Reading Husserl’s Time-Diagrams from 1917/18

JAMES DODD
New School University

1. Introduction

In his reflections on inner time consciousness written in the years 1917–1918, Husserl makes use of an illustrative device he apparently developed in fits and starts between 1905–1911: the so-called “time-diagram.” It proves to be an important instrument for several of the texts published in Husserliana XXXIII, in particular Text Nr. 2: “Die Komplexion von Retention und Protention. Gradualitäten der Erfüllung und das Bewusstsein der Gegenwart. Graphische Darstellung des Urprozesses”. More, the diagram appears in these texts in a much more refined and complete manner than anything found in Husserliana X, which in turn allows us to sharpen a number of questions that had already arisen with original 1928 publication of Husserl’s 1905 Zeitvorlesungen.

The very employment of a diagram in the analysis of time consciousness is itself a source of questions. And this is not only due to the concern that spatial representations in principle threaten to undermine a coherent understanding of the nature of time, a concern the classic formulation of which is found in Henri Bergson’s 1889 Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience. There is also the more general issue of Husserl’s frequent metaphorical use of concepts from mathematical analysis, such as the differential and the continuum, and above all the fact that the time diagram is strongly reminiscent of the Cartesian coordinate plane. Given Husserl’s background in mathematics, including his work as an assistant to Weierstrass in the 1880’s, it would be a mistake to dismiss this feature as mere coincidence; clearly many of these texts are inspired by the revolution in analysis that took place during the previous century, culminating in the work of Husserl’s friend Georg Cantor.

It is also useful to emphasize this link with analysis, because not only does it allow us to mark the difference between Husserl and Bergson with respect to the problem of time, but it also serves to introduce an important aspect of Husserl’s approach. Bergson’s demarcation of the lived passage of consciousness as a pure, qualitative multiplicity is set up in such a way that excludes its description in a language of “points,” even “continua,” if by using such language one is seeking to fix a representation of the continuity
of duration by adopting a perspective governed by the fixed simultaneity of points taken to be definitive of its extremes. If the genuine theme for a reflection on time’s passage is a pure qualitative unity of consciousness, then to adopt a perspective grounded in a rigid schema of countable simultaneities, or an image of quantitative multiplicities, corrupts reflection and obscures the theme from the start.

For Husserl, however, in some way the opposite is the case. Not because consciousness is an example of a quantitative multiplicity, but because a reflection on the lived passage of consciousness is always already a reflection on the order and structure that belongs to a kind of distance, which in turn is not necessarily exhausted by the notion of a qualitative interpenetration of concretely unfolding time. To be sure, this is not the distance between positions fixed within a representation of a homogenous space, such as the Cartesian coordinate plane, where all positions are simultaneous, all intervals static, but rather that distance between positions which appears only thanks to a non-simultaneity expressed using the temporal designations of past, present, and future. Even if this distance expressed by these designations cannot be represented as, or reduced to, an interval simultaneous with the positions it separates, it is nevertheless a distance, thus something that can be symbolized, or illustrated in a manner that is at least comparable to spatial distance. Thus for Husserl, contra Bergson, the self-givenness of “living” consciousness is understood in terms of an opened distance, though of a particular kind, one that resists the static representation of spatial coordination, but which is not for all that completely indifferent to the representational capacities of spatial coordination. And again, it is the radical new approach to thinking about the different senses of “distance” found in the continuum, for example in the work of Dedekind, which represents one of the sources of inspiration for Husserl’s analysis of time.

Yet this is not to say that Husserl applies modern mathematical methods to solve the problem of time. The phenomenological passage of the moment with its retentions and protentions will not be modeled on a Dedekind cut, nor will the juxtaposition of the originary now with the horizons of retentional and protentional contents be described in the language of non-denumerable sets. Nevertheless, these ideas are an inspiration for the unique development of the descriptive resources necessary for a phenomenology of time, in that they pioneer an understanding in which something as apparently homogeneous as “continuity” can harbor surprisingly counter-intuitive properties (e.g. being a set denumerable by a proper subset of itself). Modern analysis is a source of inspiration for Husserl, I would argue, because the problem of time-consciousness is equivalent to the problem of understanding the nature of a peculiar kind of distance that harbors its own rather counter-intuitive properties. More specifically, the issue has to do with the kind of distance that belongs to, and makes possible, the self-manifestation of intentional consciousness itself;