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The Nonpresence of the Living Present: Husserl's Time Manuscripts

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Derrida suggests in *Speech and Phenomena* that for Husserl subjectivity is constituted and entails no identity with itself at the level of the living present. He further suggests that Husserl's understanding of absolute subjectivity is "as absolutely present and absolutely self-present being, only in its opposition to the object."¹ In making such claims, Derrida is not giving as much weight to Husserl's manuscripts from the 1930s as those warrant. The manuscripts may serve to draw Derrida's claims into question.² They provide an interesting look at the question of subjectivity in light of intersubjectivity and present the possibility of conceiving identity and alterity within the streaming living present. The ambiguity and complexity we find in Husserl's manuscripts in particular suggests that Husserl was prepared to address absence even at the most fundamental level of phenomenological discovery. In the following, I will explore several of Husserl's manuscripts in order to indicate how he might escape Derrida's critique.³ This will raise several questions with respect to the phenomenological subject and its relation to the alterity of the other. Through such an investigation, we will see how it is possible to accept Derrida's criticism of a metaphysics of presence, while recognizing that the criticism does not mean we must reject Husserlian phenomenology as an example of such.

Derrida views the phenomenological project as being committed methodologically to an understanding of experience that precludes nonpresence. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida asserts that the phenomenological understanding of consciousness is "the self-presence of the living, the *Erleben*, of experience. Experience thus understood is simple and is in its essence free of illusion, since it relates only to itself in an

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absolute proximity.”⁴ When we turn to Husserl’s manuscripts on time, however, we see that the phenomenological reduction to the most primordial level, i.e., the streaming living present, reveals a foundation where the “I” does not relate only to itself, but where the I and the “Other” are coincident. This deepest level of time consciousness is inextricably linked to intersubjectivity, or more concisely, it is intersubjective. But how can we understand such a claim? What does it mean for the streaming living present to be intersubjective? How does that claim draw into question the notion of absolute subjectivity and its self-presence?

The temporal reduction to the streaming living present reveals a position where I am with Others in a more original way than Husserl’s analysis of empathy allows. The ego is with the Other in a radically immediate way. Husserl describes this level as one of “coincidence with Others on an original level of constitution, my coincidence, so to speak, before there is constituted a world for myself and Others...”⁵ This coincidence is a connection to an other ego which does not depend upon knowledge, but has a more primordial status. From the Derridean perspective this may seem like Husserl is reducing the Other to presence or to the same self-presence as the ego, but instead Husserl is trying to show that even at this most primordial level the ego is not self-present. Rather, at the deepest level of subjectivity, which is the streaming living present, the ego is not isolated into its own self. Its streaming living present cannot properly be called its own. It is “... not mine in opposition to that of other humans, and it is not mine as that of a body-soul existent, that of a real human.”⁶ As prior to the distinction between the I and the Other, the streaming living present can belong to both.

When we are living an experience, it belongs to both of us as living. The experience is only distinguished as belonging to the ego or the Other when it is subsequently thematized. It must belong to us both as opposed to belonging to neither of us because if it did not belong to us both, we would be talking about a time that would be cosmological rather than lived human time.

As an anonymous level which is prior to an articulated, single stream of consciousness the streaming living present provides the foundation for the concrete ego and its sedimented activity, but is not itself ego, or ego-activity. Husserl claims that “the structural analysis of the primal present” leads us to the egoless stream which founds the ego-structure, “to that which makes possible and is presupposed by sedimented activity,” to that which is “radically pre-egoical.”⁷

But what sense does it make to speak of something which is pre-egoical and yet the locus of acts? Clearly, in drinking from my cup of coffee there is an ego which acts. How do we reconcile

this seeming contradiction? How do we think of an ego that is within the flow of time, but also constituting the flow of time? Husserl does so by distinguishing between the transcendental ego and the transcendental ego-pole. The ego-pole is very closely associated with the streaming living present, and at times in Husserl’s manuscripts the precise distinction between the streaming living present and the ego-pole is unclear. This is what allows us to view the ego-pole itself as to some extent intersubjective.

The ego-pole is not really anything new at this stage for Husserl. He speaks in *Ideas II* of the pure ego as the core from which rays are directed to that which is objective.⁸ In the C-manuscripts, the ego-pole is significantly defined and explicated in contrast to that ego which is within the flow of experience. The ego-pole, as outside of time, is the foundation of the transcendental ego in that the ego-pole is prior to and makes possible the original identity of the transcendental ego. It is the dark core of consciousness which itself cannot be thematized. It is not self-present. It resists every attempt by the ego to claim it as its own. As Husserl writes, “on the one side we have the temporal stream of consciousness and related to this temporality, the transcendental ego of acts ... on the other side we have the primal ground of temporalization, the primal ego” (C 2, 8b).⁹ The ego-pole is thus also distinguished from the concrete ego. We understand that the concrete ego has an intentional relationship to objective events and is itself constituted. The ego-pole by implication, is *not* concrete. Husserl explains that “in the stream of the living present [the ego-pole] is the identical persisting pole in the changes of the immanent temporal occurrences [...] this pure ‘I’ is abstract, it is only concrete through the content of the streaming present” (C 3, 42a).¹⁰

This characterization of the ego-pole suggests that the ego-pole has no objective sense. It is prior to any objective sense. It is prior to reflection upon the activities of the ego, so its unity is different from that which synthesis through reflection usually provides. Since at the core of its functioning the ego-pole has no objective sense, it cannot be considered a concrete ego that can be named as you or me. It is anonymous. Husserl is able to claim that “the primal-ego carries in itself, the counterpart, the existing, having-become ego and its surroundings, what is there for this and for me as anonymous ego as non-ego” (C 2, 3a/b).¹¹ The ego-pole is thus mine and not mine, present and absent.

In our regressive inquiry back to the origins of the ego, we are faced with a foundational level that precedes individuation of the ego in its concrete form. This suggests that the ego has a foundation which is not of its making, and which connects the ego to other egos, prior to the individuation of any ego. A kind of intersubjectivity makes itself felt here. For the ego acts out of

a non-self-present core that arises in part from its habitualities which, at this deepest level, do not come from it alone. Husserl calls this originary habituality. It is a kind of habituality that arises from sedimented transference. In other words, it is a kind of habituality that is inherited from previous generations. This primordial type of intersubjectivity can be experienced only reconstructively at the level of the streaming living present. It also takes place at the level of the ego-pole and involves the instinctual activities of the ego-pole, which are not necessarily self-present to the ego.

Husserl refers to two types of instinct in these manuscripts. The first type of instinct is that which is involved in the appropriate reception of hyletic data, which Husserl refers to as "the original drive to objectification" (C 13 I, 136). The second type of instinct, which most concerns us here, is that which is inherent in intersubjectivity, or perhaps more aptly put, the instinctually inherent intersubjectivity. This mode of instinct is located on a level "deeper" than the drive to objectification. The instinct for intersubjectivity characterizes the first choice that might eventually develop into a habit through the process of association. This type of instinct is clearly connected to the first. It is the *how* of the drive to objectification. The Other is instinctually present to the ego in a manner not unlike the hyletic presence of the world. Husserl refers to this as an instinct for empathy, by which he means a certain revelation of a continuity with Others which is the result of inheritance. He maintains that there is: "... an instinctive primal intentionality of communalization which pre-grounds the constitution of community and in which there is a pre-awareness of community among different particulars and nevertheless ones which are bound in different particularities and still connectednesses" (E III 10, 8b).¹²

The instinctive primal intentionality suggests a connectedness between the ego and the Other at a most primal level, a connectedness which does not cease with the cessation of any particular ego because of the transference of tradition between generations. Husserl refers to what a monad leaves behind in this world, for example, a child whose gestures, idiosyncracies, and even looks are an inheritance. The dead monad shows itself in a limited way through its progeny. These gestures, idiosyncracies, and the like are not actively taken up by the child, but are inherited at the deepest level, at the level of the ego-pole.

The concrete ego is constituted out of the unity of sedimentations and habitualities of the ego-pole through pure passive synthesis. The hyle provides the primal experiential contents which do not come from the ego, but which are passively associated temporalizations upon which the activity of the ego depends. As Ludwig Landgrebe explains, "The ego discovers

itself first in a transcendental genesis as transcendental history ... and each hyle is, in fact, already 'sedimented history'."¹³ What this passage indicates is that the transcendental ego is already passively constituted through its history just as the hyle is itself already passively constituted. In their connection with one another, we begin to understand that the passive level of constitution involves both the ego and the hyle in the "immanence of transcendental becoming itself."¹⁴

The passive genesis of the ego means that the ego absorbs certain elements from its surrounding world thereby limiting the ego in a way that makes its activity of constitution not entirely spontaneous. It is because there is this preindividual passive genesis that we are able to speak of a coincidence between ego and Other, a transcendental intersubjectivity. The world of meaning is one that the ego is born into and inherits in the form of sedimented meanings of the objects within the world. This is not to say that it is this way structurally as much as it is intersubjectively through inheritance of communal and familial traditions. The world of meaning is intersubjective from the start. The ego makes those things its own through the process of habituation and personal sedimentation, but this does not mean that those things are transparent or present to the ego. Many of those sedimented habits remain hidden to the ego in the streaming living present.

From the passive genesis of the ego arise habits which contribute to the unity of the ego. The repeated attitudes the ego takes toward the world are progressively sedimented to form the 'character' of the ego. This is how an ego actively maintains its own identity in the everchanging situations of its existence. These attitudes the ego takes up can range anywhere from a very simple reaction to something, to a very complex decision-making process that the ego has performed repeatedly. This implies that each ego has its own individual history and style of constitutional life. Husserl recognizes this as early as *Ideas II*, where he writes, "The Ego remains unchanged as long as it remains 'of the same conviction', 'of the same opinion.' To change the conviction is to change 'oneself.' But throughout change and unchange the Ego remains identically the same precisely as pole."¹⁵ What this suggests is that there is an original core, the ego-pole, which remains the same. Around this core, every opinion, conviction, and position of the ego gathers to constitute the ego progressively in its identity. But the originary positions of the ego-pole do not come from itself alone. They are laced with alterity and are not necessarily self-present to the ego. In other words, the ego-pole is not immediately present to itself. The terms "throughout change and unchange" make clear that the opinions and convictions, the habitualities, are not unchangeable. The ego is always in a position to evaluate and reassess its convictions and opinions.

Husserl speaks of habitualities as being sedimented in the ego. Through the process of sedimentation, the ego becomes more and more "determined" in the sense that the more a position is sedimented, the more difficult it would be to upset or unseat that conviction. There is, however, another sense of sedimentation that is vitally important to the notion of habitualities and to the establishment of the ego's convictions. Such sedimentation is inherited from Others who have established those convictions themselves through their own process of collecting evidence. The most obvious inheritance of habitualities occurs from parent to child at the level of the ego-pole. Husserl describes this transfer in a manuscript of 1931. "With the awakening of the new monad there is awakened or preawakened the parental habituality; but the new monad has a new hyle and the parental monad its own habituality (as dead); everything merges and 'blends' in sedimented overlaying" (C 17, 84b).¹⁶ What this quotation suggests is that the sense of the ego's experience does not arise from the ego alone, but is handed down through tradition from other generations. This process connects the ego to those generations prior to it as well as to those that will subsequently inherit the tradition. Very simply, this is about being born into a world that already has a cultural sense, and leaving that world behind in the instant of human death. Tradition provides the continuity that makes for a transcendental intersubjective community.

The importance of this discussion of the deepest level of temporality as the streaming living present is to make clear this dimension of alterity and non-presence that is prior to the ego or the Other, prior to the active synthesis by the ego. The deepest level of temporality allows for an understanding of the passive acceptance of traditions that become the sedimentations of a transcendental ego having their origin in an ego of another generation. The transference of tradition takes place at the level of the ego-pole. The ego-pole then is the locus of the coincidence of the I and the Other.

From this deepest temporal level of coincidence, the I and the Other arise, but it is clear that their foundation is communal. "But it <the union of I and Other> is still community (the word 'coincidence' refers unfortunately to coinciding in <temporal> extension, i.e., to association), as in the case of my not extensively temporal one and the self-same ego supporting the streaming-constituting temporality. Community, with oneself and others, relates to an ego-pole union" (C 16, VII 5).¹⁷

It is only out of this deepest level that the identity of an ego and the otherness of the Other as itself an identity can be constituted. The identity of the ego arises through sedimentation. At the level of the streaming living present, the ego begins to develop through the passive sedimentations coming

from this preconstitutive level. This means that there are sedimentations of the ego which are not the result of the ego's constitutive activity. What Husserl is ultimately able to say about this most primordial level is that it gives an indication that the Other is in some way necessary to the I, because it is the Other who contributes to the sedimentations of the ego before the ego itself is even a concrete ego. The necessity of the Other is not as an Other in complete opposition to the ego, but as an Other in terms of the community of Others who are *with* the ego. The ego is never, even, or perhaps especially, at the deepest level, isolated from a community of Others.

What we have seen here is that Husserl's reduction to the deepest level of time as the streaming living present allows him to provide an explanation of intersubjectivity that frees him from the problems that an egoical account necessarily entails. The streaming living present, because it is anonymous and prephenomenal, makes possible an understanding of the alterity entailed in the sedimentation and traditions that become localized in a transcendental ego through the temporalization of the ego-pole. Such an understanding of transcendental intersubjectivity clearly would not be possible without the reduction to the streaming living present that only becomes detailed by Husserl in the late 1920s and 1930s with the more complete development of the genetic phenomenological method. Even Derrida seems to recognize the importance of this type of investigation. He writes in *La Problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl* of the manuscripts on time suggesting that they raise three vital issues: temporality, hyle, and transcendental intersubjectivity. Of these three issues he writes:

It is such that from the point of view of transcendental idealism, their signification is the same: a simple explication of the transcendental ego as such, and in its monadicity, can not realize their existence and the constitution of their sense. Thus the objectivity of consciousness, of which transcendental phenomenology is the 'theory', is only possible—and Husserl insists the same—by means of passive synthesis of the temporal and sensible hyle and by means of originary transcendental intersubjectivity.¹⁸

But Derrida does not recognize the impact of this on the question of the nonpresence of the living experience, the lack of absolute proximity of consciousness to itself that the manuscripts indicate.¹⁹

The originary transcendental intersubjectivity is revealed through the process of inquiring back to the deepest level of time, the streaming living present. At this deepest, primal level of the subject, we discover certain drives which indicate a relationship between the ego and the Other, which testifies to an intersubjective coincidence at the most fundamental level of

subjectivity. The dark core of the ego is the unthematizable foundation of the concrete ego's habitualities and drives.²⁰ The being-with of the ego likewise has its foundation in the intersubjectivity of that core of the ego. This transcendental being-with does not eliminate the individuatedness of either the ego or the Other. Both are primordially present and are primordially interdependent. We can claim a certain priority of the Other precisely because passive genesis and the production of habitualities indicate the taking-up of positions by the ego that are not necessarily generated by the ego alone.

This position is not without its difficulties and paradoxes which Husserl himself recognized, but it is a step in identifying the experiences of the Other which are not necessarily of an egoic-constituted nature and which help us to recognize that we are with Others in a primordial way—not only with those with whom we share a present, but with those from whom we inherit a past and to whom we bequeath a future. Such a representation of the subject provides for an understanding of the inheritance we each have without giving up the individual responsibility for habits and convictions.

The fundamental level of the ego structure then entails the alterity that remains in some respects obscured from the ego itself. In other words the self-presence of the ego to itself is never something that can be wholly counted upon. If it is part of the streaming living present, then Derrida's insistence that this self-presence be "produced in the present taken as now"²¹ is clearly misdirected. The present of the self-presence is riddled with nonpresence.

Derrida's claims that Husserl has tried to avoid the difficulties of nonpresence through the "voice that keeps silence" and "the blink of an eye"²² can be drawn into question on the basis of what we have witnessed in these manuscripts. Clearly, meaning and selfhood do depend upon something more than the temporal unity provided by the present now and do depend upon a past which is not 'present' anymore, nor can be made present again. By admitting alterity into the deepest level of temporality and subjectivity, Husserl allows for an original nonpresence that Derrida does not recognize.

But what does this mean for Derrida's larger project? The problem that Derrida raises for the derivative structure of language in phenomenology cannot necessarily be solved by the C-manuscripts, but they can give us an insight into the difficulties that Husserl recognizes in his own project, and the attempts that he was making to understand the complexity of the alterity within the ego that might lead us to rethink the objections to the phenomenological achievements as presented by Derrida.²³ We may indeed be able to think the alterity of subjectivity without giving up the self-responsibility of the subject to which Husserl was so committed.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 84.

² Judging from his own account in *La Problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*, we can conclude that Derrida has some knowledge of Husserl's C-manuscripts. Derrida provides bibliographical information about the C-manuscripts and specifically cites manuscripts C 6, C 7, C 12, C 13, C 17 IV. See Jacques Derrida, *La Problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), 238–243. In spite of this, it is safe to say that Derrida was working from a more established understanding of Husserl that was expounded by other authors he references such as Tran-Duc-Thao, Jean Cavailles, Ricoeur, and Merleau-Ponty.

³ For a thorough and extremely helpful explanation of Husserl's published works on time-consciousness and their relation to Derrida's criticism of a metaphysics of presence, see Rudolf Bernet's "Is the Present Ever Present? Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence" in *Research in Phenomenology* 12 (1982): 85–112.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 58.

⁵ From manuscript C 17, 88a, as quoted by James Mensch, *Intersubjectivity and Transcendental Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 19.

⁶ Manuscript C 3, 3b. "[...] so ist sie für mich nicht die meine gegenüber derjenigen anderer Menschen, und sie ist nicht die meine als die des körperlich-seelisch seienden, des realen Menschen." I follow the cataloging system of the Husserl Archives, Leuven, Belgium. All further references to unpublished manuscripts will be within the text, providing the letter, number, and page number for the reference. I would like to thank Rudolf Bernet, Director of the Husserl Archives in Leuven for permission to quote from the manuscripts.

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjectivität, Dritter Teil: 1929-1935* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 598. "Die Strukturanalyse der ertümlichen Gegenwart (das stehend lebendige Strömen) führt uns auf die Ichstruktur und die sie fundierende ständige Unterschichte des ichlosen Strömens, das durch eine konsequente Rückfrage auf das, was auch die sedimentierte Aktivität möglich macht und voraussetzt, auf das radikal Vor-Ichliche zurückleitet."

⁸ See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*, trans. R. Rojcewiczand and A. Schuwer (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1989), 103. Hereafter referred to as *Ideas II*.

⁹ "Auf der einen Seite haben wir den zeitlichen Bewußtseinsstrom und auf diese Zeitlichkeit bezogen das transzendente Ich der Akte [...] andererseits als Urgrund dieser Zeitigung [...] das Ur-Ich [...]"

¹⁰ "Im Strömen der lebendige Gegenwart ist er der identisch verharrende Pol im Wechsel der immanent zeitlichen Vorkommnisse [...] Dieses pure "Ich" ist abstrakt, konkret ist es nur durch den Gehalt der strömenden Gegenwart."

¹¹ "Ich finde in diesem beständigen Sichspalten des Ich und sich dann wieder Identifizieren ein Ur-Ich, Ich, das ich als Urpol, als ursprünglich fungierendes Ich bezeichne, und das dem Ur-Ich zum Gegenüber, zum Seienden gewordene Ich und den Umkreis dessen,

was für dieses und für mich als anonymes Ich, als Nicht-Ich da ist ... in sich trägt.”

¹² From James Hart, *The Person and the Common Life* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 197–198.

¹³ Ludwig Landgrebe, *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵ Husserl, *Ideas II*, 324.

¹⁶ C 17, 84b. “Mit der Erweckung der neuen Monade ist erweckt oder vorerweckt die elterliche Habitualität; aber die neue Monade hat eine neue Hyle und die elterliche ihre eigene Habitualität (als tote); das alles in sedimentierter Überdeckung und sich “mischend”, verschmolzen.”

¹⁷ C 16 VII, 5. “Aber es <die Einigung von Ich und Anderem> ist doch Gemeinschaft (das Wort ‘Deckung’ weist leider auf Deckung in <zeitlicher> Extension, auf Assoziation hin), so wie bei meine, die strömend-konstituierende Zeitlichkeit tragenden, nicht extensivzeitlichen einen und selben Ich. Gemeinschaft mit sich selbst und Anderen bezieht sich auf Ichpol-Einigung.” After Klaus Held, *Lebendige Gegenwart* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 157.

¹⁸ Derrida, *La Problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*, 239.

¹⁹ For further discussion of Derrida’s appreciation of genetic phenomenology and its relationship to the discussion of presence and nonpresence, see Françoise Dastur, “Finitude and Repetition in Husserl and Derrida,” in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1993, suppl.): 113–130. This entire supplementary volume is dedicated to Derrida’s reading of Husserl and provides much valuable analysis of a range of issues for the two philosophers.

²⁰ This is a moment where Husserl recognizes a certain impossibility that genetic phenomenology faces; the impossibility of phenomenologically grasping the dark core of the ego. For an excellent discussion of Derrida’s relation to such Husserlian impossibilities see Paul Davies’ response to Rodolphe Gasché in “Commentary: Being Faithful to Impossibility,” P. Davies, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1993 suppl.): 19–25.

²¹ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 59.

²² These two phrases are used repeatedly in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *Speech and Phenomena*.

²³ For a further discussion of language and alterity or diversity in Derrida’s work see Len Lawlor’s “Distorting Phenomenology: Derrida’s Interpretation of Husserl!” in *Philosophy Today* (Summer 1998): 185–193.