze time,” Merleau-Ponty thus states, “is not to follow out the consequences of a pre-established conception of subjectivity, it is to gain access, through time, to its concrete structure. If we succeed in understanding the subject, it will not be in its pure form, but by seeking it at the intersection of its dimensions. We must therefore consider time in itself, and by following its internal dialectic, we will be led to reform our idea of the subject.”¹⁰

As John Sallis shows in a close interpretation of the chapter on temporality in *Phenomenology of Perception*,¹¹ it becomes clear that we will have to work through three successive stages in order to resolve the question. For what characterizes the development of a thought as it merges with experience is that it first passes through realism (first stage) and then through idealism (second stage) before finally coming to phenomenology (third stage), which alone is capable of thinking passivity *as* activity and of seeing a “passive synthesis” in time, according to one of Husserl’s expressions borrowed by Merleau-Ponty.¹² This triadic structure of the process of thought, a reflection [*reflet*] of the dialectic of experience, comprises first the realist response to the problem of time (the subject is *in* time), then the idealist response (the subject is *outside* of time), and finally Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological response (the subject *is* time).

The realist position is that the subject is *in* time, and like any thing is “subject” to time, which implies a “factuality” or an “objectivity” of time. This is what we mean when we speak of time as a flow, according to a metaphor as old as philosophy—namely, that of time as a river, into which one can never step twice, as we’ve known since Heraclitus.¹³ Merleau-Ponty clearly demonstrates the confused character of this famous metaphor, which claims to situate successivity (the before and the after) within objective events themselves, which a subjectivity would then merely record even as it participates in them. But because time is not a thing or a dimension of things, but rather a relation, “it arises from *my* relation to things.”¹⁴ The future and the past do not exist in the objective world, which is “too full for there to be time,” since the non-being of yesterday and tomorrow is missing from it; this non-being can be unfolded only by a subjectivity who is the “witness” of the flow and for whom what is upstream and downstream, though not actually given, is nevertheless present— whereas we find only “nows” everywhere in the objective world, detached from the finite perspectives opening on it and from the gaze of the finite observer who carves events out of it.¹⁵

But putting time “in” subjectivity does not let us escape the realist point of view, which views time as a real process. The Bergsonian critique of physiological theories of memory discredits the idea of a bodily preservation of the past in cerebral traces, but does not break with the idea of memories preserved in the unconscious.¹⁶ The thesis of psychological preservation continues to assume the being-present of the past in the form of contents of consciousness. Yet no present bodily or mental trace *by itself* could ever refer to the past or the future unless these two dimensions have already been unfolded *in advance* by a being who has a sense of the past and the future and that is *itself* always situated in the dimension of successivity. We cannot make the past or the future out of the present; the present must instead become a *sign* of what was or what will be, which is possible only if the *passage* of time (from the present to the past and from the future to the present) already constitutes our originary experience. Only on this basis can we then delimit events within time and give them autonomous existence by objectifying them. This is why Merleau-Ponty states that “time is thought by us before the parts of time, the temporal relations make possible events in time. The subject must thus correlatively not be situated itself so that it

may be present in intention to the past and the future. We no longer say that time is a 'given of consciousness,' but rather more precisely we say that 'consciousness deploys or constitutes time.'¹⁷

Saying that consciousness deploys or unfolds time thus leads us from the realist to the idealist point of view. But the idealist refutation of the subject's being-in-time leads to the claim of the subject's nontemporality. The subject must be outside of time if we want it to be able to synthesize all the parts of time. Time is thus subjected to the subject, and the subject is no longer subject to time. A consciousness constituting time must be outside of the moments of time and not imprisoned in any one of them, precisely in order to be able to freely place them in relation. Merleau-Ponty wonders whether consciousness's liberation from time is nothing more than an illusion of freedom that closes off rather than opening up consciousness's access to temporality, in the sense that being free of time is not equivalent to being free for time. For time constituted wholly by consciousness is a "leveled" time, a succession of nows similar to real time, which is *for* no one, since the subject is entirely disengaged from it. Yet the very "essence" of time is such that it can never be completely deployed beneath the disengaged spectator's gaze, and it can never be completely constituted and "completed" precisely because it "is" not of the order of being, but rather of the order of *process*, of coming-forth or passage: "it is essential to time to become and not to be," as Merleau-Ponty says, translating the Heideggerian discourse on time that "*is* not, but rather temporalizes itself."¹⁸

Realism immerses the subject in time to the point of destroying every possibility of the consciousness of time as a unitary phenomenon because consciousness is enclosed exclusively in the dimension of its present. But idealism, which wants to free consciousness from its imprisonment in the "objective" present and open it to the totality of time, only manages to make incomprehensible what it wants to "make explicit" (namely, consciousness's *intrinsic* relation to time) because the time constituted or deployed by idealism is not "true" time (that is, "the passage or transit itself") but only its derivative result ("this setting distinct from me where nothing either elapses or happens").¹⁹ In the two cases, what remains beyond reach for objective thought (in both its realist and idealist modes) is *passage* itself, which this thought can grasp only in its result—precisely because objective thought remains incapable of truly relating time to consciousness or consciousness to time, making them into distinct and separate "beings" that have to be reunited from the outside, instead of joining "from within" this non-being that "is" consciousness with this other non-being that "is" time. As John Sallis says, "it is prescribed in the framework of these alternatives that the subject must be wholly in time or wholly outside time, and each possibility leads, in the end, to a sacrifice of time-consciousness."²⁰

Another "alternative" must therefore be considered, one that does not end with the "sacrifice" of time-consciousness, an expression that must now be written with hyphens in order to show that we are dealing with a unitary structure expressing the non-scission between "a real that unfolds and a consciousness that watches" (or in other words, expressing the reciprocal "immanence" of consciousness in relation to time and time in relation to consciousness, which is exactly what constitutes Husserl's problem in the 1905 *Lectures*, as Gérard Granel has shown).²¹ Time-consciousness is always sacrificed when the connection of the different parts of time (that is, the synthesis of time) is thought as *already* accomplished, either in the object or in the subject. The synthesis of time itself must instead be understood as temporal, or in other words, as always in the midst of being accomplished rather than as always already completed, which is how the "hyperdialectic" that Merleau-Ponty develops in *The Visible and the Invisible* allows one to conceive it.²² The hyperdialectic is a dialectic without *Aufhebung*, or a dialectic whose synthesis remains always incomplete, because it is always "inchoate" and in a "nascent state" in that it is a dialectic of experience and not the coming-to-self of an absolute subjectivity. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, this absolute subjectivity remains the "philosophers' dream"—the dream of an eternity beyond the permanent and the changing, hindering them from accessing the eternity encountered "at the heart of the experience of time," which is the point from which we must begin but from which it is in no way a question of escaping because, as Merleau-Ponty states, "the problem is how to explicate time in its nascent state and while it is appearing, and how it is always subtended by the notion of time, which is not an object of our knowledge, but a dimension of our being."²³

Merleau-Ponty's interest is therefore to pursue this third way, the phenomenological path, in order to think consciousness's engagement in time and the structural identity of temporality and subjectivity. This implies accomplishing the dialectical "sublation" [*la relève*] of the positive content of realism and idealism,²⁴ rather than opening an entirely new path and abandoning the well-worn traditional paths. But concretely, this means that we have to bring Husserl and Heidegger, whose different phenomenological styles are normally opposed, into dialogue,

which in turn leads Merleau-Ponty to claim (in his original interpretation of Husserl's famous diagram of time in the 1905 *Lectures*) that operant intentionality [*die fungierende Intentionalität*] "which Husserl is led to place in evidence under the intentionality of act that is thethetic consciousness of an object is nothing less than what Heidegger calls transcendence."²⁵ The discovery in the 1905 *Lectures* of this "anonymous" intentionality, which makes consciousness into a unitary flow and thereby makes objectifying intentionality possible, may well constitute an advance over the "transcendental voluntarism" on which the *Logical Investigations* still depended (wherein intentionality is too one-sidedly conceived as the subject's activity),²⁶ but the consequence of this for Husserl is neither the destabilization nor the shattering of the subject. Instead, it lets Husserl bring to light what one might call the "passivity of its activity." Husserl's last word—at least in the 1905 lectures on internal time-consciousness, the only one of Husserl's texts on time cited by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*—is the affirmation of the absolute temporal flux's self-constitution and its identity with subjectivity.²⁷

The bringing to light of consciousness's double intentionality—which we could call its originally divergent strabism, which directs the intentional gaze both through temporal profiles to the object constituted by them and to the flux of constituting consciousness itself as a flux of profiles or phases of the temporal flow—does not in any way lead Husserl to the subject's "deconstruction," but instead leads him to the affirmation of the flow's selfconstituting phenomenality, which implies the possibility for the flow itself to appear in its flowing, and for the One to make itself appear in the multiple. Merleau-Ponty seems to rejoin Husserl's position when he understands *ek-stasis* as a subject's *ek-stasis*, whereas Heidegger understands it as the *ek-stasis* of an existence that is, so to speak, always "thrown." This is what emerges from this passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

This *ek-stasis*, this indivisible projection of an outcome that is already present to it, is subjectivity. The originary flow, says Husserl, not only *is*, but must also necessarily give itself as a "manifestation of itself" (*Selbsterscheinung*), without our needing to place behind it another flow which is conscious of it.... It is essential to time to be not only actual time or time which flows, but time which is aware of itself, for the explosion or dehiscence of the present towards a future is the archetype of *the relation of self to self* and traces out an interiority or an ipseity.²⁸

Heidegger appeals to the transcendence of an *existence* rather than a subject to show the *derivative* character of intentionality (objectifying or operant, transversal or longitudinal)²⁹ and of every intentional *gaze* with respect to a being always already thrown in the world and attuned to it. For Heidegger, affective disposition (*Befindlichkeit*), in the sense that it is attunement (*Stimmung*) with the whole of the being, is what originally opens us to the world—not the gaze by which we intend the phenomenal, whether the latter be understood as manifest being or as a self-manifesting subjectivity. Moreover, Heidegger openly makes this claim in "On the Essence of Ground," a 1928 text dedicated to Husserl for his seventieth birthday, by underlining that transcendence allows for an understanding of intentionality rather than the reverse.³⁰ Heidegger rejects the classical opposition of transcendence and immanence (which still orders Husserlian thought despite the complication to which phenomenology submits it)³¹ and claims that it is not the thing that is transcendent (that is, exterior to consciousness), but rather that what is transcendent—that is, what authentically transcends—is on the contrary what modern thought conceived of as an immanent subject. For we are not dealing with a subject that initially and originally remains in itself in order then to transcend itself intentionally toward objects, but rather with an existence that is always already outside of itself and *ek-statically* open to the world. Insofar as such an existence merges with the very movement of transcendence that originally takes it outside of itself, it cannot be understood on the model of *hypokeimenon*, the substrate that was translated into Latin as *subiectum*. All intentional relations occur only on the ground of such a transcendence because intentionality puts into play not only the subject's *intentio* and the object as *intentum*, but also, as Heidegger shows in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,³² the understanding of the object's mode of being—that is, the preliminary opening of being that alone makes the disclosure of beings possible or, put in more concrete terms, the preliminary opening of the world that alone makes the discovery of the singular thing possible. Now, this opening precedes every objectifying grasp effected by transcendence insofar as it is merged with an existence that is always in the midst of completing itself and that is able to "see" itself only as always already completed, according to the finitude inherent to thrownness.

When Merleau-Ponty joins the terms "subject" and "transcendence" together in the same sentence, we could say from a strictly Heideggerian point of view that he in some way mixes fire and water and tries to identify

subjectivity with existence, intentionality with transcendence, by making the subject inseparable from the world and by making activity into a mere consequence of a passivity of intentionality. In doing so, *he enlarges subjectivity instead of deconstructing it*. I would like to try to think of Merleau-Ponty's position in *Phenomenology of Perception* as the intermediary position between, on the one hand, the completion [*achèvement*] of the tradition and the fulfillment [*accomplissement*] of modernity represented by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and, on the other hand, the "new beginning for thought" that Heidegger wants to promote, insofar as he attempts not so much to "overcome" (*überwinden*) but rather to assume or take on (*verwinden*) metaphysics—that is, to restore the tradition to its truth without, however, taking up once again its fundamental concepts, but rather by returning to the original experiences from which those concepts are derived.³³

In such a perspective, Merleau-Ponty appears as the figure of the phenomenological movement situated "between" Husserl and Heidegger. Now it is precisely with respect to the problem of time, whose capital importance for both Husserl and Heidegger is well known, that Merleau-Ponty's mediating position appears in all its fullness. We must recall that in 1905, Husserl sees in the question of time "the secular cross of the problem of knowledge"³⁴ and, later in 1913, the place of "the definitive and true absolute" with respect to which the transcendental absolute brought about by the reduction is only secondary.³⁵ Heidegger's fundamental question, in contrast, concerns the explication of time as the horizon of the understanding of Being on the basis of the kind of being that understands Being, which he calls "Dasein" rather than "subject." I would like to try briefly to highlight Merleau-Ponty's situation "between" Husserl and Heidegger by following the movement of the entire chapter on "Temporality" in *Phenomenology of Perception*. For the moment, I will have to leave aside the perspectives opened in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a book in which, despite its incompleteness, it is clearly suggested that the "reformation of consciousness" will more decisively take the form of a *destruction* of the classical subject and in which transcendental phenomenology is definitively dismissed, precisely because consciousness is thought in it (against the Husserlian project of bringing mute experience to speech)³⁶ as operant intentionality and because the emphasis is placed on the irreducible divergence between Being and meaning, the silence of experience and philosophical speech.³⁷

Merleau-Ponty's third way carries out the sublation of realism and idealism and so retains their positive content. What it preserves of realism is the privileged character of the dimension of the present that comes from the immersion of the subject "in" time: "there is time for me because I have a present.... None of the dimensions of time can be deduced from the others. But the present (in the broad sense, with its originary horizons of past and future) has a privilege because it is the zone where Being and consciousness coincide."³⁸ Does Merleau-Ponty here simply renew the privilege granted to self-presence (which Derrida sees in Husserl's work)³⁹ by invoking the necessity of avoiding an infinite regress by arriving at an ultimate consciousness that has nothing else behind it and in which Being and being-conscious are one and the same? It seems that the present to which Merleau-Ponty refers here is the Husserlian "living" present, which is not reduced to the punctuality of the now, but rather as an "enlarged" presence, includes retentive and protentive horizons within it. There may therefore be a primacy of the present, but it is *not* the present in which realism sees the dimension appropriate to objective being, which Heidegger calls *Vorhandenheit*—that is, being's always already complete presence conceived as substance. For Merleau-Ponty, however, this primacy of the present does not refer only to this "life" of consciousness, which, because it is able to retain all of the past, guarantees its own continuity and thus leaves behind the instantaneity that Bergson had confused with unconsciousness itself.⁴⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness of the present is not the result of a subject absolutely transparent to itself, for which Being is reduced to the knowledge that the subject has of it, but rather of a subject "complicit" with the world; and because it is "in-the-world," its "being conscious" is merged with "ex-sistence" itself,⁴¹ implying that its self-presence is also self-absence and likewise exists "in" the world.⁴² By seeing the experience of a self-presence (which is at the same time presence to other) in the consciousness of the present, Merleau-Ponty paradoxically rejoins the Heideggerian existential analysis. This is in effect what he states: "It is by communicating with the world that we indubitably communicate with ourselves. We take time in its entirety and we are present to ourselves because we are present to the world."⁴³ Heidegger does not define Dasein any differently when he sees it as the kind of being that is itself concerned with its own being, the kind of being that is not indifferent to its being, precisely because it is open to Being and because it is concerned by the Being of beings.⁴⁴ This onto-ontological privilege of Dasein—by which (as Aristotle says of the *psyche*) it is

“in a certain way beings”—is what, by making its being the site of presence,⁴⁵ prevents thinking the human’s being as a subject closed in on itself and deserted by the truth.

But the subject’s situation in the present must allow it to originally open itself to other dimensions of time (the past and the future) if it is to have consciousness of time as a whole—and as we have seen, this is what constitutes idealism’s “positivity,” which frees consciousness from its realist incarnation in the present alone. This liberation guarantees the Husserlian enlarged present because it opens it to the immediate past and future by showing the abstract character of the punctual now and of the linear representation of time in contrast to the effectivity of the “field of presence” where the “network of intentionalities” comprising time is unfolded. As Merleau-Ponty says, “Everything therefore refers me back to the field of presence as the originary experience where time and its dimensions appear ‘in person,’ with no intervening distance and with absolute self-evidence.”⁴⁶ The impressional, retentive, and protentional intentionalities “anchor me in an entourage” that is not explicitly perceived in its totality: these intentionalities therefore cannot be correlated to a “central ego” that would dominate them, but rather only to the perceptual field of a being situated in time—which “again takes in hand” its immediate past, which already “bites into” its future, and for which the “thick” present is not in any way the present of an instantiated consciousness. This is why there is no need for the synthetic *activity* of a “central ego” that would connect the past to the present and reattach them to a life’s discrete events in order to constitute a cohesion; there is instead a need for a *passive* synthesis or, to borrow again a term from Husserl, a synthesis not of identification but of *transition*,⁴⁷ a synthesis effected not by the intervention of an intellectual act of gathering, but rather by its flight outside of self or in the total dehiscence that time is. Merleau-Ponty vigorously underscores this: “Once again, time’s ‘synthesis’ is a transition-synthesis, the movement of a life which unfolds, and there is no way to bring it about other than by living that life, there is no seat of time, time bears itself and launches itself afresh.”⁴⁸ The emphasis is therefore placed on the continuity of time and on the unity of the temporal process, which means that time is not a series of instants juxtaposed to one another but rather a continuous passage wherein “each present reasserts the presence of the whole past which it supplants, and anticipates that of all that is to come.”⁴⁹ Time’s presence “in person” in experience constitutes the truth of the river metaphors and of the mythical personifications of time because the metaphor and the mythology are the only means to speak justly of “that for which we lack names”⁵⁰—namely, the absolute flow, the “undivided thrust” of time,⁵¹ which alone is able to take account of time in its proper unity as successive multiplicity, or of what Heidegger calls intratemporality.⁵²

By placing the emphasis on the subject’s ek-static rather than synthetic character, Merleau-Ponty is led to discover “in the hollow of the subject itself ... the presence of the world.”⁵³ Temporality therefore tears the subject away from its substantial or formal being: with time, it is radical exteriority, the “outside of self in itself and for itself” that bursts into the very heart of the for-itself.⁵⁴ This is why Merleau-Ponty can see the “archetype” of ipseity in time itself and thus conjoin the philosophy of the subject and the thought of existence. This conjugation of Husserl and Heidegger constitutes the proper singularity of Merleau-Ponty’s work, which manages to give an eminent sense to the unity of what we have rightly called not the “school” but the “movement” of phenomenology. Phenomenology as “movement” goes in the direction of Merleau-Ponty’s work, which remains inchoate after having been abruptly interrupted by his death. This is to say that he goes from Husserl to Heidegger, from “concrete” subjectivity to the deconstruction of subjectivity, from a phenomenology of the autoappearing of the absolute flow to the “phenomenology of the inapparent,”⁵⁵ about which the later Heidegger spoke, and which, it seems to me, we could show constitutes the horizon of *The Visible and the Invisible*.