

# THE PROTENTION-RETENTION ASYMMETRY IN HUSSLERL'S CONCEPTION OF TIME CONSCIOUSNESS

## La asimetría de la protención-retención en la concepción del tiempo-consciencia de Husserl

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### *Abstract*

*In this paper I shall try to clarify Husserl's conception of time-consciousness. In particular, I try to explain what exactly the asymmetry between protention and retention consists in. I argue (i) that Rodemeyer's understanding of the protention-retention relationship, as developed, seems misleading, mainly for two reasons: first, it does not take into account that the 'now' has duration; second, she conceives the relation between protention and retention as symmetric, (ii) that the asymmetry between protention and retention could be better understood if we could not only take into account the influence that retention and affect have on protention, but also if we could take into consideration the conceptual difference between surprise and disappointment. This difference, I suggest, reveals new ways to understand the protention-retention asymmetry.*

Keywords: Husserl; time; consciousness; protention; retention

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Recibido: febrero 8 de 2013    aprobado: abril 22 de 2013

# LA ASIMETRÍA DE LA PROTENCIÓN-RETENCIÓN EN LA CONCEPCIÓN DEL TIEMPO-CONSCIENCIA DE HUSSERL

## *Resumen*

*En este artículo intentaré clarificar la concepción del tiempo-consciencia que defiende Husserl. En particular, intentaré explicar en qué consiste exactamente la asimetría entre retención y protención. Argumento (i) que la explicación que ofrece Rodemeyer de la relación entre protención y la retención es errónea, básicamente por dos razones: en primer lugar, no tiene en cuenta que el 'ahora' tiene duración. En segundo lugar, asume que la relación entre protención y retención es simétrica, lo cual es falso. (ii) Que la asimetría entre protención y retención podría entenderse mejor si tomamos en cuenta no sólo la influencia que la retención y el afecto tienen sobre la protención, pero la diferencia conceptual que existe entre la sorpresa y la desilusión. Esta diferencia, sugiero, revela nuevas maneras de entender la asimetría entre protención y retención.*

Palabras clave: Husserl; tiempo; consciencia; protención; retención

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# THE PROTENTION-RETENTION ASYMMETRY IN HUSSERL'S CONCEPTION OF TIME CONSCIOUSNESS

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## **Husserl and the cognitive paradox**

According to a classical, naïve, conception of time, 'past', 'present' and 'future' are different moments of time, each of which is part of a sequence of events that we experience in our consciousness. Since the past is no longer present—this conception holds—and the future has not yet taken place, we should conclude that the only really existing phase in our consciousness is the present. In other words, we live in an eternal present; and all we can say about the future is based on fantasy or imagination, and all we can say about the past is based on memory. It is easy to make an analogy between this conception and the mathematical notions of lines and space. A sequence of time could be represented as a line, and each of the phases of the sequence could be represented as a segment in the line. Thus, a line could be subdivided in smaller lines, each of which would represent a moment of time (i.e. past, present or future).

This way of conceiving time is, however, misleading, for it fails to explain how the identity of objects through time and their representation as successive are possible. In fact, since 'past' and 'future' are inexistent in our consciousness (the past because it is no longer present, and the future because it is not yet present), we would not be able to compare the past objects with the present objects in our minds and, therefore, it would not be possible to recognize a past object as the same object that we experience

in the present. We would not be giving a plausible account, in other words, of what James described as a “constant feeling *sui generis* of the pastness, to which every one of our experiences in turn falls a prey”<sup>1</sup>—i.e. a feeling according to which we do not experience a single, isolated moment, but rather a block that comprises three different moments of time all in one. James calls this block ‘duration-block’ or ‘interval of time’.

A possible way to avoid the problems implied in the classic conception of time is to affirm that, in one way or another, past and future *affect* the present and coexist with it. This, in principle, would solve the problem of how the identity of objects through time and the duration of events in consciousness could be explained. Brentano, for instance, held a view like this. The difficulty with such a view, however, is that it leads to what has been regarded as the ‘cognitive paradox’: if time has three different moments—i.e. past, present and future—but we live in a constant present, how can we then explain the fact that the three of these moments coexist simultaneously in our consciousness? In other words, if past and future are part of the present, then there would be one single moment; but if they are not part of the present, then there would be multiple different moments, different from the present.

An interesting challenge consists, then, in trying to construct a conception of time that explains the identity of objects and events through time (or, as James would put it, of the duration) in a way that could avoid falling into the cognitive paradox. Husserl proposed, in this sense, a very plausible solution. According to him, the present phase of consciousness, rather than being composed of three different acts—i.e. an act of memory of a past event, an act of expectation of a future event, and an act of perception of a present event—is structured in a way that automatically retains the past and “protentions” the future. Husserl, in other words, solves the problem of unity and multiplicity by integrating in the structure of the act of perception itself three different functions: retention, primal impression, and protention. In order to better understand Husserl’s conception of time it becomes necessary, then, to explain each of these three functions. However, a separate and independent account of them would not be enough, for what is essential in Husserl’s conception is not to define each of them as unconnected from one another, but to understand the interrelation between them. In fact, if one of his motivations is to circumvent the cognitive paradox, his view needs to explain the underlying nature that unifies each of these phases.

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<sup>1</sup> W. James. “The Principles of Psychology”, page 1 (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin15.htm>)

## Retention, perception and protention

From Husserl's texts<sup>2</sup>, and from what his interpreters inferred or added to his view<sup>3</sup>, it is possible to construct a general plausible conception of time-consciousness that integrates its three different phases. In this section, I will present the basic features of this conception, and I will clarify as much as possible its possible ambiguities.

Primal impression—the direct access to the strictly present phase of the intentional object—is related to the future and to the past. It is related to the future when it anticipates what we will perceive next, and it is related to the past when it retains what has just been fulfilled. While the anticipation of the future is not-yet fulfilled (otherwise it would not be future), the intention of the past is fulfilled. Husserl calls 'protention' to the first case and 'retention' to the second. Protentions, retentions and impressions (or *Urimpression*, as Husserl later calls them) are not different acts of our consciousness, but rather part of one single mental act (i.e. perception, memory or imagination). It is impossible to isolate each of these operations, or to conceive them separately. They are, in other words, part of one single process. The following example could clarify these notions. When we hear a song, we have a direct access to a certain note. The song, however, is not composed of a single, isolated, note. It is, rather, a coherent unity of different notes, and we perceive it as such. In practice, the melody is simply one. Husserl's account of primal impression, protention and retention explains how this is possible. The direct access to a certain note is the primal impression. That note, however, is not all we experience. Simultaneously, we anticipate the subsequent notes—i.e. we protend them—and we retend the notes that are no longer heard.

It is important to note that the impression is not simply a mathematical middle point or, as Rodemeyer wrongly suggests<sup>4</sup>, the point in which retention and protention converge. Impression is rather a zone or a fold where retention and protention interweave; and also the operation through which we obtain the material for fulfillment if there is ever to be anything

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<sup>2</sup> Husserl's conception of time can be reconstructed almost entirely from Husserl, Edmund, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917), trans. John Brough, *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991). It is possible to read important selections of these readings in Welton, Donn. *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*. Bloomington, Ind. : Indiana University Press, c1999, Chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> Rodemeyer, Lanci. "Developments in the Theory of Time-Consciousness: An Analysis of Protention", in Welton, Donn, ed. *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, c2003.

Or Gallagher, Shaun. *The Inordinance of Time*. Northwestern University Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Rodemeyer, page 134

new. Since it is not conceivable as separated and isolated from protention and retention, it is not possible to clearly differentiate its limits. The demarcation between them is, therefore, only a conceptual abstraction.

Husserl explains the stream of consciousness by analyzing the interaction between impression, retention and protention. The 'living present' contains within itself the past sequence of events and the anticipation of the future events. Every impression becomes a retention and it is subsequently replaced by new impressions. These new impressions, in turn, also become retentions; and what was then a retention becomes the retention of a retention. The further the retention from the now-point is, the less vividly we feel it. This process continues indefinitely. A melody is perceived with more intensity when we have a primal impression of it, but this intensity gradually fades away. The further the melody is from the focal point of the primal impression, the less intensely we experience it. At one point, the melody simply vanishes in our consciousness, and it is replaced with a different and new retentional chain.

214 Each retention is, then, a consciousness of a past that corresponds to a past now-point, which is distant from the present now-point. To put it in other words, retention has a double aspect: it is both a former now-point and a present awareness of a past.

Retention, however, should be differentiated from reflection. Retention is a necessary condition of reflection, because we would not be able to reflect on something if we have not retained it in the first place. In other words, when we reflect on something, we turn back to consider what is held in retention. Retentions themselves, however, are not the product of any active effort. They are, in this sense, *passive*.

As for protention, Varela describes it accurately when he says that "the only definite thing is that without exception something will come"<sup>5</sup>. When we hear a melody, we will always protend further notes of the music. What exactly these notes will be depends entirely on the particular situation in which we are embedded. Nothing changes, however, the fact that we will protend a new note.

The process I have described so far is *formal*—i.e. it is an invariant structure that can be distinguished from the particular varying events, but nonetheless it does not exist separately from them on its own. No matter where we are, what we do, or what we perceive, there will always be a retentional chain, an impression of the now, and an anticipation of the future. It is also possible, however, to describe Husserl's account of

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<sup>5</sup> Varela, F. 1999), The specious present: The neurophenomenology of time consciousness, in: J. Petitot, F. J. Varela, B. Pachoud and J.-M. Roy (Eds.), *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Current issues in phenomenology and cognitive science*, Stanford University Press, page 298

time from the perspective of the *contents* that are related to its formal structure. This becomes clear when we analyze how our particular past experiences influence the way we intend the future. The way I anticipate the future depends on my past experience—i.e. on my retentional past. The accumulation or sedimentation of retentions seems to affect the way we approach the future. The more familiar our neighborhood is, the more precise and accurate our anticipations will be. After walking two times down College Street, we might doubt that the department’s building will come next. After walking ten times down College Street, our degree of certainty will be higher. This means, in other words, that we can anticipate or ‘induce’ the future based on our previous experiences. The world we are confronted with, then, is not an unfamiliar place: we are habituated to many of its features in virtue of our past experiences. The world presents itself to us, in other words, as populated of ‘empirical entities’ such as table, chair, house, and all kinds of different objects. It is important to note at this point that to be habituated to an object is different from mere remembrance. In fact, I can remember a past object, but whatever I remember from it can be later shown to be invalid. And, if it is invalid, it cannot be the basis of the object we are habituated to. Thus, we can remember having seen a cow, which ended up being simply a tree. This “cow”, however, does not contribute to the formation of what we normally identify as a cow. The only experiences that contribute to the formation of the type “cow” are those that remain valid when we identify an object as a cow. It could be useful to point out here<sup>6</sup> that the “invalid” memory—which is different from habituation—is not invalid in virtue of the fact that the person incorrectly reproduces events or object in his consciousness—i.e. because he inaccurately ‘brings back’ past experiences to the present—but rather because the memorized objects or events do not correctly map the “real world”. The invalidity, then, relies on the fact that a past impression was wrong, and not on the fact that the past was wrongly reproduced.

Husserl’s account, as developed so far, refers to temporal objects and to the consciousness that perceives those temporal objects. This account, however, necessarily needs to be more complicated. In order to better explain the fact that objects or events, such as melodies, are perceived as one and the same throughout time, Husserl notes that the unity of the flow of consciousness is constituted by a double process: ‘longitudinal intentionality’ and ‘transversal intentionality’. By the former, Husserl refers to the operation of protending and retaining past phases. By the latter, he refers to the operation of retaining

<sup>6</sup> In order to avoid a potential confusion between veridical memory and the mere experience of remembering

the whole previous phase and, therefore, the previous primal impression. So, indirectly, each phase of consciousness retains, in an intentional manner, the previously intuited objects. The following remarks could clarify this idea a bit more. In the flowing process, the first primal impression becomes changed into a retention of itself, this retention becomes changed into a retention of this retention, and so on. Thus, there is a continuous retentional modification. To focus our attention on this continued process, Husserl says, is to focus on the ‘horizontal intentionality’ of consciousness. When this occurs, we turn our attention away from the object—say, a note—and we focus on what is new and on the retentional process. However, when we direct our attention toward the intended object (the note) we immerse ourselves in the ‘transversal intentionality’. In this case, what is important is not the continued protention-impression-retention process, but the fact that our consciousness is consciousness *of* something. The unity of the objects within the flow is constituted with the interaction of these two types of intentionality. Although it is not possible to fully and clearly explain these notions here, it is important to point out that, since the transversal intentionality retains whole previous phases—and therefore the past event as whole—it contains in it the whole protention-impression-retention structure.

### **The protention-retention asymmetry**

So far, I have described, in general, Husserl’s account of time. In this section I would like to focus on the nature of the retention-protention asymmetry in particular. To clarify this seems crucial; not only to better understand Husserl’s theory, but also to better understand the direction that the future research on time consciousness should take.

There have been several different relevant contributions to the debate on how exactly we should understand Husserl’s conception of retention. Rudolf Bernet<sup>7</sup>, for example, has explored the constitution of immanent time objects; a genetic analysis of the emergence of all acts of intentional consciousness; a new understanding of the present now in terms of a process of fulfillment in the tension between retentions and protentions; and new analyses of specifically noematic temporal characteristics including the theme of individuation. On the other hand, Dieter Lohmar<sup>8</sup> has addressed

<sup>7</sup> See Rudolf Bernet, “Husserl’s New Phenomenology of time consciousness in the Bernau Manuscripts” in Lohmar, I. and Yamaguchi (eds.), *On Time - New Contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, *Phaenomenologica* 197, DOI 10.1007/978-90-481-8766-9\_1, Chapter 1. C Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

<sup>8</sup> See Dieter Lohmar, “On the Constitution of the Time of the World: The Emergence of Objective Time on the Ground of Subjective Time”, in *Ibid*, Chapter VI.



some of Husserl's attempts to answer the question how the objective time of the world is constituted on the basis of the experienced subjective time. Finally, Dan Zahavi<sup>9</sup> has attempted to examine the relation between

Husserl's notion of inner consciousness (self-consciousness) and his theory of inner time-consciousness. He argues that the distinction between reflective and pre-reflective self-consciousness is crucial if we are to understand Husserl's analysis of time. Other key authors, such as John Brough, Nicolas de Warren, James Dodd and Salulius Geniusas, among others, have also contributed to the debate<sup>10</sup>. In this article, I would like to focus on the contributions on time that two important authors have put forward: Rodemeyer<sup>11</sup> and Gallagher<sup>12</sup>. It is important to focus on their interpretation, for a proper understanding of them will show us new ways of understanding the protention-retention asymmetry in ways that the above mentioned authors do not really explore. To this end, I will try to show in this section why Rodemeyer's view is misleading; and why Gallagher's approach, although not developed in detail, seems more promising.

According to Rodemeyer, Husserl considered the notion of 'now' only a fiction, because it would be the analogous to a mathematical middle point: something infinitely small and divisible and, therefore, virtually non-existing. For some reason, Husserl apparently decided, Rodemeyer says, to replace this notion with the notion of *Urimpression*. Rodemeyer claims, however, that with the introduction of this term, the conception of the 'now' as a mathematical middle point remains. This could be confirmed by looking at the figures she presents, where she considers the 'now' simply an intersection of a horizontal and a perpendicular line<sup>13</sup>. On her understanding, Husserl claims that protention and retention "push" towards the line of convergence in the lines, but does not mention the "point" of convergence. This "point", she says, is not necessary anyway. Instead, it is to be understood as the zone of convergence of two different streams.

The whole idea seems, however, deceptive. Not only because protention, following Husserl's account, does not "push" towards the now (it is rather the now that "pushes" towards protention); but also because it assumes that the

<sup>9</sup> See Dan Zahavi, "Inner (Time-)Consciousness", in *Ibid*, Chapter XVI.

<sup>10</sup> In general, recent findings on Husserl's conception of time have been collected in Lohmar's and Yamaguchi's book mentioned above. Other relevant readings for the topic of time consciousness are Zahavi, Dan, 2003, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; and Bernet, Rudolf, with Iso Kern and Eduard Marbach, 1993, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Rodemeyer

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Gallagher, pages 67-69

<sup>13</sup> Rodemeyer, pages 134-135

‘now’ is merely a point where retention and protention meet, denying thus the independent role that the ‘now’ has: to provide material for fulfillment, on which retention later relies. This view, in other words, reduces the ‘now’ to the operations of protention+retention. She seems to suggest, then, that we can dispense with the ‘now’. This confusion, I believe, stems from the fact that Rodemeyer equates the middle point to the *mathematical* middle point. These two notions are, however, different. While the notion of *mathematical* middle point represents the idea of an infinitely small point; the notion of middle point simply refers to something that is *in between* two other things, but that is not necessarily small as a point. If we accept the latter, the possibility that the now has its own function remains open. Rodemeyer claims, of course, that the ‘now’ in an ‘in-between’. However, the ‘in-between’ seems to be, for her, thin as a point.

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On the other hand, if Rodemeyer’s interpretation were valid, it would not be possible to explain how our intentions are fulfilled. As explained earlier, retentions are, by definition, fulfilled; but they become fulfilled only when they appear to us as an impression in the first place. Retention depends, then, on the fulfillment that the primal impression provides. When we protend a certain note in a melody, that note is not yet fulfilled (as Husserl says, the protention has a “not-yet” status). But when that melody fully presents itself to our senses, and we have direct access to the sound of the note, the not-anymore protention becomes fulfilled. If the ‘now’ were merely the meeting point of retention and protention, as Rodemeyer suggests, then the only really existing phases of time would be retention and protention. However, since protention has a “not-yet” status and retention a “not-anymore” status, we would never reach the point of having a direct contact with what presently is. Therefore, it seems necessary not only to claim that time (when it includes its three phases) has a certain density, but also that the ‘now’ has density as well. If we accept that the now is the zone where retention and protention meet, but we do not reduce this zone to these two operations, we would still be able to claim that it functions as the ‘in-between’. The notion of ‘in-between’, however, would not necessarily refer to an infinitely small mathematical point; it could also refer to a zone or fold—and, consequently, to something somehow thicker than a point.

The upshot of Rodemeyer’s conception is that protention and retention end up being considered symmetrical and equivalent phases which interact with each other, the only substantial difference between them being that one refers to the future and the other to the past. Rodemeyer explains the

relationship between these two phases<sup>14</sup> in the following way. According to her, what has just passed gives us a basis upon which to project in the future: my next moment's expectations arise out of the last moment's fulfillment. That seems clear. In fact, as I stated earlier, the more familiar we are with our neighborhood, for example, the more accurate our anticipations of what we are going to find in the future will be. What is not so clear is her next claim: retention is always affected by what was protended in a given manner. How is it possible to make sense of the claim that protentions affect retentions? Retentions, Rodemeyer says, are retained as both retentions of what came before and as their former protention. When a fulfilled moment passes into retention "it is not a retention of a momentary former now-point—that would be the 'mathematical' explanation; it is a retention of a fulfilled protention, one which itself protends toward the next fulfillment"<sup>15</sup>, she says. In other words, on her view, retentions retain *fulfilled protentions*. This claim is, however, misleading for the simple reason that fulfilled protentions, by definition, do not exist. In fact, they have, as I stated earlier, a not-yet status; as soon as they are fulfilled, they cease to be protentions and they acquire the 'now' status. Rodemeyer could not have possibly considered this option, however, precisely because the 'now' is, on her view, virtually non-existing—or thin as the mathematical middle point.

Rodemeyer claims to find support for the claim that protentions affect retentions in the following paragraph, written by Husserl<sup>16</sup>:

The new phase is thus not just the transformation of a retention into a retention of the next level—which in its mediated intentionality holds what was earlier in modified consciousness—and a transformation of the co-interwoven protention; instead it is also a retention of the earlier protention... The new protention is new and a modification of what was earlier, which itself, however, is known through a moment of interlaced retentional consciousness

I am bit puzzled about how this paragraph could be interpreted as a clear and straightforward support to the idea that protentions modify retentions. When Husserl claims that the new phase is a retention of an earlier protention, he might simply be meaning that everything which is right now being retained used to be a protention, before changing its status to retention. In the same manner, when he says that the new protention is new and a modification of what was earlier, he could be meaning that a protention, when fulfilled, might generate a retentional continuum which

<sup>14</sup>Rodemeyer, Pages 132-137

<sup>15</sup>Rodemeyer, p131

<sup>16</sup>Rodemeyer, 133

is inconsistent or different from the one we already have; in which case we would not have a modification of earlier retentions but merely a new set of retentions. To clarify, let us consider the following example. If I am hearing a sentence, and I am in the middle of it, I will have a protention of how the sentence might end, and a retention of what I have heard so far. My girlfriend could say to me “I love...”, and I will definitely expect that she will complete the sentence by saying “you”. In this case, we retain “I love” and we protend “you”. However, if she completes the sentence by saying “Richard” instead of “you”, I will not only be very frustrated and jealous about what she said, but also the whole meaning of the sentence will change. This does not mean, however, that the protention “you” modified my retentions of “I love”, but rather that the disappointment caused by the unfulfillment of “you” will generate a new retentional chain, different from the previous one (continuous with the previous one, but not overlapping the previous one). The first retentional chain—i.e. what we retained before when we were expecting the word “you”—still exists, but at a greater distance than the second retentional continuum. The proof of this is that it is possible to ‘bring it back to the present’, by memorizing and reflecting upon it. We can, in other words, remember how we felt and what we thought before getting the bad news that our girlfriend loves another person.

Admittedly, retentions seem to contain protentions, in the sense that there is a whole retention-impression-protention phase that is previous to the ‘now’ and to the present protention. The notions of longitudinal and transversal intentionality (a distinction which Rodemeyer seems to overlook in her analysis) become crucial at this point. As explained above, the notion of transversal intentionality seems to suggest that retentions and protentions are interrelated. However, the protentions contained in that phase are part of the past, so they are not really ‘protentions’ in the sense that the real protentions are. They can be retained as past protentions. It is possible, I believe, that Rodemeyer focused only on the longitudinal intentionality level in her analysis, and that led her to believe that retentions cannot exist without the modification of retention. But once the distinction between the two types of intentionalities is made, it becomes clear that at least the longitudinal intentionality seems to show that protentions do not modify retentions. They can, however, modify the contents of retention, by bringing about new chains of retentions, as I explained above.

The upshot of Rodemeyer’s ideas that the *Urimpression* has no duration and that protention modifies retention is that retention and protention end up being envisaged as *symmetrical* and proportionate. In fact, this is what Rodemeyer concludes about both phases of time:

The interrelation of protention and retention can manifest itself in two essential ways so far: retentions “contain” protentions, first, in the limited sense that they “contain” protentions directed from one “moment” or “phase” to the next “moment”, linking the retentions to one another, and second, in the broader sense that groups of retentions are linked to each other as events. In each way retentions are modified by protentions. Protentions and their fulfillments likewise may link serially from moment to moment or may protend towards unities interpreted as events in themselves. And in both of these modes, they are modified by retention<sup>17</sup>.

As we can see from this paragraph, Rodemeyer conceives retention and protention as two phases that continuously overlap each other. This, however, is not the only way to imagine the relationship between them. Gallagher<sup>18</sup> presents an alternative—opposing—view on this that seems, to me, more promising. In what follows, I shall briefly present this view, and argue in what sense it is useful to better understand the notion of protention.

According to Gallagher, in order to understand the notion of integration—i.e. the way the phases are related to each other—it becomes necessary to explain the notion of protention. The first thing he says about protention, contradicting Husserl himself, is that the idea that protentioning is simply the reverse of retentioning is erroneous. There is a clear asymmetry between them, he says, which relies on the following three facts: first, while retentioning is already determined, there is nothing determinate for protentioning to protend, since the intended about-to-be function of consciousness has not yet taken place. Second, whereas retentioning always involves a continuum, there is not a protentional continuum, because the will-be that we intend has not yet occurred. We might protend *x* event or object, but that will not generate a chain of further protentions that emanate from *x*, because *x* does not yet exist in the first place. If we are walking down College Street, we might expect or intuit that the department’s building will soon appear in our vision field. But anticipations of this kind seem to have a relatively narrow scope: we do not expect many more things apart from the building. We might, on the contrary, experience a long sequence of retentions in our consciousness. After hearing a two hours concert, the first melodies could still be somehow present in our consciousness. These melodies could have a weaker impact than the more recent ones, but they would still be part of the same retention chain. Third, the intentional content that we retain influences the protentional process. In other words, what we have already experienced constrains what we expect to happen next. However, Gallagher

<sup>17</sup>Rodemeyer, page 132

<sup>18</sup>Gallagher, pages 67-69

says, the only plausible way in which protention affects retention is because retention is always a former protention, but not vice versa. The more familiar our neighborhood is, the more precise and accurate our anticipations will be. After walking two times down College Street, we might doubt that the department's building will come next. After walking ten times down College, our degree of certainty will be higher. This, however, does not occur the other way around. Protentions do not seem to affect retentions in that way, and they cannot accumulate or sediment in the first place: as soon as we try to store them, they vanish as protentions and appear as retentions.

222 Gallagher's and Rodemeyer approaches seem incompatible in some respects. While Rodemeyer emphasizes the continuous overlapping and interaction of retention and protention, Gallagher points to the fact that protention is somehow dependent on retention (in the sense that the retentional chain largely determines or conditions the content of protention, but not the other way around). Unfortunately, Gallagher does not spell out his ideas much more; but there are three obvious ideas that we can conclude from his analysis: first, the content of our experiences affect our temporal structure—in particular, what we retain seems to constrain the objects that we will pretend in the future. Second, the scope of protentions is limited, whereas the retentional chain seems unlimited. Third, the nature of protention is to be open, undetermined.

This, however, does not conclude our analysis of protention. When we notice that some things in particular are protended and some others are not (as when, for example, we pretend notes  $x$  or  $y$  in a melody, but not notes  $a$  or  $b$ ), the following question arises: what exactly motivates our interest or expectation in one particular thing over the other? This is something that we should answer only by appealing to the content of our experience, and not to the formal structure of time consciousness; for the formal structure is the same for everyone, regardless of the context in which the subject is embedded. Gallagher makes the interesting suggestion (and in this point he seems to coincide with Rodemeyer) that our retentional past conditions our protentional future. This is a clear example of how the content affects the structure.

But there is a second, interesting way through which the content seems to affect the structure: affect. Varela, Depraz and Thompson are some of the authors that developed this idea (Rodemeyer also writes along these lines, but from a different perspective)<sup>19</sup>. According to them, emotions are

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<sup>19</sup> Varela, F. "The specious present: The neurophenomenology of time consciousness", in: J. Petitot, F. J. Varela, B. Pachoud and J.-M. Roy (Eds.), *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Current issues in phenomenology and cognitive science*, Stanford University Press. 1999.

a constitutive part of protention, because protention involves motivation. Moreover, as Varela and Depraz say,<sup>20</sup> “affect *precedes* temporality: affect implicates as its very nature the tendency, a “pulsion” and a motion that, as such, can *only* deploy itself in time and thus *as* time”. So the claim seems to be that we feel motivated and attracted to certain objects and events, which are previous to the temporal stream, and which somehow orient our protentions in a certain way. Varela and Depraz give the example of a person who changes his mood when listening to an Italian Sonata at the theater. The sonata not only causes the change of mood, but also permeates the person’s consciousness with the melody that he is listening. The person pretends certain notes of the melody, because he already knows it, and is expecting to repeat the same pleasant moment that he experienced when listening to the melody for the first time. Examples like this, it seems, are not isolated. The living present is always rooted in emotions, which motivates us to direct our protentions in a certain direction. This motivation is, in turn, generated by the attraction or affect that a certain event or object exerts upon us. Motivation and affect are, in other words, constitutive of our time consciousness.

### Surprise and disappointment

Affect and our retentional past, however, are not the only dimensions of our experience that affect the structure of our time consciousness. There is, I believe, an aspect of the content of our experience that has not been developed in the literature on protention, which seems crucial to understand the sense in which protention and retention are asymmetric. In order to show this, let us consider the following example. Affect explains, in part, our expectation towards the future. If we are eager to see the person we love in the train station, but we find out that she did not take the train because she decided to stay at home watching TV, our expectation to see her will be frustrated and unfulfilled. We will experience, in other words, disappointment. This protention is, of course, based on the attraction that the external object “person we love” exerts on us and, probably, on the past repeated experience of seeing her in the train station that day at that time. There is, however, a very different and relevant way in which our protentions could be unfulfilled. If a sudden and unexpected event interferes in the experience we are protending—for example, if we feel that the tea we are drinking tastes like salt—our protentions will also be frustrated and unfulfilled, but we will experience that unfulfillment as a surprise, rather than

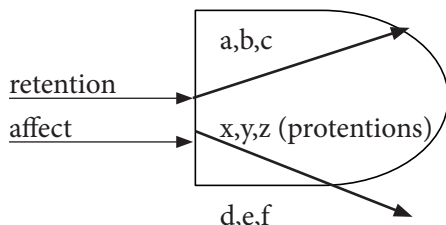
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Varela and Depraz, “At the Source of Time: Valence and the constitutional dynamics of affect”. Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of the Mind*. 2007

<sup>20</sup> Varela and Depraz, p. 21



as a disappointment. The difference between these two types of unfulfillment, although not analyzed in the literature I have consulted, seems relevant. In order to see how, let us consider the following diagram.



Retentions and affect both influence the scope of objects or events that we protend. In this case, x, y and z are protended. However, since the set of objects or events that we might protend is potentially infinite, there are many things that are simultaneously not protended. In this case, “a,b,c,d,e,f“ are not protended. If we are expecting to see our girlfriend in the rail station, we will certainly not be protending to find our grandmother there.

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The difference between surprise and disappointment seems clear in this context. ‘Surprise’ is usually used to refer to something that we do not expect but unexpectedly happens. Francoise Dastur describes surprise in a beautiful way:

Against all expectation, even if it has been partially expected and anticipated, such is in fact the “essence” of the event (i.e. surprise). Based on this we could say without paradox that it is an “impossible possible.” The event, in its internal contradiction, is the impossible which happens, in spite of everything, in a terrifying or marvelous manner. It always comes to us by surprise, or from that side whence, precisely, it was not expected. The difficult task of phenomenology is therefore to think this excess to expectation that is the event<sup>21</sup>.

And then she adds:

The event appears as that which intimately threatens the synchrony of transcendental life or existence, in other words, the mutual implication of the different parts of times: retention and protention for Husserl<sup>22</sup>.

The concept of ‘disappointment’ is, on the contrary, usually used to refer to something that we are expecting but does not happen. In the diagram,

<sup>21</sup> Dastur, Francoise. *Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise* Hypatia - Volume 15, Number 4, Fall 2000, pp. 178-189

<sup>22</sup> Dastur



x,y,z are simply unfulfilled if they do not occur and, consequently, our affect to the intended object becomes frustrated; whereas in the case of a surprise an external object a,b or c abruptly appears into our perceptual experience. When this happens, affect and retentional past are not immediately modified, as in the case of the disappointment. However, the way we approach the world is, at least for a short moment, altered. The astonishment caused by the intervention of the new object or event might subsequently alter the retentional chain and our affective motivation.

The difference between surprise and disappointment leads us to some interesting consequences. In the first place, it becomes important to explain how surprise is possible. Given that, within Husserl's framework, objects are the correlate of the activity of our consciousness, it seems unclear how we could be surprised with objects that are intended by us in the first place. This, however, is an epistemological problem that is not very relevant for the purposes of this paper. Second, it seems that there is a substantial difference in the way that affect relates to surprise and disappointment. Affect is always present in our consciousness. We are in a constant state of affect of some kind and, in this sense, affect is a constitutive aspect of our conscious experience. An object or event is continually exerting influence and attraction upon us and, even if it is possible to imagine a situation where this does not occur, we might also claim that affect can arise internally, in response to some kind of mental image. Imagination or fantasy, for instance, could trigger a certain emotional tone. The way that affect relates to disappointment is, however, different from the way it relates to surprise. Disappointment and surprise are both affective tones. However, they arise in our consciousness for very different reasons. Disappointment is experienced when the object or event that we anticipate is not fulfilled (e.g. we do not see our girlfriend at the train station). This frustration is experienced precisely because there was a previous motivation to see her, based on the strong attraction that we had for her. In other words, had the motivation not existed, we would not have experienced disappointment when not finding her at the train station. Surprise, however, is experienced when there is an intervention of an unexpected object or event which is outside the scope of the things we pretend (a, b, c in the diagram), but not because our motivation is frustrated. The crucial difference between disappointment and surprise seems to be, then, that while the former is caused by the impossibility to fulfill the desire to attain the object that exerts attraction upon us; the latter is caused by an object which is absolutely beyond the scope of the objects that exert influence upon us. So disappointment depends on a previous particular object to which we felt attracted to exist—our girlfriend at the station; but surprise does not

seem to depend directly on *that* previous particular object to exist. In fact, although what brings about surprise is a particular object or event (a, b, c in the diagram), this object or event is never, by definition, the object we were previously protending (precisely because they are beyond the scope of the things we are expecting). The following example could possibly clarify a bit more the difference between disappointment and surprise. In a given moment of time,  $t1$ , we feel attracted—and consequently motivated—to  $x$ . In a subsequent moment,  $t2$ , we feel disappointed because our desire to obtain the object protended at  $t1$  was not fulfilled. Disappointment, then, depends on the fact that there was an object protended at  $t1$ , which is  $x$ . Had there not been any object exerting attraction at  $t1$ , disappointment would not have taken place. Surprise, however, is not related to  $x$  in the same way. Surprise occurs, at  $t2$ , because an unexpected event shows up in our consciousness. This event, however, was not exerting influence upon us, as  $x$  was in  $t1$ . Surprise, then, occurs when an object to which we do not feel attracted intervenes. There seems to be, then, an asymmetry between surprise and disappointment that could be worth exploring.

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From the previous analysis, we can add a new element in the nature of the protention-retention asymmetry. So far, we have claimed that, while retention is determined, protention is open to any possibilities. This, however, seems only partially true. Not only because the scope of things we pretend is partially influenced by affect and retention, as I mentioned earlier; but also because there is always a potentially infinite number of events which fall outside the “protentiable” set of events (a,b,c in the diagram). These events are, almost by definition, within the scope of the things we do not pretend—otherwise, they would not cause surprise when they occur. Dastur, in fact, defines them as the “impossible possible”. There should be a relevant difference, then, between a) the different events that we pretend ( $x,y,z$  in the diagram—only one of them usually is fulfilled), b) the things which we simply do not pretend, but causes no surprise to us if they happen (such as when, for instance, we merely feel disappointment or the absence of an expected event), and c) the events which are completely unexpected and beyond the scope of things we pretend, which abruptly intervene in our perceptual experience.

There seem to be some interesting consequences of this analysis. First, it becomes necessary to explain what exactly the role of affect is in time consciousness, in relation to surprise. Second, it also becomes necessary to understand the status of the non-protended events. *What* is protended and *why* seems, so far, more or less clear. However, the scope of things that are *not* protended, and the role that these events might play in our perceptual

experience, is something that has not been sufficiently explored in the literature. I simply wanted to suggest, in this section, a possible direction for future research on time consciousness.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to clarify Husserl's conception of time. In particular, I have tried to elucidate the notions of protention, retention and impression, and what the nature of the relation between them is. I have also tried to explain the reasons why some approaches to retention are, in my view, misleading; and what exactly the future research on time consciousness should, in my view, focus on. In the first section of the paper I have reconstructed Husserl's view on time consciousness, in a way that it could make sense to claim that it avoids the cognitive paradox. Important to understand his view, I suggest, is to take into account the fact that the 'now', in his view, has a certain duration or "thickness"; and that the content of our experience largely determines our experience of time (or, in other words, that the structure of time consciousness is not only formal). In the second section, I have argued that Rodemeyer's understanding of Husserl's view of time is misleading—mainly because it does not take into account the fact that the now has a certain duration. I have also argued in this section that Gallagher's approach seems more promising, because it better explains the nature of the retention-protention asymmetry. In the third section, I have showed that Gallagher's explanation and the idea that affect is crucial to understand protention do not seem to take into account the difference between surprise and disappointment. This difference is important, I believe, because it reveals that there are events that fall outside the scope of the things we can pretend. To include these events into future analysis seems relevant, especially because they open a new dimension of analysis of the retention-protention asymmetry, which seems important to explore.

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