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Phenomenology of life

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introduction

nick hanlon

Michel Henry taught philosophy for many years at the Université Paul Valéry – Montpellier III. His published work includes several novels (*L'Amour les yeux fermés* was awarded the Prix Renaudot in 1976), an analysis of Maine de Biran (1965), a two-volume study of Marx (1976), a book on the conceptual origins of psychoanalysis (1985), a book on Kandinsky (1988) and several books on Christianity (from 1996). His nine hundred page magnum opus, *The Essence of Manifestation*, was published in two volumes in 1963. Henry died in July 2002.

Henry is a phenomenologist first and foremost, and, in keeping with Husserl's teaching, his point of departure is the way things appear to and are experienced by the living subject. At the beginning of *The Essence of Manifestation* Henry describes his project as concerned with the meaning of the being of the self. This theme remains with him in one way or another throughout his work, as he attempts a reconceptualisation of the subject and its position in relation to phenomena in such a way as to overcome every variant of Cartesian dualism. In opposition to a broadly Cartesian or Kantian perspective, Henry conceives of manifestation in terms of the fundamental unity of subject and object: manifestation is an immanent relation of subject and "life." (Unlike Husserl, Henry distinguishes the term "life" with its existential associations of engagement and intensity from the more easily objectified or neutralised term "world.") In *The Essence of Manifestation* Henry proposes an ontology in which the subject is the absolute foundation of being, such that the experience of

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translated by nick hanlon

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self is the very essence of the "Absolute." As with Heidegger's presentation of being as grounded in the (self-)interrogation of Dasein, Henry's subject is originary and primordial, but, rather more insistently than in Heidegger's conception of things, Henry's subject lives in dynamic reciprocity with the phenomena of life. The subject perceives such phenomena through receptive sensibility affected by mood, i.e. through "affectivity." In particular, Henry explores the experience of anguish in dialogue with Kierkegaard and the implications of mood entailed in Heidegger's key term *Befindlichkeit* (situatedness). In Henry's account being is thus not only "immanent" (i.e. immanent within the experience of one's self) but also experienced through affectivity, which is the essence of "ipse-

ity,” the indivisible identity of that which affects and that which is affected.

Henry reiterates the primacy of such living self-affectation when he turns his attention to Marx and Freud. Against both the classical Marxist and Althusserian emphasis on the “pseudo-scientific” claims of dialectical materialism, Henry’s *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality* (1976) is concerned with the fundamental conditions of human individuality, subjectivity and productivity. Henry reads Marx as a philosopher of living labour or creative praxis, of praxis considered, in both its existential intensity and complex social context, as the sole basis for all genuine value. Consequently, he downplays abstract concepts like productive forces or social class as merely derivative of “the subjective element of individual praxis, which alone founds value and accounts for the capitalist system,”⁷¹ just as it inspires the quest for a communal socialism.

In *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (1985) Henry again distinguishes living affectivity from its alienation in lifeless representation, as he charts the slow historical emergence, from Descartes to Freud, of the concept of the unconscious. In so far as this concept confirms the “radical immanence of auto-affectation” (as it does, up to a point, in the affirmations of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), it makes an essential contribution to an ontology of life. To the degree that psychoanalysis realises that “psyche’s essence does not reside in the world’s visible becoming or in what is object-ed,” so then it helps us to understand, among other things, anxiety as “the anxiety of life’s inability to escape itself,” or drive as “the principle of all activity.”⁷² On the other hand, in so far as the unconscious continues to be analysed in terms of representation or motivation (as it generally is, according to Henry, in Freudian psychoanalysis), i.e. in so far as the unconscious is reduced to a process that merely (albeit obscurely) registers and cathects certain objects and experiences of the world, so then it remains fully compatible with the fundamental operation of consciousness itself: the showing or seeing of that which appears in the world. *This* concept of the unconscious arises at the same time “and as the exact consequence” as that of consciousness in the broadly Cartesian

sense,³ and it contributes to the same disastrous result: the dilution of living thought within the anaemic confines of representation.

Nowhere does Henry’s lifelong distinction of life from world assume more dramatic form than in his first explicitly theological book, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* (1996). Christ figures here as nothing less than the original *Living*, the original instance of an eternal self-affecting and self-revealing Life forever independent of the world. Genuine life is “not possible in the world; living is possible only outside the world, where another Truth reigns”⁷⁴ – the other-worldly truth of Christianity. Christ is the Absolute in whom all living beings dwell, in so far as they are themselves incapable of accounting for their self-affectation, which remains irreducible to any process that appears or evolves in the world, and thus irreducible to any philosophy of consciousness, no less than to any would-be “science” of life. In this, as in all of Henry’s works, the primacy of affectivity manifests itself in and through the process of self-experiencing [*s’éprouver soi-même*], itself grounded in a sufficient (or divine) Self that experiences itself as the living of eternal self-revelation. Interest in such self-experience also implies, as you might expect, recognition of the primordial importance of the body, which has likewise remained one of Henry’s most consistent concerns (from his first book *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* (1965) to his last work *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (2000)).

Above all, self-experience involves suffering and *pathos* which is coexistent with joy. The experience of suffering is ontologically primordial; it enables (through contrast and reciprocity) the experience of joy and constantly mediates our experience of self and phenomena. In section 70 of *The Essence of Manifestation* Henry cites the Christian slogan “Happy are those who suffer,”⁷⁵ a phrase to which he returns at the end of the present article. The phrase not only indicates the persistence of Henry’s philosophical preoccupations but summarises in a single formula the way his ontology integrates the primacy of affectivity and corporeality, the co-constituency of suffering and joy, the self-reflex-

ive character of life, just as it points towards the need for a reappraisal of Christian and, in particular, of Johannine thinking. It is no accident that the conclusion of Henry's last book is entitled "Beyond Phenomenology and Theology: The Johannine Archi-Intelligibility."

notes

- 1 Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality* 14.
- 2 Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* 285, 7, 298.
- 3 Ibid. 2.
- 4 Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* 30.
- 5 Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation* 671.

phenomenology of life

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The phenomenology of life lies within the ambit of that great current of philosophical thinking which originated in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century with Edmund Husserl and that, via major thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler, continued throughout the whole of the twentieth century. It still remains very much alive today, notably in France.¹ I would like to show in which ways the phenomenology of life is a tributary of this movement of thought which is one of the most important in our culture, and in what ways it diverges from it.

The originality of phenomenology must be understood on the basis of the objective it has assigned itself. Whilst the other sciences study specific phenomena – physical, chemical, biological, juridical, social, economic, etc. – phenomenology explores what allows a phenomenon to be a phenomenon. Phenomenology investigates pure phenomenality as such. One can confer various names upon this pure phenomenality: pure manifestation, showing, unveiling, uncovering, appearing, revelation, or even a more traditional word: truth. As soon as the object of phenomenology is understood in its difference from the object of other sciences, a further distinction seems to impose itself: that of the phenomenon considered on the one hand in its particular content, and on the other hand in its phenomenality. Such is the distinction between that which shows itself, that which appears, and the fact of appearing, pure appearing as such. It is this difference that Heidegger formulates in his own way in paragraph 44 of *Being and Time* when he distinguishes truth in a secondary sense as that which is true, that which is unveiled, from, at a deeper level, the unveiling as such as “the most original phenomenon of truth [*das ursprünglichste Phänomen der Wahrheit*].”²

Another primary intuition of phenomenology is that appearing is more essential than being; it is only because it appears that a thing is able to be. To express this with Husserl, using a formula

borrowed from the Marburg School (which I modify slightly): “Something is inasmuch as it appears [*Autant d’apparaître, autant d’être*].” I carry this precedence of phenomenology over ontology one step further by saying that it is only if the appearing appears in itself and as such that something, whatever it may be, can in turn appear, can show itself to us.

Despite these various points, however, the phenomenological presupposition of phenomenology still remains wholly indeterminate. The principles of phenomenology tell us that “something is inasmuch as it appears” and they urge us to go, to quote the famous slogan, “straight to the things themselves [*zu den Sachen selbst*].” But the meaning of these principles remains obscure, so long as we lack a clear definition of what is meant by the fact of appearing, by the concrete phenomenological mode according to which this pure appearing appears (i.e. the pure phenomenological matter, so to speak, in which phenomenality as such phenomenalisises itself). Now, if one directs this question towards the founding texts of phenomenology one notices that behind the phenomenological indeterminacy of the principles of phenomenology, and owing to this same indeterminacy, a certain conception of phenomenality slips in, the very conception which initially presents itself to ordinary thought and which constitutes at the same time the oldest and least critical prejudice of traditional philosophy. This is the conception of phenomenality that is derived from the perception of objects in the world, which is to say, in the final reckoning, the appearing of the world itself.

The reader may not easily accept the idea that the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, confronted with the explicit question of “how” objects are given (*Gegenstände im Wie* – “objects in the how”),³ answers: via the appearing of the world. Doesn’t Husserl, in keeping with tradition, instead refer the principle of phenomenality to consciousness and thus to a type of “interiority”? However, we should not forget the essential definition of consciousness as intentionality. Understood as intentional, consciousness is nothing other than the movement through which it throws itself outside; its “substance” exhausts itself in this coming

outside which produces phenomenality. The act of revealing in such a coming outside, in a setting at a distance, is what constitutes showing [*faire-voir*]. The possibility of vision resides in this setting at a distance of that which is placed in front of the seeing, and is thereby seen by it. Such is the phenomenological definition of the object: that which, placed in front, is rendered visible in this way. Appearing is here the appearing of the object in a double sense: in the sense that that which appears is the object, and also in the sense that since that which appears is the object, so then the mode of appearing at issue here is the mode of appearing peculiar to the object and that which renders it visible, i.e. this setting at a distance in which arises the visibility of all that which is susceptible of becoming visible for us.

At this point a further question cannot be avoided: how does the intentionality which shows or makes visible every thing reveal itself to itself? Could it be by directing a new intentionality upon itself? If so, can phenomenology avoid the bitter destiny of that classical philosophy of consciousness which finds itself bound in an endless regression, obliged to place a second consciousness behind the knowing consciousness (in our case a second intentionality behind the one that we are attempting to wrest from obscurity)? Or else does a mode of revelation exist other than the showing of intentionality, in which phenomenality would no longer be that of the outside? Phenomenology has no answer to this question. Thus a crisis of extreme gravity takes form in it which soon leads to aporia. The very possibility of phenomenality becomes problematic if the principle of phenomenality escapes its grasp. As we know, Husserl could only describe as “anonymous” that self which in the final instance is constitutive of the way things appear. It is with Heidegger that the appearing of the world is taken to its highest degree of elaboration. From section 7 of *Being and Time* the phenomenon is understood in the Greek sense – *phainomenon*, from the root *pha, phos*, which signifies light, so that appearing signifies coming into the light or into clarity, i.e. “that inside of which something can become visible or manifest in itself.” The world is this ek-static horizon of

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visibilisation inside of which every thing can become visible, and the second part of *Being and Time* declares explicitly that this “horizon” concerns exteriority, the “outside of self” as such. The world is identified here with temporality, and temporality is nothing other than “the originary ‘outside of self’ in and for itself [*Zeitlichkeit ist das ursprüngliche ‘Außer-sich’ an und für sich selbst*].”⁴

There are three decisive traits that characterise the appearing of the world. Their brief enumeration will serve as an introduction to the phenomenology of life itself, whose first thesis will be that no life can appear in the appearing of the world.

1. In so far as the appearing of the world consists in the “outside of self,” in the coming outside of an Outside, so all that shows itself in it, shows itself outside, as exterior, as other, as different. *Exterior* because the structure in which it shows itself is that of exteriority; *other* because this ek-static structure is that of a primordial alterity (all that which is outside of me is other than me, all that which is outside of self is other than self); *different* because this Ekstasis is identically a Difference, the operation which, opening up the divide of a distance, renders different everything to which this setting at a distance allows to appear – in the horizon of the world. Such an appearing turns away from itself with such a violence, it throws outside with such force (being itself nothing other than this originary expulsion of an Outside), that everything to which it gives appearance can never be anything other, effectively, than exterior in the dreadful sense of something which, placed outside, chased as it were from its true Residence, from its original Homeland, deprived of its ownmost possessions, finds itself from that point abandoned, without support, lost – prey to this abandonment from which Heidegger needed to deliver man once he had made of him, as “being-in-the-world,” a being of this world and nothing more.

2. The appearing which unveils in the Difference of the world does not just render different all that which unveils itself in that fashion, it is in principle totally indifferent to it, it neither loves it nor desires it, and having no

affinity with it, it does not protect it in any way. As far as this appearing is concerned, it doesn't matter whether that which appears is a darkening sky or the equality of a circle's radii, a nanny-goat or a hydroplane, an image or a real thing, or even the formula that might contain the secret of the universe. Like the light of which Scripture speaks, which shines on the just as well as on the unjust, the appearing of the world illuminates everything that it illuminates in a terrifying neutrality, without distinguishing between things or persons. There are victims and torturers, charitable acts and genocides, rules and exceptions, and exactions, and wind, water, earth, and all this stands before us in the same way, in this ultimate manner of being which we express when we say "This is," "There is."

3. However, this indifference of the appearing of the world to that which it unveils in the Difference, which makes everything of it except that which a Father is for his Son, a brother for his brothers, a friend for his friends (a friend who knows everything that his friend knows, a brother who knows everything that his brothers know, and first and foremost the first among them: the First Born Son) – this indifference, we should say, hides a more radical destitution. The appearing of the world is not only indifferent to everything it unveils, it is incapable of conferring existence upon it. It is without doubt this incapacity of the appearing of the world to take account of that which unveils itself in it which explains its indifference towards it. Indifference and neutrality here mean powerlessness, from which they are derived. Heidegger, who first thought the concept of the world in its originary phenomenological signification as pure appearing, was quite aware of both this indifference (the anguish in which everything becomes indifferent) and this powerlessness. The unveiling unveils, uncovers, "opens," but does not create [*macht nicht, öffnet*]. This is how the ontological destitution of the appearing of the world reveals itself, as itself incapable of setting out reality.

Now this ontological destitution of the appearing of the world does not result from a peculiarly Heideggerian thesis: one finds it already in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant under-

stood what is at stake in the question of the world as phenomenological. This is why the *Critique* consists of an extremely rigorous description of the phenomenological structure of the world. The world is co-constituted through a priori forms of pure intuition, the intuition of space and of time, as well as through the categories of the understanding. "Forms of pure intuition" means pure ways of showing [*faire-voir*], considered in themselves, independently of the particular and contingent content (which is designated as "empirical") of that which they show on any given occasion. "A priori" means that these pure ways of showing precede all actual experience. Considered in terms more general than those of their specific characteristics (substance, causality, reciprocal action), the categories of understanding have the same fundamental phenomenological signification, that of belonging to showing and of rendering showing possible by assuring its unity. Now, the phenomenological structure of this unifying power is the same as that of the pure intuitions, it is a showing which consists in the fact of placing outside [*poser dehors*] that which becomes visible in this way. According to Kant's decisive affirmation, the forms of intuition and the categories of understanding are both representations. To represent in this sense is expressed in German as *vor-stellen*, which signifies very precisely "to place in front" [*poser devant*]. Now, what is important for us in all this, the recurrent thesis of the *Critique*, is that the phenomenological formation of the world in the conjoined and coherent action of these diverse "showings" is forever incapable, by itself, of setting out [*poser*] the reality which constitutes the concrete content of this world – in order to gain access to this reality, Kant was forced to have recourse to sensation.

But the appeal to sensation which can alone give access to reality hides within it an appeal to *life*, that is, to a radically different mode of appearing. Life is phenomenological through and through. It is neither a being [*étant*] nor a mode of being [*être*] of a being. This is not the life about which biology speaks. To tell the truth, modern biology no longer speaks about life. Since the Galilean revolution its object has

narrowed to material processes compatible with those studied by physics. As François Jacob expresses it: "In today's laboratories one no longer enquires about life."⁵

The only life which exists is transcendental phenomenological life, the life which defines the originary mode of pure phenomenality to which henceforth, for the sake of clarity, we will reserve the name revelation. The revelation peculiar to life stands opposed point by point to the appearing of the world. Whereas the world unveils in the "outside of self," being only the "outside of self" as such, such that everything which it unveils is exterior, other, different, the first decisive trait of the revelation of life is that, because it carries no divide or gap within it and never differs from itself, it only ever reveals itself. Life reveals itself. Life is an auto-revelation. Auto-revelation, when it concerns life, thus means two things. On the one hand it is life which accomplishes the work of revelation, it is everything except a thing. On the other hand what it reveals is itself. Thus the opposition between that which appears and pure appearing, which had already been present in classical thought and which was then brought to the fore by phenomenology, disappears in the case of life. The revelation of life and that which reveals itself in it are as one.

Everywhere where there is life we encounter this extraordinary situation, which is discernible in each modality of life, even in the most humble of impressions. Take, for example, an experience of pain. Because in ordinary apprehension a pain is at first taken as a "physical pain," one attributed to part of the objective body, let us practice on it that reduction which retains only its painful character, the "painful as such," the purely affective element of suffering. This "pure" suffering "reveals itself to itself," which means that suffering alone allows us to know what suffering is, and that what is revealed in this revelation, which is the fact of suffering, is indeed precisely suffering. In this modality of our life the "outside of self" of the world might well be absent – a fact indicated by the lack of any divide that might separate suffering from itself, such that, driven back against itself, overwhelmed by its own weight, it is incapable of instituting any form of stepping-back from itself, a dimension of flight

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thanks to which it might be possible for it to escape from itself and from that which was oppressive about its being. In the absence of any divide within suffering, the possibility of turning one's gaze upon it is ruled out. No one has ever seen their suffering, their anguish, or their joy. Suffering, like every modality of life, is invisible.

Invisible does not designate a dimension of unreality or illusion, some fantastical other world, but exactly the opposite. We have seen that it is the appearing of the *world* which, throwing every thing outside of itself, at the same time denudes it of its reality, reducing it to a series of exterior appearances into which it is impossible to penetrate because they have no "interior," each merely referring you to another one which is just as empty and devoid of content as itself, in this game of indefinite referrals which is the world. We have seen that, according to Heidegger, the appearing of the world is incapable of creating that which unveils itself in it. By contrast, each of the modalities of life is a reality – one that is abrupt, immediate, incontestable, insuperable. But as soon as I try to see this reality, it disappears. I am certainly able to form the image of my suffering, re-present it to myself, yet the fact remains that the reality of suffering never exists outside of itself. In the representation of suffering I am only in the presence of a noematic unreality, of the signification "suffering." It is only when all distance is abolished, when suffering experiences itself as pure suffering and joy as pure enjoying, that we are dealing with actual suffering, that revelation and reality are as one.

This brings us to the third characteristic which opposes the revelation of life to the appearing of the world. Whereas the latter differs from every thing that it causes to show itself, in such a way that it is totally indifferent to every such thing, life, on the contrary, keeps within it that which it reveals, it resides inside, in every living being, as that which causes it to live and never leaves it for as long as it lives. This then is a new relationship, foreign to the world, peculiar and interior to life; we must now consider in itself the hitherto unthought relation between life and the living being, without which we can understand nothing of this living being that we

are. Foreign to the world, acosmic, invisible, the relation of life to living being is a relation of absolute immanence. How could one conceive of a living being that did not carry life within it? But the question equally arises of knowing why there is a living being in life: why is no life possible that might be anonymous, impersonal, foreign to every individuality?

Now, no more than the question of immanence, the question of the relation of life to the living being is not a metaphysical one, an object of speculative constructions or of indefinite debates. It is a matter for phenomenology and more particularly for a phenomenology of life, of which it becomes the central question. It is also an originary question. It obliges us to go back to an absolute life, to the Life spoken of by John.

Absolute life is life which has the power to bring itself into life. Life “is” not, it happens and does not cease happening. This coming of life is its eternal reaching into itself, the process or trial [*le procès*] in which it gives itself to itself, crushes itself against itself, experiences itself [*s’éprouve soi-même*] and delights in itself, thus constantly producing its own essence, as far as this consists in this testing experience [*épreuve*] and delight in itself.⁶ Now, no experience produces itself as experience or trial of itself if it does not generate in its very accomplishment the Ipseity whereby it is able to experience itself and delight in itself. As long as we are not speaking of the concept of life but of a real life, a phenomenologically actual life, then the Ipseity in which this real life comes into itself in experiencing itself is also one that is phenomenologically actual, it is a real Self, the First Living Self in which, experiencing itself, Life reveals itself to itself – its Word. Thus the process of Life’s auto-generation is accomplished as the process of its auto-revelation, in such a way that the auto-revelation does not come at the end of this process but belongs to it and is consubstantial with it like an immanent condition of its effectuation. “In the beginning was the Word.” There is no life without a living being, like this Self that all life carries in it in so far as it is this experience of self of which we are speaking. But equally there is no Self without this Life in which every Self is given in itself,

in such a way that outside of life no Self is possible.

However: doesn’t this analysis of absolute life distance us from the phenomenology which seeks to confine itself to the concrete phenomena that we live through, does it not throw us back into speculation, if not into dogma or belief? Haven’t we yielded to the “theological turn of French phenomenology”⁷ denounced by Dominique Janicaud?

And yet are we not, we too, living beings? Living beings in the sense of a life which experiences itself, and not just a complex set of material processes which know nothing of themselves. Living beings which are themselves also living Selves. This strange analogy between the internal process of absolute life experiencing itself in the Self of the First Living Being and our own life revealing itself to itself in this singular Self that each of us is forever becomes less extraordinary than it seems at first sight if we first of all establish the distinction between them.

Our life is a finite life incapable of bringing itself into self. The Self that this life carries in it is itself a finite Self. As Husserl says in a manuscript of the 1930s: “I am not only for myself, but I am me [*Ich bin nicht nur für mich, aber Ich bin Ich*].” I am not only for myself, i.e. this individual appearing in the world, a thing among things, a man among men, who represents itself constantly to itself, always in a state of care for itself, who only busies itself with things and with others with a view to itself. In order to relate everything to oneself, one must first of all be this Self to whom everything is related, one must be able to say *Ich bin Ich*. But the point is that this *Ich bin Ich* is not at all originary. I am indeed myself, but I am not brought to myself in this me that I am. I am given to myself, but it is not me myself who gives me to me. A Self such as that of man, a living transcendental Self – such a Self is only ever to be found in the “Word of life” of the first letter of John, whom Paul described as “a First Born among many brothers” (*Romans* 8: 28–30). For we too are born of absolute Life. To be born does not mean to come into the world. Things appear for an instant in the light of the world before disappearing into it. Things are not “born.” Birth concerns only

living beings. And for these living beings, to be born means to come to be as one of these transcendental living Selves that each of us is. It is solely because we have first come into life that we are then able to come into the world.

In this way the nature of our transcendental birth becomes clear. How do we come into life? We come into life in so far as life comes in *itself* [*vient en soi*] and in the same way that life comes in itself. It is because absolute life comes into *itself* while experiencing itself in the ipseity of the First Living Self which is its Word that every man given to himself in the ipseity of this life comes into himself as a transcendental living Self. It is for this reason that every life, every transcendental phenomenological life, is marked at its heart with a radical and insurmountable individuality.

Here we should make an historical observation which is laden with repercussions for our time. Life has been notably absent from the Western philosophy inherited from Greece, which defines man through thought. When at the beginning of the nineteenth century life makes, with Schopenhauer, its great return to the European scene, it is a life stripped of individuality, anonymous, impersonal, savage, which will establish its rule not only over philosophy but over culture as a whole, conferring upon it its tragic and absurd character, clearing the way to brutal force, to violence, to nihilism.

The phenomenology of life is thus confronted with one last question. We said that in every living being life comes to pass as a Self which belongs to every life and to every determination of life. Thus there is no suffering which might be nobody's suffering. Because God is Life, one must effectively say with Meister Eckhart: "God engenders himself as myself [*Dieu s'engendre comme moi-même*]"⁸ – an abyssal affirmation which suffices to dismiss all the various "crises of subject" of contemporary nihilism. However, since the latter not only conceives of life as anonymous but also as unconscious, so then, taken in once again by the Greek *phainomenon* which reserves manifestation to the light of exteriority, modernity proves incapable of grasping the invisible in its proper phenomenological positivity.

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What does this phenomenological positivity consist in? Consider suffering once more. We said that suffering reveals suffering, but this proposition must be corrected. The auto-revelation of suffering which is accomplished in suffering cannot be the fact of suffering considered in its particular content, if it is true that it is accomplished just as well in joy, boredom, anguish or effort. It is in its affectivity in reality that anguish is revealed to itself, in this pathetic auto-impressionality which constitutes the flesh of this suffering as of every other modality of life.⁹ This is the reason why these are all affective modalities. There is here, according to the inspired intuition of Maine de Biran, a "feeling of effort" such that it is only in the trouble of this effort or in its satisfaction that any form of action is possible, not as an objective displacement which is itself unconscious, but as an "I Can" experiencing itself, in and through its affectivity. Thus affectivity does not designate any particular sphere of our life, it penetrates and founds as a last resort the entire domain of action, of "work" and thus of economic phenomena, which consequently cannot be separated from the realm of human existence, as it is believed possible to do today.

In the same way, finally, there is a pathos of thought which explains the privilege accorded by classical philosophy to obviousness, to matters that seem self-evident. It is easy to recognise behind this privileging of the self-evident the reign of the visible which dominates the development of our culture, which remains a prisoner of Greek *theoria*. However, the fact is that thought, including rational thought, is only ever given to itself in the pathetic auto-revelation of life, and even Husserl himself, despite his effort to found phenomenological method upon the visibility of the self-evident, had to admit that "the consciousness which judges a mathematical 'state of things' is an impression."¹⁰

Against Husserl, then, let us acknowledge the decisive fact that all modalities of life, those of theoretical and cognitive thought no less than others, are affective at their root, and this is because the phenomenological matter in which pure phenomenality originally phenomenalisises itself is an *Archi-passibility*; every "self-experi-

encing” only becomes possible through this Archi-passibility. In John’s words, God is not only Life, he is Love. Thus an essential connection is set up between the pure fact of living and Affectivity.

If our various tonalities find their ultimate possibility in the essence of life, it follows in the first instance that they can never be explained solely from the worldly events that we interpret as their “motives” or “causes.” We say: “a misfortune has occurred.” This signifies that an objective event – accident, illness, bereavement – has produced a suffering to the point of being identified with it. Such an event, however dramatic it may be, can nonetheless only produce a feeling of suffering in a being that is susceptible to suffering, i.e. a living being given to itself in a life whose essence is Archi-passibility. Yet why should such a sentiment take on the form of this affective tonality rather than another? How can we fail to notice here that all the modalities of our life are divided up according to a decisive dichotomy between modalities lived as positive – impressions of pleasure or of happiness – and modalities said to be negative – impressions of pain or of sadness? As a result, our entire existence seems caught in an affective becoming which is not in the least bit indeterminate, ceaselessly oscillating between malaise and satisfaction, suffering and joy – with neutral tonalities like boredom or indifference presenting themselves as a sort of neutralisation of this primitive oscillation.

How, then, can this dichotomy be explained if it does not result merely from the events of the world, if instead we are determined to locate its ultimate condition within ourselves? We have replied to this question. In so far as the essence of “living” is “self-experiencing [*s’éprouver soi-même*],” in the immanence of a pathetic auto-affection without divide or distance vis-à-vis oneself, life is marked with a radical passivity towards itself, it is a suffering of oneself or a “self-suffering,” a “self-enduring,” a passivity stronger than all freedom and whose presence we have recognised in the most modest suffering which is incapable of escaping itself, driven back to itself in a primordial passion peculiar to every life and to every living being. It is only

because of this primitive “suffering” which belongs to every “self-experiencing” as the concrete phenomenological mode of its accomplishment that something like a “suffering” is possible.

In the accomplishment of this “self-suffering,” however, life experiences itself, comes into itself, augments itself with its own content, delights in itself – it is enjoyment, it is joy. It is clear that these two originary and fundamental phenomenological tonalities, a pure “suffering” and a pure “enjoying,” root themselves a priori in the “self-experiencing” which constitutes the essence of every conceivable life. In its turn, the dichotomy made manifest over the whole of our affective tonalities rests upon this division between the two fundamental phenomenological tonalities. But what is thereby revealed to us, at the same time as this most profound essence of life, is the a priori and transcendental possibility of the passing of all our tonalities each into each other. This continual slippage of our tonalities – whether it be a case of a continual transformation or of an abrupt change, of a “leap” – is itself also discernible in the concrete becoming of our quotidian existence. Such a becoming can sometimes seem absurd and incomprehensible when subjected to the vicissitudes of a contingent history or to the play of unconscious drives. Thus it was in the eyes of the poet Verlaine when, casting his gaze over the whole of his past existence, he wrote this disillusioned line: “Old good fortunes, old misfortunes, like a line of geese ... [*Vieux bonheurs, vieux malheurs, comme une file d’oies* ...]”¹¹

This impression appears superficial, however, once we understand that this potential modification of our multiple modalities is inscribed in an originary possibility of the passage each into each other of the fundamental phenomenological tonalities belonging to the essence of life. And this is because pure suffering is the concrete phenomenological mode according to which the coming of life into itself accomplishes itself, its embracing of itself in pure enjoying and thus the possibility of every conceivable form of happiness and joy, something which in the final reckoning is never anything other than *joie de vivre*, the limitless happiness of existing.

Considered in their specific phenomenological content, suffering and joy are assuredly different, in the same way as are malaise and satisfaction, desire and gratification. It is even this difference, the will to substitute positive modalities for negative modalities, which most often determines action, and this from its most elementary forms (like the immediate impulse of every need to satisfy itself). However, despite their difference and sometimes their violent opposition, suffering and joy as well as their multiple modalisations are united in a more originary identity, which is that of the co-constituent *suffering* and *enjoying* of the essence of life and its ipseity.

In order to grasp this most originary identity, however, we must not lose sight of the finitude of our own life, we must perceive our life in its Foundation, i.e. no longer in that place where it seems to us that it experiences itself in a sort of psychological facticity always incapable of recognising itself, but instead where it is given to *itself* in the auto-donation of absolute life, in the place of our transcendental birth. Such was the inspired intuition of Kierkegaard when he understood that it is at the peak of his suffering, at the limit of his despair, that this despair inverts itself into beatitude, when, as he puts it, “the self plunges through its own transparency into the power which established it.”¹²

From the Archi-passivity of absolute Life there further follows that most singular character of the human condition, which is being an incarnated existence. Because the latter is immediately interpreted as an existence in a body it refers us back to the question of the body which, like every fundamental question, refers us in its turn to a phenomenological foundation, that is, to a mode of appearing. Now, the mode of appearing which presents itself here as being evidently that of the body is the appearing of the world, and this in two senses. On the one hand, every body, whether it be our own body or any other body, shows itself to us in the world, taking its phenomenological properties from the phenomenological properties of the world, and first and foremost its very exteriority. However, this worldly body is not only “exterior,” it is a body furnished with several sensual qualities.

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This means that this body which is seen, touched, heard, etc. presupposes a second body, a transcendental body which feels it, which sees it, which touches it, which hears it, etc., thanks to the powers of its different senses. In the phenomenology of the twentieth century these powers are understood as so many intentionalities, in such a way that the transcendental body which constitutes the universe is an intentional body. It is in this second sense that *our* body is a body of the world, in this sense that it opens us to this world itself. The appearing upon which this opening to the world rests is the same as that in which the body-object of the philosophical tradition shows itself to us; it remains in both cases the “outside of self” as such. Only, as we have seen, the intentionality which causes every thing to be seen [*qui fait voir*] is incapable of bringing itself into phenomenality. The aporia upon which Husserlian phenomenology came to founder is repeated in respect of the body reduced to the intentional body. Each of these features of this transcendental body can only give us that which it gives – seeing, touching, hearing ... – if it gives itself originally to itself in the giving that it accomplishes. An immanent auto-donation of this type only happens, however, in life, in its pathetic auto-revelation.

Only in this way can we overturn our conception of the body: when we understand that the appearing to which it is consigned is no longer that of the world, but precisely that of life. And this overturning consists precisely in the fact that this body which is ours differs completely from other bodies which people the universe, it is no longer a visible body but a flesh – an invisible flesh. For in so far as flesh finds its phenomenological foundation in life, it takes from this latter all of its phenomenological properties. It is characterised not only by acosmism and invisibility – which themselves suffice radically to distinguish flesh from the “body” of the philosophical tradition – but also by this fact, this small fact: that all flesh is the flesh of someone. All flesh is someone’s, not just on account of a contingent liaison, but for this essential reason that since a Self is implicated in every auto-revelation of life, it erects itself in all flesh at the same time as life,

in the very event which gives life to *itself* – in its transcendental birth. In every respect a tributary of life, flesh takes from this latter its own reality, this pure phenomenological matter of auto-impressionality which is indistinguishable from that of pathetic auto-affection. Flesh is very precisely the pure phenomenological matter of every genuine (i.e. radically immanent) auto-affection, in which life experiences itself pathetically. It is only because flesh is the phenomenological matter of auto-impressionality (which derives its possibility of auto-affection from life) that it finds itself constituting the reality of the whole of our impressions.

Our life, however, is a finite life.

Our finite life is only comprehensible on the basis of the infinite life in which it is given to *itself*. Just as our Self, incapable of bringing itself into itself, refers back to the First Living Self, to the Word in which absolute life reveals itself to itself, so too in the same way the auto-impressionality which renders possible every impression and every flesh presupposes the Archi-passibility of absolute life (i.e. the originary capacity to bring itself into itself in the mode of a pathetic phenomenological effectuation). It is only in this Archi-passibility that all flesh is passible, which is to say that it is possible in its turn – this flesh which is nothing other than that: the passibility of a finite life which draws its possibility from the Archi-passibility of infinite Life.

This is where the phenomenology of life can defend its claim that it is able to escape the domain of philosophical tradition. Is it not capable of illuminating certain decisive elements of our culture that belong to its non-Greek source, notably Judaeo-Christian spirituality? Precisely to the extent that all flesh is only given to *itself*, in the Archipassibility of life, the phenomenology of life unveils the singular link which establishes itself between the two initiatory declarations which mark the famous Prologue of John: “In the beginning was the Word,” “And the Word was made flesh” (John 1: 1–14). We have already explained the first declaration, if it is true that no life is possible which does not imply in itself the Self in which it experiences itself. And if, coming now to the second expres-

sion, all flesh is only passible in the Archi-passibility of life in its Word, then the Incarnation of the Word ceases to seem absurd, as it seemed in the eyes of the Greeks. On the contrary, we must recognise between Word and flesh much more than an affinity – rather an identity of essence which is nothing other than that of absolute Life. As soon as flesh is given over to life, it ceases to be this objective body with its strange forms, with its incomprehensible sexual determination, apt to arouse our anguish, delivered to the world, indefinitely subjected to the question “why”? For as Meister Eckhart understood, life is without why. The flesh which carries in it the principle of its own revelation does not ask for any other authority to illuminate itself. When in its innocence each modality of our flesh experiences itself, when suffering says suffering and joy joy, it is Life that speaks in it, and nothing has power against its word.

This Archi-passibility beyond all passibility but present in it, immanent in all flesh as that which gives it to itself, beyond all sensible or intelligible evidence, what can it be called if not an Archi-intelligibility, an Archi-gnosis whose essence John described as the coming of absolute Life in its Word (before it makes possible the coming of the Word in a flesh similar to our own)? Thus Johannine Archi-intelligibility is implied everywhere that there is life, it reaches out even to these beings of flesh that we are, taking up in its incandescent Parousia our derisory sufferings and our hidden wounds, as it did the wounds of Christ on the cross. The more purely does each of our sufferings happen within us, the more each suffering is reduced to itself, to its phenomenological body of flesh, so the more strongly we experience in ourselves the limitless power which gives suffering to itself. And when this suffering reaches its limit point, in despair, then, as Kierkegaard puts it, “the self plunges through its own transparency into the power which established it,” and the intoxication of life submerges us. Happy are those who suffer. In the Depth of its Night, our flesh is God. The Archignosis is the gnosis of the simple [*la gnose des simples*].



notes

1 “Phénoménologie de la vie” was first delivered as a lecture to the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, 14 November 2000. The French version of the text is available online at <<http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/henry-ph1>>; Angelaki is grateful to Joseph and Joëlle Llapasset for permission to translate it. A month before he died in July 2002, Henry confirmed, in discussion with Joseph and Joëlle Llapasset, his belief that this article conveys the essence of his whole philosophical project. In the following translation I have chosen to adhere quite closely to the often dense French original, in particular so as to convey the effect of Henry’s persistent use of reflexive constructions; readers should bear in mind the multiplicity of words used to refer to self or selfhood (*soi*, *se*, *Soi*, *soi-même*, *lpséité*, *ipséité*). On occasion, when translating *soi*, I have italicised the “self” of “itself” (itself) to emphasise the sense of the reference to self in the French, which might be slightly obscured by a reading of “itself” as a primarily reflexive construction in English. [Translator’s note.]

2 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1941) 220–21.

3 Edmund Husserl, *Leçons pour une phénoménologie de la conscience intime du temps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964) 157.

4 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* 329.

5 François Jacob, *La Logique du vivant: une histoire de l’hérédité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) 320.

6 Picking up on the second meaning of *procès* (i.e. “trial,” in the juridical sense), *épreuve* can mean trial, test, or experience of a hardship; *s’éprouver* means to feel or experience, but is also used in the sense of suffering or experiencing a hardship. The phrase “testing experience” is meant to convey this combination of meanings, since my rendering of *s’éprouver soi-même* as “experiencing itself” or “self-experiencing” otherwise loses the crucial sense of suffering or testing. [Translator’s note.]

7 Dominique Janicaud, *Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combas: L’Eclat, 1991).

8 Meister Eckhart, “Sermon no. 6” in *Traités et sermons* (Paris: Aubier, 1942) 146.

9 As Susan Emanuel (the translator of Henry’s *I Am the Truth*) notes, Henry uses the term *pathé-*

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tique in its etymological sense, i.e. to refer not to an object that might arouse an emotion but to the person who undergoes that emotion, the person who is capable of suffering or feeling something (“Note on Terminology” in Henry, *I Am the Truth*). [Translator’s note.]

10 Edmund Husserl, *Leçons* 124.

11 Paul Verlaine, “Ô vous, comme un qui boite au loin, Chagrins et Joies,” *Sagesse* in *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, eds. Yves-Gérard Le Dantec and Jacques Borel (Paris: Gallimard, “Pléiade,” 1962) 247.

12 Søren Kierkegaard, *Traité du désespoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) 64.

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