

# Given Life: The Phenomenality of Revelation in Michel Henry

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Over the past decade, interest among an English audience in the work of French phenomenologist Michel Henry has grown considerably. While there is still relatively little secondary work done on him in English, and while a number of his works—including his significant late work *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*<sup>1</sup>—are still untranslated, that promises to change soon. At present, interest in Henry comes primarily from students of phenomenology, as well as from those interested in the so-called ‘return of religion’ in Continental thought since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For those interested in the relation of the phenomenological method to this return of religion, one of the main issues is how phenomenology itself is being redefined and expanded to address new modes of phenomenality, including what has been called by Henry and others ‘invisible phenomenality’.

This paper will examine the unfolding of this redefined phenomenology in Henry’s work; it will consider especially what methodological difficulties arise for Henry in his unfolding of what is defined by him as ‘affective phenomenality’ as the key to fundamental ontology. In doing so, it will also address what has been referred to as the “theological turn” of Henry’s thinking in his attempt to solve those difficulties.

## 1

The phenomenological context in which Henry finds himself already as a young philosopher in the late 1940’s is one thoroughly soaked with the thought and the critique of Western onto-theology of Heidegger. Henry came into this relationship with Heidegger already with an intense interest in the question of subjectivity, his insistent focus on which question was shaped

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1. Paris: Seuil, 2000.

to a great extent by his experiences during the second world war.<sup>2</sup> Deeply interested in Heidegger's thinking, and without doubt crucially influenced by his 'destruktion', Henry nevertheless later came to reject Heidegger's thought as falling short of articulating any other mode of phenomenality than the classical one—namely, phenomenality articulated as 'ekstasis', a term which would become a key concept for Henry and in distinction from which he would unfold his own thinking. That thinking relentlessly sought to unfold a philosophy of subjectivity on the basis of what Henry would call pre-ekstatic, or 'auto-affectivity'.

Yet Henry remained ever indebted to the profound influence on him of Heidegger's work—for following Heidegger's lead, Henry goes back to the Greeks for the original meaning of the 'phenomenon', and for the way the understanding of phenomenality had unfolded since that time. The 'phenomenon', for the Greeks, as Henry points out, is "what shows itself by coming into the light"—"from the verb *phainesthai*, which carries within it the root *phaphos*, which means light."<sup>3</sup> That which shows itself in the light appears, it is present, it is a presence—that is, a being. Its coming into the light, its "upsurgence in *physis*"<sup>4</sup>, is in Heideggerian terms, an unconcealing of itself in the openness of Being. Or, as Henry would say, a manifesting of itself in the "light of the world"—that is, in the 'ekstasis' of an intentional horizon.

But of course, Heidegger warns that what shows itself is not Being *per se*, but beings in their *beingness*. His critique of ontology as beginning with the Greeks basically consists in the uncovering of this early Western privileging of *presence in the light*—that is, of *beingness*—to the point of negating anything else. As Heidegger sees it, the Greeks understood Being less in terms of unconcealment (*alethia*)—that is, the *coming-to-presence out of concealment* of beings—than they understood *beings* in their coming-

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2. See interview with Anne Henry, "Vivre avec Michel Henry", in *Auto-Donation: Entretiens et conférences* (ed. Pr tentaine and directed by Magali Uhl). Paris: Beauchesne, 2004, pp. 237–67.

3. M. Henry, *I Am the Truth: Towards a Philosophy of Christianity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 14. — Hereafter IAT.

4. M. Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (trans. Douglas Brick). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985, p. 88. — Hereafter GeP. — Henry refers here to Heidegger's discussion of the Greek concept of phenomenality in the latter's *Nietzsche* volumes, especially volume 1, chapter 22, on Plato's concept of *mimesis* in relation to the idea.

to-presence from out of concealment, standing out specifically in their radiance *as* beings and offering themselves in the truth of their Being—*as* beings. In other words, what was primarily wondrous to the Greeks was less the coming-to-presence itself, the *upsurgence in physis*, than precisely the beings which had (in fact always already) upsurged. Indeed, for Heidegger, that very wondrousness was what inevitably wove the first covering over, the first forgetfulness of Being as coming-to-presence out of concealment. No longer Being itself, thought in the way in which unconcealment maintained always some root worthy of question in concealment, but rather beings' full disclosure in the openness of Being—as though a *negation* of concealment altogether—came to be defined as Being *in general*, Being as beings' ground. For Heidegger, Greek thinking “experiences and posits the *truth of beings*, without inquiring into truth as such, because what is unhidden in it, a being as a being, necessarily overpowers everything and uses up the nothing, taking it in or destroying it completely as the ‘not’ and the ‘against’.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the main reasons for the occurrence of this privileging, or for the *securing* of it, is, as Henry points out, the role that the *idea* plays with regards to this upsurgence in later Greek thought: the Platonic *idea* which also, as a “consequence of the *physis* on the one hand”, “proposes itself to man, opening him to its light and through that light to being”, such that, on the other hand, it is at the same time that which “gives man access to beings”. On the one hand, the *idea* itself upsurges in *physis* to and within, or through, human being—and on the other, it allows for the possibility of the upsurgence of everything else to, within, or through human being at the same time. But in fact, Henry argues, the unique relation between these two properties of the *idea* is (perhaps inevitably) strained, for

... this second property tends to veil the first. Because the *idea* opens an access to beings for man, thus determining itself as those beings' a priori condition of possibility, it presents itself as the source of their appearance, which nevertheless resides in *physis*. It is no longer the upsurge of beings in *physis* that founds their placing on view: it is now the placing on view that makes the upsurge possible. (GeP 88–89)

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5. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 125.

Phenomenality is thus defined from this very early period in the West as 'ekstasis', the throwing out before (ob-ject), or exteriorization of Being as beings in the light—that is to say, in the light of the *idea*. The interesting thing, however, is that this upsurgence, this unconcealment of beings in the light, while "detached from its foundation so that it begins to float freely before man's gaze" as an ekstasis, doesn't actually find its *explicitly* founding principle in that gaze until Descartes—that is, until the transformation of the Platonic *idea* into the Cartesian *perceptio*, into the "I represent" all things, thereby becoming master of them in their being (or rather, in their *beingness*). (GeP 89)

Now for both Heidegger and Henry, this actually changes nothing with regards to the question of Being in its truth (in terms of unconcealment *as such*). Or, if it changes anything, it rather makes that question even more problematic than ever, by making it precisely *not* problematic at all—that is, by covering it over doubly: firstly, in the original privileging and the securing of the privileging of *presence in the light* of the idea, which privileging negates that of Being which withdraws in the event of the upsurgence (thus, defining Being as strictly *beingness*), and secondly, in the assumption of man to mastery over phenomenality in and through the power of representation, which culminates, as far as Heidegger is concerned, in Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God and the triumph of the *will-to-power*, most poignantly in its expression as modern technology. In this way, Western history, from its beginning with the Greeks up to its fulfillment in late Modernity, summed up in the thought of Nietzsche and embodied in modern technology, is for Heidegger 'nihilism'.

By nihilism, Heidegger understands the forgetting or the covering over (and to that extent a forgetting of even this forgetting) of the question of Being in its original truth as *physis*, and as the withdrawal that attends such upsurgence. Such a double forgetting leads Heidegger, already in the opening to *Being and Time*, to state the necessity of re-posing the question of Being in the face of contemporary claims (doubly forgetful) that Being is the "most universal" concept, "indefinable", yet "self-evident" and thus not or no longer requiring investigation.<sup>6</sup> Precisely such a forgetting Henry refers to, under the profound influence of Heidegger, as 'ontological monism': the

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6. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson). San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962, ¶1.

view that there is only one mode of phenomenality, namely, presence in the light—be that presence even (and perhaps especially) ideal presence, and be that light precisely the light of reason, or, in more phenomenological terms, the light of intentionality, the horizon of ekstasis. The double covering over, moreover, Henry refers to as ‘barbarism’—a state that humanity has arrived at, as he sees it, under the rule of modern technology.<sup>7</sup>

Thus for both Henry and Heidegger, something has been lost, and then of course further lost with the entry into Modernity—namely, the question of Being in its truth. To that extent, nihilism, or ontological monism, while deepening, nevertheless remain, for both Heidegger and Henry, continuous in Western history. As Henry says, nothing really changes in the “shift from the ancient and medieval philosophy of Being to the modern philosophy of consciousness [which] is generally interpreted as one of the great breakthroughs in Western thought. However, such a shift changes nothing in the definition of the thing as phenomenon but on the contrary carries it to the absolute level. . . [For] consciousness is nothing other than this relation to the object. . . than this manifestation that consists in the fact of being placed before. . .” (IAT 15–17). That is to say, consciousness is nothing other than the “self-exteriorization of the externality of the ‘outside’ which we call world” (IAT 17)—nothing other than ekstasis itself. Precisely what ontological monism fails to understand, however, says Henry, is that in speaking of this self-exteriorization of consciousness, the being of the ego in which it functions is itself always already assumed—indeed, it is itself posited ekstasically. What is needed is ultimately to “bring to light *the bond which unites the problem of truth with the problem of the ego at the source of the two*. However, classical philosophy has never raised such a bond to the status of a problem, and reason tries to escape the paradox”.<sup>8</sup> Thus the continuity of ontological monism, for Henry, in the West.

Continuity, yes—on the one hand. On the other hand, however—and herein lies the seed of Henry’s ultimate departure from Heidegger’s path

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7. See M. Henry, *La Barbarie*. Paris: Grasset, 1987. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001). See also O’Sullivan, *Michel Henry: Incarnation, Barbarism, and Belief*, chapter 4; and James G. Hart, “A Phenomenological Theory and Critique of Culture: A Reading of Michel Henry’s *La Barbarie*”: *Continental Philosophy Review* 32/3 (1999): 255–70.

8. *The Essence of Manifestation* (trans. Girard Etzkorn). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, p. 6. — Hereafter EsM.

of thinking—there have also been distinct ruptures of that continuity throughout Western history. According to Henry, a particularly decisive one is to be found in Descartes, despite the unquestionable force of the Cartesian *perceptio*. For it was Descartes who accomplished the radical phenomenological reduction to the *cogito* which initiated the epistemological turn into Modernity—a turn which, according to Henry, did not consist strictly speaking in an act of representation. Indeed, Henry takes Heidegger to task for interpreting Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" as rather entailing a self-representation—something along the lines of "I represent myself, therefore I am".<sup>9</sup> To interpret Descartes in this way is precisely to miss, in what Henry calls 'beginning Cartesianism', the crucial distinction between *videre* and *videor*—between seeing (taken more or less in a representing sense) and *seeming*.

According to Henry, what is at issue for Descartes is the problem of certainty. Of what can he be certain? Nothing in the world, of course—which consequently falls under the power of Descartes' phenomenological reduction. What is left? He himself? But what if he is deceived? Still, there necessarily exists some thing who thinks—or, as Henry reads it, to whom it *seems*—that he exists. 'Thought' here, for Henry, is *seeming*, "a primal upwelling of phenomenality", an absolutely interior self-seeming of existence, a "self-presenting self-sensing" (GeP 26), a "self-affection", "the mute immanence of its first being-to-self, in the affectivity of pure self-sensing" (GeP 33). The 'I', says Henry, always discovers itself first as a 'me', in self-seeming, in *originary self-impressionality*—in *ipseity*—and only afterwards is able to open within itself the ekstasis of representation by way of which doubt (including self-doubt), understanding (including self-understanding), willing or imagination (of self or anything else), and even sensing of anything else (including a body), is made possible. This originary self-impressionality is for Henry—and for Descartes, in Henry's version of 'beginning Cartesianism'—precisely the *pre-ekstatic* effective reality (which Henry calls 'life') upon which any possible ekstasis is founded. It is a mode

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9. See M. Henry, "The Critique of the Subject" (trans. Peter T. Connor), in *Who Comes After the Subject* (Eduardo Cadava et al., eds.). New York & London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 157–66. See also Heidegger's discussion of Descartes in chapters 15–18 of volume 4 of his *Nietzsche* (trans. Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell, and Frank A. Capuzzi). San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987.

of phenomenality distinctly different from ekstasis, rupturing ontological monism in its sudden appearance, in its sudden 'revelation' in Descartes' thought.

But there is also that other Descartes—the Descartes of, as Henry calls it, 'constituted Cartesianism'. It is precisely the character of 'constituted Cartesianism' which leads Heidegger to place Descartes squarely in the position of ushering in the doubling of the covering over of the question of the truth of Being. If the certainty of Being is established strictly by the power of representation—"I represent myself, therefore I am" (and therefore all other things *are*, too, *in* being represented by me)—then the original sense of phenomenality as a coming-to-presence, as an upsurge in *physis*, is entirely lost. 'Beginning Cartesianism' fails, says Henry, because the essence, as *videor*, is an abrupt rupture in ekstastic phenomenality which takes place in the course of Descartes' radical phenomenological reduction of the world, but which almost as abruptly slips into obscurity on account of Descartes' faltering gaze: "when Descartes is confronted with the blinding intuition that affectivity constitutes appearance's first coming into itself (the original self-affection wherein appearance appears to itself and wells up in its own phenomenality's appearance), his gaze falters" (GeP 44). The *impression* of the essence leaves as it were an after-taste in his thinking. But insofar as it ceases for him in that after-taste to be a spontaneous "welling up", it remains albeit an essence, but persists in obscurity—it remains "laced with ontological impotence" (GeP 53). What is left to Descartes now is to re-present to himself in an ekstasis what has "withdrawn" from him as an effective vision. Therefore, representation steps forward in Descartes' emphasis on "clear and distinct ideas", as precisely the potency, the effectiveness, to replace the now impotence of the spontaneous upwelling which has been lost to him.<sup>10</sup>

Now taken primarily in its form as 'constituted Cartesianism', it is quite true—Henry would admit in concession to Heidegger—that Descartes'

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10. "Descartes gave the concept of consciousness its ontologically radical significance, in which the concept designates appearance considered in itself—not just some thing but the principle of every thing, the original manifestation in which everything that can exist comes to be a phenomenon and so into being for us. Descartes introduced the concept of consciousness at such a depth, however, that its primal importance could not be preserved or truly perceived, not even when taken up again by contemporary phenomenology, which claimed to develop it fully—not even, I would say, by Descartes himself." (GeP 6)

ushering in of Modernity changes nothing in the history of nihilism, or ontological monism, except to the extent that it deepens the forgetfulness of, by covering over doubly, the question of the truth of Being. In its form as 'beginning Cartesianism', however, which, according to Henry, Heidegger completely misses, a great rupture of that history occurs: a new mode of phenomenality is introduced. Actually, such a rupture is admittedly not entirely new: it was already there in Meister Eckhart, for example, from whose thought Henry draws heavily; and, of course, also in Augustine (whom Henry surprisingly hardly ever mentions), whose argument for the certainty of his own existence based on the fact of the felt immediacy of the perception of his being alive<sup>11</sup> pre-dates Descartes' argument by nearly thirteen centuries. Also, the whole tradition of 'apophatic' theology already breaks with phenomenality in its ekstastic mode. But what Henry seeks is precisely a *positive* articulation of phenomenality in its originary mode—that is, in its phenomenological *effectiveness*: in terms of "*the bond which unites the problem of truth with the problem of the ego at the source of the two*" (EsM 6). It is 'beginning Cartesianism', argues Henry, which allows for the first time the possibility of developing a philosophy of subjective life which can claim the status of fundamental ontology.

## 2

To find the key to a foundational phenomenological ontology in its inseparability from a philosophy of subjectivity: this is precisely the goal and the very heart of Henry's thinking. The key, for Henry, lies in affectivity, in "upwelling self-seeming". This originary upwelling of self-presence to itself in *ipseity* is, as Henry calls it, 'life'. The self is originally *given* to itself as 'life' *to be a living one*—and it is only as a living one that it would then be capable of being affected by the upsurge into being of that which is other to itself. The *givenness*<sup>12</sup> to itself of itself as life in the *pathetik materiality*, this 'pure stuff', of its livingness—that is, the auto-affection which first gives

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11. See Book XV, Chapter 4 of Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Edmund Hill). New York: New City Press, 1991.

12. Henry's articulation of the *givenness* of the self to itself draws deeply from his critical reading of Husserl's "principle of principles". See especially Part I of M. Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*.

it to be a living self—is what Henry calls the ‘absolute body’. The absolute body is the revelation of affectivity in its *originary phenomenological effectiveness*. As Henry says, “[a]ffectivity is the essence of auto-affectation, not its theoretical or speculative possibility but its concrete [i.e. its *effective*] one.” (EsM 462)

It should be pointed out however, that this ‘absolute body’ does not constitute, for Henry, a pure ‘spirit’ standing over against—as in a traditional dualism—an ‘objective body’ encounterable within an ekstatic horizon. Rather, the absolute body—to wit, the *relation* of the absolute body with itself—gives for the very possibility of objectivity, and to that extent constitutes for Henry a ‘double revelation’. The first ‘fold’ of this double revelation concerns the self which affects itself in “upwelling self-seeming” and as such *receives* itself in the givenness of itself to itself *a posteriori*—as though it were itself somehow the hidden, immemorial ‘other’ to itself: “The ‘already’ of the Being-already-given-to-itself of feeling has to do with its phenomenological effectiveness and determines it. . . in such a way that it has a content and appears as already overflowed with it, even though such a content is identical to it” (EsM 472). To that extent, the self is already originally given to itself in the dative case, as a ‘me’, in *passivity*—before it has actively appropriated itself as an ‘I’. It *surprises* itself, it undergoes itself; indeed, it *suffers itself*—given to itself, and given above all *to be a self*. It is for this reason—namely, this givenness to itself as a self *a posteriori*—that Henry refers to the specific mode of phenomenality which affectivity is as a *revelation*. Indeed, such revelation constitutes, in the passivity of the *being-given-to-itself-to-be-a-self*, the relation of the absolute body with itself.

This brings us to the second ‘fold’ of the ‘double revelation’. Insofar as in revelation the self is originally given to itself *to be a self*, it must *appropriate* itself *as* such a self in order to become so. However, it is only able to appropriate itself because the revelation is essentially twofold: that is, it reveals not only the self’s givenness to itself to be a self, but also the very *possibility* of its being so. That possibility lies precisely in the appropriative structure in which it is given to itself to surpass itself in its passivity towards its self-possession as an ‘I’. But insofar as the very movement of surpassing is by definition an action which the self in its pure passivity cannot undertake, the revelation which reveals the possibility of such a movement must necessarily be itself the accomplishment of it. In other words, it is given to itself to be a self, and that ‘being a self’ has

already been effectively accomplished for it and *given over to it*.<sup>13</sup> Such an appropriative accomplishment, then, constitutes the relation between the absolute body and what Henry calls the 'subjective body'—the subjective body in its organic character, as a centre of orientation for itself from the perspective of which it "organ-izes" its world, being the terminus of the originary movement flowing out from the double revelation. It becomes, as Henry says, a *situated self*, and a powerful self, defined as the 'I can'.

Furthermore, such situatedness, as the subjective terminus of the originary movement, opens the ekstastic horizon in which the organic powers find their own terminus in their spatial localization within the body and are limited to that spatiality by their contact with and resistance by things. In this way it distinguishes itself in its objective body from other human bodies and other objects in the ekstastic horizon, since its objective body is precisely the outermost terminus of the continuous movement and expression of life which begins originally in the relation of the absolute body with itself, and which immediately self-surpasses itself in its passivity in the appropriative structure of the 'double revelation'. As such, it establishes within itself the very openness of the structure of 'transcendence' (ekstasis) which allows for the possibility of the "throwing out before itself" in representation. As it ever surpasses itself in that very throwing precisely *to be the living self for whom* the affective content of that throw is given, the self as 'hetero-affected' by the resistance that it encounters in the world is always already grounded in the accomplishment of self-surpassing which constitutes the appropriative structure. In this sense, the self "maintains itself close to itself" even in its movement out towards an ekstastic horizon. In fact, this "maintaining close to self" is the very condition and foundation of the ekstastic horizon. Henry writes:

The maintaining close to self of the act of transcendence in the original receptivity wherein transcendence receives itself, discovers its Being, masters itself, controls itself, coheres with self in the unity which makes it to be, to be what it is and what permits it to act, the original affection of transcendence. . . the auto-affection of transcendence. . . is the condition and the foundation of every ontological affection by the world as of every affection by a being. (EsM 461)

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13. Here, Henry seems heavily influenced by the later Heidegger. But he would still argue that Heidegger never got to the full (i.e. *effective*) revelation of the structure in its totality, pointedly in terms of the self's radical self-givenness to itself in its essential passivity.

This “original receptivity wherein transcendence receives itself. . . ” is precisely the second ‘fold’ of the ‘double revelation’ that auto-affection is—the fact that it reveals not only the self’s givenness to itself to be a self, but as well the very possibility and accomplishment of its being so, namely, the appropriative or transcendent structure. Such is “*the internal structure of the original mode of revelation of movement in its ontological identity with the possibility for this movement remaining near itself in its accomplishment and, consequently, as constituting this very possibility*” (EsM 268). “*Immanence is the original mode according to which is accomplished the revelation of transcendence itself, and hence the original essence of revelation*” (EsM 227). This original self-reception of transcendence and this “maintaining close to self of the act of transcendence” in that original reception make it possible for the self to undertake—in a *properly phenomenological way*—an objectification of whatever has affected it, as if it is “life itself that entered into the objectivity and brought itself before itself, giving itself to itself in and through this objectivity”<sup>14</sup>.

Now the proper title of this paper is “Given Life”. As applied to Henry’s thinking, there are three distinct and yet intertwined senses in which this expression could be taken. The first sense suggests what we have discussed concerning the relation between the subjective and the absolute body and of the absolute body with itself: the self in affectivity is given life, given to itself to be a self, to be a living one. But there are two other senses in which the phrase can be taken. The second sense, which necessarily follows from the first, has this meaning: given life, the self is, as a self, incapable of escaping from itself. Bound to itself *as a self*, since it is precisely its *pathetik materiality* which makes it to be a self, it is like a condemned man to whom has been given a life sentence. In other words, phenomenologically

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14. From Michael O’Sullivan’s English translation of a passage from Henry’s *La Barbarie*, in M. O’Sullivan, *Michel Henry: Incarnation, Barbarism, and Belief (An Introduction to the Work of Michel Henry)*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006, p. 149. — To that extent, the mode of phenomenality called ‘ekstasis’ by Henry is not ultimately that which he wants philosophically to contest. Rather, it is *ontological monism* that he wants to contest, i.e. the point of view that there is *only one mode of phenomenality*, namely ekstasis, as well as the ‘project of knowledge’-oriented science that has inevitably arisen out of this mistaken view and which eschews (indeed, *must* eschew) the question of the foundation altogether—Heidegger’s ‘double forgetfulness’ of Being, what Henry calls ‘barbarism’.

speaking, the self *is* in the dative case—and yet, it is at the same time in the *accusative*.

The originary pathos of the undergoing or suffering itself of the self is a theme to which Henry gives a considerable amount of attention. Such a suffering is the essential characterization of the radical passivity and impotence in which the self is originally given to itself and receives itself. It cannot *not* receive itself—for it does not even exist to oppose the givenness prior to being given life. Indeed, the classic adolescent rebellious rejection of the obligation of gratitude towards one's parents—"I didn't ask to be born!"—is quite fitting here. For puerile as it may seem, such a refusal is at some level always an expression of the very existential agony of *having to be*—as Henry says, of "the anxiety of the Self to be a Self. . . this Self that he is without being able to avoid or escape this condition" (IAT 200). For Henry, the existential and the ontological here coincide: the suffering of *having to be* is in fact an *essential affective tonality* of the ontological structure revealed as life. Henry writes:

The essence of affectivity resides in suffering and is constituted by it. In suffering, feeling experiences itself in its absolute passivity with regard to self, in its impotence at changing itself, it experiences itself and has the experience of self as irremediably handed over to itself in order to be what it is, as loaded forever with the weight of its own Being. Being delivered over to self, being loaded forever with the weight of its own Being, *the heaviness of the tonality included in its original situation and constituting I, is therefore what feeling experiences when it experiences itself, when it is what it is. . . In suffering as the self-suffering of self resides and is discovered as its original and fundamental mode, consubstantial with its essence and posited by it, the suffering of Being.* (EsM 658)

"The suffering of Being" is an interesting phrase here. It could mean, on the one hand, the self-suffering of the self "loaded forever with the weight of its own Being", in which case it *suffers Being*. To that extent, to suffer self, to suffer life, and to suffer Being all mean the same thing—since the fundamental mode of phenomenality is, as affectivity, the very life, or *livingness*, of a living self as an *ipseity*. Again, it could mean that those who *are*, necessarily suffer, i.e. in the suffering that goes along with Being as an essential affective tonality of the ontological structure revealed as life, and precisely because life, or livingness, is a fundamental mode of phenomenality. In other words, the second meaning is already contained in the first.

A third meaning, however, introduces us to a certain dimension of Henry's thought which has not yet been discussed in this study.<sup>15</sup> Namely, that—because of the coincidence, that is, *consubstantiality* of the self as an *ipseity* and affectivity as a fundamental mode of phenomenality—as the self suffers, so Being itself suffers. To that extent, the phrase “the suffering of Being” could mean also the suffering which belongs to Being, the suffering proper to Being itself—the suffering that Being itself suffers *in and as this self* in each individual case. For Henry, Being—indeed, ‘Life’, absolute Life—comes into itself, grasps itself, *begets* itself, *in each case in and as this individual self*. It begets itself, *engenders* itself, and suffers, as it were, self-birthing pangs.<sup>16</sup> Such birthing pangs, says Henry, are the self's “*being-crushed-against-itself*” (IAT 149), the self's *embracing* of itself in the self-grasping as self of absolute Life. Henry writes:

*The Self self-affects itself only inasmuch as absolute Life is self-affected in this Self. It is Life, in its self-giving, which gives the Self to itself. It is Life, in its self-revelation, that reveals the Self to itself. It is Life, in its pathetik embrace, that gives to the Self the possibility of pathetically embracing itself and of being a Self. (IAT 107)*

Indeed, if the individual self in each case cannot *not* be a self, it is because Being itself, as absolute Life, cannot *not* be a *Living One*. For this very reason, however, suffering is only one of *two* original affective tonalities “co-constitutive of life's self-revelation” (IAT 200). The other affective tonality (and in some sense the consummate one) is joy:

It is only in experiencing oneself in the “suffer oneself” that the life of the living Self comes into itself, such that suffering is veritably a path and a way. It is the test that life must pass so that, in and through that test, it attains itself and comes into itself in that coming that is the essence of any life, the process of its self-revelation. . . . But to suffer is not a way of a path in the sense in which we usually

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15. This dimension of Henry's thought is the very sore point for the majority of Henry's critics, who take him to be just another onto-theologian, even onto-theo-egologist, making a pretense of doing rigorous phenomenology.

16. The theme of the self-begetting or self-engendering of absolute Life is taken up by Henry especially in his late work *I Am the Truth: Towards a Philosophy of Christianity*, for instance in IAT 77: “Birth does not consist of a succession of livings, in each of whom life is presupposed, but rather consists in the coming of each living into life out of Life itself. Nor can birth be understood except on the basis of this Life and its own essence.”

understand it; . . . "to suffer" dwells inside "to rejoice" as *that which leads to joy inasmuch as it dwells within it*, as its internal and permanent condition. (IAT 200–01)

In other words, absolute Life as the fundamental ontological reality *is as* the pure affective self-enjoyment of itself in the eternal process of the suffering coming-into-itself and grasping itself as a self in each individual *ipseity*.<sup>17</sup> Such a process constitutes its self-revelation, the pure affective 'substance' of which, in the effectivity of its affection, *is* its ontological reality.

This, then, brings us to the third sense of the expression "Given Life" specifically in its phenomenologically problematic nature. The third sense concerns the problem of the precise relation between phenomenology and ontology. In the givenness to itself as an *ipseity* (i.e. as a living one in auto-affection), the self is originally given to itself in the dative case—a *posteriori*. Nevertheless, such auto-affection in its livingness—in its *effectivity* and thus precisely in its *concreteness*—is, for Henry, the very 'substance' or *pathetik materiality* of essential reality, constituting the *mode of phenomenality* which he articulates ceaselessly throughout his writings as that mode upon which all transcendence (i.e. the phenomenality articulated as ekstasis and central to the Western tradition) is founded. As such a foundational ontological structure, affectivity is an *a priori*—that is, "*the bond which unites the problem of truth with the problem of the ego at the source of the two*" (EsM 6). All 'life' is thus absolute 'Life'—such that the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* coincide. Absolute Life itself *gives* for there to be living ones, individual selves given to themselves in the individuality of their living *ipseity*. But what precisely is the *phenomenological* justification of making such an *ontological* leap from the phenomenality of the individual self in its always-already-being-given-to-itself-as-a-self (that is, in its *dativity*), to absolute Life in its *nominativity* grasping itself in the *ipseity* that is this individual self? For such a leap casts the originary nature of

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17. In the context of a discussion of Henry's reading of Descartes' *cogito*, Marion interprets this originary revelation of self to itself—here described as the coming-into-itself, indeed, generation of itself in itself in joy, and self-enjoyment of itself of Life in that generation—as an originary "generosity", or self-gifting. See J.-L. Marion, "Generosity and Phenomenology: Remarks on Michel Henry's Interpretation of the Cartesian *Cogito*" (trans. Stephen Voss), in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes* (ed. Stephen Voss). New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 52–74.

the individual self as a being-given-to-itself (in the dative) rather into the *genitive* case which underlies and founds the dative, consubstantial in its affective concreteness with absolute Life itself. But it does so *without truly establishing this so-called absolute Life phenomenologically* as anything other than the ground for this *individual* living ipseity. Its *nominativity* is *assumed*, in other words, in order to support the genitive into which the originarily dative self has been cast. To that extent, the problem of absolute Life's *phenomenological* justification is the same problem, for Henry, as the problem of transcendental solipsism.

### 3

Before addressing the problem of solipsism—and along with that, the precise relation of Henry's ontology to theology—it will be helpful to first consider Henry's treatment of the problem of forgetfulness—that is, the problem of the fact that we *forget* that in our essence we are given to ourselves as selves by and in absolute Life. For Henry, we forget, if not inevitably then at least as a structural likelihood, on account of the fact that there is something in the very structure of the essence itself which withdraws—and this has to do with the articulation of the essence as a pre-ekstatic mode of phenomenalization. As the essence and foundational mode of phenomenality grounding the ekstatic structure itself, affectivity in its internal structural concreteness cannot show itself in the world—it cannot appear in the light of an ekstatic horizon. In the ekstatic light, it is precisely *invisible*. It is to be characterized as the 'withdrawing', the 'hidden', the 'absent'—even as that having an inherent 'modesty'.

That the original essence of presence maintains itself outside the world and is in principle absent from it is what constitutes its modesty. . . . Because modesty is rooted in the internal structure of the essence and is identical to it, it is not a fortuitous determination, for example, a psychological determination, which may or may not exist at a given moment in history. Modesty is rather the very foundation of all conceivable existence, its internal possibility, its essence. (EsM 381)

Here, Henry makes use of the traditional notion of 'presence' (more or less coincident with ekstatic manifestation), and speaks of the essence of that 'presence' as being absent from the manifestation that is the world. Any attempt to establish that essence as itself a presence within an ekstatic

horizon (be it especially an ideal horizon) would clearly fall once more into the domain of the project of onto-theology. Yet for Henry, such an essence can still be known in its effectivity. It is just that such an essence necessarily reveals itself *on its own terms and of its own accord*. It reveals itself in affectivity, outside of any ekstatic horizon, invisible in the light of the world. It is known, then, with a *different* sort of knowledge, a more originary, pre-ekstatic knowledge—a knowledge *consubstantial*, as Henry says, with the self in its givenness to itself as an *ipseity*, an “upwelling self-seeming”: a *revelation*.

How, then, does one forget? For Henry, the problem of forgetfulness is structurally tied up with this hiddenness or modesty of the essence. It is also tied up with the fact that the revelation is twofold: the self, given to itself to be a self in both its possibility and its accomplishment as that self (that is, in the revelation of the appropriative structure along with the revelation of the self in its essential passivity), “throws out before itself” in representation. Everything here turns on whether or not, in that throw, the self maintains itself close to itself in receiving itself in its act of transcendence—that is, whether or not it preserves the *crushing grasp* of the effectiveness of its essential passivity in the midst of its self-surpassing. But what determines whether or not such a ‘knowledge’ here preserves itself? What determines, in the movement of that throw, at what point the self, in the enthused power of its ecstasy, throws too far—at what point, that is to say, its foot comes off its ground? At what point it ‘*impropriates*’<sup>18</sup> itself, claiming itself as its own foundation? At what point it forgets that it is (of) Life?

For Henry, as for Heidegger, we are of course faced with a situation in which some kind of ‘forgetting’ has already taken place—although the two thinkers ultimately define the nature of that forgetting differently. On the one hand, Henry argues, following Heidegger, that such a forgetting—*precisely as a forgetfulness of the question of Being in its truth*—is historical; that is, it is based on the unfolding of the possibilities of the Western tradition’s birth out of Greek phenomenality. Furthermore, for Henry (still following Heidegger), such a forgetfulness is a structural *likelihood*, if not an *inevitability*, of Being itself—precisely because there is something of Being’s essence (or *as* Being’s essence) which withdraws: in its essence Being hides. On the other hand,

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18. The coinage is mine, and simply refers to an ‘improper’ mode of appropriation of the self to itself—to be discussed in what follows.

Henry departs from Heidegger's articulation of forgetfulness by defining that essence explicitly as the pre-ekstatic revelation of auto-affective Life.

As for the practical *reason* for the forgetfulness of this essence, Henry's answer largely focuses on two aspects of it.<sup>19</sup> First, the very *structural possibility* of it, which is itself twofold: 1) the essence does not show itself in the ekstatic light; it is inherently modest; and, since the essence hides, 2) the illusion of the self-sufficient ego is possible. That is, the self, being appropriated to itself as a self—and further given to itself as a self with powers and as a centre of orientation, as 'I can'—'impropriates' itself in egoistically claiming itself in its powers and central orientation as grounded only in itself—as though it itself were the very source and foundation of them.

Of course, such a possibility still does not imply any structural *necessity* for such an egoistic illusion. If there *were* such a structural necessity, then there would ultimately be no way of overcoming forgetfulness—nor could such forgetfulness even be recognized as a problem from the start, except, it seems, by metaphysical speculation. Furthermore, such an illusion is in the end not even totally illusory for Henry: "Once given to itself, the ego is really in possession of itself and each of these powers, able to exercise them: it is really free. In making the ego a living person, Life has not made a pseudo-person. It does not take back with one hand what it has given with the other" (IAT 141). In other words, for Henry, it is not the ego *per se* in its freedom of movement and activity and central orientation which is definitively problematic, but only the illusion of the ego's radical, ontological self-sufficiency—so that a certain "maintaining close to itself" of the ego with Life, a certain *recollection* of Life by the ego in its outgoing activities, is part of the overcoming of forgetfulness.

The second aspect of forgetfulness as discussed by Henry is a particular existential outgrowth from such a system of egoism: namely, the care structure. Dasein, as that being for whom its being is a concern, *in* its concern in each case for its ontic possibilities, tends to become completely absorbed in that concern and, in the attempt to master those possibilities by egoistic action, loses sight of the ontological question of its existence altogether. To

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19. See IAT, chap. 8. — For an excellent treatment of Henry's discussion of forgetfulness, see Anthony Steinbock, "The Problem of Forgetfulness in Michel Henry": *Continental Philosophy Review* 32 (1999): 271–302.

that extent, it becomes wholly “outward looking” and solicitous in all its activities, and it recognizes beings only in their beingness, and even, the more absorbed in its concerns it becomes, only in relation to its own ends. It values efficient action and progress towards its ends above all else—and because of this, it *misunderstands* passivity as the radical powerlessness and *failure* of the self, rather than as the very condition for the possibility of its action and power. Moreover, its strong *futural* projection of itself, and especially the existential anxiety that it suffers on account of its concerns, often obscures its own feelings of itself as an affected ego in the deep and *immediate* truth of its appropriative structure which opens the ekstasis within itself—i.e. in the second ‘fold’ of the twofold revelation of auto-affection in which it was first given to itself to be a self.

Now it may be true that absolute Life has given with one hand to the ego its life and its freedom and power and has not taken back with the other. But actually, in such a situation of forgetfulness, in the ego’s self-*abandonment*, the ego itself has already given itself and its freedom and its power away to the world, and lost itself in its truth and effectivity precisely in losing its relation to absolute Life. Thus a bankruptcy and an emptiness. According to Henry, this is precisely the situation of ‘double forgetfulness’, or ‘barbarism’, ruling the modern era in which the ego is “no more than a phantom, an illusion. From this dissolution results one of the most characteristic traits of modern thought: an extremely serious challenge to man himself, his devaluation and reduction to what subsists when one no longer knows what makes him a man—to wit, an ego and a me.”<sup>20</sup> Here, of course, the ‘ego’ refers to the second ‘fold’ of the revelation in auto-affection, the ego in the truth of its expression as an appropriative structure; and Henry’s ‘me’ refers to the first ‘fold’, that is, to the self given to itself in its passivity (in the dative/accusative case).

How, then, does one overcome this forgetfulness? According to Henry, by realizing in revelation the essence, and the self’s passivity and self-givenness to itself in that essence, upon which all ekstasis is founded. But how do we do this? For even if one is ‘called’ by it—which in fact Henry contends one is, and necessarily, because it is one’s own essence—and a

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20. IAT 150. Henry continues by referring to “the modes of this theoretical murder from Kant to Heidegger and, on a more superficial level, by Marxism, structuralism, Freudianism, and various human sciences, not to mention the scientism specific to our own era”.

certain turning away from the world and towards the essence “within” is undertaken, there is still the problem that the essence does not show itself in the ekstatic light. Of course, the essence auto-affects itself, and in so doing affects the ego as well. However, in forgetfulness, the ego imagines itself to be the source of its own powers and orientation. As such, it experiences this affection as though it came from something other than itself—other than itself and yet paradoxically from within itself. To that extent, it is *hetero*-affected by the essence in a similar fashion to the way in which it is hetero-affected by things in the world. It experiences the affection by the essence, in other words, in only a ‘weak’ affection, as Henry says—since the revelation of the essence in a ‘strong’ affection (i.e. in auto-affection, in the passivity of its givenness to itself), is here concealed from it. For this very reason, the ego opens, as it were, an “interior ekstasis” and throws out—or rather, throws *in*—before itself in a representation the (obscurely felt) and beckoning essence by which it is always necessarily called. But the problem is that the essence does not let itself be seen in the ekstatic light—it likes to hide.

How, then, does one proceed? According to Henry, a “decisive transmutation” is required. Precisely in what this decisive transmutation consists will be made more clear by turning first to the question of the relation of Henry’s fundamental ontology to theology, after which we will return to Henry’s solution to the problem of forgetfulness.

#### 4

In 1991, French phenomenologist and historian of philosophy Dominique Janicaud published his *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*<sup>21</sup>, which was nothing short of an all out accusation of French phenomenologists of abandoning, by introducing a certain “phenomenology of the invisible” into their thinking, Husserl’s pivotal “principle of principles” (see note 12 above). Of course, what he held to in that principle of principles

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21. D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*. Paris: Éditions de l’Éclat, 1991. English: “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology” (trans. Bernard G. Prusak), in *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate* (co-authors, Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Paul Ricouer). New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, pp. 16–103. — Hereafter PTTFD.

was not 'givenness' as emphasized by Henry, but rather the intentionality ultimately made definitive by Husserl himself. Janicaud's critique of Henry basically charges him with promoting not a truly phenomenological pathetik structure consubstantial with ontological absoluteness, but only a conceptually tautological interiority, a form of metaphysical essentialism. He writes: "Henry supplies his work with all the appearances (and titles) of phenomenology in order to achieve the most fantastic restoration of essentialism. . . By means of the originary, he instills himself in the essential, autonomizes it, even celebrates it. . . Henry authorizes himself, from the investigation of a (determined) *eidos*, to go back to a purely auto-referential foundation" (PTTFD 73). He transforms "precise, limited, clarifying [phenomenological] procedures" into *incantations* "gesturing towards invisibility" (PTTFD 86). "[W]e cannot help but object that it is a question, here, of a fantastic metaphysical essentialism autopromoting itself."<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, continues Janicaud, the determined *eidos* which Henry sets up as the alpha and omega of his thinking is one which he borrows from Meister Eckhart—and this is part of what Janicaud refers to as French phenomenology's "theological turn".<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Henry makes extensive use of Eckhart in his early *L'Essence de la manifestation*, and his articulation of the originary absolute is in fact not at all unsimilar to Eckhart's, with regards specifically to the latter's confession of the immanence to the soul of divine revelation—an immanence so intimate that the soul at once *knows* itself

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22. PTTFD 75. — Janicaud is not wrong concerning the highly *incantatory* nature of Henry's writing. It is as if 'Life', 'absolute Life', has become for Henry a sort of *conceptual mantra*, already half revealing its effectiveness, and the repeated utterance of which would lead to the phenomenologist's (in this case, Henry's) complete realization and embodiment of it. Indeed, were all conceptually repetitive content to be removed from Henry's massive *L'Essence de la manifestation* (over 900 pages in the original French), it would be *considerably* shorter. However, Janicaud is not completely accurate in his claim that Henry's thinking is tautological. He totally misses the import that the concept of *givenness* has for Henry (in its relation to the essential passivity of the self, to the *always-already-being-given-to-itself-as-a-self*), and he privileges the intentionality aspect of Husserl's "principle of principles". Missing such an emphasis on givenness, it is inevitable that Janicaud ends up interpreting Henry as though he spoke of the essence in its revelation as Life only in the nominative. If Henry did so, then in fact Janicaud would be right: Henry's *would* be merely a tautological metaphysical essentialism.

23. But, of course, this is a different critique altogether: it concerns not any charge of tautological essentialism, but Henry's precise relation to theology. This is unquestionably the stronger of Janicaud's two critiques.

to be of one essence with God. To know itself here, however, is, for both Eckhart and Henry, not in any way an ekstasis of knowing, an intentionality; it is rather an immediate feeling of itself in the givenness to itself as a self in absolute Life which takes place as a radical passivity. Such knowledge, to that extent, *confesses* absolute Life; it does not represent it. It confesses it in the immediate affection of the “always-already-being-given-to-itself-as-a-self”, the *intensive excess* or “overflow” (EsM 472), the “upwelling”, “the blazing up of its Being” (EsM 474)—or in Eckhart’s terms, the “simplicity and nakedness of being”<sup>24</sup>. As Eckhart says: “God leads the spirit into the desert and solitude of himself where he is pure unity and gushes up only within himself. This spirit no longer has a why.” (BMECS 355) Of course for Eckhart, as Henry points out, “the understanding of the ultimate ontological structures which constitute the essence of reality is not the *prima facie* goal. . . He is interested only in the care of souls. . . and [the soul’s] possible union with God” (EsM 309). But it is clear from Eckhart’s teaching—and this is what Henry himself primarily takes from him—that “*the relation to the absolute depends on the nature of the absolute and its internal structure or rather it is identical to them; the existentiell union of man with God is possible only on the basis of their ontological unity*” (EsM 309).

Now that structure of unity Henry articulates phenomenologically as affectivity, as auto-affection, constituting the foundational mode of phenomenality which Henry calls revelation and in which the soul, or the self, is founded *consubstantially* with the absolute. Such a founding, of course, does constitute a certain leap in Henry’s thinking from the livingness of the individual *ipseity* to the universality of absolute Life—but ultimately whether such a leap is theological à la Eckhart or merely a metaphysical leap is no matter. For in either case—in the immediate *dativity* of the self’s being given to itself as a self—there is no strictly *phenomenological* justification for assuming the existence of any other ipseity like to one’s self. The individual self in the internal ontological structure of its self-presence to self is inherently solipsistic. As Dan Zahavi argues, Henry “never presents us with a convincing explanation of how a subjectivity essentially characterized by such a complete self-presence can simultaneously. . . be

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24. Meister Eckhart, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (translation with introduction and commentaries by Matthew Fox). Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980, p. 467. — Hereafter BMECS.

capable of recognizing other subjects.”<sup>25</sup> The only access we have to other ipseities (and this was Husserl’s problem as well) is through analogy. But analogy itself always maintains itself within a certain metaphysics—and it is a *distinctly metaphysical leap* that Henry makes if, by analogy, he merely projects and posits the existence of an absolute Life which gives for *all* ipseities to be selves. Indeed, Henry’s primary methodological difficulty lies in the necessity of articulating, *rigorously phenomenologically*, the simultaneous coming-into-itself and grasping itself as a self of absolute Life *in and as multiple ipseities*. But how can this be accomplished? In fact, absolute Life (as supposedly the absolute and transcendental source of multiple ipseities) comes off sounding like nothing more than an abstract metaphysical postulation. It is in Henry’s attempt to solve the problem of transcendental solipsism—in his undertaking of a phenomenology of Christ as the ‘Arch-Ipseity’—that the real key to Henry’s “theological turn” lies.

Henry’s late ‘Christian’ thinking begins more or less in the late 80’s<sup>26</sup> and definitively establishes itself with his *C’est moi la vérité: Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (1996). This work was followed by *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (2000) and *Paroles du Christ* (2002). Although having slightly different engagements to start out with, what the three of these texts hold in common is the attempt to develop an explicit phenomenology of Christ—primarily inspired by John’s Logos theology—on the basis of the utterances of Jesus, especially Jesus’ ‘I Am’ utterances. The three texts unfold as their central concern a sustained interpretation of the figure of Christ and of the relation of this figure to the self which is the human being. That relation is as follows: we are in our essence, and have always been, each

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25. D. Zahavi, “Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible”: *Continental Philosophy Review* 32/3 (1999): 223–40; pp. 232–33.

26. In his papers at the 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> International Conferences on Hermeneutics in Rome (held in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 2000), Henry deals with issues showing a kind of conflation of phenomenology with the Christian outlook in order to radicalize *both* phenomenology and Christian thinking regarding topics like “Théodicée dans la perspective d’une phénoménologie radicale” (1988), “Acheminement vers la question de Dieu: Preuve de l’être ou épreuve de la vie” (1990), “La parole de Dieu: Une approche phénoménologique” (1992), “Qu’est-ce qu’une révélation?” (1994), “Éthique et religion dans une phénoménologie de la vie” (1996), and “L’expérience d’autrui: Phénoménologie et théologie” (2000). The proceedings of these conferences are published each session under the direction of Marco M. Olivetti. Padua, Italy: CEDAM.

individually begotten—as a “son within the Son”—within the *archetypally pathetik structure*, the ‘Arch-Ipseity’ which Christ is. The auto-affection of absolute Life in its self-generation as a Self constitutes the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son are to that extent consubstantial (in auto-affection) because they are co-eternal in the process of the self-begetting of absolute Life as a Self in the Arch-Ipseity. Of course, because it is a *process* of self-begetting, there is always some sense in which the Father is eternally shrouded in the mystery of His self-gifting of Himself to Himself as the Arch-Ipseity in and as the Son. One might speak, then, of an ‘originary otherness’, or original difference within absolute Life itself, constituting it in its original essence as the ‘affective substance’, the *pure affective materiality*, of its always-already-being-given-to-itself as the Arch-Ipseity in radical passivity. But the Father and the Son are also paradoxically radically co-equal for Henry. For despite his emphasis on *givenness* in the relation of the Son-as-Arch-Ipseity to the Father-as-absolute-Life, this relation is above all an *eternal* (which Henry defines as *perpetual*) process of Life’s begetting-of-itself, or coming-into-itself and grasping itself in the Arch-Ipseity. It is this *eternal (perpetual) process*, then, which for Henry constitutes the *nominative* foundation of his ontology.

Now the individual selves are each uniquely begotten within the Arch-Ipseity as “sons within the Son”. This is what Christ means, says Henry, when he speaks his ‘I Am’ utterances—especially “before Abraham was, I Am” (John 8:58), “I am the gate of the sheepfold” (John 10:7), and “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).<sup>27</sup> In their original begottenness, Christ “led Life to the living by *first leading it to itself in him*, in and through his essential Ipseity—and then by making a gift of this ipseity to any living being so that, within that ipseity, each of them becomes possible as a living Self” (IAT 128). In other words, we are first born, first begotten, first given to ourselves as selves in the Arch-Ipseity which is Christ. To that extent, Christ is the Alpha and also the Omega, for Henry, in that we are called and led back to

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27. Although French translations of this Biblical passage generally have “Je suis le chemin, la vérité, et la vie”, Henry writes it for his own purposes—in order to accentuate the self-givenness to itself of absolute Life in the dative/accusative case—as “C’est moi la voie, la vérité, et la vie”.

him in the context of our forgetfulness of our essence, back to absolute Life itself, through the gate of the sheepfold which this Arch-Ipseity is.

But now here comes Henry's most crucial point with regards to the problem of transcendental solipsism: *it is in the pure affective materiality of the Arch-Ipseity which consists the continuity of materiality*, of affective 'substance', of affective flesh, between all individual ipseities. "In my flesh I am given to myself, but I am not my own flesh. My flesh, my living flesh, is Christ's."

[T]he gate of the sheepfold, which according to this strange parable provides access to the place where the sheep graze—thus founding the transcendental Ipseity from which each me, being connected to itself and growing in itself, draws the possibility of being a me—this gate *provides access to all transcendental living me's*, not to only one of them, to the one I am myself. . . [In fact] it is impossible to come to someone, to reach someone, except through Christ, through the original Ipseity that connects that person to himself, making him a Self, the me that he is. It is impossible to touch flesh except through this original Flesh, which in its essential Ipseity gives this flesh the ability to feel itself and experience itself, allows it to be flesh. It is impossible to touch this flesh without touching the other flesh that has made it flesh. It is impossible to strike someone without striking Christ. And it is Christ who says: "Whatever you did for one for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). (IAT 166–67, my emphasis)

In other words, Henry attempts to solve the problem of transcendental solipsism by appealing to the continuity of the affective flesh of all individual ipseities in the affective Flesh of the Arch-Ipseity that is Christ. Christ is the 'All-in-All'. He is *infinite affective flesh*, the *archetypally pathetik structure*. As such, he is absolute Life in its self-givenness which gives (itself) for there to be, and which grasps and experiences and suffers and enjoys itself in and as, multiple ipseities. But does Henry, in fact, *solve* the problem of transcendental solipsism through his phenomenology of Christ? We shall conclude with this question below. First, however, it is necessary to address the "decisive transmutation" envisioned by Henry as the solution to the problem of forgetfulness.

## 5

Henry is rather a phenomenologist with distinct onto-theological leanings than an ethicist as such. Of the array of his writings—dealing with topics

as various as phenomenology, Marx and Marxism, psychoanalysis, art, Christianity—there is not a single work that one could point to which might be called a work of ethics proper. Even his 1987 work of cultural criticism, *La Barbarie*—despite, or perhaps because of, its polemical moralistic tones—is more of a critique of the cultural repercussions of ontological monism than it is the articulation of an ethical system or vision. If there is an ‘ethics’ at all operative in Henry’s work, as pointed out by Natalie Depraz, it lies implicitly in the “absolute right of life in general. Life is the sole condition of possibility of any action or thought.”<sup>28</sup>

Rather than an explicit ethical system, what unfolds in Henry’s work is a certain “philosophy of action” (already in EsM chapters 68 & 69), connected to the problem of ‘real’ objectification and the “maintaining close to itself” of the self in life. This philosophy of action is itself intimately tied up with the problem of the return—i.e. the problem of how to overcome the forgetfulness of the essence and along with that, how to realize authentic action in relation to the passivity of the self in its givenness to itself as a self in absolute Life. However, this *how* of overcoming forgetfulness is not something that Henry is truly able to unfold in *The Essence of Manifestation*; indeed, he did not and he *could* not arrive at any articulation of it until his ‘conversion’ in his Christian writings. The reason for this is quite clear. As already mentioned, such an overcoming is incapable of proceeding by way of the opening of an interior ekstasis which would seek to return to the essence as to a represented object. Such a method is inherently non-phenomenological in that it simply posits the essence as a metaphysical ideal goal; it merely reiterates, for Henry, the ‘impropriation’ of the ego which improperly grounds itself and its powers of appropriation in itself. It seeks—as did Augustine in his vain attempt to repeat his ascent to the Neoplatonic ‘One’ by way of his own powers—to *storm the gates of heaven*, as it were, or to enter the essence without passing through the gate, through the Arch-ipseity, Christ—in the manner of thieves and robbers: “I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber” (John 10:1; as quoted by Henry, IAT

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28. N. Depraz, “The Return of Phenomenology in Recent French Moral Philosophy”, in *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy: A Handbook* (eds. John J. Drummond and Lester Embree). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, pp. 517–32; p. 524.

118). In other words, 'impropriation' of the essence is not only not possible, but any attempt at it is deeply unethical.

How, then, does one overcome forgetfulness? Through 'faith' in Christ, one supposes. Yes, but many who have faith in Christ have not overcome their forgetfulness. One main reason for this is that there is a certain "luxury" of inaction and passivity that faith will sometimes allow itself—giving up an unethical search for an ideal in the comfort and assured knowledge that such a return will ultimately be secured for them by Christ himself. But such inaction and passivity is not, for Henry, the *true* passivity; it is not the passivity of being given to oneself (in the dative case) as a self in absolute Life. It is not the passivity of the 'double revelation' in which, in its second 'fold', an ekstasis is made possible in which the self, accomplished as a self in a true appropriation of itself, is born as a living one. Rather, the passivity that faith—indeed, still in its forgetfulness—sometimes allows itself actually blocks the possibility of return. The reason it does so is that it suppresses the deep living energies of the essence, of absolute Life itself, which otherwise seek to extend and to express themselves in the individual ipseity. To that extent, for Henry, *action is necessary*. One *must act* in order to overcome one's forgetfulness. The question now becomes—and this is the closest one gets to pinpointing a positive ethics in Henry's work: what kind of action? Henry's answer: "acts of mercy".<sup>29</sup>

Now Henry's prescription of undertaking acts of mercy is not ultimately a matter of ethics *per se*, in terms of an orientation towards 'the other': "it is neither the neighbour nor the mercy with which we should treat him that explains the way of acting required by the Christian ethic" (IAT 168). Rather, it is a matter of bringing about the ego's 'disimpropriation' of itself and its powers. To that extent, paradoxically, the remedy for overcoming the forgetting of the self in its givenness to itself in absolute Life is precisely also a forgetting of sorts, but of an altogether different kind—namely, the 'impropriative' ego's forgetting of its solicitous self-concern, or the dissolution of the care structure. The ego, Dasein, quite literally has to forget itself as a being for whom its being is a concern. It has to forget all of its impropriative ego's concerns. It has to *no longer be* this impropriative ego. Indeed, the very fact that it has concerns about its being at all is itself only a symptom of the impropriative attempt of (despite the impossibility of)

29. Henry develops this idea in chapters 9 and 10 of *I Am the Truth*.

grounding itself and its powers in its own being. It becomes *concupiscent*, as it were—on account of its radical existential anxiety over the preservation of itself in its being—while all the while it “knows without knowing” that it simply *cannot* so preserve itself, so that it grasps desperately after many things. Moreover, even after it comes to the dazzling realization that its ‘true life’ cannot be preserved by way of worldly things, yet if it impropriately attempts to return to its own essence by its own powers—through ‘acts of righteousness’, for example, or be it even ascetic and “mystically” other-worldly in orientation—it is no less concupiscent in its being. Its action still constitutes a hungering and a grasping after precisely the *effectivity* of its essence as after an ideal object which it would possess and over which it would have intentional mastery in order to secure itself in its being. Indeed, this tendency to concupiscence of the ego in its existential desperation which causes it to grasp after its own essence as after an object is precisely why Henry promotes acts of mercy:

*Only the work of mercy practices the forgetting of self in which, all interest for the Self (right down to the idea of what we call a self or a me) now removed, no obstacle is now posed to the unfurling of life in this Self extended to its original essence. (IAT 170)*

Now this unfurling of life in the Self is what is most significant for Henry: a releasing and expressive extension of the heretofore suppressed energy and power—or rather “hyper-power”, as he calls it—of absolute Life in and through the individual ipseity. Such a release amounts to a distinct *transmutation* in the being which itself *constitutes* the overcoming of the forgetting of the self in its essence. Henry writes:

*In works of mercy—and this is why they are “works”—a decisive transmutation takes place by which the ego’s power is extended to the hyper-power of absolute Life in which it is given to itself. In such a transmutation, the ego forgets itself, so that in and through this forgetting an essential Ipseity is revealed—not its own Self but precisely what gives this self to itself by making it a Self, absolute Life’s self-giving in the Ipseity of which this life gives itself. It is no longer me who acts, it is the Arch-Son who acts in me. And this is because “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). (IAT 169)*

According to Henry, once this decisive transmutation has occurred, then forgetfulness of the essence has been overcome—and with its overcoming, *all* action becomes true action, since all action is seen as being carried out

by the hyper-power of absolute Life in and through the individual self. The individual self in this case, like Paul, becomes a *vertical witness* to a hyper-power working through him—a power which is not rooted in and does not originate from his own ego, but rather precedes him and even gives him to himself as (the possibility of) such an ego. This is what it means, for Henry, to do the Father's Will: "To do the Heavenly Father's Will is to let the relation to the self that joins the singular Self to itself be accomplished, just like the relation to itself of absolute Life—for the living man it is to let life be accomplished in himself like the very Life of God" (IAT 166). The ego, to that extent, no longer 'impropriative' of itself and its powers, becomes *authentically appropriative*—that is to say, on the basis of the second fold of the double revelation in which the givenness to itself as a self is also at the same time an accomplishment of the self in a self-appropriation. In other words, *it lets absolute Life live in and through itself as a self*, and in this way it *truly* lives—but it lives as precisely a witness and a servant, indeed as a *son*, and not a mere puppet: "[i]n making the ego a living person, Life has not made a pseudo-person. It does not take back with one hand what it has given with the other" (IAT 141). Such an ego, then, is *reborn* into its true essence—and any action undertaken by absolute Life in and through such an ego is a true action.

Returning now to the problem of transcendental solipsism, a crucial distinction needs to be made. On the one hand, we have Christ himself—Christ *in himself as the Son*—who is eternally begotten by the Father as the Arch-Ipseity in the *process* through which absolute Life in the mysterious gifting of itself comes into itself and thus becomes a *Living One*. Taken purely in itself, this is without question a theological assertion. Henry simply cannot establish a *phenomenology* of Christ *in himself* as begotten in such a *process*. Henry himself admits that the asymmetry of the relation between the Arch-Ipseity and any individual 'me' "marks the infinite distance that separates Christ from other people. . . God could just as well live eternally in his Son and the latter in the Father without any other living ever coming to Life".<sup>30</sup> This Christ, furthermore, is *as* the Arch-Ipseity through whom

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30. IAT 129. — Also: "It is not that there are two trajectories, one leading from Life to the livings. . . and the other leading from each living to Life. . . These two trajectories are congruent: there is but a single gate, a single Arch, a unique Rapture in which Life blazes forth. . . But the intersection of these two pathways under the Arch where Life radiates—the pathway that leads

absolute Life begets *individual* ipseities (albeit not eternally), and grasps and experiences and suffers and enjoys itself in and as these multiple ipseities—such that for any individual ipseity, it is true that “I am not my own flesh”, that “my flesh, my living flesh, is Christ’s” (IAT 116). Such a realization constitutes, according to Henry, a certain *vertical witness* by the ego of the ‘otherness’ of Christ, which is at the same time the ego’s own essence. To that extent, there is no use denying that Henry’s phenomenology has indeed made a “theological turn”, as charged by Janicaud, in order to justify the leap from the individual ipseity in its livingness to absolute Life—the phenomenological effectivity of life in the *vertical witness* being immediately referred to, and resting ultimately upon Henry’s nomination of, the eternal (perpetual) *process* of self-begetting of the Father in the Son.

But still one difficulty remains to be solved: namely, the fact that within this affective flesh of Christ—with which my own flesh is continuous to the point of no longer being mine alone (and thus the *vertical witness*)—my own flesh is moreover *continuous with the invisible pathetic flesh of all other ipseities*, which fact is still phenomenologically unestablished by Henry. What we *still* do not have from Henry is a way for the ‘otherness’ of *other ipseities* to be made intelligible to each ipseity within that continuity of Christ’s affective flesh. Henry’s material phenomenology is thus pressed to establish here the precise phenomenological content of the revelation of *other ipseities*—in a sort of *horizontal witness within* the vertical one—to the ipseity that is this ‘me’ within the continuity of my affective flesh in absolute Life with that of other ipseities. To what extent the rich and still hidden possibilities of Henry’s phenomenological thinking—perhaps in a dialogue with contemporary philosophies of ‘otherness’—can broach this content fruitfully remains to be seen.

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from Life to the living and the one that leads the living to Life—does not produce a reciprocity between these two terms, between Life and the living. . . The relation between the Ipseity of absolute Life and the me of each living implies no reciprocity of this kind: the path cannot be traveled in both directions.” (IAT 128–29)