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PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

GOING BEYOND HUSSERL'S CONCEPTION OF THE  
STRUCTURE OF INTERNAL TIME CONSCIOUSNESS

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Edmund Husserl has accounted for internal time consciousness by proposing a formal structure as a condition of its possibility. This structure of internal time consciousness accounts for the original primordial flow. Husserl concluded that there can be no consciousness without this original flow. Thus, to Husserl, consciousness is necessarily temporal consciousness.

Husserl's version of time consciousness and its underlying structures, however, cannot account for all imaginable forms of consciousness; in fact, it does not even account for all *human* forms of consciousness. That is, there are familiar states of consciousness that cannot be accounted for by Husserl's formal structure and which conflict with his claim that time, for consciousness, must always flow. It is the purpose of this paper to explore these states and to suggest alterations to the structure of internal time consciousness that will open up new possibilities for our understanding of time-consciousness universally.

### **Husserl's Consistent Claim**

Husserl tells us that "*every* subjective process has its internal temporality."<sup>1</sup> Most fundamentally, according to Husserl, the formal structure of internal time consciousness accounts for time-consciousness, which, in turn, accounts for synthesizing. Subsequently, synthesizing is the basis for all forms of subjectivity. It is, in fact, the underlying formal structure of intentionality itself.<sup>2</sup> Thus, according to Husserl, the flowing nature of internal consciousness is necessary not only for time-consciousness, but consciousness generally. Husserl cannot imagine these relationships and structures being any other way. On this basis, he concludes that

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, (hereafter, CM) trans. Dorian Cairns (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1950), 41. Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 65.

his structure of internal time consciousness is necessary, invariable, and complete. These strong claims can be found virtually unchanged throughout Husserl's career.<sup>3</sup>

### **Phenomena That Challenge Husserl's Claim**

Against these strong claims, there are states of human consciousness that alter and even disrupt the primal flow of temporal consciousness. For example: confabulation, dissociation, and absorption.

#### Confabulation

Psychologists have found that memories can be formed that do not contain chronological information.<sup>4</sup> To cope with this loss, subjects tend to invent chronology in order to make sense of such memories. This is called confabulation or fabrication. This situation, however, is neither unusual nor pathological. Confabulation is extremely commonplace, even healthy.<sup>5</sup> Typically, confabulation results from a disorientation in time or place.<sup>6</sup> It involves all the tenses of experience and reflects a disruption of how personal temporality is experienced.<sup>7</sup>

Confabulation shows that chronological order can be *missing* from a conscious experience. In response, the mind confabulates to add chronology back into the memory. This repair, whether it is successful in discovering the objective order of events or not, makes use of the

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<sup>3</sup> Early expression of this concept: John B. Brough, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893- 1917)* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991), 102, 306-307; Middle expression: Toine Kortooms, *Phenomenology of Time: Edmund Husserl's Analysis of Time-Consciousness* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 2002), 208. Kortooms cites (*Husserliana* XXXIII 316-17); Late expression: Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1950), 41, 44, 45, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Bortolotti and Rochelle E. Cox. "'Faultless' Ignorance: Strengths and Limitations of Epistemic Definitions of Confabulation," *Consciousness and Cognition* 18 (2009): 954.

<sup>5</sup> Thalia Wheatley, "Everyday Confabulation," in *Confabulation: Views from Neuroscience, Psychiatry, Psychology, and Philosophy*, ed. William Hirstein (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 219.

<sup>6</sup> Gianfranco Dalla Barba, "Temporal Consciousness and Confabulation: Escape From Unconscious Explanatory Idols," in *Confabulation: Views from Neuroscience, Psychiatry, Psychology, and Philosophy*, ed. William Hirstein (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 224.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

logical order that is retained within memories that lack chronology as well as other background knowledge. This indicates that extended periods of time can pass during which an altered non-temporal mental state occurs. This state can be explored phenomenologically.

### Dissociation

Music can alter conscious. In *some* cases, music causes dissociation, and in the extreme of dissociation, even trance. Dissociation is often experienced after listening to a piece of music repetitively.<sup>8</sup> But we have all experienced it to some degree when we notice that music helps us to pass the time. Dissociation is described as a cutting off of consciousness from the world *and* from itself. It involves an alteration or insulation of normal mental processes.<sup>9</sup> The subject withdraws and detaches.<sup>10</sup> Extreme cases of dissociation become instances of trance states. Dissociation is also described as a dulling of consciousness or even as holding consciousness at bay. It involves a distancing-from rather than a fascination-with a stimulus. Subjectively, surroundings fade and seem unreal.<sup>11</sup> Subjects have described dissociation as “hard to explain,” as “changing perception of the world,” as “altering my perception of reality,” and as an “out of body experience,”<sup>12</sup> Others described it as a “relief from self” and a “relief from being.”<sup>13</sup>

It is quite common to use music to “block out” thought, to not think anything at all, or to think less. Music has the potential to reduce critical thought.<sup>14</sup> Music can also attenuate or eliminate awareness of surroundings, be used to “blot out the environment,” and to “put the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>9</sup> L. D. Butler, and O. Palesh, “Spellbound: Dissociation in The Movies.” *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*, 5:2 (2004): 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Herbert, *Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 100.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 62.

world into the superfluous background.”<sup>15</sup> Subjects with this experience also report dissolving-into or combining-with their music.<sup>16</sup> Music that is heavily rhythmic and repetitive is more likely to produce dissociation and trance.

Dissociation is thus a reduction of consciousness that produces a reduction or loss of awareness, especially temporal awareness. At the extreme, the trance state represents a complete loss of consciousness. This involves, most relevantly, a lack of awareness for *new* sensations. During dissociation, music becomes so familiar and easy to anticipate, that a kind of limit is approached. At this limit, the potential for new profiles ceases, and the new is ignored, intentions are not formed; for consciousness, they are simply gone. Yet, paradoxically, no other intentions replace them. This explains why dissociation is described as a *reduction* in awareness. It is a state that, as it increases, progressively approaches the obliteration of consciousness.

Dissociation is quite common. We have all experienced the way that music can help pass the time. Some of us may not have experienced full trance, but most of us have gotten close. We have all experienced the time-altering and consciousness-numbing effects of familiar music to some degree.

### Absorption

Absorption is different from dissociation. It occurs with *increased* rather than decreased focus. Subjects experience fascination, immersion, balance, pleasant dreaminess, and of course, absorption.<sup>17</sup> There is a heightening of imaginative involvement. In cases where the subject has musical training, an analytic manner of listening can be pursued.<sup>18</sup> *This* can facilitate absorption

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Bartel, “Can Musical Understanding Be Grounded In The Phenomenology Of Musical Experience?” Paper presented at The 10th Annual Oxford Philosophy Graduate Conference, Oxford, UK, available [www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/1883/Musical\\_Understanding.pdf](http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/1883/Musical_Understanding.pdf) (11 November 2006); see also

as fascination grows with musical detail or techniques of performance. Effort, focus, and attention increase for the listener.<sup>19</sup> Rather than dissolving into the music, one lords over the experience as if one is in control of what is happening, of what is coming next.<sup>20</sup> We have all done this. We tend to play conductor in our minds, or drummer, or guitarist. We begin to pretend that our thoughts and actions are *causing* the music to happen. Knowing what is coming next is one of the most enjoyable elements of music listening. This is why music becomes more enjoyable as it becomes more familiar. And, this aspect of listening to music leads to absorption. Absorption *always* involves anticipation of what is about to happen in the music.

Absorption, like dissociation, also causes the listener to lose track of time. It can be difficult for absorbed listeners to estimate the amount of time that has passed after they exit the altered state. Once the listener realizes how much time has elapsed, he or she can be surprised because it actually seemed longer or shorter. This alteration in time consciousness is called temporal compression, and may be caused by a loss of chronological order in memory.<sup>21</sup>

In my own experience, it seems that I can remember a familiar song well enough that I can begin to explore it as a whole. As I listen, I focus on this or that note. I focus on a rhythm that is about to change; I hear it before it changes. Imagination begins to obscure and replace perception. I anticipate notes and beats before they arrive, but when they do arrive, I may have already moved on. In this way, I focus less on what I'm hearing at any specific time, and this lack of focus obscures perception. The background, containing everything that I am not focused upon, recedes. I can even lose track of my body as my thoughts become completely absorbed with the music.

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[www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/graduate/graduate\\_conference/graduate\\_conference\\_2006](http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/graduate/graduate_conference/graduate_conference_2006) (11 December 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Herbert, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

## Phenomenology and Absorption

It takes more than one presentation to identify an object, whether that object be visually, tangibly, or aurally perceived. We take in different aspects with each new profile. In this way, more and more is understood about the object. This shows that there is additive change that comes with repeated perceivings of the same object. There is *accumulation*. Yet, something *additional* starts to happen when this accumulation continues to build toward an extreme. New features begin to arise. New details start to replace old ones. Being either overwhelmed or bored with details, we start to focus on new and more subtle features while losing focus on others. During the phenomena of absorption, as with dissociation, music becomes extremely familiar and easy to anticipate. A point is approached with absorbed listening at which nothing new is learned or experienced. Yet, the sameness is *appreciated* rather than ignored. I intend the musical performance, but I do not experience its aspects as new, or arriving, or receding into the past. I begin to appreciate extended parts of the music as a whole and in greater depth, my sense of time becomes warped as a *direct* result.

It seems that being able to experience in advance what is *coming into* experience is the primary cause of both of these altered states. Therefore, intentions about the future can be, at least partially, and in some way, filled in advance! The more these intentions are filled, the more pronounced the altered state becomes. Increasing availability of future consciousnesses produces increased deviation away from normal states of mind. As complete familiarity is approached, a new state of consciousness is approached as well. Near this limit, while I listen to my music, I completely block out the surrounding world. I do not think about what came before the music started, and I do not think about what is coming after it stops. The music becomes my world as I am completely absorbed into it. My imagination fills the future and obscures *everything* else.

## These Altered States Contradict Husserl's Claim

Both dissociation and absorption produce an alteration in the primordial flow of time; this is not a disruption of world time; it is a disruption of inner time. As redundant confirmation, confabulation that repairs a non-chronological memory is evidence that a disruption of this sort has occurred in the past. These two states, however, are difficult to describe phenomenologically if Husserl's formal structure remains inflexible. The inactivity of trance, on the one hand, and the hyperactivity of absorption, on the other hand, can only be accounted for if alterations to this structure are made. If Husserl's structure is essential and unalterable, and if all consciousness is temporal consciousness, then no phenomenon involves variation in the primordial perception of time. But, dissociation and absorption *do* involve variation in the primordial perception of time. Therefore, it is *not* the case that Husserl's structure is essential and unalterable. Husserl has set a boundary that human experience already, normally crosses.

Because these altered states involve temporal compression, trance, and complete loss of background, effects that speak to an alteration of inner consciousness, it is *not* the case that they merely involve a disconnect between world time and inner time.<sup>22</sup> It is the flow of inner time itself, consciousness itself, that is being altered by these phenomena. Yet, counter to Husserl's expectations, with absorption, this stopping does not entail the elimination of consciousness all together. Husserl's structure does not account for these states because it is specifically designed to describe and account for *flowing* consciousness. Husserl states firmly and repeatedly that consciousness *must* flow. His proposed structure thus, does double duty. Not only does it account for the consciousness of inner time, but it accounts for consciousness itself. So, it is designed to

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<sup>22</sup> A disruption merely in world time, without a disruption of inner time, would be like watching a movie that suddenly speeds up or slows down. You, the viewer, would perceive this unusual scene without being affected internally. The world would seem to "flow" in unusual ways, but your consciousness would remain steady and unchanging. In contrast, absorption involves a change in consciousness, internally. Even though this change is noticeable, it is not reducible to a change merely in world time.



combine consciousness with temporal flow from the start. Or rather, it is designed to account only for one kind of consciousness, the flowing kind. Consciousness that does not flow, therefore, is not accounted for by this structure.

### **Formal Structures Accounting for Consciousness**

To account for absorption and dissociation, therefore, Husserl's structure must be altered. To begin, I will first describe Husserl's structure in some detail and then go on to propose some alterations. Those who are familiar with Husserl's own drawings will recognize the two-dimensional diagram in Figure 1A. Figure 1B is my attempt to fill in some missing details, which I think is helpful in understanding the basic concepts being illustrated.

Within either of these diagrams, each column of the diagram accounts for one moment of consciousness. This is a mental time-slice called a *living present*. Several living presents are shown as vertical columns lined up in succession. Each living present possesses a vertical axis that mimics an objective two-dimensional timeline including a past, present, and future. Successive living presents are lined up according to an objective chronological order. Thus, the vertical axis of each living present mimics the horizontal axis. So, the experience of each moment *includes* an awareness of the past and future.

Along the vertical axis of each living present are situated chronologically-ordered intentions. In the middle is the primal impression, which is the intention that accounts for the subject's experience of the present moment, or objects in the present. Above the primal impression are *protentions* that represent objects in the future. Below are *retentions* that represent objects in the past within entire, past living presents. That is, retentions are past moments captured in their entirety. Protentions are empty intentions that are lined up in a way

that mimics a temporal coming-into-being, and retentions are filled (though fading) intentions that are lined up in a way that mimics a temporal passing-out-of-being. Protentions are analogous to but more fundamental than anticipations, likewise with retentions and memories. The living present, thus, contains a chronologically ordered set of intentions that mimics the objective timeline.

The flow of time can be experienced because intentions in successive living presents are identified. Diagonal dashed lines in the diagram show the nature of these identifications. Thus, what was just future is now identified as present and what was just present is now identified as past. This connects moments of time together and prevents the mental isolation of one moment from the others and it also allows time to flow rather than to be experienced in a staccato fashion.

In later formulations, primarily from what are called the “C-Mss,” which are posthumously published notes written during the last years of Husserl’s life, three important components were added to the structure: the obscuring of retentions, two stages for protentions, and a new z-axis that measures the degree of fulfillment for intentions. Figure 2 shows the first of these alterations, which involves the manner in which retentions fade. Husserl suggested that there is an obscuring of older retentions by newer retentions similar to the way that a geographical horizon causes distant objects to be obscured by near objects. There can be any number of retentions, but at some point, there are too many to hold in one consciousness. At that point, old retentions are obscured by more recent retentions and are no longer in consciousness at all. This is the retentional horizon.

In some sense, an obscured or missing intention is darker than dark. Once a retention is obscured, consciousness is *completely* unaware of it. As retentions build up and begin to obscure the oldest retentions, the resulting horizon effectively eliminates the oldest retentions from

consciousness. Even though they are potentially recoverable as memories, their elimination from the living present is absolute for consciousness.

Husserl also speaks about a *protentional* horizon,<sup>23</sup> and this entails a similar obscuring for protentions as there is for retentions. Thus, the diagrams are somewhat symmetrical top-to-bottom.

As compared with retentions, protentions are by nature more limited in number. Husserl discussed two main stages for protentions: clarifying and confirming.<sup>24</sup> These stages (Fig. 3), are *classes* of protention and are not an explicit limit upon the number of protentions. The number of protentions, however, can grow if consciousness has some way of seeing multiple stages of fulfillment in advance. One of the best examples of this is involved with the enjoyment of a familiar melody. Not only can multiple future notes be *anticipated*, but they can also be *protended*. My own versions of these diagrams involve three levels of protention and of retention, but a larger or smaller number of either is possible.

Husserl's final addition to the structure of internal time consciousness was the addition of a third dimension to the diagram (Fig. 4). Because protentions and retentions can have varying degrees of fulfillment, a z-axis is effectively added.<sup>25</sup> The point of maximal fulfillment for each living present represents those intentions that are experienced in consciousness as fully present,

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<sup>23</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 44. Husserl states, "Every subjective process has a process 'horizon', which changes with the alteration of the nexus of consciousness to which the process belongs and with the alteration of the process itself from phase to phase of its flow—an intentional horizon of reference to potentialities of consciousness that belong to the process itself. There belongs to every external perception its reference from the "genuinely perceived" sides of the object of perception to the sides "also meant"—not yet perceived, but only anticipated and, at first, with a nonintentional emptiness (as the sides that are "coming" now perceptually): a continuous protention, which, with each phase of the perception, has a new sense. Furthermore, the perception has horizons made up of other possibilities of perception, as perceptions that we could have." Underlining added.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 45. See also, Neal DeRoo, "A Positive Account of Protention and its Implications for Internal Time-Consciousness," in *Epistemology, Archaeology, Ethics: Current Investigations of Husserl's Corpus*, eds. Pol Vandavelde and Sebastian Luft (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 102-103. See also, DeRoo, "The Future Matters: Protention as more than Inverse Retention," *Bulletin d'Analyse Phénoménologique* IV 7 (2008); and DeRoo, "Protention as More Than Inverse Retention," a paper presented at the Husserl Circle conference, 26 June 2008, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI; and *Husserliana* XI, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Kortooms, 159, 165-173. See also, *Husserliana* XXXIII, 30.

neither coming into nor going out of being. The diagram also reveals that retentions and protentions each possess a *true* horizon, the points at which distant future and past extend beyond the reach of consciousness.

According to Husserl, this structure is fundamental to consciousness generally. And, if anything disrupts this structure, consciousness is lost.

### Moving Beyond Husserl's Structure

By my own phenomenological investigation, I have found that the following alterations to Husserl's structure are needed to account for dissociation and absorption.

During dissociation, the listener becomes numb to *new* sounds. This reduces the formation of protentions. As dissociation deepens, protentions eventually disappear. During this process, the primal impression and any lingering retentions lose their degree of filling. Diagrammatically (Fig. 5), this means that the protentional horizon of the living present begins to contract and then disappear. In the z-axis, note how the cross-section changes at the bottom of the figure. The primal impression widens from a peak to a plateau even as it loses altitude, that is, magnitude in the z-axis. Even though the primal impression is still the intention with the *most* fulfillment within each living present, its degree of fulfillment fades to nothing as trance is entered.

During absorption, in contrast, the listener begins to *anticipate* future notes and rhythms in the music. This alone would not alter time consciousness! Therefore, since inner time is altered, it is probably the case that the listener actually begins to *protend* future notes and rhythms. Anticipation begins to obscure sensation, and the source of protentions becomes the imagination rather than sensation. This kind of protention,<sup>26</sup> unlike normal protentions, can possess unusually

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<sup>26</sup> I call this a pseudo-protention, which is a protention that originates from and is filled by imagination rather than sensation.

high levels of fulfillment. Because the magnitude of fulfillment is the means by which the primal impression is known to be the present, rather than the past or future, it follows that unusually strong protentions will be indistinguishable from the primal impression in such a way that chronological order can be lost.

Diagrammatically (Fig. 6), this means that protentions are lifted up to the level of the primal impression in the z-axis, which begins to both extend the peak of the primal impression into a plateau and shorten and steepen the protentional horizon. One key difference from dissociation is that overall fulfillment for the plateau is not reduced, but remains high. This accounts for the mental hyperactivity of absorption compared to the mental inactivity of trance.

Since absorption involves the fading of all background phenomena, this is represented in the diagram as the reduction and even loss of the protentional and retentional horizons. The result, at the extreme, is a state of consciousness in which *all* intentions have risen to the level of the primal impression. These intentions are experienced in an all-at-once fashion! All other intentions are missing entirely. The past and future are obscured by the ‘now’ and logical order replaces chronological order.

The extreme of dissociation is trance, but the extreme of absorption has no name. I *would* call it “hyper-protention,” but because these protentions are artificial in some sense, coming from imagination, I prefer the term “pseudo-hyper-protention.”

### **Conclusions**

Husserl has sought to limit us to a rather mundane form of time-consciousness. However, it seems that human phenomena cannot be contained so narrowly. While Husserl’s structure

accounts well for everyday human consciousness, it cannot account for time-altering phenomena, phenomena that are quite common.

I conclude that Husserl's proposed structure of internal time consciousness lies in the middle of a continuum between a form of mental cessation and death on the low end, and a form of mental hyperactivity on the high end. While Husserl gives us an idealized form of temporal consciousness that is mostly passive with regard to protentions,<sup>27</sup> the more active the mind becomes with regard to certain activities, the more protentions can become imaginative. Imaginative protentions, however, can be had in advance and can therefore possess maximized levels of fulfillment. This claim will likely be controversial, but I think that this is the best way to account for the time-altering effects of dissociation and absorption. Presumably, if imagination could not produce pseudo-protentions, and if such protentions could not extend the peak of maximal fulfillment into a plateau, then absorption would not alter the experience of inner time. Therefore, it seems that a new field of exploration must be opened up to expand the structure of internal time consciousness into a continuum of states of inner consciousness ranging from pseudo-hyper-protention on the hyperactive end down into full trance on the hypoactive end. Husserl's structure, then, would best describe a point somewhere between these two extremes.

These concepts could be useful not only in better understanding *human* phenomenology, but could also lend a hand to fleshing out Neo-platonic<sup>28</sup> and Christian conceptions of non-

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<sup>27</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 41. Husserl states, "If we consider the fundamental form of synthesis, namely identification, we encounter it first of all as an all-ruling, passively flowing synthesis, in the form of the continuous consciousness of internal time." Underlining added.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Plotinus, *Ennead* III.7.11.45-48; III.7.3.12-17; III.7.3.34-39. See, Plotinus, *Ennead III*, Trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 341, 303, 305 (respectively); see also, Richard Sorabji, "Myths About Non-propositional Thought," in *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy Presented to G. E. L. Owen*, eds. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Craven Nussbaum (Bath, Great Britain: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1982), 310-311; see also, Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2006), 137; and Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2007), ch. 4.

temporal and non-discursive thought.<sup>29</sup> If human phenomenology can involve pseudo-hyper-protention, then it seems likely that a *true* hyper-protention is a coherent notion. If so, then what has been opened here is the possibility for a phenomenological study of non-temporal consciousness universally. Perhaps it will even be possible to propose a phenomenological structure for “the possession all at once of illimitable life.” While this will no longer be phenomenology, properly speaking, it will be no less legitimate or useful. Using human phenomenology as an analogical model could be useful for exploring the possibility and nature of other forms of consciousness. This would allow us to be somewhat less preoccupied with our own experience of time so that we can be more objective regarding what is possible.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, see Augustine, *Confessions*, XI; Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, V.6; and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. 10, 14; see also, Paul Helm, *Eternal God*, 2d ed. (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

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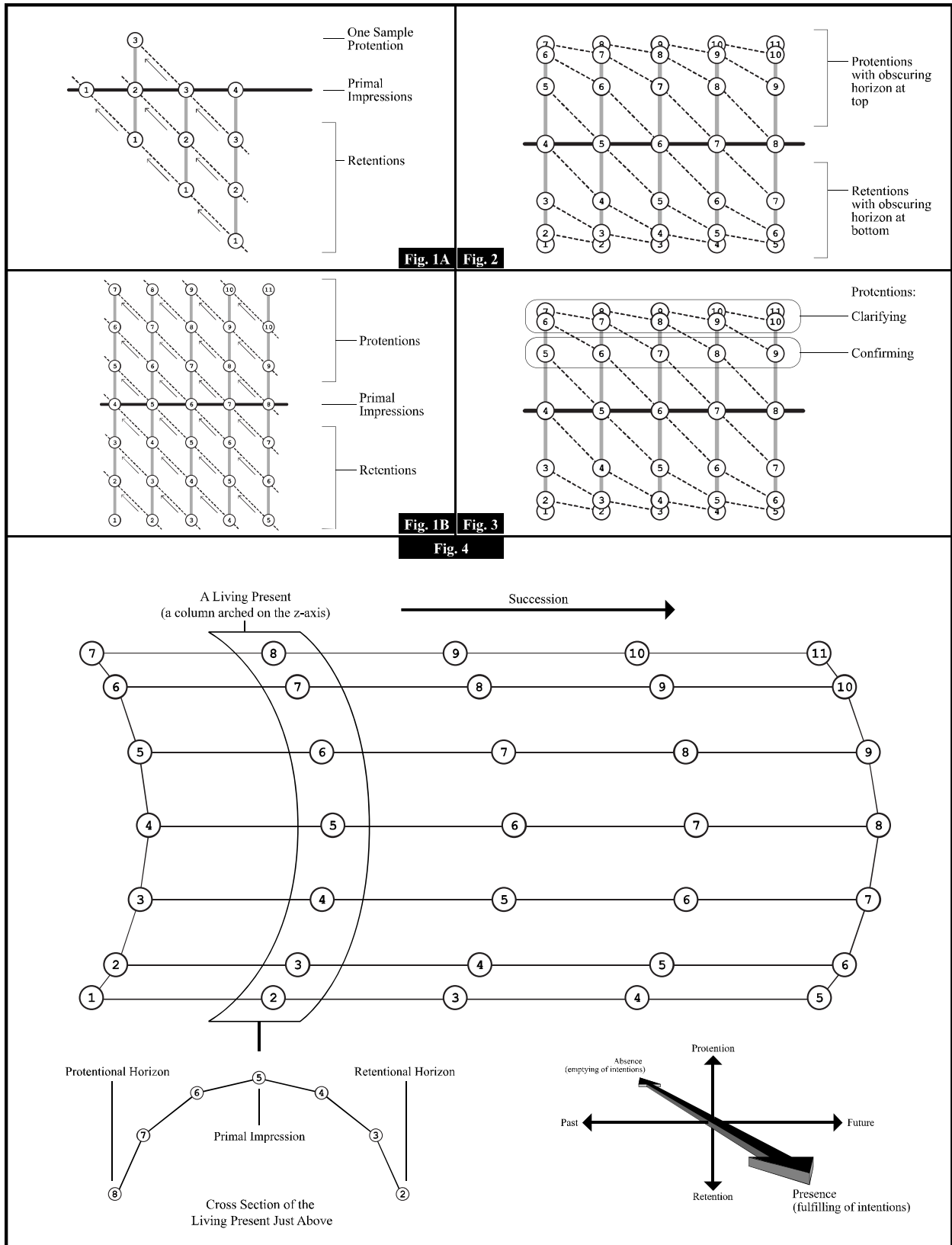




Fig. 5

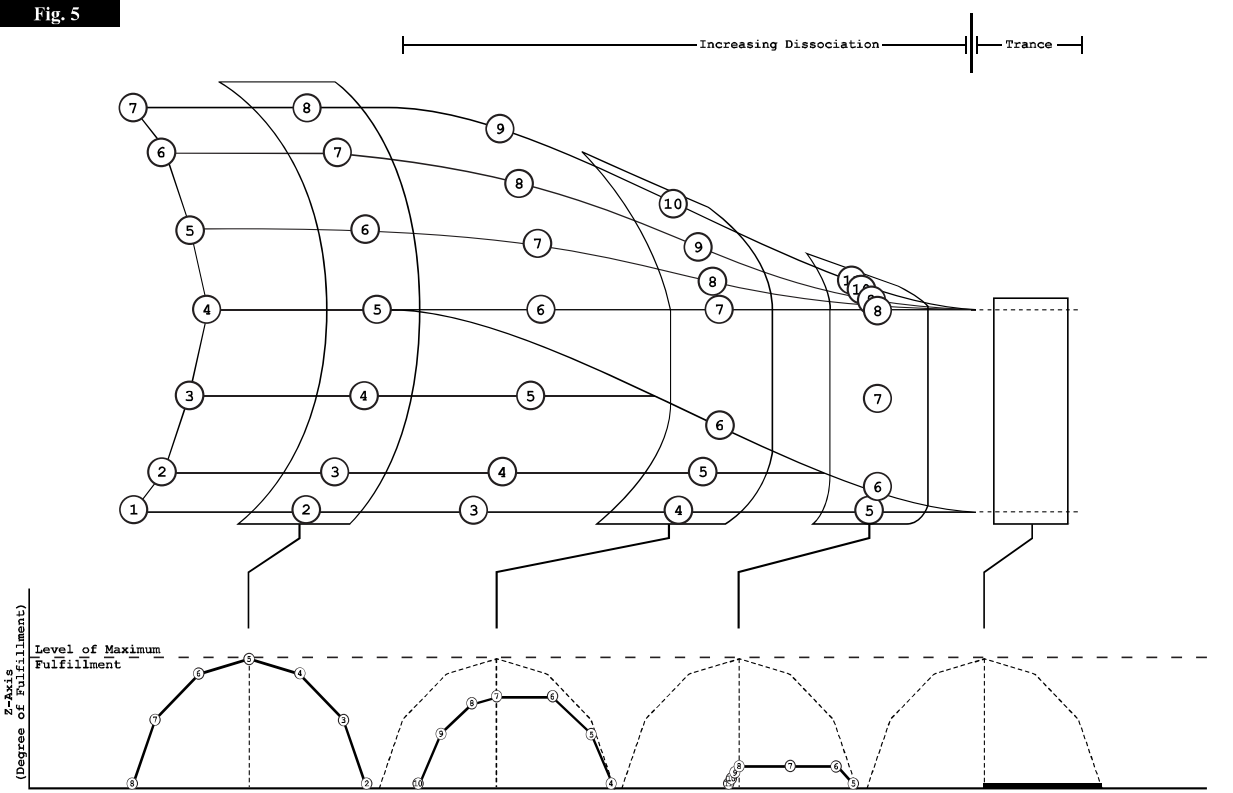


Fig. 6

