

## The *Primal I* and the Anonymous Origins of Time in Husserl's Genetic Phenomenology

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### Abstract

Husserl's analysis of reflection leads to the discovery of the anonymous character of functioning subjectivity, which is further developed through an examination of the living-present (*Lebendige Gegenwart*) in the context of his genetic account of time-constitution. Given phenomenology's reliance on first-personal access and evidence, the anonymity of the flow brings about certain questions regarding how to account for it and if it is indeed a part of my experience. In this paper, I reflect on the problem of accessing and accounting for the primal I in phenomenological reflection. Taking from Ronald Bruzina and László Tengelyi's readings, I claim that genetic analyses lead to an absolute *Faktum* in which the existence of Ego and World coincide. This brings me to consider whether the primacy of the primal-I (*Ur-Ich*) as the ultimate source of temporalization that is often displayed in Husserl's work can be considered a necessary result of the analysis of temporality or rather a theoretical gesture or choice in favor of maintaining the strong first-personal character of phenomenological inquiry. Against this view, a French-inspired interpretation that focuses on the equi-primordially of primal-I and primal-Hyle can be seen as a rival reading that opens up a new path in the tradition.

**Keywords:** primal-I, primal-Hyle, living-present, temporalization, equi-primordially

### 1. Introduction

The idea of an impersonal consciousness is not uncommon amongst phenomenologists, especially in the French

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tradition: Levinas and Henry, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, all work with some notion of an ego-less domain where personal consciousness originates and develops. The problem with these usages of the pre- or im-personal is that it is not easy to provide proper justification for them. In the context of Husserl's phenomenology, the evidence that allows us to make claims about the structure of experience is tightly related to first-personal givenness. The immediate access to our own conscious experiences is what grounds phenomenological certainty, and, together with the performance of the reduction, provides a strong criterion for the validity of any results. Husserl's insistence on this methodological principle has long been a contentious point amongst those who believe it can lead to an overly subjectivistic idea of philosophy. However, the desire to avoid this potentially harming consequence is not enough to undermine its validity.

A first person can be characterized as that which is given in a different manner than objectivities, and that can be ascribed to myself as the "I" of enunciation. When it comes to the passive, anonymous ground of conscious experience, we face a peculiar problem, namely that through first-personal reflection we seem to reach a non-personal consciousness. That this inert background is prior to the personal realm suggests that it is also prior to the emergence of the first-person, and thus to the related evidence on which our affirmations should stand. But this would mean that I can come in contact with something through an experience that is not mine. How is that possible? When we reach the pre-personal consciousness, we do not encounter it as a content of experience, and this is precisely what makes it *anonymous*. It is, in fact, not a different layer but our own consciousness regarded as an *operating consciousness* in the present moment: once we turn it into the object of our reflection, it ceases to be operating since now the operating consciousness is the one conducting the act of reflection. This makes it impossible to identify the functioning consciousness as my own *while* it is functioning, and so it is described as anonymous. At the same time, because it is an anonymity that is given to *me*, and it is retrospectively identified with myself,

Husserl holds that this pure passive field is nevertheless centred around an I, namely the primal I (*Ur-Ich*):

„Bewusstseinsstrom in seiner Uroriginalität <ist> undenkbar ohne uroriginalen Ichpol. Er liegt auch im anonymen Bewusstseins Erlebnis. Der Reflexionsakt enthüllt das im Modus Soeben unreflektierte Erlebnis und seinen Ichpol; aber beides in Deckung derselbe <Pol>.“ (Hua 15, 350)

“The flow of consciousness is unthinkable in its primal originality without the primal original I-pole. This is there even in anonymous living conscious experience. The act of reflection reveals the unreflective living experience and its I-pole in the mode of the just-now; but in coinciding both are the same pole.”<sup>1</sup>

The *mineness* of experience is what leads Husserl to incorporate the primal Ego as a central notion in his genetic analysis. My aim in this paper is to show that this is not a necessary step but rather involves an interpretative and theoretical *choice*. I will do this by analysing Husserl's account of time-constitution and primal temporalization, focusing on the late genetic stages of his work. I begin by presenting the notion of primal-I as the subject of the living-present, and introducing some competing interpretations about the process of primal temporalization and the nature of the originary flow of time. I then go deeper into the consequences that stem from the anonymous character of the flow, and consider the thesis of the primal I as a non-being (*meon*). After briefly addressing a potential distinction between forms of primordiality in the specialized literature, I take a closer look at Husserl's reconstruction of the genesis of time. Following László Tengelyi's reading, I claim that genetic analysis leads to an absolute *Faktum* in which the existence of the ego and non-ego pole coincide. Faced with this *Faktum*, an interpretative choice is warranted: either genesis is considered, in a Merleau-Pontyan line, as an equi-primordial process between subject and world or rather, as a more orthodox reading of Husserl would suggest, the primacy of the primal-I in the process of primal temporalization is privileged.

## 2. The living present

Husserl's reflections on the primal I, are closely linked

with his developments on time, whose constitution is at the very bottom of the unfolding of conscious experience. This is clear from the fact that Husserl speaks of the primal I mainly in the Bernau manuscripts on time (Hua 33, from 1917/18) and in the C-manuscripts on time (Hua/Mat 8, from 1929-1934). In the elemental levels of experience, subjectivity and time get conflated in such a way that being able to thematize the primal I would be like witnessing the beginning of time. The anonymity that is reached through reflection can also be accounted for in terms of the impossibility of reaching the ever-functioning source of time, that Husserl will address in the late manuscripts under the name of “living present” (*Lebendige Gegenwart*), a perpetually self-renewing present that gives rise to the flow of time by becoming modified in retention.

This living or flowing present is one of the names Husserl uses to describe the ultimate structure of consciousness, which he had partially previously addressed under the notions of primary temporalization, originary impression, absolute consciousness or subjectivity, etc. Husserl defines this structure as the originary source from which time emerges or, more accurately, as the movement of temporalization itself from which consciousness is developed along with every temporal transcendence, the “*originary stream*” (*Urström*), the originary ground on which “*the last originary source of the spatial world and its form of spatio-temporality lie.*” [Der Urstrom der lebendigen Gegenwart ist die Urzeitigung, in welcher der letzte Ursprung der raumzeitlichen Welt und ihrer Form der Raumzeitlichkeit liegt] (Hua/Mat 8, 4).

The living present is at the same time flowing and static because, while being the origin of the flow of time, it cannot itself be *in* time. It is an eternal present and not a passing present moment. If it were the latter, it would become a duration or a temporal content, thus presupposing the flow that it gives rise to. What Husserl calls the ‘primal I’ is the Ego-centring of this living present. Once it has been retained, the I is already *in* time and so it is no longer the first layer, the origin of time. The living present has to be thus in a way outside of time or, as Husserl puts it, it has to be “trans-temporal”, the same as the primal I:

„(...) das Ich als identischer Pol für alle Erlebnisse und für alles in der Intentionalität der Erlebnisse selbst ontisch Berschlossene (z.B. die vermeinte Natur als vermeinte) der Pol ist für alle Zeitreihen und notwendig als dar „über“-zeitlich ist, das Ich, für das sich die Zeit konstituiert, für das Zeitlichkeit, individuell singuläre Gegenständlichkeit in der Intentionalität der Erlebnissphäre da ist, das aber nicht selbst zeitlich ist. In diesem Sinn ist es also nicht „Seiendes“, sondern Gegenstück für alles Seiende, nicht ein Gegenstand, sondern Urstand für alle Gegenständlichkeit. Das Ich sollte eigentlich nicht das ich heißen, und überhaupt nicht heißen, da es dann schon gegenständlich geworden ist. Es ist das Namenlose über allem Fassbaren, <das> über allem nicht Stehende, nicht Schwebende, nicht Seiende, sondern „Funktionierende“, als fassend, als wertend usw.“

“The I [as identical centre, the pole, to which the entire content of the stream of experience is related] is “trans”-temporal. It is the I for which time is constituted, that for which there is temporality, that is, that for which there is the individually singular objectivity in the intentionality of the sphere of experience; but the I itself is not temporal. In this sense it also is not “being,” but the opposite to all being, not an object over against, but the primal carrier for all objectivity. The I should properly not be called I; it should not be named at all, because then it is already something objective. It is the nameless, beyond all not as standing over everything, nor is it hovering, nor being, but rather ‘functioning,’ as conceiving, as valuing, etc.” (Hua 33, 277-278)

Husserl puts forward this idea as a way to solve a problem concerning a potential infinite regress in the constitution of time. In the lectures on internal time-consciousness, he distinguishes between the constitution of objects that have a duration in time and the acts through which they are constituted. He realizes these acts, the ‘lived experiences’ (*Erlebnisse*) exhibit a temporal character of their own. Indeed, lived experiences have a beginning and an ending in time, they relate to one another in the flow of internal time-consciousness, they are organized temporally and brought together by the common feature of being *my* experiences. In order for them to be brought together and organized in such a way, they must be manifested or given to consciousness in some way. The absolute time-constituting flow is where these acts are themselves constituted. In order to avoid an infinite regress, the absolute flow cannot be given in the same way as the experiencing acts, since this would entail there is another

flow constituting this one, and so on. Therefore, the absolute flow must itself be at once constituting and constituted. How exactly this occurs can be difficult to explain, since “*The constitution and the constituted coincide, and yet naturally they cannot coincide in every respect*” (Hua 10, 83; Husserl 1991, 88). We can find in the upsurge of time a type of paradox. In a manuscript from the C-group, Husserl uses this term to describe the living-present, as that which can only show itself as non-temporal once it is temporalized:

„Nun aber ist das Paradox, dass auch die Zeitigung sich zugleich selbst verzeitigt, dass lebendige Gegenwart selbst wieder, als gegenwärtige lebendige Gegenwart, in soeben gewesene lebendige Gegenwart kontinuierlich überleitet usw. Auch diese Paradoxie muss zur Klärung kommen.“

“Now, however, it is paradoxical that the temporalizing also temporalizes itself, that the living present itself, as present living-present, continuously passes into the living present that has just been, etc. This paradox must also be clarified (Hua/Mat 8, 50).”

According to John Brough’s reconstruction of this matter on “Notes on the absolute time-constituting flow”<sup>2</sup>, the basic constitution of internal time through lived experiences would already presuppose the absolute flow of time, and so this primal level must be posited. Thus, after the lectures on the internal time-consciousness, in a text written between 1907 and 1909 (Hua 10, 73) Husserl starts differentiating between three levels of time-constitution and most notably, identifying a basic level corresponding to the absolute time-constituting flow. These levels would then be: 1) objective time, where the objects of experience are constituted, 2) internal consciousness, the immanent flow of lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*), and 3) the absolute self-constituting flow where experiences are themselves constituted. The third and most fundamental level is not, however, in need of a new flow to constitute it, since it is not itself temporal. According to Brough, the absolute flow is what will become the “living present” in the late manuscripts on time, and he notably describes it as “*merely the potentiality to experience all things*” (Brough 2010, 44).

The self-constitution of the flow is accomplished through what Husserl calls its double intentionality, and particularly

through *Längsintentionalität* (generally translated as lengthwise or longitudinal intentionality) as opposed to *Querintentionalität* which is the “transverse” intentionality directed at the objects of experience. The acts through which objects are intended via transverse intentionality have the temporal structure *retention-primal impression-protention*. Lengthwise intentionality reaches beyond the actual phase – the primal impression – through retention and protention (although Husserl seems to focus mainly on retention) to the past and future phases of the flow, ensuring its continuity and the connection between phases within it. This is simply because retention and protention, as the consciousness of the just elapsed or the next phase of the flow, reaches every phase of the flow by the same act of reaching the immediate ones (since retaining the last phase means retaining the phase that the last phase was retaining, and so on).

Dan Zahavi (1999) objects to Brough’s (and Sokolowski’s<sup>3</sup>) views that the absolute time-flow is a separate level of time-constitution. Zahavi argues that awareness of the lived experiences is nothing more than the pre-reflective self-awareness of the acts that characterizes consciousness. He claims that the flaw in Brough’s account, even though he might be interpreting Husserl in the right way (since his unfinished theory of time-constitution allows for multiple readings) is that he considers the experiencing acts as objects with temporal phases of their own, and for them to be constituted in this way – *in* time –, another level of the flow must be posited. However, Zahavi considers that only the objects of experience have temporal phases while the experiencing acts are experienced as *quasi*-temporal. Experiencing acts are only temporal objects when we reflect on them:

“it is only in reflection, where we are confronted with a relation between two different acts, the reflecting and the reflected, that the latter can appear as transcendent vis-à-vis the first. On the prereflective level, where there is only one experience, it cannot appear as a temporal object, since it cannot appear as transcendent in relation to itself.” (Zahavi 1999, 77)

So, the absolute flow and the flow of immanent time would be the same flow seen as constituting or constituted. In

this sense, Zahavi stresses the impossibility of a self-manifestation of the absolute flow. This is, indeed, true, but it does not necessarily conflict with the distinction between levels presented by Brough. In fact, Zahavi admits the difference between their readings could be simply a matter of emphasis (Zahavi 1999, 234). If we consider the absolute flow to be what Husserl refers to as the living present, then it is obviously not possible for it to manifest itself as such, but so is the case for pre-reflective self-awareness. It is through reflection that the pre-reflective givenness can become a theme. Before that, it is “*unexperienceable, unsayable*” [unerfahrbar, unsagbar] (Hua/Mat 8, 269). However, it is still for Husserl an (primal) Ego.

Although it might seem like a matter of scholarly nit-picking, this difference in nuance is at the bottom of what I understand to be the interpretative choice Husserl makes in favour of a robust first person. Being able to isolate, at the bottom of time-constitution, an ego-centred level of temporalization that can be considered independently of lived experiences, entails putting the material core that makes up those experiences in a secondary place. This will become clearer in the third section, but before, I will go deeper into the problematic status of the flow and why it cannot be said to be given.

### 3. Primal I as a non-being

Going back to the question of the anonymity of the flow, we can now say that if the flow is anonymous, it is because, technically speaking, it is not *given*. In its functioning aspect, the flow (pre-reflective experience, constituting consciousness) is only lived through; and when it manifests itself, it loses its originary character and it becomes objectified or ‘ontified’, that is to say, it is presented as a thing or an entity. It is also at this moment that it reveals itself as mine. In this sense, “primal I” is here a way to name what retrospectively appears as having been mine but in its originaryity was not given as such. As Rudolf Bernet (1982) points out, the flow has a way of givenness characterized by its retrospective character; what he translates as “post-factuality” (*Nachträglichkeit*). On these grounds, Bernet argues that the present is always unconscious<sup>4</sup>.

In a similar line, Bernhard Waldenfels considers the pure present as “*a plain chimera*” (Waldenfels 2017, 422), and places this impossibility of the present to coincide with itself at the bottom of a reconfiguration of Husserlian phenomenology.

The retrospective structure of the flow can be an argument in favour of defending the notion of a pre-egological stream of consciousness. This is, for example, the position that Sartre takes against Husserl in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, where he claims consciousness is pre-personal and the Ego a transcendent object as opaque as the Ego of another person. However, as Zahavi points out in response to this argument, the egoless structure of the stream means that temporalization is a completely passive process where the Ego is not actively involved, “*but although the passive syntheses are not initiated by me, they still happen to me, not to somebody else or to nobody*” (Zahavi 1999, 153). As regards the possibility of passive syntheses happening “to nobody”, Zahavi points out that the danger of admitting a pre-individuated stream would be mainly related to the theory of intersubjectivity: if the primal stream is pre-individual, it would mean all subjects participate in the same stream, thus levelling-off their differences and not recognizing the radical transcendence of the other. Epistemologically, this would undermine the objective status of the intersubjectively constituted world. Ethically, it would entail the other is simply grasped as a copy of myself, and thus what counts for me should count for anyone, which could be problematic. On the other hand, it cannot be said that the stream is precisely characterized by being individuated, because individuation only comes along once I find myself in relation to others: for there to be an “I” there has to be a “you”. But the constitution of others already requires that there be a primal Ego, which is the ultimate source of constitution. Therefore, this primal Ego cannot be one amongst many.

Shigeru Taguchi (2019) argues against both the position that holds that the absolute stream is individual, and the opposite which holds that it is plural, pointing out that at the stage of primal temporalization, the difference between being one or many does not apply, precisely because others have not yet been constituted, and so it is a meaningless distinction. He

also argues that it shouldn't be construed as a pre-individuated stream, for the primal I expresses a primal perspective, a living point of view that is always mine, and so it is first-personal. If we consider this first-personal character to be given only retrospectively, however, this can lead into a circular argument. There is a logic of presuppositions functioning here, such that the primal I is found to be a pre-condition for my irreflective experience of things and my reflective experience of myself:

„Betrachten wir dieses transzendente Ego, oder betrachte ich mich, als wie ich allen meinen Vorurteilen, allem für mich Seienden, voranzusetzen bin, als Urbedingung für ihren Seinssinn für mich, so finde ich mich als strömende Gegenwart.“ (Hua/Mat 8, 41)

“If we consider the transcendental I, or if I consider myself as to how I am presupposed in all my prejudices, in all that is existent for me, as the proto-condition for the sense of being those things have, then I find myself as the flowing present.” (emphasis is mine)

In another manuscript Husserl repeats this idea and even refers to the constituting anonymity as a non-being:

„Mit anderen Worten: Das Universum des vorgegebenen Seins ist das Universum des für mich in einer gewissen Form der Endgeltung, der bleibenden „Relevanz“ für mich konstituierten Seins. Was darüber hinausgeht in der Weise der konstituierenden Anonymität, in der Latenz, ist ein μη ὄν, es ist nicht nichts, sondern „Voraussetzung“ des Seins aus einer vergessenen Zeitigung, die noch nicht Zeitigung eines ὄν ist und so hinterher zu enthüllende ist und als notwendig zu erkennende Funktion zur Ermöglichung für Seiendes (und damit zu einer nachkommenden Zeitigung gebracht (wird)).“

“The universe of pre-given being (Seins) is the universe of what is given to me in the form of the final validation, i.e., of the abiding “relevance” of what is constituted being for me. What goes beyond that, in the manner of constituting anonymity, in latency, is a meon; it is not nothing, but rather a “presupposition” of being from out of a forgotten temporalization which is not yet the temporalization of an on. Thus it is something to be subsequently uncovered and recognized as necessary to the knowing function and as necessary for the very possibility of there being something existing (and thereby it is something to be made evident through a subsequent temporalization).” (Husserl XXXIX, 471)

As Eugen Fink points out in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*,

“The first person that phenomenological reflection unveils is at the same time the source of phenomenological reflection and a product of

it. Phenomenological experience does not cognize something which is already existent, as what and how it is; it cognizes the sort of thing which is 'in itself' not existent." (Fink 1995, 76)

The pre-being that works as the pre-given horizon that makes experience possible is not something already existent that the reduction unveils but it is in fact produced through phenomenologizing. Fink refers to this as a "*secondary (or non proper) enworldment of phenomenologizing*" (Fink 1995, 116) different from primary enworldment in that it is not the process by which transcendental subjectivity objectifies itself into man, but the necessary objectification of the results of the phenomenological inquiry.

But why is postulating this pre-being necessary to explain experience? The idea that, at bottom, constituting subjectivity is a *meon*, a non-being, might be problematic not only for methodological reasons – namely that it is not given to intuition but presupposed – but also because it is hard to see how such a non-being could perform constitutive functions, given that constitution requires a sort of being-in-the-world<sup>5</sup>. This makes understanding its pertinence all the more pressing, and in order to do so we have to put the living present under the microscope. But before that, a quick note on the primordially of the Ego.

#### 4. A note on primordialities

According to the specialized literature, at least two senses of the primordial Ego can be distinguished: the proto-ego (Ur-ich) and the pre-ego (Vor-ich). While the pre-ego seems to be employed when Husserl addresses the genesis of the ego in the past, the proto-ego is a genetic figure in the present. In this sense, Lohmar (2012) draws attention to the fact that the pre-ego is often employed to talk about the first stages of the development of the empirical ego in childhood, and Roberto Walton (2015) distinguishes between two forms of primordially (*Urtümlichkeit*) that the past pre-ego and the present proto-ego represent.

Regarding their difference, there is potential disagreement in the scholarship as to which one is most originary. I will follow here Walton, who states that, even when

the pre-ego can be thought of as a more basic figure, methodologically the proto-ego is the primary one:

“El origen genético-histórico es reconstruido a partir de un origen cognoscitivo. Por eso el proceso de reconstrucción presupone al protoyo. A diferencia del preyo que debe ser reconstruido, soy ya el protoyo como condición de posibilidad de la reconstrucción, como lugar originario de toda asignación de sentido y validez, como presupuesto anónimo y no-temático de toda experiencia, emoción o volición, y como fuente última de todos los horizontes.”

“The historical-genetic origin is reconstructed starting from a cognitive origin. This is why the reconstructive process presupposes the proto-ego. Unlike the pre-ego that must be reconstructed, I am already the proto-ego as a condition of possibility of reconstruction, as an originary place of all sense donation and validity, as anonymous and non-thematic presupposition of all experience, emotion or volition, and as the last source of all horizons.” (Walton 2015, 80)

Walton marks an interesting difference between the methods for reaching both these primordial spheres: *reconstruction* of the pre-ego and the *presupposition* of the primal-ego. Neither of these primal figures are actually given, but they are in one way or another connected to what is and, in Husserl’s view, required by it. They could not be given because neither of them is in time, but at the edge or the beginning of time. This is why the primal I does not begin or end, why it is “immortal”<sup>6</sup>.

According to the classification made by Dieter Lohmar (2012) and generally followed by Saulius Geniusas (2012), it is also possible to identify a different usage of the primal-ego in the *Crisis*, a result of performing a reduction to the primordial sphere that leaves aside all intersubjective events. This primal-ego of the primordial sphere is the Ego of the living present. The concrete living present excludes past and future dimensions as they are given thematically but it is a present *in* time and thus it cannot exclude them completely. In the primordial sphere time is already in motion, and the difference with normal experience is that we focus on what is given in the present without recourse to intersubjectively constituted objectivity. But the concrete present is not the living present as it is thematized in the C manuscripts. Here, the primal-present cannot be given because it is trans-temporal. Once it becomes a

concrete present it loses its originary character. It is, however, as Lohmar himself puts it, a question of different focuses and not different entities (Lohmar 2012, 302). His functional interpretation of the Ego suggests that “*The precise meaning of each of these arch-egos can only be determined in the concrete context of research in respect of different and ever deeper levels of constitution (...)*” (Lohmar 2012, 302). If we consider that most of these writings are manuscripts and not systematic works, it is even easier to understand the diverse array of perspectives on the Ego.

As I have suggested in this section, I find that the primal Ego in its most fundamental aspect is, as Walton states, the proto-Ego; and this proto-Ego is the primal Ego of the living-present that coincides with primal temporalization.

### 5. “Inside” the living present

How exactly, in Husserl’s view, do we get from the non-being of primal temporalization to the flow of immanent time? In manuscript C 10, Husserl explores what would be the inner structure of the living present and the most basic levels of affection.

The living present is characterized by a purely passive non-intentional consciousness. The primal ego, as we have seen, is referred to as the ego-pole of the living present, but sometimes it is also plainly identified with it. This is because at this stage the Ego is not separated from its counterpart in primal experience. As far as every lived experience is double-sided, that is, it has an Ego side and a non-Ego side, Husserl posits the existence of an hyletic pole in the living present, that in its most basic aspect is referred to as primal or proto-hyle (*Urhyle*), the core of material sense that sets temporalization in motion. At this point this core is indistinguishable on its own: “*The I is not something for itself and the not-I is not something set apart from the I, and between the two there is no room for a movement of turning towards.*” [Das Ich ist nicht etwas für sich und das Ichfremde ein vom Ich Getrenntes, und zwischen beiden ist kein Raum für ein Hinwenden.] (Hua/Mat 8, 350). The positing of a material core that will gradually become differentiated from the Ego pole is not an addition to the living

present but merely the result of taking a closer look at what the primal mode of experience should look like. It is, once again, presupposed by the regressive analysis of the already formed experience but not given as such:

„Nun könnten wir das natürlich nicht wissen, wenn es, obschon selbst vor-seiend, nicht konstituiert wäre und somit in seiner Weise ebenfalls das Ich, den selben Ichpol affizieren könnte und thematisch werden könnte – und so in infinitum. Also die Selbstkonstitution der transzendentalen Subjektivität führt auf die schönen unendlichen Regresse, mit denen ich schon in Bernau fertig zu werden versuchte.“

“Of course, we could not know that [there is such a core] if it were not constituted, even though it was pre-existing, and thus in its own way could affect the ego, the same ego-poles, and become thematic – and so on in infinitum. That is, the self-constitution of transcendental subjectivity leads to the beautiful infinite regressions with which I already tried to cope in Bernau.” (Hua/Ma 8, 189)

The genetic account of the primal sphere aims at ending this infinite regress, via a reconstruction of the beginning of temporalization. We find, at the “bottom” two primal sources (*Urquellen*) corresponding to the functioning Ego (*Ich als fungierendes*) and to the non-ego (*Nicht-Ich*) (Hua/Mat 8, 199). In order for them to become separated, the Ego must turn towards the *Urhytle*, which thereby becomes sensation-hyle (*Empfindungshyle*) affecting the I. This turning-towards of the Ego is motivated, in Husserl’s account, by a primal instinct (*Urinstinkte*) described as an instinct of objectivation (*Instinkt der Objektivierung*) that is directed in a general manner to hyletic data. (Hua/Mat 8, 258). Through this turning of the Ego that can now be affected by *Hyle*, “*the hyletic proto-flowing, the proto-impressional*” becomes a “*new impressional*” and gets retained, putting time in motion. In the lessons on the phenomenology of internal time consciousness, Husserl characterizes the primal impression as the absolute beginning of the generation of modifications that is time, and he states:

“One can only say that consciousness is nothing without an impression (...) it [impression] is the primally generated, the “new”, that which comes into existence foreign to consciousness, that which is received as opposed to that which is generated through the spontaneity proper to consciousness.” (Hua 10, 100; Husserl 1964, 131)

It would be possible to find in these passages the cornerstone of

the bifurcation that the French-inspired tradition of post-Husserlian phenomenology represent, insofar as the valorisation of the sensible over the subjective as the fundament of appearing is its defining feature (Bégout 2004, 35). According to Osswald (2016), authors like Zahavi (2002) and Montavont (1999) take them as proof of an equi-primordiality of Ego and World. Their argument could be summed up roughly in the following way: if at the most basic level of experience there is a fundamental union of (ur)Ego and (ur)Hyle, then this means that speaking of a worldless consciousness and making constitution fall exclusively on her side is a falsification of this fundamental implication of subjectivity and world. The potentially problematic consequence of these interpretations, however, is that they undermine Husserl's transcendental enterprise, which seems to rest on the key role of subjectivity as all-encompassing. Against these readings, Osswald takes a closer look at Husserl's later analysis of affection to suggest that it is the Ego's movement of *turning-towards* that the whole dynamic rests upon, restoring its primacy. Even if this is an instinctual movement, this instinct is, in Husserl's view, not opposed to consciousness but actually a proto-form of it. In this sense, Osswald stresses the immanent character of affection and warns against identifying *Urhytle* and the world too quickly; in fact, when we talk about the world, we are always referring to a constituted world, that as such cannot be involved with subjectivity at the elemental level reserved for the Ur-Hyle.

In a complex and thorough article on this topic, Ronald Bruzina draws attention to what he finds to be a certain naturalism that is "*not simply allowed but needed*" (2010, 118) in Husserl's late phenomenology. Even if *Hyle* is not to be immediately identified with the world, according to Bruzina it is also important to consider that this hyletic core is the basis for the constitution of objective nature, which is the first layer of the objective world. Let's recall that this whole genetic explanation of primal temporalization is merely a way of accounting for what, in pre-given experience, we find already at play. Transcendental life is always "*already in the midst of world-constitution*" (Fink 1995, 58), and what a radical genesis

attempts is to disclose this “absolute ‘fact’” (*absolute “Tatsache”*) (Hua 15, 403). “Absolute” because, even if what we find is factual, and so, as it would seem, *not* necessary, it is not simply the actualization of a possibility amongst others, but that which makes all possibilities possible. As Klaus Held holds in his study on the living present:

„Das letztfungierende Ich ist Urfaktums schlechthin; es hat nicht den Charakter des Zufälligen und Singulären gegenüber der absoluten Wesensnotwendigkeit und Allgemeinheit des Eidos, sondern als absoluter Ausgangspunkt alles Fungierens, als apodiktisches Ziel der phänomenologischen Rückfrage muss es selbst "absolutes Faktum" genannt werden.“

“The last-functioning ego is the original fact; it does not have the character of the accidental and singular opposed to the absolute essentiality and generality of the Eidos, but as the absolute starting point of all action, as the apodictic goal of the phenomenological inquiry it must itself be called ‘absolute fact.’” (Held 1966, 148)

Alongside the factuality of subjectivity, Husserl also speaks about the absolute fact of the world as being the fundamental ground for all experience:

„Ist es also „zufällig“, dass Menschen und Tiere sind? Diese Welt ist, wie sie ist. Aber es ist widersinnig zu sagen, zufällig, da Zufall in sich schliesst einen Horizont von Möglichkeiten, in dem selbst das Zufällige eine der Möglichkeiten, eben die wirklich eingetretene, bedeutet. „Absolutes 'Faktum'“ – das Wort Faktum ist seinem Sinn nach verkehrt hier angewendet, ebenso „Tatsache“, hier ist kein Täter. Es ist eben das Absolute, das auch nicht als „notwendig“ bezeichnet werden kann, das allen Möglichkeiten, allen Relativitäten, allen Bedingtheiten zugrunde liegend, ihnen Sinn und Sein gebend ist.“ (Hua 15, 668)

“Is it then “contingent” that there are humans and animals? This world is as it is. But it is countersensical to say accidental, because an accident includes a horizon of possibilities in which the accidental means one of the possibilities, precisely the one actually occurring. “Absolute Factum” —the word factum is used here with its sense inverted, precisely a “done fact” [“Tatsache”], here there is no doer [kein Täter]. It is precisely the absolute that also cannot be designated as “necessary,” that lies as the ground for all possibilities, all relativities, everything conditioned and gives them their sense and being.”

László Tengelyi systematizes these findings in what he calls Husserl’s metaphysics of primal facts (*Metaphysiks der*

*Urtatsachen*), consisting of four main groups: the Ego, the world, intersubjectivity and teleology (Tengelyi 2014, 184). Amongst these four, “*the respective ego as a primal fact seems at first to have a priority among them, but on closer inspection one discovers that this ego has additional facticity structures that deny it this priority*” [Das jeweilige Ich als Urfaktum scheint zunächst eine Vorrangstellung unter ihnen einzunehmen, aber bei näherem Zusehen macht man die Entdeckung, dass diesem Ich weitere Faktizitätsstrukturen zukommen, die ihm diese Vorrangstellung abstreiten.] (ibid., 184). Against a more orthodox–subjectivistic–reading of Husserl, he points out that “*intentional consciousness cannot serve as an explanation here because the question relates to an event in which an intention arises in the first place*” [das intentionale Bewusstsein kann hier deshalb nicht als Erklärung dienen, weil die Frage sich auf ein Ereignis bezieht, in dem überhaupt erst eine Intention entsteht.] (ibid., 193).

Beyond Husserl’s potential agreement or disagreement with the interpretations that follow his own work, a radical genetic analysis reaches some transcendental “puzzles” (*Rätsel*) (Hua 42, 81) whose solution does not depend on further analysis, but largely rests on the theoretical stance taken by the phenomenologist. A future inquiry into the possibilities and limits of the reconstruction method involved in these types of analysis could help develop some basic criteria for the validity of competing interpretations. For now, we have wanted to point to the examination of primal temporalization as the place where such interpretations take over.

## 6. Conclusions

The reflection on the living-present and the primal I has shown that, for Husserl, “*The I in its most original originality is not in time*” [Das Ich in seiner ursprünglichsten Ursprünglichkeit ist nicht in der Zeit] (Hua/Mat 8, 197). Paradoxically, in order to show itself as that which is not in time, it must become temporalized (Hua/Mat 8, 50). This temporalized objectification of the primal flow leads us to the presupposition of its timeless origin. This is the living-present, whose Ego-pole is the primal I. Genetic investigation has

reached an absolute *Faktum*, that involves not only the egological but the hyletic side of the experience. Because the functioning I is anonymous, but it is demanded or *presupposed* by genetic analysis, there is a certain openness in the question of primal temporalization. What may come across through our review of different readings of this process and the living-present within the scholarship, is that any treatment of the issue requires us to make an interpretative *choice*, namely, the choice to either consider the primal I, the Ego that turns toward primal *Hyle* in the living-present, as the most fundamental and elemental dimension of constitution; or to consider a co-constitution model where “subjective” and “objective” poles are considered to have the same status. This is by no means a trivial decision, and in fact it is one of the points of divergence between a more classical reading of Husserl’s phenomenology, and several divergent readings in post-husserlian phenomenology not only Merleau-Ponty inspired but also Finkean or Heideggerian. It is in this interstice that phenomenology as a tradition can continue to redefine or strengthen the basic notions and that Husserl has reflected upon, on its way back to the things themselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All translations are the authors, unless specified.

<sup>2</sup> In *On time, New contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, Lohmar & Yamaguchi (eds), Springer, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> In this text, Zahavi discusses mainly John Brough’s “The emergence of an absolute consciousness in Husserl’s Early writings on Time-consciousness” (1972), and Sokolowski’s *Husserlian Meditations* (1974).

<sup>4</sup> This might turn out to be problematic when it comes to explaining how it is retained, since, according to Husserl, retention of an unconscious content is impossible (Hua 10, 119). Husserl’s own views about the unconscious depicts it not as the opposite of consciousness, but as a limit within its spectrum.

<sup>5</sup> A similar point is raised by Steven Crowell (2012) who speaks of “*an absolute consciousness that seems too anemic to constitute a world*” (p. 30).

<sup>6</sup> The meaning of immortality here can be closely linked with timelessness and not with an infinite duration in time, as would be the case with a more intuitive, perhaps religious notion of immortality. Even though Husserl speaks of the immortality of the transcendental subject and not specifically of the primal I, the reason subjectivity cannot constitute its own ending is

precisely located at this level of time-constitution. For a detailed account of this topic see: Vecino 2021.

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