Temporality as a fundamental concern of twentieth-century continental thought had its roots in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Although time occupied Husserl throughout most of his philosophical career, it was his lectures and sketches from early in the century, eventually published in 1928 under Martin Heidegger’s editorship, that influenced later figures in the phenomenological tradition, such as Heidegger himself, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Husserl described time as the most important of all phenomenological problems, and also as the most difficult. The time Husserl investigates is not time understood as an empirical phenomenon tied to the movement of celestial bodies and measured by clocks. His interest is in the consciousness of time. Husserlian phenomenology is marked by a focus on consciousness as “intentional,” by which Husserl meant not (simply) purposeful conscious activity but the directedness of every conscious experience toward something. Thus a perception is the perception of a bird in flight or of a melody playing on the radio, a memory is the memory of a dinner I had last week. The consciousness of time, Husserl thought, is an exceptionally important and complex form of intentionality, involved in virtually every aspect of conscious life. It not only exemplifies intentionality, but makes it possible in its many forms.

The facets of Husserl’s phenomenology of temporal awareness match those of the phenomenon he investigates. Since acts of consciousness intend objects and since temporal objects play such a prominent role in our experience, Husserl has much to say about temporal objectivity. The most obvious sorts of temporal objects are those we encounter in perception. Perceived objects, whether relatively stable or caught up in change, are temporal because they endure, succeed one another or exist simultaneously, and display themselves in temporal modes of appearance. The restaurant in which I am enjoying a dinner appears to me as now existing, as having existed in the past, and as having an indefinite future ahead of it. I also experience the dinner itself in ever-shifting modes of now, past, and future, although, compared to the room in which it occurs, the dinner is a short-lived and temporally unique event. It is important to note that now, past, and future are not static containers, nor are they parts of temporal objects, or even points of time; they are, rather, the ways in which temporal objects and the points of time they occupy appear to us.

Among these modes of appearance, Husserl singles out the now for special attention. He is particularly concerned to avoid the presumption that we can be conscious
only of what is now, that since past and future are, respectively, no longer and not yet, they are simply not available to consciousness. This prejudice of the now would leave us imprisoned in the present, forever locked away from past and future. Husserl argues to the contrary that temporal objects as they actually endure or run off appear as now, past, and future. Indeed, if they appeared only as now, they would never appear as temporal objects. The now is not sealed up within itself; it is in dynamic relation to the past and to what is to come. As such, now, past, and future are relative to one another. The now “is a relative concept and refers to a ‘past,’ just as ‘past’ refers to the ‘now’” (Husserl 1991: 70). The now always has its fringe or horizon of past and future.

Although now, past, and future are mutually dependent for their sense, the now enjoys a “privileged” status (Husserl 1991: 26). It serves as the point of orientation for our conscious lives. What is past appears as past in relation to the now, and it is in relation to the now that what is future appears as future. The now is also privileged in the sense that it is open to the new. It is the “generative point” (Husserl 1991: 26), consciousness’s moment of hospitality in which new moments of an object, or perhaps an altogether fresh object, present themselves. If we experienced nothing as now, we would be severed from this cornucopia of life. We could not even be said to be aware of the no longer or of the not yet, since we would never experience anything new that could become old. The spring of our experience would dry up.

The now is equally “the source-point of all temporal positions” (Husserl 1991: 74). To play host to a new object-point is to welcome a new time-point. “Each actually present now creates a new time-point because it creates . . . a new object point” (Husserl 1991: 68). Whatever appears at the new time-point will remain forever fixed to that point as it slips into the past. Hence the now is also the source of our experience of the temporal relation of before and after. Once a being or event has actually presented itself in the now, it will forever after be something that came before, and followed, something else. Furthermore, if the now is the source of new temporal positions and of the objects occupying them, and if individuation depends on appearing at a definite point in time, then the now “is a continuous moment of individuation” (Husserl 1991: 68). Finally, while the individual object has its abiding place in the sequence of temporal points, it has an ever-changing location in relation to the actual now. “Time is fixed, and yet time flows” (Husserl 1991: 67).

Not every object of consciousness is a temporal object. There are timeless objects such as the Pythagorean theorem that are no more bound to a particular moment in time than they are attached to a particular place in space. Even in these cases, however, time plays a role: it is only against the background of the temporality pervading the rest of our experience that we intend such objects as escaping time.

Husserl is not only concerned with the way in which temporal objects appear. He also investigates the constitution or structure of acts that enables them to bring temporally extended objects to appearance. If a melody I am hearing appears to me as in part now, in part past, and in part to come, then each phase of my act of hearing it must not only be conscious of the now-phase of the object but also reach out beyond the now to elapsed and future phases. If I did not preserve a consciousness of the elapsed tones as they slip ever more deeply into the past, I would hear only a single note and never the whole melody or even an extended part of it. Similarly, I must be open to further experience of the melody, or at least to the experience of something
that will follow it. But preservation of what has elapsed and anticipation of what is to come will not by themselves account for the perception of the temporal object. For that to occur, presentation and anticipation must be tempered by modification. If I were simply to preserve the elapsed notes of the melody without modification, I would not hear a coherent melodic succession but “a disharmonious tangle of sound, as if I had struck simultaneously all the notes that had previously sounded” (Husserl 1991: 11).

Husserl claims that what makes possible this reaching out beyond the now, anticipating, preserving, and modifying, is that each momentary phase of the perceiving act possesses a threefold intentionality: primal impression, retention, and protention. Primal impression is the originary consciousness whose correlate is the phase of the object appearing as now. Primal impression is the moment of consciousness that presents a new object-phase in a new time-point as now, as there itself and in person. By contrast, retention, as Husserl sometimes says, is “perceptual” or impressional consciousness of the past. By this he means that it is the actual holding on to what has elapsed as it moves away from the now. Retention differs essentially from ordinary memory, as when I recall last week’s dinner in the restaurant. Memory is an independent act, like the perception on which it is founded and that it recalls. Retention, on the other hand, is not an act but a dependent moment of a phase of an act. And unlike ordinary memory, it is presentation of the past rather than re-presentation. Ordinary memory assumes that retention (and primal impression and protention) have already done their work, leaving behind a constituted act and object to which it can return. Memory can then re-present a past event or object by running through the already constituted perception of it again. Memory thus re-collcts the past, while retention “collects” it for the first time, and in immediate relation to the now. This collecting is intentional, a matter of consciousness and not like the retention of fluids in the body. Retention “transcends itself and posits something as being – namely, as being past – that does not really inhere in it” (Husserl 1991: 356). It is consciousness reaching out directly and originally to what has just elapsed. This means, too, that what is retained should not be thought of as an echo or afterimage: an echo is a present sound heard as now. The echo of a violin tone, for example, would not be the past violin tone but a weak present violin tone. To insist that what is retained is like an echo or image is an indication that the prejudice of the now – that one can experience only what is present – is still intact, while the whole thrust of Husserl’s notion of retention is that consciousness can be directly and immediately aware of what is no longer now.

Protention is the impressional openness of consciousness to the future. It is essential to the perception of a temporal object “that there be an intention directed toward what is to come, even if not toward continuations involving the same temporal object” (Husserl 1991: 240). Just as retention is not ordinary recollection, protention is not an act of expectation. Expectation is a kind of memory in reverse: a full-blown act that rehearses some experience one expects to have in the future. Protention, on the other hand, is a moment of the actual phase of the ongoing perception that immediately opens me up to further experience, usually of what I am presently experiencing, without running through it in advance as if it were present. Perhaps because the future is indeterminate, Husserl has less to say about protention than about primal impression and retention.
Husserl presses his investigation of time-consciousness still further. The inventory of temporal objects is not exhausted by things such as houses and melodies: the acts of consciousness intending them are equally temporal objects. This is true of every act, not just of perceptions. The act of thinking of the Pythagorean theorem is a temporal object, even if the theorem itself is not. Acts are immanent to consciousness rather than transcendent, of course, but, like melodies and other transcendent things, they begin, endure for a time, and come to an end. Acts are the immanent temporal unities through which we intend objects, temporal and otherwise, transcendent to them. They have a place in the internal time of consciousness rather than the “external” time of the world. Unless we freely undertake an explicit act of reflection, we do not perceive or thethically posit our acts, but Husserl insists that we are nevertheless aware of them implicitly, and in the temporal modes of now, past, and future. I perceive a house and at the same time nonthetically “experience” or consciously live through my perception as an act extended in immanent time.

The final question Husserl asks is how these immanent temporal unities become constituted, and how, in the process, we become aware of the unity of consciousness itself. His answer is that the constitution is the achievement of “the absolute time-constituting flow of consciousness” (Husserl 1991: 77). The absolute flow is not a metaphysical absolute; it is absolute in the sense that it is the ultimate stratum of conscious life, responsible for its own constitution, for the constitution of acts as immanent temporal unities, and, through them, of transcendent temporal objects. Husserl is reluctant to apply the temporal predicates of now, past, and future to the flow (he reserves them for the constituted acts and their objects), but he does understand the flow to have successive phases, one of which will be actual while others will be post-actual and pre-actual. Each of these phases has the intentional moments of primal impression, retention, and protention, which together account for the flow’s remarkable constitutional prowess. Thanks to them, the flow may be said to have a “double intentionality” (Husserl 1991: 84, 390): it constitutes the acts as temporal unities in internal time and it is conscious of itself as a single, ongoing flow. The two intentionalities require “one another like two sides of one and the same thing” (Husserl 1991: 87). Retention plays a particularly important role in the flow’s double intentionality. Through its retentional moments, the flow experiences the elapsing phases of itself as they slip away; but since these phases in their primal impressional moment originally intended phases of the act as now, it holds on to the elapsed phases of the act as well, and through them the past phases of what the act intended. Hence Husserl can claim that “there is one unique flow of consciousness” in which both the unity of the act in immanent time “and the unity of the flow of consciousness become constituted at once” (Husserl 1991: 84).

The absolute flow may be seen as Husserl’s way of explaining how the unity of my conscious life remains intact despite the myriad experiences I undergo. I live through innumerable acts, each with a finite duration, but their incessant beginnings and endings do not splinter my abiding sense of unity and identity. Husserl suggests that at the deepest level of my conscious being I am a flow, and in that sense my being is temporal being, but thanks to that very flow I remain one and the same being across the diaspora of time. Finally, Husserl’s notion of the flow reveals how the awareness of both temporal presence and absence are fundamental to my conscious life. The flow
flows away yet recaptures itself, becomes absent but overcomes its absence by intending its absent phases in their absence, not by making them present again in some surrogate. We are neither locked in presence nor condemned to wander in absence. Thanks to time-consciousness, our lives are complex tapestries of presence and absence, unity and diversity, and identity and difference.

Heidegger worked and studied under Edmund Husserl as his “assistant” and protégé. Husserl’s admiration for Heidegger was great enough that when Husserl decided to bring the core of his lectures on the phenomenology of internal time-consciousness into print, he asked Heidegger, then an associate professor at Marburg University, to edit them. Heidegger was, thus, steeped in Husserl’s phenomenology of internal time-consciousness. What is more, Heidegger places the phenomenology of time and temporality at the center of the project of *Being and Time*: “time needs to be explicated primordially as the horizon for the understanding of Being, and in terms of temporality as the Being of Dasein” (Heidegger 1962: 39). Heidegger embraces Husserl’s aspiration to work out an account of the temporality of the being of Dasein (us), that is, an account of how our experience is constituted temporally. His further project of developing an ontology of being in general on the basis of the temporality of Dasein’s being is quite alien to Husserl’s way of thinking. It is also, perhaps, less phenomenologically oriented. For both these reasons, we will focus on the first theme in Heidegger, his exploration of existential temporality.

As we saw above, according to Husserl time-consciousness is “absolute,” and in three senses: (1) it is the ultimate foundation for intentionality; (2) it is characterized by “double-intentionality” and is thereby self-constituting; and (3) it is a condition of the possibility of any awareness of any object at all. Heidegger adopts these three theses as well, albeit in slightly modified form. He embraces (1) implicitly in *Being and Time*, and explicitly in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, when he there characterizes the “ecstatic unity of temporality” as the final horizon of intelligibility and ontological understanding (Heidegger 1982: 308). He also shares Husserl’s commitment to the notion of “double-intentionality” (2). This theme is central to *Being and Time*, but Heidegger again puts the point somewhat more clearly in *Basic Problems*, where he describes our own being as co-awaited (or co-protended) and co-retained in every protention and retention of objects (Heidegger 1982: §19b). Finally, Heidegger accepts (3) as well and gives it a new name: it is the ecstatic-horizontal unity of temporality. Temporality “carries Dasein away” or “enraptures” it to the horizons on the background of which the entities we encounter can show up at all. It thereby constitutes Dasein’s “transcendence,” its stepping over to a world, its “being outside itself” in a world (Heidegger 1962: §69c). Hence, he concludes, “The world is neither present-at-hand nor ready-to-hand, but rather temporalizes itself in temporality” (Heidegger 1962: 417). Therefore, Heidegger shares the fundamental contours of Husserl’s account of internal time-consciousness.

Heidegger diverges from Husserl in important respects as well, however, and it is Heidegger’s disagreements with Husserl that give life to the debate among temporality.
phenomenologists about temporality and time-consciousness. As we saw above, Husserl regards the primal now as the point of orientation for our conscious lives. Heidegger argues, however, that, the future is primary in human temporality (see, e.g., Heidegger 1962: 378). He places the future at the center of our temporal orientation, rather than the present, the now. Why? Because for Heidegger the life of Dasein is not primarily the life of consciousness, but rather, the life of a concrete social agent. It is on this basis that Heidegger rejects the language of subject and object and replaces it with *Dasein and world.* We (Dasein) are primarily and usually at work in the world being who we are, and in this regard, the future is primary. We are who we are in so far as we understand ourselves thus, but to “understand ourselves” is not to grasp, imagine, or know ourselves cognitively or reflectively. Rather, to understand ourselves is to be capable of being who we are. Understanding is having the knack of something, “being equal to it” or being “able to manage” it (Heidegger 1962: 183). Being able to manage something (even being ourselves), being equal to it, is a matter of “pressing ahead” into being it, forging forth into our way of life and self-understanding. In this experience, the “for-the-sake-of” predominates; the structure of this experience is one of “coming-towards oneself.” This is all to say that who I am is not primarily a matter of what I have done, nor primarily consists in what I am like just now, but rather resides in who I am trying to be. This who is futural, not present. The future is primary in primordial temporality.

The experience of the now and now-time is derivative of primordial futural temporality. In setting about being a teacher, I grab hold of the implements of my trade, chalk and erasers, textbooks and handouts, etc. I “make them present” by availing myself of them. This making-present is made possible, however, by my futural pressing ahead into being a teacher. I could not grab hold of the chalk and use it as chalk, unless I understood myself as a teacher or in some other way to which chalk is relevant. The now-dominated experience of perceiving and using things is grounded in the future-dominated experience of self-understanding. Heidegger thus grounds the now, the reference point of consciousness, in the future, the reference point of self-understanding.

Further, for Husserl it is distinctive of time-consciousness that it tails off into an indefinite and presumably infinite horizon of future and past. Time as the horizon of object-consciousness is focused on the now and diffuses into the indefiniteness of past and future. For Heidegger, time as the horizon of self-understanding is aimed toward a future into which I press, a future for the sake of which I act as I do. My self-understanding for the sake of which I act is not for the sake of anything further, however. My self-understanding is an ultimate or final horizon, beyond which I cannot see, beyond which it makes no sense to inquire. Unlike the infinite temporal sequence in which objects present themselves, the future of my self-understanding is finite. By finite here Heidegger does not mean that the time in which I understand myself stops. Rather, he means that it is limited, that it has an uttermost horizon. There is no reference point beyond my self-understanding. Indeed, the mathematical question whether time is infinite or finite gets no grip on primordial temporality, for primordial temporality is not a sequence of nows, but rather our self-constituting openness to our own existence.

Thus, although Heidegger shares Husserl’s conception of time-consciousness, or better, temporality, as the framework and structure in terms of which experience is
possible, and although he also shares Husserl’s commitment to the absoluteness of temporality (though not Husserl’s word “absolute”), he relocates temporality from time-consciousness to the structure of agency. The finite and futural temporality of active self-understanding supplants the infinite and now-oriented time of self-consciousness.

**Sartre**

Sartre’s phenomenology of time does not offer any radically new departure. Rather, Sartre shares Husserl’s orientation to consciousness and the I, but seeks to restate some of Heidegger’s innovations in a language that is more consciousness-friendly. Sartre uses the terminology of ecstasis and horizon, and like Heidegger before him, views primordial temporality as the foundation for our “transcendence” or “openness” to a world. Sartre thought of himself as working out a critique of Husserl’s account of time-consciousness. He viewed Husserl’s theory as being too “egological” and trapped in the now, but in this regard, as we saw above, he was wrong. Husserl’s view is not trapped in the now: protention and retention constitute our awareness of the flow of time, including past and present. Husserl’s account is, however, centered on the now. Sartre was no doubt influenced by Heidegger’s criticisms of this orientation to the now, but in order to fund Heidegger’s objections to Husserl, one must make the move from the logic of subject and object to that of Dasein and world, agent and social context. Only by focusing one’s phenomenology on engaged and absorbed action, and viewing consciousness as a secondary derivative of such action, does one win the ground necessary to opt out of Husserl’s orientation to the now.

**Merleau-Ponty**

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty focuses his phenomenology on action. Merleau-Ponty’s advance over Heidegger lies in his insistence on not only conceding, as Heidegger sometimes does, that the social agent is embodied, but placing this embodiment at the center of his account. Merleau-Ponty’s specific contribution to the phenomenology of temporality lies in his development of a theme that is suggested by Heidegger, but not worked out in the sort of detail for which one would hope. Heidegger insists upon the unity of the three “ecstasies” of existential temporality, that is, the unity of our being ahead of ourselves in pressing forth into a self-understanding (our futurity), our being already situated in a world that matters to us in determinate ways (our beenness), and the presence to us of objects of use and observation. He also argues that we “never have power over our ownmost being from the ground up,” that is, that we are subject to who we already are, that we have “been released from our ground . . . so as to be as this ground” (Heidegger 1962: 330). Heidegger also links all this with freedom. He does not, however, connect the dots.

It is left to Merleau-Ponty to clarify the connection of these points in terms of temporality (Merleau-Ponty 1962: Part 3, chs. 2 & 3). He argues that we could possess no freedom, if the present and future were not linked to and bound by the past. If the present and future swung free of the past, then every decision we make would
have to be made over again in every instant. No decision or resolution could count as an achievement on which we could rely as we press forward into being who we are. This means, in turn, we would never make decisions or form resolutions. To decide or resolve is to commit oneself in one’s future. If the decision had to be remade in every instant, however, then one could never commit oneself. The decision I make now could not limit and commit my future, because in the next moment, I would be “free” to take it back. Such illusory “freedom” – sometimes called “radical choice” and sometimes attributed to Sartre – is no freedom at all. It is chaos and discontinuity. Freedom, the possession of the future by an act of resolution, requires that I be able to commit, bind, and limit my future, and this requires in turn that the now be grounded in the past. Decisions I have already made must remain controlling in the present.

References and Further Reading