

Time and lifetime

Phenomenology final paper,

Gérolde Nicolaisen, master's student at Universiteit van Amsterdam, January 2025

Introduction

In view of the common sense account of time extending infinitely in the past and in the future, my lifetime extends over an infinitely small interval on this line. What is the probability of such an interval to occur in any finite period of time? The theory of probability would say that it is zero. Still I am living my conscious life here and now. Isn't that a bizarre situation. Is it even possible? Is time not extended infinitely? Phenomenology teaches us that time in consciousness is not the same as the common sense time of nature. Does this lead to a solution to the posed unlikelyhood? I will look at some accounts of the nature of time and the experience of it and will then hold these against insights from the phenomenology of Husserl and Stein to investigate how these insights may help to address the problem of the finite lifetime on the infinite line of time.

Reflection on time and lifetime

Natural time

We all have some intuitive notion of time. Someone who has never given time much thought is aware of days going by leading us from one season to the next, hours going by leading us from breakfast to lunch and to dinner; from waking up to getting to bed. At some age we realise that our parents also have parents and that there is something like a family history. Losing our grandparents makes us realise that at some day we will lose our mother, on another day our father and this ultimately leads to the realisation that our own life, our conscious life, will come to an end. Our children's children will have children living their lives in the future, if conditions allow for it, and we will not be there to witness it.

Then we learn that we can measure time by comparing duration with that of regular events like the rotation of the earth or the swinging of the clock's pendulum. We learn to do calculations on velocity and acceleration of objects as a function of time. We have arrived at what we call the Cartesian account of time and space. According to this account time is given as representable along an imaginary line that goes on infinitely into past as well as future. Note the word *representable*! We can work with it but giving it a second thought (and reading Augustine, Confessions, Book XI) we come to the conclusion that we have no clue what time is.

Lifetime

As I am writing these words I do it spending some time that is part of my lifetime. My lifetime started at my birth, or my conception, or maybe when I first had a genuine thought (whatever that means exactly). My lifetime will end somewhere between now and the end of the century and will span a period of, let's say, from 64 to 100 years. Thinking this period as being somewhere on the infinite Cartesian timeline it is infinitely small. The chance of an arbitrary event with equal probability to take place anywhere on the Cartesian timeline to take place in this period is zero. And still I am living my conscious life and write these words, being conscious of the limited time I have to finish this paper on time.

So on one hand there is lifetime projected on the real world cartesian lifetime, the lifetime seen by myself and also by others as part of a historical sequence of events, starting with my birth. On the other hand there is lifetime as my unique experienced conscious life. In this experienced lifetime time seems to play a much more complex role. Edmund Husserl discusses the consciousness of internal time (1960, §18). It is hard to see how, if at all, this internal time relates to the Cartesian timeline of the outer world.

Knowledge of time

Een tijd is lang door het op elkaar volgen van vele bewegingen die er niet tegelijkertijd kunnen zijn. In de eeuwigheid gaat niets voorbij. Die is helemaal heden, maar tijd is nooit helemaal nu. Wat was wordt verjaagd door wat komt, en wat komt, zit altijd het verleden op de hielen. Maar verleden én toekomst als geheel worden gemaakt en verlopen vanuit een altijd tegenwoordig heden. (Augustinus, 2009, §13)

In this quote, part of an attempt to answer the question "What did God do before creating the world?", Augustine positions time as part of God's creation. Creation takes place in the context of eternity in which there is no time. In eternity the whole creation, including time, is *eternally* present. Only within time there is past and future, divided by an *always* present now.

Time is in our lives in a very prominent way. We think in terms of time, talk about time and work with time. And we all understand each other if we use time in our communication. But at the point we are asked to explain the nature and essence of time we get stuck (Augustinus, 2009, §17). How can the past be if it is not anymore and the future if it is not yet? And the now moves into the past at the very moment it is present. We know that today is present, yesterday is past and tomorrow is future. But considering the day of today we see this hour as the present hour thinking of past hours and hours not yet reached. The present hour again divides in past and future (ibid. §§19,20). Still we talk about duration of periods of time. How can we measure what is not? Thinking of measuring time we think of duration. We measure duration in comparison to the duration of something else. Considering the meter of a poem we measure a certain syllable as twice as long as another syllable. But if we have heard the syllable it is already in the past! how can we measure it? The sound of the syllable is represented in our memory. In our memory, the representation of the syllable with its duration is present (ibid. §34). But still all we do is compare

durations. There is no established unit of time. Augustine suggests time may only exist in our mind (2009, §33). Just as duration of past events is also future expectation of durations related to what is already in our mind:

Een psalm zeggen die je kent of luisteren naar een lied dat je kent, verdeelt je waarneming tussen de verwachting van de woorden die nog komen en de herinnering aan de woorden die voorbij zijn, en ook je gevoel gaat heen en weer. (Augustinus, 2009, §41)

I will later compare this to the concept of retention and protention in Husserl. Can we know time? Augustine prays to God for the light to see time and concludes that the insight does not come. He takes a pragmatic stand in this. We talk about past and future and though they do not exist it is practical to use them so let us just say there is past, present and future. Though our use of the concept of time is inaccurate, we are understood (2009, §26).

Existence of time

So with Augustine we conclude that we don't know what time is but we can use its concept in a pragmatic way. In doing so we ascribe to time certain aspects in order to work with it like succession, duration, past, future and presentness. McTaggart takes a critical look at the concept of time to question the possibility of time being real (1908).

McTaggart mentions two ways positions in time can be distinguished. First there is succession. We can say of a position in time that it is earlier than some and later than other positions in time. Then there is the fact a position in time can be in the past, in the present or in the future, representing a series of far past to near past to present to near future to far future. This series he calls the A series and the series of pure succession he calls the B series (1908, p. 458). If we look at events we observe taking place at moments in time we must conclude that these events *apparently* form an A series as well as a B series (ibid.). The B series seems more objective. This is because the order of events that are in the series does not change. The A series could be subjective being an artefact of how we perceive time rather than that it represents a reality of time (ibid. p459). Now McTaggart makes the assumption, supposedly universally admitted, that time must involve change (ibid. p 459). Several ways this change could happen are looked at to come to the conclusion that the only way we can have change in the characteristics of an event is its determination in terms of the A series (ibid. p 460). As an example he mentions the event of the death of queen Anne. This event began as an event in distant future shifting every moment into nearer future until it became present and then past after which it moves further and further into past. Because the change of this characteristic is the only change an event undergoes and change is essential to time the A series representation of time must be a necessary aspect of time (ibid. p 461). McTaggart now uses several pages to show that the A series is more fundamental as a necessary aspect of time than the B series is. I will not go through all the details. He arrives at the final and crucial step of his argument, namely that the A series is essential for time but time is presupposed in order to account for the A-series. This means that in

order to show that time is real we end up in a vicious circle and therefore time can't be real (ibid. pp 467, 468).

I think there is a weakness in McTaggart's argument. He argues that the only way there can be change in the way events are considered in the context of time is by change of an event in the characteristic of its presence on the A series. Apparently he assumes that all events are existing, not only in the past and present but also in the future. Take the event of the death of queen Anne. It starts in the far future, but does it already exist at all? I would argue that change can come about by new events being added to the B series as they occur. I do agree (intuitively) that past, present and future are essential to the concept of time but this is because of accounting for the subjective experience of time. McTaggart mentions this aspect but dismisses it as untenable (1908, p. 458). I will get back to this later.

Perception of temporal objects

In "The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness" Husserl addresses the question of the origin of time (1964, § 2). He takes the account of Brentano as a starting point for exploring how time is perceived (ibid., § 3). Sensation of the real temporal object (.e.g. a sounding tone) occurs only in the moment of the now. At the moment the stimulus disappears the direct sensation stops as such but it produces a constantly altering representation of the sensed data that is associated with the other already sensed fragments to perform a representation of an enduring tone. This productive process Brentano calls primordial association (ibid. § 3). Husserl objects that the perception of the tone as a whole is to be considered real (ibid. § 6). It doesn't make sense to consider the fraction sensed now as real and the rest of the tone as produced, though joined in primordial association, but still a product of "phantasy" (as a technical term in broad sense of not directly sensed).

Now Husserl proposes a way temporal objects are comprehended (1964, § 7). Temporal objects are to be understood as having a temporal extension in themselves. After perceiving a temporal object, for instance a short melody, the object as a whole is present in the now. We can't consider the individual tones as perceived as individual objects, combined in memory to a melody. The melody is perceived as the object of an enduring act. The temporal object has its own temporality. There is a duration of time attributed to the object altogether present in the moment of perception. This is achieved by primal impression and retention (Husserl 1964, § 11). Let's take a sounding tone as example again. The primal impression is the actual sensation of the sounding tone. The past sounding (and sensed) parts of the tone descend along a time axis and remain part of the perception of the tone as a whole. The past parts of the tone stay present in the now with their own temporality by means of retention.

This retention is to be considered an intentional act (ibid. § 12). We can compare the act of retention with other intentional acts like Edith Stein does for the act of empathy (Stein, p. 6). The act of retention is not primordial and not an outer perception. The primordial source is the primal impression. There is a parallel with the act of empathy as analysed by Edith Stein (1989, pp. 6-11).

Here empathy is analysed to be a primordial perception but not an outer perception. However, in the case of empathy, the object is present here and now (ibid. p 7). This is also the case for retention. The temporal object is perceived as a whole in the here and now.

Like retention for the past part of the object's temporality there is protention for the future or expected part of it. If, for example, a ball is thrown at us we perceive the trajectory of the ball as a temporal object. We will instinctively bend over to avoid being hit by the ball. For this we must be aware of the upcoming part of the temporal object. We perceive the complete trajectory including the part not yet fulfilled by retention, primal impression and protention.

The phenomenology of life

The big significance of this becomes clear if we consider it in the context of the transcendental phenomenology as Husserl describes later in *Cartesian Meditations* (1960). He makes the transcendental turn by subjecting all knowledge to the phenomenological epoché. As starting point there is only my transcendental-phenomenological ego with my transcendental-phenomenological self-experience (ibid. § 11). If I apply the phenomenological way of looking at the world to looking at myself as a self-reflection I am not looking at my life but at the way I perceive my life. I am the cogito and cogitatum in natural reflection and the duality cogito - cogitatum becomes the cogitatum in phenomenological reflection. (ibid § 15) By applying the insights of perception of temporal objects as discussed earlier on my life that I perceive it through primal impression, retention and protention. Of course I don't perceive my life as a whole in one simple perception. The perception is the result of synthesis of the results of an ongoing flow of perceptions (ibid. § 18). I perceive temporality in all perceptions that build up in synthesis of my life and of all other objects of my perceptions. These perceptions of temporality add up to the consciousness of internal time as ultimate synthesis of this (ibid. § 18). The protention of our life at every instance of perception forms a horizon of potentiality. We act in the realm of this potentiality and give direction by actualising potentialities that lie in the horizon of the consciousness of my life at this instance (ibid. § 19).

Conclusion and next step

To understand time or at least give it a place in the world different approaches have been taken to give it its grounding or preconditions. For Augustine it was the timeless God and eternity that provided context for the creation of the world with time as a part of it. McTaggart did not try to find a grounding context and had to conclude that time does not exist. Husserl gave us the transcendental-phenomenological perception with its internal temporality to make time in the objective world possible and that gives us the time-consciousness of our life perception. Husserl points out that there is a problem of infinite regress here (1960, § 18). This appears to be an observation similar to the argument of McTaggart. Investigation on if and how Husserl addresses and solves this needs to be done. The constitution of life as the ultimate phenomenological synthesis can make us understand that our consciousness of lived time does not map to the time

of the outer world. Taking this idea a step further Heidegger reduces this life again to the fundamental "Dasein" where the finiteness of lifetime, so the approaching death, plays an important role or is even essential to our existence (2010). A next step in the search to understand lifetime in the context of natural time will be to see what Heidegger's existentialism can bring us.

(word count: 2850)

Bibliography

Husserl, Edmund. 1960. *Cartesian Meditations, an Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. Springer-Science+Business Media B.V.

Husserl, Edmund. 1964. *The Phenomenology of Internal time-Consciousness*. Edited by Martin Heidegger. Translated by James S. Churchill. Indiana University Press.

Augustinus, Aurelius. 2009, Belijdenissen [confessiones], Boek 11. Vertaald door Willem Sleddens. Damon, Eindhoven

McTaggart, J. Ellis. 1908, The Unreality of Time, in *Mind*, Vol. 17, No. 68, Oxford University Press, pp. 457-474

Gallagher, Shaun and Zahavi, Dan. 2021. *The Phenomenological Mind*. 3d edition. Routledge.

Stein, Edith. 1989. *On the Problem of Empathy*. 3d ed. Translated by Waltraud Stein. The Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington D.C.

Heidegger, Martin. 2010. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. State University of New York Press