

# Temporal Skew: Asymmetry and the Ground of Subjectivity

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## Abstract

This paper develops the concept of *temporal skew* as the constitutive structure of minimal selfhood. Drawing on Husserl's analyses of passive synthesis and internal time-consciousness, I argue that lived experience is structured by an asymmetry between retention and protention: the past recedes irretrievably, while the future remains indeterminate and unforeseeable. This skew resists reduction to equilibrium or closure and grounds the continuity of selfhood at a pre-reflective level. In contrast, contemporary phenomenological accounts (Gallagher, Zahavi) and predictive processing models in cognitive science often presuppose symmetry, depicting selfhood as balanced, recursive, or homeostatically regulated. By emphasizing asymmetry, I show that subjectivity is constituted not by stability but by deferral, openness, and vulnerability. This account clarifies the ontological ground of minimal selfhood while reorienting debates in philosophy of mind that equate instability with pathology. It also extends to ethical and political life, where the exposure intrinsic to skew underlies autonomy, responsibility, and justice. Recognizing temporal skew thus reframes selfhood as fragile and incomplete, but also as the very condition for phenomenological, ethical, and political existence.

Keywords: temporal skew; minimal selfhood; time-consciousness; passive synthesis; phenomenology of subjectivity; predictive processing

## 1. Framing Temporal Skew

Questions of minimal selfhood — the pre-reflective dimension of subjectivity that underlies reflection, recognition, and higher-order cognition — remain central in both phenomenology and contemporary philosophy of mind. Recent decades have seen a proliferation of accounts that emphasize the immediacy and transparency of pre-reflective self-awareness, particularly in the work of Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher.<sup>1</sup> By “minimal self,” I mean the immediate, pre-reflective sense of selfhood implicit in lived experience, prior to reflection, recognition, or higher-order cognition. It is the felt givenness of subjectivity that accompanies consciousness without being thematically grasped. This baseline orientation has been emphasized in contemporary phenomenology as the ground upon which reflective structures are built, but it requires sharper articulation once the asymmetry of temporality is foregrounded. These approaches have made it possible to resist reductive models that treat selfhood as the product of reflective or metacognitive operations. Yet they also risk presupposing a model of symmetry: a stable, balanced structure in which the self is consistently co-present with its acts and experiences.

The aim of this paper is to challenge that presupposition by introducing the concept of temporal skew. Drawing on Husserl’s analyses of internal time-consciousness and passive synthesis,<sup>2</sup> I argue that the minimal self is not constituted through equilibrium or closure but through an asymmetrical temporal structure. Retention and protention do not mirror one another; rather, they pull consciousness in different directions, embedding it in a horizon that is both fragile and open-ended. This skew is not a secondary complication but the ontological ground of subjectivity itself. As Rudolf Bernet emphasizes, Husserl’s time-consciousness reveals “a fundamental lack of coincidence with itself,” which destabilizes any model of selfhood premised on immediate givenness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Husserl’s term for the pre-reflective structuring of experience prior to acts of attention or judgment; see Rudolf Bernet, *Consciousness and Time* [Dordrecht: Springer, 1994], 15.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bernet, *Consciousness and Time* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 118.

Foregrounding temporal skew provides a corrective to prevailing accounts of minimal selfhood. While Zahavi has argued that pre-reflective self-awareness is “an immediate and intrinsic feature of consciousness,”<sup>4</sup> and Gallagher has described it as “a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time,”<sup>5</sup> both accounts risk reifying selfhood as a transparent, symmetrical structure. This is not to deny their crucial contributions; rather, it is to highlight the need for a more radical phenomenological description. As Sebastian Luft notes, time-consciousness itself must be understood as “an unbalanced synthesis,”<sup>6</sup> a ceaseless tilting toward what has just elapsed and what has not yet arrived.

Although the primary focus here is Husserl, the implications of temporal skew inevitably extend to Heidegger’s account of temporality in *Being and Time*. Heidegger’s analysis of Being-toward-death (§§46–53) famously emphasizes the futural anticipation through which Dasein discloses itself. Yet if temporality is skewed rather than symmetrical, anticipation is not a resolute grasp of one’s ownmost possibility but an exposure to indeterminacy. The concept of skew thus both deepens Husserl’s analyses and complicates Heidegger’s futural framework, situating minimal selfhood within a more fragile horizon of temporal openness.

The stakes of this argument extend beyond phenomenological description. Temporal skew not only reorients our understanding of the minimal self but also provides a framework for reconsidering ethical and political life. As Lisa Guenther has shown in her analysis of carceral temporality, disruptions of temporal openness profoundly alter one’s sense of existing as a self.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Derrida and Butler have emphasized the structural vulnerability and incompleteness that condition ethical and political responsibility. By beginning from temporal skew, we can recover a phenomenological account of selfhood truer to the lived instability and openness that define human existence.

The discussion begins with Husserl’s account of passive synthesis and internal time-consciousness, before turning to the concept of temporal skew as the constitutive structure of

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<sup>4</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 204.

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Luft, *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 96.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 147.

minimal selfhood. From there, I critique prevailing models that presuppose symmetry and develop skew as the ontological ground of selfhood. Anticipated objections are addressed, and the paper closes by drawing out the broader phenomenological, ethical, and political implications of this account.

## 2. Husserl's Passive Synthesis

Edmund Husserl's phenomenological investigations into the structure of consciousness reveal a dimension of experience that precedes active, reflective thought. This dimension, termed passive synthesis, plays a crucial role in constituting the continuity and coherence of experience without the intervention of deliberate acts of consciousness. Passive synthesis forms the ground upon which reflective and active syntheses are later built; it is the silent operation of consciousness that gathers and retains impressions, enabling the flow of experience as a continuous temporal phenomenon.

Husserl first develops the concept of passive synthesis in his early lectures on internal time-consciousness, later elaborated in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (commonly known as *Ideas II*). He distinguishes between active synthesis, which involves acts of judgment, reflection, and deliberate attention, and passive synthesis, which occurs without explicit intentionality or thematic focus. Passive synthesis operates “beneath” the level of volition, organizing the manifold of experience into meaningful unities without the subject’s conscious intervention. It is through passive synthesis that sensations, memories, and anticipations are woven together into the seamless fabric of lived experience. As Rudolf Bernet emphasizes, Husserl’s analyses show that “the cohesion of experience is achieved prior to any thematic act of the ego,” making pre-reflective temporality the very condition of subjective life.<sup>8</sup>

Passive synthesis marks a significant departure from earlier theories of consciousness, particularly those rooted in the Brentano school. Brentano’s theory of intentionality famously emphasized that consciousness is always consciousness of something, positing intentionality as the defining feature of mental life. While Husserl inherits the centrality of intentionality, he

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<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Bernet, *Consciousness and Time* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 15.

critiques Brentano's overly static model and shifts focus toward the dynamic structure of consciousness itself. For Husserl, intentionality is not merely a directional relation toward objects but an unfolding temporal field in which objects and their horizons emerge. Consciousness is not a series of discrete acts directed toward discrete objects; it is a continuous temporal flow in which past, present, and future are synthesized without interruption. Sebastian Luft notes that this shift marks Husserl's move "from intentionality as act to intentionality as horizon," situating subjectivity within an ongoing temporal synthesis.<sup>9</sup>

Central to passive synthesis is Husserl's account of internal time-consciousness. He contends that temporal objects are never given in an instantaneous, fully present form. Instead, the experience of any temporal object involves a complex structure comprising three key elements: primal impression (*Urimpression*),<sup>10</sup> retention (*Retention*), and protention (*Protention*). The primal impression marks the living present, the fleeting "now" of experience. Retention holds the just-past moment in a modified form, not as a recollection or re-presentation, but as an immediate fading presence. Protention, by contrast, is the horizon of expectation, the pre-conscious anticipation of what is immediately about to occur. As Ullrich Melle observes, this triadic structure ensures that "the now is always more than itself, already extended toward what has just been and what is to come."<sup>11</sup>

Further unpacking Husserl's concept of *Urimpression* helps clarify the distinctive character of pre-reflective temporal experience. The *Urimpression* is not a punctual "now" in the ordinary sense but the immediate source of the flow of consciousness itself. It is the living present, but Husserl emphasizes that it is always already thickened by retentions and protentions. He notes:

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<sup>9</sup> Sebastian Luft, *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 83.

<sup>10</sup> Husserl's term for the immediate "now," always thickened by retentions and protentions; see Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893–1917), trans. John Brough [Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991], 53.

<sup>11</sup> Ullrich Melle, "Husserl's Phenomenology of Time-Consciousness," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 164–66.

“The ‘now’ is not a knife-edge but a living, vibrating center, pregnant with a just-elapsed past and a just-anticipated future.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Urimpression* cannot be isolated as a pure point; it is structurally inseparable from its horizon of fading and anticipation. This accounts for why temporal experience is not a chain of discrete moments but a fluid continuity. Time-consciousness is a flowing (*Fluss*), and within this flow, the minimal self arises not as a self-identical entity but as an unfolding structured by asymmetrical temporal horizons.

Husserl emphasizes the interdependence of the three temporal elements in constituting temporal objects. In his words:

“The perception of a temporal object is never simple; it is a synthesis of a manifold of retentions and protentions, each of which modifies the primal impression and contributes to the constitution of the object’s unity in time.”<sup>13</sup>

Without retention, the past would disappear entirely; without protention, the future would remain utterly inaccessible. It is only through the interplay of these structures that consciousness can grasp temporal objects as enduring across time. The structure of internal time-consciousness is thus not a static snapshot but a dynamic unfolding, a continuum in which presence is always thickened by what has just passed and oriented toward what is about to arrive. As Dan Zahavi has pointed out, this continuity is not merely additive but involves a “temporal thickness” that grounds minimal selfhood even before reflection.<sup>14</sup>

Critically, retention and protention are not symmetrical operations. Retention involves a holding or sedimentation of the past, maintaining it in a quasi-presence that differs from reflective memory. Protention, in contrast, projects toward an indeterminate future, shaping the present moment with a horizon of expectation. The two are not mirror images but asymmetrical poles of temporal experience. Retention gradually fades, sinking into the sediment of memory and losing

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<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893–1917), trans. John Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Husserl, *Internal Time*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 21.

its immediacy, while protention remains oriented toward a future that is inherently open and underdetermined.

Passive synthesis, and the internal time-consciousness it supports, thus constitute the pre-reflective ground of subjectivity. Before any act of reflection, judgment, or recognition, consciousness is already temporally structured by these asymmetrical syntheses. This pre-reflective temporality is not a product of higher-order cognitive operations but a fundamental feature of lived experience itself. As such, it provides the conditions of possibility for the emergence of reflective self-awareness and the more complex structures of selfhood built upon it.

Husserl's insistence on the primacy of passive synthesis challenges the notion that consciousness is fundamentally an active, intentional engagement with the world. Instead, it reveals that consciousness is always already a temporal becoming, a flowing of experiences in which the subject is passively carried along. As he writes:

“The flow of consciousness is not a being but a becoming; it is not something, but the forming of something.”<sup>15</sup>

This insight has profound implications for our understanding of selfhood. The continuity of the self is not the result of a self-sustaining loop or a reflective mirroring; it is the outcome of a skewed, pre-reflective temporal unfolding. By focusing on passive synthesis, we gain access to the originary structures that underlie and enable the more familiar forms of self-consciousness.

Husserl's insights into passive synthesis and internal time-consciousness thus lay the groundwork for rethinking the genesis of selfhood. They point to a fundamental temporal asymmetry that precedes and makes possible the reflective acts typically associated with self-awareness. In what follows, I will sharpen this account by articulating the concept of temporal skew. Whereas passive synthesis reveals the inseparability of retention, protention, and primal

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<sup>15</sup> Husserl, *Internal Time*, 98.

impression, temporal skew designates their lack of symmetry. The next section develops this concept as the constitutive structure of minimal selfhood.

### 3. Temporal Skew and Protention

Building on Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness, we can now more closely examine the asymmetrical structure of retention and protention. While often treated as complementary poles of temporal experience, a closer phenomenological analysis reveals a profound skew between these dimensions. This skew is not merely a difference in directionality — past versus future — but a structural asymmetry that has significant implications for the genesis of selfhood.

Retention, in Husserl's account, holds the immediate past in consciousness, maintaining it in a modified, non-present form. It is not recollection; it does not re-present the past as an object of reflection. Rather, retention is an intentional modification that allows what has just elapsed to remain immanently available within the flow of consciousness. As Husserl describes, retention "preserves the just-past not by duplicating it, but by maintaining it in its fading away."<sup>16</sup> This fading is crucial: retention is a diminishing horizon, a sedimentation that inevitably recedes, losing vividness and immediacy without becoming a distinct object of thought.

Protention, by contrast, is the horizon of expectation. It anticipates the immediate future, not as a prediction based on inference, but as a structural openness toward what is about to occur. Protention constitutes the present as dynamically oriented toward the not-yet. Unlike retention, which holds a determinately elapsed past, protention is radically indeterminate; it is the openness of consciousness toward the unforeseeable. Husserl writes that protention is "the expectation that the object will continue to appear as it has been appearing," but this expectation is never fully grounded; it projects beyond what is given.<sup>17</sup>

The asymmetry between retention and protention thus lies not merely in their orientation but in their ontological structure. Retention diminishes and solidifies, progressively losing its affective force as it recedes into the sediment of memory. Protention, conversely, is expansive and

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<sup>16</sup> Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. John Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Husserl, *Internal Time*, 48.

anticipatory, structuring consciousness toward a horizon that is never fully present. While retention can, in principle, be reactivated through recollection, protention remains irreducibly open and unactualized. The two are not symmetrical inverses but structurally distinct modalities of temporal consciousness. As Rudolf Bernet emphasizes, “the horizon of protention cannot be closed by any act of reflection; it is constitutively beyond the grasp of the present.”<sup>18</sup>

This asymmetrical structure is what I propose to term temporal skew. Temporal skew designates the fundamental lack of symmetry in the temporal constitution of experience. It is a skew because the past and future are not mirror images; they are differently weighted, differently open, differently implicated in the structure of consciousness. Retention stabilizes the flow of experience by anchoring it to what has just passed; protention destabilizes it by opening consciousness to what has not yet arrived. Their interplay does not result in a balanced equilibrium but in a dynamic, skewed horizon that resists closure. Sebastian Luft underscores that this “unbalanced synthesis” is the true ground of temporal subjectivity: “time-consciousness is not equilibrium but a ceaseless tilting toward what is no longer and what is not yet.”<sup>19</sup>

A close reading of Husserl’s account of temporal objects underscores this point. In describing the perception of a tone, Husserl notes:

“The tone is constituted in the flow of consciousness not by a series of discrete perceptions, but by a continuity that retains its just-past moments and anticipates its future continuation. Yet retention and protention are not symmetrical: the just-past is held in a mode of fading, while the future is anticipated as a blank openness.”<sup>20</sup>

This skewed temporality constitutes the very fabric of lived experience. The minimal self — the pre-reflective sense of self that accompanies lived experience — is constituted not by symmetrical reflection or mutual recognition but by this skewed temporality. The self is not a stable point of identity but a dynamic unfolding structured by an asymmetrical relation to its own

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<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Bernet, *Consciousness and Time* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 122.

<sup>19</sup> Sebastian Luft, *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 96.

<sup>20</sup> Husserl, *Internal Time*, 52.

temporality. As Ullrich Melle observes, the *Ur'impression* is “thick with both absence and expectation, refusing the possibility of a neutral present.”<sup>21</sup>

Dan Zahavi’s interpretation of Husserlian time-consciousness further supports this reading. Zahavi emphasizes that minimal selfhood involves “a form of self-awareness that is implicit in experience, prior to any thematic reflection,” and that this self-awareness is characterized by “a certain kind of temporal thickness, an openness toward both past and future that resists reduction to static presence.”<sup>22</sup> By foregrounding temporal skew, we deepen Zahavi’s account: the implicit self-awareness of the minimal self is not simply temporally extended; it is structured by an asymmetrical temporal horizon that defers full presence and resists symmetrical stabilization.

Temporal skew also clarifies the vulnerability and partiality of subjective life. Because consciousness is always oriented toward an indeterminate future while sedimenting a fading past, it is never fully present to itself. The self is constituted in a horizon of deferral, in which neither past nor future can be fully grasped or stabilized. This structural deferral means that selfhood is always incomplete, always in formation, and always exposed to the temporal flux that underlies it. Lisa Guenther has argued that disruptions of this asymmetry — as in solitary confinement, where the horizon of protection collapses — reveal how essential skew is to the very sense of existing as a self.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the concept of temporal skew helps resist the temptation to model selfhood on recursive or reflective structures that imply symmetry and closure. Reflection presupposes a capacity to fold back upon oneself, to make oneself an object of thought. Yet this capacity is secondary to the pre-reflective temporality in which the self is first constituted. As Zahavi notes:

“The minimal self is characterized by a first-personal givenness that does not require reflection or thematic self-awareness.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ullrich Melle, “Husserl’s Phenomenology of Time-Consciousness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 166.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 65; see also Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 24.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 148–150.

<sup>24</sup> Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity*, 71.

Temporal skew grounds this first-personal givenness not in any form of closure but in an originary asymmetry that structures experience from the outset. The self is not self-coincident but is always already deferred, exposed to a future it cannot master and a past it cannot fully possess.

Recognizing temporal skew as the ontological ground of minimal selfhood thus reorients our understanding of subjectivity. It suggests that the self is not a self-contained entity but a dynamic horizon structured by asymmetry, openness, and deferral. This analysis also prepares the way for a critique of contemporary models of minimal selfhood. In the following section, I show how phenomenological accounts such as those of Gallagher and Zahavi, as well as cognitive frameworks like predictive processing, presuppose equilibrium and thereby obscure the asymmetry that phenomenology discloses.

#### 4. Symmetrical Models of Minimal Selfhood

Contemporary accounts of minimal selfhood, while acknowledging the pre-reflective nature of subjective experience, often implicitly rely on models of symmetry and closure. These models conceive of the minimal self as an equilibrium structure, a balance between self-awareness and world-directed intentionality, or as a recursive formation stabilizing the self's first-personal perspective. While these approaches have advanced our understanding of subjectivity, they risk overlooking the fundamental asymmetry — the temporal skew — that underlies and conditions the very possibility of selfhood.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that symmetrical models are not without value. Gallagher's emphasis on embodiment and Zahavi's insistence on intrinsic self-awareness clarify the immediacy of lived subjectivity and resist reductive accounts that treat the self as a reflective construct. These approaches have made indispensable contributions to phenomenology and philosophy of mind, particularly in articulating the transparency of experience and the continuity of first-person perspective. Yet the very strengths of these models—their emphasis on stability and co-

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<sup>25</sup> Gallagher, Zahavi, and predictive processing accounts occasionally acknowledge instability or disequilibrium (e.g., Gallagher, *Action and Interaction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020], 65; Zahavi, *Self and Other* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021], 24). My critique addresses their tendency to treat such features as secondary rather than constitutive.

presence—risk obscuring the asymmetrical structures that phenomenology itself reveals. By situating selfhood within equilibrium, they downplay the constitutive vulnerability and incompleteness that temporal skew makes visible.

Shaun Gallagher's influential work, for instance, emphasizes the embodied and enactive dimensions of the minimal self. He argues that the minimal self is “a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time.”<sup>26</sup> Gallagher's model focuses on the embodied nature of experience, highlighting the pre-reflective awareness that accompanies action and perception. However, in his emphasis on the immediacy and transparency of the minimal self, Gallagher risks framing selfhood as a symmetrical structure: a continuous, self-sufficient presence that coheres without internal rupture. Gallagher notes:

“The sense of ownership or mineness of experience is not something we infer; it is pre-reflectively given in the structure of experience itself.”<sup>27</sup>

While this emphasis on givenness is crucial, it subtly promotes a model of selfhood in which the relation between the subject and its experience is immediate and stable, minimizing the destabilizing effects of temporality. The model suggests a form of equilibrium, where the self is neither deferred nor fractured but consistently co-present with its acts and experiences. This framing has persisted in Gallagher's later work, where he continues to describe minimal selfhood in terms of a “pre-reflective sense of ownership” that remains unbroken across the flow of action.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Dan Zahavi's work on self-awareness stresses the first-personal givenness of experience. For Zahavi, the minimal self is characterized by a “non-objectifying form of self-awareness,” one that is immediate and intrinsic to consciousness itself.<sup>29</sup> He critiques higher-order theories of consciousness for introducing unnecessary reflective distances between the subject and its experiences. Yet even in Zahavi's more recent accounts, there is an implicit

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<sup>26</sup> Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204.

<sup>27</sup> Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Shaun Gallagher, *Action and Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 65.

<sup>29</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 21.

symmetry: self-awareness is conceived as an inherent feature of consciousness, available without the mediation of temporal or structural disjunctions. Zahavi writes:

“The self that is revealed in pre-reflective experience is a self that is co-present with its acts, not something detached or observed from a distance.”<sup>30</sup>

This orientation toward co-presence is echoed by Evan Thompson, who emphasizes the “ongoing, balanced integration of past and future horizons” in the constitution of lived temporality.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Matthew Ratcliffe highlights the “smooth continuity” of affective temporality, often framing the flow of experience as an even passage rather than a structurally skewed horizon.<sup>32</sup> Such formulations illustrate how the assumption of balance or equilibrium remains deeply embedded in the phenomenological discourse.

What Gallagher, Zahavi, Thompson, and Ratcliffe share is a tendency to frame the minimal self as a stable, self-present structure — immediate, intrinsic, and transparent. While they rightly reject reflective and objectifying accounts of selfhood, they nonetheless risk reifying the minimal self as a kind of ontological given, a presence that underwrites experience without internal complication. This orientation occludes the dynamic, skewed temporality that Husserl’s analyses of internal time-consciousness reveal. Anthony Steinbock underscores this when describing horizontal givenness as a structural unity, which further reinforces the impression of balance rather than asymmetry.<sup>33</sup>

The problem lies in the assumption of balance: the idea that the minimal self exists in a state of equilibrium, equally present to itself across the flow of experience. If, however, we take seriously the asymmetrical structure of retention and protention — the temporal skew — it becomes clear that the minimal self is constituted not by balance but by structural deferral and openness. Retention and protention do not mirror one another; they pull consciousness in

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<sup>30</sup> Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 327.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 45.

different directions, embedding it in a temporal horizon that is always uneven, always leaning toward an unrecoverable past and an indeterminate future.

This skew has significant implications for our understanding of subjectivity. Rather than being a stable point of self-givenness, the minimal self is an unstable horizon structured by temporal asymmetry. It is never fully present to itself; it is always deferred, always partial, always skewed.

A similar tendency toward symmetrical modeling appears in predictive processing accounts of consciousness, now influential in cognitive science and philosophy of mind. Predictive processing theories, as articulated by Andy Clark and Jakob Hohwy, conceptualize cognition as a process of minimizing prediction error by continuously updating internal models based on incoming sensory information.<sup>34</sup> Consciousness, on this view, emerges from the brain's attempt to anticipate sensory inputs and adjust its expectations accordingly. This model presents a dynamic but symmetrical structure: past experiences inform future expectations, and future predictions guide present perception in a balanced feedback loop.

Hohwy describes the predictive mind as engaged in “a bidirectional cascade of predictions and prediction errors,” a constant interplay between top-down expectations and bottom-up sensory data.<sup>35</sup> While elegant, this model privileges a form of temporal symmetry: the system is structured around a balance between prior models and future inputs, aiming for an optimal match. The temporal flow of experience, in this framework, is regulated by a principle of homeostasis — minimizing surprise and maintaining internal equilibrium.

Moreover, predictive processing models tend to idealize temporal flow as if the brain could “smooth out” time into a continuous series of corrected anticipations. Yet phenomenological descriptions of lived temporality resist this flattening. The asymmetrical skew between past and future means that consciousness is not merely correcting its errors but is exposed to an irreducible indeterminacy. Predictive models aim at minimizing surprise, but lived experience is

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<sup>34</sup> Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23–26; Jakob Hohwy, *The Predictive Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55–59.

<sup>35</sup> Hohwy, *The Predictive Mind*, 60.

inherently open-ended and vulnerable to what cannot be foreseen or controlled. The self, structured by temporal skew, thus exceeds any homeostatic model of cognition.

Although predictive processing models have been elaborated with impressive empirical support in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, their emphasis on minimizing error presupposes a symmetrical temporal structure. Friston's free-energy principle, for instance, describes the brain as continuously updating priors to reduce surprise, while Clark interprets cognition as a balanced loop between top-down prediction and bottom-up correction.<sup>36</sup> These accounts illuminate the neural dynamics of anticipation, but they risk conflating regulation with constitution. Lived temporality, as phenomenology describes it, is not homeostatically balanced but structurally skewed: the past recedes irretrievably, while the future remains constitutively unforeseeable. Empirical models may chart the mechanisms of prediction, but they do not capture the ontological asymmetry through which selfhood is constituted.<sup>37</sup>

Foregrounding temporal skew thus allows us to revise and deepen these models. It suggests that the self is not a symmetrical or balanced entity but a skewed unfolding, constituted by its uneven relation to time. This reorientation moves beyond the assumption of immediate self-presence, emphasizing instead the structural vulnerability and partiality of subjective life.

By critiquing the symmetry implicit in contemporary models of minimal selfhood, we can recover a more faithful account of the pre-reflective structures that underlie subjectivity. The minimal self is not a given, stable presence; it is an ongoing negotiation within a skewed temporal horizon. Recognizing this skew enables a more accurate phenomenological description of the self as incomplete, open-ended, and exposed to the temporal flux that both sustains and destabilizes it.

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<sup>36</sup> Karl Friston, "The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?" *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11, no. 2 (2010): 127–138; Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty*, 23–29.

<sup>37</sup> My argument here is conceptual rather than empirical: it concerns the ontological asymmetry of temporality rather than adjudicating between predictive-coding models. For predictive approaches, see Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23–29; Karl Friston, "The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?" *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11, no. 2 (2010): 127–38.

In the next section, I will develop this claim further, arguing that temporal skew constitutes the ontological ground of selfhood, preceding and enabling the reflective structures that are often taken as definitive of subjective life.

## 5. Ontological Ground of Selfhood

Having demonstrated the asymmetry of retention and protention and exposed the limits of symmetrical models, I now advance the positive claim: that temporal skew constitutes the ontological ground of selfhood. This ground is not a stable substance nor a self-enclosed identity; rather, it is the skewed temporal dynamic that enables but also destabilizes the continuity of subjective life. In shifting from critique to construction, this section formalizes skew not as a contingent feature of consciousness but as the very condition of subjective existence.

Temporal skew, as articulated through Husserl's analyses of internal time-consciousness, reveals that the flow of experience is structured by a non-reciprocal relation between past and future. Retention anchors consciousness in the receding horizon of what has just elapsed, while protention orients it toward an indeterminate horizon of possibility. Their interplay is not a balanced equilibrium but a skewed dynamic: the past sedimenting into an inaccessible depth, the future extending into an unforeseeable openness. This asymmetry is constitutive; it is not an accidental feature of time-consciousness but its essential structure.

From this perspective, the minimal self is not a static center of experience but an emergent phenomenon arising from the skewed temporality of consciousness. The self is not simply given; it is constituted through the uneven, non-coincidental relation between what has been and what is yet to come. As Merleau-Ponty observes:

“Time is not a process that unfolds in an already open space of possible states, but is the very deviation of being from itself, the internal fission whereby the past passes into the future by never being fully coincident with itself.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 478.

This deviation, this skew, sustains the continuity of experience without reducing it to static presence or immediate self-coincidence. Merleau-Ponty's insight reveals that temporality is not a neutral or symmetrical backdrop for subjectivity but is itself a structure of deviation — a skew that destabilizes any notion of a unified, self-present subject.

Although the focus here has been on Husserl, the notion of skew inevitably raises questions about Heidegger's account of temporality in *Being and Time*. Heidegger insists that the self (*Dasein*) is fundamentally futural, constituted through projection and disclosed most radically in Being-toward-death.<sup>39</sup> In §§46–53, he emphasizes that anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) of one's ownmost possibility gives existence its temporal unity.<sup>40</sup> Yet the framework of temporal skew complicates this picture. If protention is not a symmetrical counterpart to retention but a structurally open horizon, then futural anticipation is never a stable grasp of one's possibility but an exposure to indeterminacy. As William Blattner notes, Heidegger's temporal idealism presupposes a "cohesive integration" of past, present, and future that allows for an authentic disclosure of selfhood.<sup>41</sup> Temporal skew suggests that such cohesion is never fully achievable: the futural is structurally unmasterable, and anticipation is always haunted by asymmetry.

This complication becomes especially clear when we consider Heidegger's account of Being-toward-death. Anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) is described as a resolute grasp of one's ownmost possibility, unifying existence by disclosing the limit-situation that cannot be surpassed. Yet temporal skew indicates that such anticipation is never a stable appropriation: the futural horizon into which *Dasein* projects itself remains structurally elusive, refusing integration with the sedimented past. To anticipate death is therefore not to master finitude but to be exposed to an indeterminate openness that continually exceeds the self's grasp. In this sense, skew highlights an instability within Heidegger's own framework: resoluteness may intend cohesion, but what is disclosed phenomenologically is a fractured horizon in which the future cannot be appropriated as one's own in any definitive way.

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 279–311 (§§46–53).

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 303–307.

<sup>41</sup> William D. Blattner, *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 112–115.

Heidegger himself acknowledges that temporality is not a sequence of balanced phases but an ecstatic unity.<sup>42</sup> Yet by foregrounding skew, we can see that even this ecstatic unity is internally fractured: retention stabilizes only as fading sediment, while protention exposes Dasein to a future that eludes appropriation. In this respect, skew sharpens the instability already latent in Heidegger's analysis of Being-toward-death. Hubert Dreyfus has argued that Heidegger's account of authenticity risks overemphasizing resoluteness,<sup>43</sup> but skew underscores instead the constitutive vulnerability of temporality itself.

Temporal skew thus accounts for the openness and fragility of selfhood. Because consciousness is structured by a temporal horizon that is always slipping away and always exceeding itself, the self cannot be fully present to itself.<sup>44</sup> It is always in a state of deferral, a becoming that never achieves complete closure. This deferral is not a lack or a deficiency but the very condition of subjectivity. As Husserl emphasizes, the flow of consciousness "is not a being but a becoming; it is not something, but the forming of something."<sup>45</sup> The forming is continuous precisely because it is skewed — never coincident with itself, always leaning toward what it cannot fully possess.

Understanding temporal skew as ontological ground also sheds light on the relationality of selfhood. The self is not an isolated monad but is constituted in and through its temporal openness to the world and others. Retention and protention structure not only the internal flow of experience but also the ways in which the self is exposed to external events and intersubjective encounters. This exposure is asymmetric: one is always already situated in a past that cannot be revisited and projected into a future that cannot be controlled. Subjectivity, therefore, is fundamentally porous and vulnerable, structured by a temporal skew that resists enclosure.

This asymmetry provides a foundation for understanding intersubjectivity not as a meeting of two self-contained subjects but as an encounter grounded in asymmetrical openness. Emmanuel

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<sup>42</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 238–243.

<sup>43</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 326–329.

<sup>44</sup> For a phenomenological analysis of skew in embodied orientation, see Chris Sawyer, "Motor Skew and the Ontology of Embodiment," *Human Studies* 48 (2025): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-025-09812-2>

<sup>45</sup> Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893–1917), trans. John Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 98.

Levinas's emphasis on the ethical relation as an encounter with radical alterity resonates with this conception. For Levinas, the self is exposed to the Other in a relation that is never reciprocal, never symmetrical.<sup>46</sup> While Levinas frames this exposure primarily in ethical terms, its underlying temporal structure mirrors the asymmetry we find in Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian temporality: a self that is open to what it cannot encompass, to a future and an Other that exceed it.

By conceiving temporal skew as ontological ground, we avoid the pitfalls of models that treat selfhood as a stable entity or a balanced process. The self is neither a given presence nor a fully self-transparent subject. It is a dynamic unfolding, a horizon structured by skewed temporality that ensures both continuity and openness. This account does not deny the role of reflective consciousness or higher-order cognitive structures; rather, it situates them as secondary formations, dependent on the more primordial skew that underlies all experience.

Moreover, this conception of selfhood has implications beyond phenomenology. It suggests that the vulnerabilities and instabilities of subjective life are not accidents or pathologies but essential features of being a self. The impossibility of full self-coincidence, the exposure to time's asymmetrical flow, and the openness to an indeterminate future are not deficiencies to be corrected but conditions to be acknowledged. They are what make selfhood possible at all.

In emphasizing temporal skew as ontological ground, we thus recover an account of subjectivity that is truer to the phenomenological descriptions of lived experience. The self is not a symmetrical reflection but a skewed unfolding, not a closure but an opening. It is this fundamental asymmetry that both constitutes and conditions the possibilities of subjective life.

## 6. Objections and Replies

No phenomenological account is without contestation, and the proposal that minimal selfhood is constituted by temporal skew invites several possible objections. Anticipating and responding to these objections helps clarify what is at stake in rejecting models of equilibrium and symmetry.

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<sup>46</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

A first objection comes from defenders of phenomenological symmetry, who may argue that retention and protention are best conceived as complementary poles within a balanced temporal synthesis. On this view, the continuity of selfhood depends upon their reciprocal interplay, which secures an equilibrium in which the subject remains co-present with its acts. Gallagher's insistence that the minimal self is a "consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time"<sup>47</sup> and Zahavi's description of pre-reflective awareness as "an immediate and intrinsic feature of consciousness"<sup>48</sup> can be read in this way. Yet Husserl's analyses of internal time-consciousness undermine such reciprocity. Retention and protention are not reversible functions: the past recedes as sediment, while the future projects an unforeseeable openness. Their interplay is not a balanced mirroring but a skew that grounds selfhood in incompleteness rather than co-presence.

A second objection arises from predictive processing and enactivist accounts of cognition. Clark, Hohwy, and others describe the mind as engaged in a bidirectional cascade of prediction and error-correction, a loop that maintains equilibrium by minimizing surprise.<sup>49</sup> From this perspective, skew might seem reducible to the inevitable asymmetry between priors and sensory inputs. Yet phenomenological description indicates that lived temporality cannot be reduced to error correction. Retention and protention are not components of a closed loop aimed at optimization; they are irreducibly open horizons in which fading and anticipation never converge. Predictive models smooth time into balance, whereas phenomenology shows that skew is constitutive of its fracture.

A third objection contends that emphasizing skew risks dissolving selfhood altogether. If retention and protention fail to coincide, how can continuity or identity be sustained? Does the self not collapse into incoherence? The response here is that skew does not abolish continuity but conditions it. Continuity emerges not from equilibrium but from a ceaseless deferral, a horizon that holds experience together precisely because it never closes. As Merleau-Ponty emphasizes,

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<sup>47</sup> Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204.

<sup>48</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>49</sup> Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23–26; Jakob Hohwy, *The Predictive Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55–59.

temporality is “the deviation of being from itself,”<sup>50</sup> and it is this deviation — this skew — that secures the ongoing possibility of subjective life.

Addressing these objections underscores the distinctiveness of the phenomenological account advanced here. Symmetry may explain stability, and predictive processing may model regulation, but neither grasps the structural vulnerability that constitutes lived subjectivity. Temporal skew grounds selfhood not as balance, closure, or optimization but as openness, incompleteness, and fragility.

## 7. Implications of Temporal Skew

This paper has argued that minimal selfhood is constituted not by reflective, recursive, or symmetrical structures but by what I have termed temporal skew: the fundamental asymmetry between retention and protention that underlies lived temporality. Drawing on Husserl’s analyses of passive synthesis and internal time-consciousness, I have shown that the continuity and coherence of experience — and, by extension, the continuity of selfhood — are sustained by a dynamic, skewed relation between the receding past and the open future. Retention anchors consciousness in a fading horizon of what has just elapsed, while protention projects it toward a future that remains indeterminate and unforeseeable. Their interplay is not symmetrical; it is a constitutive skew that resists closure and ensures the ongoing becoming of subjective life.

Foregrounding temporal skew enables us to challenge prevailing models of minimal selfhood that presuppose symmetry, stability, or equilibrium. Phenomenological accounts, such as those advanced by Gallagher and Zahavi, while rightly emphasizing the pre-reflective and non-objectifying character of self-awareness, often risk framing the minimal self as a stable point of first-personal givenness. Enactivist models, likewise, tend to depict the organism–environment relation as a balanced coupling, overlooking the internal asymmetries of temporality. Predictive processing theories, too, conceptualize consciousness in terms of symmetrical feedback loops aimed at minimizing surprise and maintaining equilibrium. Against all of these approaches,

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<sup>50</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 478.

temporal skew reveals that selfhood is not a stable presence but a horizon structured by deferral, openness, and vulnerability.

For phenomenology, this reorientation suggests that the analysis of subjectivity must attend not to stability but to constitutive instability. The self is not a point but a field, not a substance but a dynamic horizon structured by skew. This aligns with broader phenomenological insights into fragility and contingency, while deepening our understanding of the temporal conditions of lived experience.

For philosophy of mind, the account of skew offers a corrective to models that ground consciousness in reflection, recognition, or recursion. Pre-reflective self-awareness is not derivative but originary, constituted in the asymmetry of time-consciousness itself. Instabilities often treated as pathologies — fragmentation, deferral, loss of temporal coherence — emerge here not as anomalies but as essential features of subjective life.

For philosophy more broadly, temporal skew sharpens Heidegger's account of temporality. Being-toward-death describes the futural anticipation through which Dasein discloses itself, but skew complicates this anticipation by showing that the future is never fully graspable. As Blattner has argued, Heidegger's account presumes a coherent integration of temporal horizons, but skew reveals their constitutive fracture.<sup>51</sup> This does not negate Heidegger's analysis; rather, it sharpens its insight into the fragility of existence by highlighting that the futural remains structurally elusive.

For political and ethical theory, the recognition of skew underscores that subjectivity is constituted by openness and vulnerability, not mastery or closure. Derrida's notion of the *à venir* emphasizes that the future is radically unforeseeable, that justice itself is always deferred.<sup>52</sup> Butler's account of precarity likewise resists fantasies of sovereign agency, stressing instead exposure to contingency and dependency.<sup>53</sup> Guenther's analysis of carceral temporality shows

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<sup>51</sup> William D. Blattner, *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 112–115.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 31.

how disrupting temporal horizons fractures the very conditions of selfhood.<sup>54</sup> Together, these perspectives suggest that autonomy, responsibility, and justice must be reconceived not as stable achievements but as fragile processes unfolding within skewed temporal horizons.

Concrete examples underscore this point. In solitary confinement, as Lisa Guenther has shown, the collapse of protention fractures the very sense of existing as a self. Trauma likewise disrupts the sedimentation of retention, producing fragmentary modes of temporality that alter subjectivity at its roots. Institutional rhythms—whether in labor, education, or migration regimes—stabilize or fracture collective horizons of protention, shaping how autonomy and vulnerability are distributed across populations. These cases reveal how temporal skew is not merely a theoretical refinement but a structure whose alteration directly transforms lived practices and institutions.

Finally, for future research, the framework of temporal skew opens multiple paths. In phenomenology, it can be extended through analyses of affective temporality, trauma, and psychopathology, where disruptions of skew alter selfhood itself. In philosophy of mind, closer engagement with empirical models of predictive coding may clarify both the limits and possibilities of interdisciplinary exchange. In political theory, the concept of skew can illuminate how institutions mediate collective temporality, stabilizing or fracturing shared horizons. Each of these directions underscores that the self is not a closed or sovereign structure but a dynamic unfolding sustained through asymmetry.

To rethink minimal selfhood through the lens of temporal skew is to recover a dimension of phenomenological analysis vital for contemporary inquiry. The self is not a static entity nor a stable point of reflection; it is a dynamic horizon constituted by an asymmetrical temporality that both enables and destabilizes subjective life. Recognizing this skew is not simply a theoretical refinement but a return to the lived conditions of existence — a recognition that fragility and openness are not deficiencies but the very conditions of selfhood.

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<sup>54</sup> Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 145–150.

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