

# Book Reviews

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*The Philosophy of Michel Henry (1922-2002): A French Christian Phenomenology of Life.* Michelle Rebidoux. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012.

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Reviewed by Garth W. Green, McGill University.

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*The Philosophy of Michel Henry* is a very good, and timely, book. It is well-conceived, well-structured, and well-written. It endeavours to explain the essential contexts and contents of Michel Henry's philosophy: its relation to Neo-Platonism and medieval mysticism, to Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, and to subsequent French phenomenology. For these reasons and on these important points, the work offers for the English reader an effective introduction to Henry's thought.

The book concerns itself with two themes: the theory of knowledge in *L'essence de la manifestation* (in its affective, intentional, and pre-intentional aspects), and the theory of God, principally in *C'est moi la vérité*. In this, too, it focuses on the two principal aspects of Henry's thought: phenomenological philosophy of knowledge and phenomenological philosophy of religion. It excels at describing the latter, and does so with full right, as Henry's *L'essence de la manifestation* (finished in 1957, published in 1963) made perhaps the most important twentieth-century contribution to the discipline, by inspiring the now predominant "theological turn" of French phenomenology.

Every chapter is worth reading: Chapter One establishes important parallels between Heidegger and Henry (13–14), and discusses with admirable clarity the problem of the self-alienation or self-objectification of consciousness. Chapter Two treats of the Husserlian context of Henry's phenomenology: it is, however, as S. J. McGrath put the point in his review, "mostly on Marion" (*Analecta Hermeneutica*, Vol. 4 [2012]). This produces the odd effect of contextualizing Henry through a later figure (cf. p. 25, note). Chapter Three considers Henry's "material phenomenology" and his "phenomenology of the body" in the sense of his *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, the concepts of hetero- and auto-affection, and the way in which this early work develops into Henry's mature, and phenomeno-theological concept of "flesh." Here, too, Henry is discussed alongside, and through, Marion. Chapter Four is particularly valuable, for its employment of materials in the history of Neo-Platonic theology and Rhineland mysticism; the comprehension of M.

Henry requires no less than this (rare) broad historical and scholarly scope, and it is sketched admirably herein. In Chapter Five, the most evaluative chapter of the work (followed only by a summary five-page conclusion), Rebidoux alleges a problem of “solipsism” (208) and a problematic “onto-theological leap” (233) in Henry’s phenomenology; here, too, she treats Marion as extensively as Henry, and considers the former as a corrective of the latter (236–237). The work concludes with the claim that Henry (though not Marion) “allows his phenomenological insights to be betrayed by the question of Being” (237).

Neither the book’s strengths nor its weaknesses should be ignored. The selection of recent French scholarship is less than complete, particularly on Henry’s philosophy of religion (Capelle, Chrétien, Greisch, Laoureux, and Leclercq are absent), and no recent Italian scholarship, in which the question of the relation between Henry’s phenomenology and theology is most central (e.g., Canullo, Marini, Molteni, and Sansonetti), is included. Such sources may, or may not, have altered or reduced Rebidoux’s impression of a (onto-theological) “leap.” But the same could not be said of a second absence or lacuna: Rebidoux has omitted, virtually without exception, any consideration of Kant or German Idealism (particularly Fichte and Hegel), the inclusion of which would have altered the character and content of this work. While this exclusion could be made virtually without cost in the case of Marion, the same cannot be said with respect to Henry. Assuming, then, the many and important virtues of this timely and welcome work, I will dedicate the rest of this review to the discussion of these absences, and their effects.

Introducing Chapter One, Rebidoux (7–8) discusses “the phenomenological context in which Michel Henry finds himself as a young philosopher in the late 1940’s.” For Rebidoux, this context is “thoroughly soaked with the thought and the critique of Western onto-theology of Heidegger” (7). One needn’t deny Heidegger’s importance, in this context or to Henry, in order to ask whether this single contextual element is sufficient. While it is true that Henry would assume in order to amplify the doctrine of *ekstasis* (with that of a pre-ekstatic or pre-intentional affectivity, an “auto-affective revelation” [9]), this required an engagement not only of Heidegger, but also of modern European philosophy as such. The latter would lead Henry not to a Heideggerian critique of “onto-theology” (Kant’s term, after all), but rather to a “theological turn.” Additional contextual elements will be required. Noting that Henry’s codename in the French Resistance during World War II was “Kant” (since he carried [only] the *Critique of Pure Reason* in his backpack, before then dedicating so many years and publications to its study), Rebidoux nonetheless underdetermines this relation. She declares, “Kant simply had no real ontology of subjectivity” (7; this declaration is repeated virtually unchanged on pp. 26, 57, 62, 97, and thereafter). She cites (7) the *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, that “a metaphysics or representivity... cannot represent...the condition of being-represented (i.e., the act of posing and

representing itself).” Correctly, Rebidoux suggests that “what would be required for such a condition to be represented would be an intuition. But any intuition of such a condition is necessarily lacking because it is impossible on account of the system’s inherent structure.” Rebidoux does not illuminate or even investigate any such insufficiencies of this structure; she rather asserts, “Kant, in other words, fits nicely into the tradition of ‘constituted Cartesianism’” (7). But Kant is not a Cartesian on the question of transcendental self-consciousness and subjectivity (as the Refutation of Idealism and the Paralogisms both attest). Nor was Kant a Cartesian for Henry; Henry’s critique of Kant is precise, technical, and informed by the most serious French Kant scholarship (e.g., Nabert and Lachièze-Rey). It treats Kant not only as yet another instance of ontological monism, but in the specific context of Kant’s doctrine of time as a form of inner sense, and thus the problem of *Selbstaffektion*, and the “internal structure of immanence.” This engagement fills not only the important §§ 22–43 of *L’essence*, but also, e.g., “*Le concept d’âme a-t-il un sens,*” “*Destruction ontologique de la critique kantienne du paralogisme de la psychologie rationnelle*” (still untranslated), and Chapter Four of *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (“Life Lost: Kant’s Critique of ‘Soul’”). The absence of the historical and thematic context provided by these texts suggests a lacuna in Rebidoux’s otherwise fine work.

This lacuna extends to each of Henry’s key nineteenth-century sources. The role of Henry’s appropriation of Fichte (e.g., *L’essence*, §38) and critique of Hegel (*L’essence*, §20) remain undetermined. Henry’s recovery of the former is important both for Fichte’s critique of Kant and for his having reintroduced themes (e.g., the ingredience of invisibility in the structures of consciousness and self-consciousness) definitively—and theo-logically—treated by Eckhart (e.g., §39). The critique of Hegel is important insofar as it is required in order to overcome the modern, philosophical resistance to this theo-logical overcoming of the insufficiencies of the representational, and self-alienating, form of philosophical knowledge. Far from a late development, this position had been taken already in 1957, already in this, the basic structure of *L’essence* (contrary to the author’s assertions on pp. 4 and 187 of a late adoption of such a theo-logical frame). The position, and its philosophical integrity, is essential to the possibility and justification of the theological turn of French phenomenology.

Chapter Two extends this difficulty. It considers Husserl as a contextual figure, but does so, principally, by means of Marion’s interpretation thereof. A helpful general review of the notions of givenness and intentionality in *Ideas I* extends from pp. 55–68, at which point Rebidoux’s book treats the way in which “both Henry and Marion...unfold Husserl’s essential phenomenological insight—namely, ‘givenness’” (69). This purported identity between Henry and Marion is advantageous; it allows Rebidoux to examine the way that “both do so by articulating a mode of phenomenality...prior to *ekstasis*” or intentionality (69). Rhetorically, it

allows Rebidoux to present Henry through a figure better known in Anglophone scholarship. However, differences between Marion and Henry are elided; on p. 87, after nearly twenty pages of exegesis of Marion, Rebidoux concludes “such as [sic] least is Henry’s reading” of Husserl, when in fact she has given evidence instead of Marion’s. It also is surely an exaggeration to say that due to “the extremely modest size of Henry’s audience even in French in the 1960’s” that Marion “just stumbled upon Henry and his seminal thought of ‘clandestine subjectivity’ as though upon an unclaimed jewel” (226). This better describes Henry’s standing in contemporary Anglophone scholarship than his stature in French phenomenological circles. One needn’t argue Rebidoux’s conclusion regarding the character of Henry’s critique of Husserl (as contained in, e.g., *Phénoménologie matérielle*) in order to suggest the risk of their presentation here—its contextualization of a prior figure through a posterior figure, one importantly influenced by the former as well as quite distinct therefrom (in his sources, methods, and results). Distinctions between them (particularly the specifically transcendental and Kantian context of Henry’s philosophy) remain underdetermined.

The author’s treatment of the mystical and theological horizon of Henry’s work is excellent and important. Chapter Four treats of “Henry’s Christianity,” and considers Henry’s late work. For the author, “as Augustine’s own Neo-Platonic quest ends in his conversion to Christ, so it seems does Henry’s.” (For discussion of this important aspect of Henry’s Neo-Platonism as a specific theological style, see pp. 146–47, 155, 157, 170, 209.) Rebidoux considers the relation between Henry and Eckhart across many of the most valuable pages of this book; she treats the Eckhartian theme of the birth of God in the soul from pp. 153 to 169. In this context, Rebidoux discusses the distinction between the theme of “generation” and the theme of “creation”—in her terms, between “creationism” and “emanationism” (e.g., p. 153, n. 20), a distinction that is essential to Henry’s *I Am the Truth*, chapters four and nine. Her treatment of Henry’s phenomenological theology extends to p. 237, making this the most sustained and articulate presentation of Henry’s philosophy of religion in English.

Rebidoux confronts Janicaud’s *constat* (in *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*) against Henry’s “phenomenology of the invisible,” his “incantations” of, and to, the purportedly anti-phenomenological principle of invisibility. Not wholly unlike Janicaud, Rebidoux ultimately understands Henry’s two thematic engagements, philosophy of knowledge and philosophy of religion, to be distinct on principle. His phenomenological investigation of the structure of self-consciousness, as containing visible images of an invisible ground, and his theological investigation of the structure of divine self-manifestation, as itself, too, containing a relation between a visible image and an invisible ground, cannot be isomorphic or even mutually informing for Rebidoux. While Henry attempts, “in his

later writings...to mediate...between the individual ipseity and the absolute Life,” this mediation involves “the *onto-theological nomination* of the process of [the] eternal self-begetting of Life in and as the Arch-Ipseity” (198; italics added). This critique, with which the book concludes, is made in two ways. In the first, Rebidoux is effective, in suggesting that Henry’s “nominalization of the unnameable pre-ekstatic source of thinking, willing, ex-istence” violates his own principles (202). While it remains undecided whether phenomeno-theology thus must remain “apophatic” rather than “nominalize” the sources that exceed or recede from phenomenological vision (158, 163, 185), this concern is important and clearly articulated. Less effectively, Rebidoux accuses Henry (repeatedly) of “onto-theology,” the character of which charge remains unclarified even as its intent to disparage is clear (As N. N. Trakakis put the point in his review of this work, “the by-now worn-out label of ‘onto-theology’ should be avoided, unless it is carefully defined (which it is not, in this instance).”) Thus, to her interpretive question, whether “Henry [has] really rigorously...established” his “phenomenology of Christ as the Arch-ipseity,” she responds that the latter involves “an onto-theological leap dependent on a certain Neo-Platonist-inspired reading of the Logos theology of John” (158, 169; cf. 158). She does not explore, but rather simply rejects, this inter-determination.

The work ends with a brief Conclusion, in which Rebidoux reviews the work’s central claims, including her critique of Henry’s “positing in the nominative the eternal process of absolute Life’s self-begetting of itself” (239). Thus, one may conclude that *The Philosophy of Michel Henry* is excellent for its treatment of both the Rhineland mystical source and the phenomenological context of Henry’s philosophy. Its treatment of the German Idealist sources of Henry’s thought lacks. Its treatment of the differences between Henry and Marion, and of the former’s role as the source from which such later and contemporary figures in French phenomenology developed, also lacks. Neither of these lacunae is fatal: this is a very good, and timely book, important for its depiction of the mystical and phenomenological sources of Henry’s thought. As interest in Henry’s phenomenology grows, Rebidoux’s work will continue to offer an excellent introduction to the phenomenological basis of his philosophy of knowledge, and the problems and potential of his philosophy of religion and its “theological turn.”