The Michel Henry Reader. Michel Henry. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii + 266. Reviewed by A.J. Smith, *McGill University*

Michel Henry's reception in English-speaking scholarship has been fragmentary at best. His phenomenological work has yet to be fully received and, accordingly, has hardly ever been fully comprehended. There is no English-language example of a detailed section-by-section exegesis where his work is systemically read and synoptically interpreted, where its internal motivations and developments are highlighted, and its theses are contextualized within the histories of French phenomenology and German idealism.[1] Although many of his monographs have appeared in English translation, his voluminous articles and occasional works have not – until now. Despite this relative Anglophone scholarly invisibility, Henry's work is important. Understanding Henry's historical significance is necessary to comprehend the shape of twentieth and twenty-first century French philosophy, and the shape of Francophone reception of Husserl and Heidegger in particular. Henry's inauguration of a so-called theological turn within a phenomenological sphere – surely one of the most important developments in French thought of the twentieth century – presages and makes possible that of other iterations or reactions significantly more famous in the English- speaking world, such as in Ricoeur, Derrida, Levinas, Marion, and Laruelle. In order to understand both the importance and limitation of this collection, it is useful to note

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1. This is because Henry's work was translated in English relatively late. Published originally in French in 1963, Henry's magnum opus, *L'essence de la manifestation* (*The Essence of Manifestation*), was translated into English in 1973. Much of the rest of Henry's work, however, would remain untranslated in English until the 1990s, long after his French contemporaries had appeared.

the particular difficulty in understanding Henry's work. It is rightly situated within the tradition of phenomenology, but in many ways, it is a rejection of phenomenology. In the author's preface at the beginning of the English translation of *The Essence of Manifestation*, Henry writes that his principal work "was born of a refusal, the refusal of the very philosophy from which it has sprung."[2] By this, Henry means it repudiates the deepest philosophical presuppositions that nonetheless gave it birth; not only the phenomenological works of Husserl and Heidegger, but also the history of philosophy stretching back to Greek antiquity. Henry argues that an external critique of phenomenology would be nonsensical, and so instead seeks to offer a critique internal to the very presuppositions he rejects, enacting what he describes as a philosophical mutation of these ideas. The result is a philosophy that deepens the phenomenological insights by moving beyond what Henry argues are the limitations imposed on thought in antiquity and taken up by Husserl and Heidegger.

The philosophical *mise-en-scène* of Henry's project is an examination of the ontological meaning of ego, one that is fundamental in the most originary sense. But it is not an examination like that found in psychology, where the ego is treated in terms of its psychic or mental functionality. Henry seeks to understand the essence of subjectivity rather than document what it is like to be a subject. Henry's interest is not, then, the mere datum of lived experience, but rather the origin (i.e., the essence) of lived experience itself. Henry endeavors to give a properly ontological

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2. Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), xi. This refers to the English author's preface not included in the French original.

account of the ego, and so is firmly opposed to a merely descriptive phenomenology that seeks to empirically exhaust lived experience. It is, instead, the ontological coordinates of subjective being in all its lived modalities (including in politics and art) that comprises Henry's project.

Given that it covers each of these modalities, the appearance of *The Michel Henry Reader* is an exciting event for English phenomenology and philosophy of religion. While not quite as exciting as having all the volumes of *Phénoménologie de la vie* translated and made available to readers without French, this sampling of Henry's essays from the aforementioned collection allows for the broad re-contextualization of Michel Henry's phenomenology and philosophy for English readers that was simply not possible before.

The editors of this collection were judicious and included not just Henry's phenomenological work, but the political, theological, and aesthetic theory that derive therefrom. *The Michel Henry Reader* is made up of essays categorized into four sections: Phenomenology; Subjectivity; Politics, Art, and Language; and lastly Ethics and Religion. They derive both their content and titles from the collection of essays assembled and published in French in a series called *Phénoménologie de la vie*.[3] However, they include just a few of the essays in that collection. This is to be regretted. That being said, the editors have chosen carefully, providing crucial instances of Henry's considered philosophical opinions. Most important for Henry's English reception, in my estimation, are the

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3. For the full collection, see Michel Henry, *De la phénoménologie*, Vol. I (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 2003; *De la subjectivité*, Vol. II (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003); *De l'art et du politique*, Vol. III (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004); *Sur l'éthique et la religion*, Vol. IV (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

essays "The Four Principles of Phenomenology" and "The Phenomenology of Birth." These essays clarify Henry's relationship with phenomenological ontology, in particular the relationship between being and appearing that is fundamental to his philosophy. While this collection by no means fills all the gaps impeding Henry's English reception, it goes a long way to facilitating this much delayed task.

My criticisms of *The Michel Henry Reader,* if minor, are regarding this contextualization. Though this collection covers a wide area of philosophical topics, in my estimation it tries to accomplish too much with too little. The genre of a reader should include not only a topically but historically diverse set of texts that trace the development of a philosopher. This reader is merely a sampling of texts taken from a single collection of texts and represent the end point of his philosophical development. These texts presuppose the results of Henry's philosophical history, rather than tracking its course. Henry's work largely takes the forms of lengthy hermeneutical critiques of figures and traditions where his philosophical ideas are developed – these conceptual mutations. Because these essays come along at the end of his philosophical development and presuppose knowledge of much of it, the otherwise able introduction has the insurmountable burden of explaining almost the whole of Henry's philosophy for these texts to be fully understandable. Ideally, it is the primary texts assembled in a reader that make a philosopher comprehensible. *The Michel Henry Reader* is not so much an English-language introduction or stand-alone entrée to Henry's thought, but something to be read alongside, or after, Henry's earlier works.

This critique is, in the end, a minor one; and perhaps an unfair one as well. The texts they have chosen are important and

clarify crucial aspects of Henry's thinking, in particular his critiques of Heidegger and Husserl in the context of phenomenological ontology. The translations are articulate and consistent, and this volume is a nice accompaniment to the translation of Henry's *Incarnation* published previously by Northwestern University Press in 2015. In the end, the problem with this work is that it leaves one wanting. To accomplish the task they set out for Anglophone Henry scholarship, more yet needs to be translated.