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Plotinus and Husserl from a Finean point of view

1. Introduction

In his paper *Tense and Reality*, Fine sketches a typology of theories on tense and time¹. This typology is based on an analysis of McTaggart's argument, which was meant to show the impossibility of combining a 'dynamic' (A-theory) and a 'static' (B-theory) vision on time. Fine shows that McTaggart's argument rests on four assumptions, each one of which may be dropped, in order to save one of four theories of time. The theories that arise when dropping the four assumptions of Realism, Neutrality, Absolutism and Coherence are, respectively Anti-Realism, Standard Realism, Relativism, and Fragmentalism.

Now by providing this fourfold typology Fine tries to escape the paradoxes, dualisms and dichotomies that have haunted philosophies of time since ages. Starting with the Zeno paradoxes, Greek philosophies held either an idealist (Plato c.s.) or a realist (Aristoteles - in the sense of non-idealist) vision on time. After the subjectivist turn of Kant, philosophies of time could be characterised as either subjectivist or objectivist, and in analytic philosophy the opposition became known as A-theories against B-theories.

In this paper I want to examine what the effects are of the more fine-grained typology of Fine, when we take a look at the older idealist philosophy of time of Plotinus and the modern subjectivist philosophy of Husserl. How can we locate these philosophies within the Finean framework? What does this framework tell us about these two philosophies, and, the other way round, what relevance do Plotinus and Husserl have for Fine's theory? Therefore I will first describe Plotinus in Fine's terms, then I will examine Husserl, and finally I will draw some conclusions.

2. Plotinus

Plotinus is a neo-Platonist, which means that he has, like Plato, an idealist conception of being. He differs from Plato in laying more emphasis on the personal ways towards knowledge and wisdom, and in giving a more systematic account of the Platonic philosophical themes. Plotinus is the first one in history who explicitly thematises and discusses time (in his main work, *The Enneads*, III.7) and that is why I have chosen him here to confront with Fine.

In Plotinus' view on reality there are three 'hypostases': on the highest level or hypostasis there is "the One", that is, on that level there are no distinctions between places, times, subject and object, etc., there is only unity. The second hypostasis is the level of the intellect (*nous*), where subject and object, truth, beauty and other concepts are distinguished. The third hypostasis is the level of the (world) Soul where there is diversity and plurality. The task of the (human) Soul is to rise by way of intellectual contemplation towards the second hypostasis in order to get a glimpse of the first hypostasis.

Plotinus reserves two levels for temporality: the second and the third. On the second level we find the idea of eternity. This eternity on the second level is the paradigm or example for temporality on the lower third level, which is (human) time. Plotinian eternity has no extension, that is, it does not equal endless duration. Eternity does not contain duration, since then it would be divisible, which it is not. It is also immutable; it is in a state of perfection, and cannot change, since then it would become imperfect. Eternity may be applied to other Ideas on the second hypostasis, like the Intellect, and Truth, and it may therefore have a

¹ Unfortunately Fine does not systematically distinguish tense and time. I will however, here not try to disentangle these two, and follow Fine in this respect.

plurality of applications, however, the concept of Eternity itself remains one and indivisible. Eternity is perfect and has therefore neither come into existence, nor will it ever perish. Time, in contrast, is imperfect, it is in constant movement, hunkering forwards, never completely fulfilled. Time is to be found in the Soul, just as eternity is found in the Intellect. Time is divisible; it consists of earlier times, later times and a present. Just as Fine distinguishes two kinds of reality: mere reality and metaphysical reality, so Plotinus distinguishes also gradations of reality. The only thing that is really real is the One. This first hypostasis emanates into a second hypostasis, the reality of which is less. And the second hypostasis emanates into the third hypostasis with an even weaker degree of reality.

Now I will examine how these two realms of temporality match with Fine's typology, to begin with the concept of Eternity. When we focus on 'real time' as eternity, we first of all see that the assumption (implicitly made by McTaggart) of Realism (Fine 2005: 271ff.) does not apply. Reality on the second hypostasis – let alone on the first hypostasis – does not consist of tensed facts; the predicates of present, past and future do not apply on the second hypostasis and are not features of the idea of eternity. Neutrality does apply: times are not opposed to another at all – there is no opposition - , so no time can be privileged. Reality on the second hypostasis also conforms to Absolutism and Coherence; it is not irreducibly relative or incoherent. Because Realism does not apply, temporality on the second hypostasis is anti-realist, and it is anti-realist in a specific way. 'Normal' anti-realism, B-theory in McTaggart's terms or 'scientific realism', consists of a static vision of temporality. Temporality then refers to the (infinite) set of time-points, and the relations of *earlier_than* and *later_than* between these time points. It contains no tensed facts, since these points and relations are not characterised by predicates as present, past and future. It does contain however, a plurality of time-points, and in this respect, 'normal' anti-realism differs from Plotinian anti-realism. The paradigm of time, that is, eternity, contains no plurality; it is the prime example for the diversity of times on the third hypostasis, but is itself not diverse. We could say that because of this lack of plurality this idea of eternity is "extratemporal". To extend the typology of temporalities, we could add an extra assumption of Diversity "there is a plurality of interrelated times", which could distinguish between two kinds of anti-realism, temporal and extra-temporal.

The assumptions of the vision of reality and time on the third level are the following. First of all, Realism applies; the whole cosmos is contained in time, while this time is contained in the soul. This containment in time corresponds, I think, to consisting of tensed facts. The assumption of Neutrality seems not to hold; the tense of the facts of reality seems to be evaluated only from the standpoint of the present. Plotinus (III.7.11) says: "Life as it achieves its stages, constitutes past time." And life should be understood here as life in the present, which then is the privileged time. Absolutism and Coherence seem to hold, or at least not questioned by Plotinus. Due to these three assumptions Plotinus' vision on time can be characterised as standard realist.

So Plotinus has two conceptions of time, on two levels of reality, the one – eternity – being in some way 'higher' or 'more real' than the other – human time. This is quite similar to McTaggart, who had also two visions on time, the static (B-theory) and the dynamic (A-theory) vision. McTaggart showed that these two visions could not be reconciled. Fine shows that the two visions rest on four assumptions, which can not be maintained all four at once. When we oppose (standard) realism and anti-realism, that is A-theory and B-theory, in the first case Realism holds, at the cost of Neutrality, while in the other case Neutrality holds at the cost of Realism. Fine's refinement of the discussion lies in showing that both Neutrality

and Realism can hold, but at the expense of one of the two other assumptions. Fine's solution to capture the advantages of both the A- and the B-theory is to loosen the assumption of Coherence, and thereby, in a certain way, reconcile the A- and B-theory.

And how did Plotinus reconcile, or relate, his two conceptions of time? As mentioned before, his B-theory differs in being 'extra-temporal'. So, how did Plotinus relate the resting, perfect, immutable and indivisible eternity with the moving imperfect time of the soul? In III.7: 11 Plotinus says: "Time at first – in reality before that "first" was produced by desire of succession – Time lay, self-concentrated, at rest within the Authentic Existent: it was not yet Time; it was merged in the Authentic and motionless with it. But there was an active principle there, one set on governing itself and realising itself (= the All-Soul), and it chose to aim at something more than its present: it stirred from its rest, and Time stirred with it. And we (i.e. human Souls as summed in the principle of developing Life, the All-Soul) we, stirring to a ceaseless succession, to a next, to the discrimination of identity and the establishment of ever new difference, traversed a portion of the outgoing path and produced an image of Eternity, produced Time." So it is thanks to an active principle, the Soul, which began to move, out of desire to more, that Time was produced. Of course many questions remain, *how* and *when* did the Soul start to move? If it rested on the second hypostasis at first, then *how* and *why* did it become the moving third hypostasis? Such questions have to do with the relation between rest and movement, and between eternity and time. Such questions in other vocabularies remained key to philosophies of time, and they are at the heart of the opposition between A- and B-theories. And, although Fine seems to take an intermediate position between A- and B-theories, these questions of movement and rest escape also his framework.

3. Husserl

Husserl is the founder of phenomenology, and has written extensively on diverse topics like subjectivity, intentionality, consciousness, perception, intersubjectivity, corporeality and life-worlds. Here I will focus on those aspects that are relevant for temporality, which is the central theme in his *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1893-1917).

Husserl resembles Kant in examining the (transcendental) conditions under which knowledge, perception, etc. are possible. While for Kant it is the *Anschauung* which guarantees the contact between subject and object, for Husserl it is intentionality. Intentionality is a feature of consciousness, and to examine it, we must, for a while, abandon the natural stance, and concentrate us on how phenomena appear into consciousness, without assuming the objective existence of these phenomena (cf. Zahavi, 2002). Now, time is unlike other intentional objects like numbers, phantasies or thoughts. It is namely a precondition for the appearance of other objects in an objective world. A condition for conceiving an object as endurable in time, and having a (not simultaneously visible) front and back side, is the existence of time itself. The leading question now for Husserl is, when we do not make use of concepts of the natural stance like rhythm or movement as pre-given, how can we experience something as time?

Husserl's important achievement in comparison with contemporaneous authors like Brentano and Meinong was that he conceived the consciousness of time, not as point-like, but as an act intended on a continuous temporal field (cf. Kortooms, 2002). Our time-consciousness would refer to a tripartite field with a sensational, a retentional and a protentional aspect. The retentional aspect would be the 'immediate past', which remains in the consciousness of time, and which forms a coherent whole with the rest of the field. The protentional aspect would be the immediate future and consist of the expectations that are part of the present time-consciousness.

In addition to the primary immediate past, which is continuous with the present, there is a secondary past (and future), which does not form a coherent whole with the present, and which forms memory or recollection. Primary past stands to the present as auditory perception to visual perception, while the secondary past stands to the present like phantasy to perception. When recollecting such a secondary past, it becomes a temporal field in itself, with retentional and protentional aspects.

This consciousness of time is like a light in the dark, which leaves a trace of protentional shadows behind it. Husserl compares it to a comet and a comet's tail. It should be clear by now, that we are in the realm of (Fine's sense of) realism: 'reality is composed of tensed facts.' Time, according to Husserl, is needed to have a consciousness of (intentional) reality at all, and this intentional reality is essentially coloured by the (time-)consciousness of being past, present or future. When this subjective time suggests a realist perspective, *what kind* of realism is implied by Husserl? It turns out to be standard realism again. The assumption of neutrality does not hold; clearly one time – the present – is privileged, and the facts of reality are looked at, evaluated, and even constituted within the present, and from there valued as retention, protention or recollection. Absolutism does seem to hold: there is an absolute sense of (intentional) reality and temporal facts. Coherence most clearly holds; in combination with an assumption of continuity, Husserl uses it throughout to prevent fragmentation and relativism with respect to the past. For instance, Husserl (1966: 10) uses these demands in order to be able to found such intuitive assumptions as: "1) dass die feste zeitliche Ordnung eine zweidimensionale unendliche Reihe ist, 2) dass zwei verschiedene Zeiten nie zugleich sein können, 3) dass ihr Verhältnis ein ungleichseitiges ist, 4) dass Transitivität besteht, 5) dass zu jeder Zeit eine frühere und ein spätere gehört."²

In addition to subjective time, Husserl distinguishes, secondly, another kind of time: objective time. The temporal order of phenomena that are successively in protention, sensation, retention, and recollection, is an objective order. Nevertheless, according to Husserl this order is constituted by the time-consciousness and its demand of coherence. This demand of coherence operates within one time-consciousness and also between various consciousnesses (assuming there are several, which is not obvious, because in some interpretations time-consciousness is transcendental and not empirical). Only due to the demand of coherence there emerges objective (temporal) order, narratives, and individual and collective stories and memories. Although it springs from the (intentional) time-consciousness, this objective order is not obviously tensed itself – in the sense that it does not bear any features like past, present or future. This objective time may be a B-theoretical kind of time, and express an anti-realist view and its temporal aspects are the relations between the *Zeitobjekte*, namely, *earlier_than*, *later_than*, and *simultaneous_with*. However, we may envision this objective time order also in its relation with the subjective time-consciousness. If so, then each temporal phase of a *Zeitobjekt*, has a different tense value. As Husserl also argues, one and the same *Zeitobjekt* can be either in the realm of retention, protention, etc., depending on the time-point of evaluation. Under this view Husserl's objective time order entails a relativist view: as above, the assumptions of realism and coherence clearly hold. Neutrality also holds; none of the temporal phases in particular has a privileged status. Absolutism does not hold, however; the composition of reality IS irreducibly relative, namely, relative to the time-point of evaluation. However, the case may be not so clear-cut in Fine's typology as it seems; also anti-realism and standard realism admit a sense in which the constitution of reality might be relative and

² It is a pity that Fine does not discuss such questions, but remains mainly within the confines of an analysis of McTaggart.

“it can sometimes be difficult to keep the views apart (cf. Fine 2005: 279).” In this case, it is quite difficult. However, I tend to the view that this is a case of non-standard realism. Fine concludes this discussion as follows (Fine 2005: 280): “But the proper formulation of the intended claim is that reality is constituted, at each time *t*, by the fact that *t* is present. This [relativism, WK] is quite different [from anti-realism, WK]. The facts that belong to reality are genuinely tensed though their belonging to reality is a relative matter whereas, for the anti-realist, the facts that belong to reality are tenseless while their belonging is an absolute matter.” Considering that Husserl’s objective world, facts, and *Zeitobjekte* are genuinely tensed, tense/time being their precondition, I think that this is indeed a case of non-standard realism, namely, relativism.

Husserl also distinguishes, thirdly, an ‘absolute time-consciousness’, which forms the condition for all changes in the subjective time-consciousness. This absolute time-consciousness is like a ‘stream’. Zahavi (2002: 86) says: “The stream is not influenced by temporal change; it does not arise or perish in objective time, nor does it endure like a temporal object. Occasionally, Husserl will speak of the stream as if it were atemporal or supratemporal, but this should not be misunderstood. The stream is atemporal in the sense of not being in time, but it is not atemporal in the sense of lacking any reference to time. On the contrary, the stream is always present, and this standing now (*nunc stans*) of the stream is itself a kind of temporality. To put it differently, inner time-consciousness is not simply a consciousness of time, it is itself a temporal process of a very special nature.” Husserl himself says: “Dieser Fluss ist etwas, das wir nach dem Konstituierten so nennen, aber es ist nichts zeitlich "Objektives". Es ist die absolute Subjektivität und hat die absoluten Eigenschaften eines im Bilde als "Fluss" zu Bezeichnenden, in einem Aktualitätspunkt, Urquellpunkt, "Jetzt" Entspringenden usw. Im Aktualitätserlebnis haben wir den Urquellpunkt und eine Kontinuität von Nachhallmomenten. Für all das fehlen uns die Namen.” There has been a lot of discussion about the interpretation of this absolute inner time-consciousness (cf. Kortooms 2002). I think that it is in some respects similar to Plotinus’ idea of eternity. It is not divisible, it does not change in time, although it is a kind of *nunc stans*. Just as Plotinian eternity is on a higher level than ordinary time, and thereby a precondition or presupposition for human time, the Husserlian ‘stream’ is also the precondition for the subjective time-consciousness. Now what view on reality and time does this third kind of temporality entail? Does the reality, as seen from the perspective of this absolute time-consciousness, consist of tensed facts? Although the question sounds a bit strange, I would answer it with yes. It is due to the absolute time-consciousness that there is change in the subjective time-consciousness, and that there is time at all. The assumption of Neutrality does not seem to hold (as far as we can decide this with this vague idea of the absolute time-consciousness): the present time (*nunc stans*) is clearly privileged. Not only here is the present privileged, but in all Husserl’s work, the present, presence, reality, evidence and truth are closely related. As said before, Coherence is quite important in Husserl’s philosophy, and Absolutism probably also holds. Therefore, this absolute time-consciousness entails a standard realist view on time.

While Plotinus has two levels, Husserl even has three levels on which temporality plays a role. As discussed in last paragraph, the relation between the absolute time-consciousness and subjective time-consciousness is not so clear. The absolute level has a certain eternalist flavour attached to it: it is a stream, in-change, but nevertheless always remains the same, which is well-expressed by Zahavi as a *nunc stans*, an eternal present. According to Husserl this is the precondition for the subjective time-consciousness. However, just as with Plotinus, it remains a bit mysterious how from one level to the next, real change appears on the stage.

Although the relation between the subjective time-consciousness and the objective temporal order seems more clear-cut, it is also problematic. The subjective consciousness is intended at temporal objects, and keeps them 'for a while' within consciousness, first in protention, next as sensation, finally as retention. This 'for a while' and this order of appearance, however, suggests some measure outside and independent from subjective consciousness itself.

Anyway, like everyone who theorizes about time, Husserl meets serious problems when trying to console his various levels of time. For Fine similar problems hold, although he does not even pretend to solve them. For instance, on page 288 he says: "We have assembled all the relevant nows, so to speak, even if there remains some question as to why the relationship between them should be taken to constitute a genuine form of succession." In this fragment Fine proposes a theory that can deal with 'the passage of time'. However, this theory only *concur*s with a time theory in which there is 'a passage of time', but about how to *explain* this passage, Fine remains silent.

4. Conclusion

My first conclusion, or observation, is that it has turned out to be quite difficult to discuss neo-Platonist and phenomenological philosophy in analytic philosophical terms, and even more so, when hoping for interesting results. Arguments, visions and themes of discussion by Fine appeared to be only slightly relevant for the hypostases of Plotinus and the three levels of time(-consciousness) of Husserl. With Plotinus and Husserl emphasis, ways of reasoning and domains of interest seem to be too different from Fine to come to very interesting confrontations. Yes, we saw how we can measure the two and three levels of temporality of Plotinus and Husserl by Fine's typology, but the feeling remained that we did thereby not grasp the Plotinian, Husserlian or Finean philosophies of time very thoroughly or deeply. As we could expect, Plotinian idealist eternity, turned out to be anti-realist in Fine's terms, while most of the other temporalities expressed standard realism. Some temporalities belonged quite straightforwardly to one of Fine's types, while others, for instance Husserlian objective time, were harder to categorise. Nothing of this came as a big surprise, although we noticed when discussing Plotinian eternity, that anti-realism may come in different sorts, and we could add other assumptions into the typology.

The only type of Fine we did not meet was fragmentalism. Coherence was implicitly or explicitly valued highly by both Plotinus and Husserl. Especially for Husserl it would be an interesting exercise to see what it would mean when we would drop the assumption of coherence. The shining light of the present would fragment into a myriad of presents, unordered, and disconnected from each other. This fragmentation would also affect coherence within and between persons. Intersubjectivity, identity and continuity would all become even more problematic than they already are in Husserl's philosophy.

One of the core insights of analytic philosophy into time is that there are two visions on time, that are essentially incompatible (A-theory and B-theory). It is striking that this incompatibility is not problematised explicitly by Plotinus, while he comprises eternity and human time in the same gesture. Husserl chooses a kind of solution, by trying to 'translate' B-theory into A-theory, though he doesn't seem to be fully aware of the fundamentals of the problem.

What Fine actually does, is trying to keep the best of the two theories, and occupying a middle position with his fragmentalism. Husserl and Plotinus both have various kinds of temporality each one of them with its own kind of realism or anti-realism. Husserl and Plotinus then are

confronted with the problem how to connect the various temporalities within one model. Whether they have succeeded in their ways of connecting is a difficult question that I can not further explore here. Fine of course succeeds, having only one kind of realism. For him the problem lies elsewhere: by having only one level, he loses some of the capacities of other types of realism (or anti-realism). For instance, as I mentioned before, Fine does not even attempt to deal with 'the passage of time', any further than showing that his model is compatible with explanations of passage.

By taking a look at Plotinus and Husserl we already found that many themes from them and the philosophy of time are not dealt with by Fine, for instance the passage of time, but also the issue of 'eternity', and the divisibility of time. The other way round, by taking a look at Plotinus and Husserl, from a Finean perspective, we become especially aware, as I said, of the 'connection problems' between levels. So, in conclusion, a confrontation between analytic, phenomenological and idealist philosophy brings up some interesting issues, but the three fields lie too far apart, and the philosophy of time comprises too many possible themes, that a small comparison, as done in this paper, can be very fruitful.

5. Literature

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