

Fichte, Henry, and the Problem of Manifestation

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Preview

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Philosophical Monism in *The Essence of Manifestation*

Michel Henry's philosophy explicitly proclaims itself as a philosophy of immanence. In order to develop his own conception of immanence, Henry carries out an ambitious survey of the entirety of modern philosophy, from Descartes to Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. We can say without doubt that the confrontation with the phenomenological tradition constitutes the comprehensive horizon within which Henry develops his own philosophy—it is not by chance that this very term, "horizon," repeatedly surfaces in the text we are here considering. This concept is fundamental in the philosophies of both Husserl and Heidegger, and constitutes the fundamental modality of the essence of manifestation. The term evokes the notion of "foundation," and it is precisely in light of this notion that the phenomenological tradition, including the thought of Heidegger, is revealed as profoundly inadequate. Heidegger's central idea, in fact, is that what conditions a manifestation is a dimension of opening, and that only within this opening is it possible for an entity to appear as such. "Milieu" is one of the terms that arises often within the context of this argumentation. This refers to a space—neither empirical nor psychological,

¹ Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) [Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF [1963] 2003)].

² *Ibid.*, § 10.

but rather ontological—which constitutes the condition of possibility for which an appearance may be produced. The term “pro-duce” (*pro-ducere*), written with a dash, indicates not only the creative dimension implicit in the appearance, but more radically still the fact that this creation must not be understood in the metaphysical and naïve manner of a *creatio ex nihilo*: rather, it brings to the appearance an element of “self-giving,” a “drive” (*ducere*) in advance (*pro*) of the opening (the “*milieu*”) as the original manifestation. Within this opening single entities may manifest themselves, susceptible in turn to becoming “products” in the ordinary sense of the term.

The word “horizon” indicates the ontological character of the space of which we are speaking. Translating our reasoning in terms of the horizon, we would say that what originally manifests itself in the horizon must be the horizon itself—in the sense that it expresses and brings to actualization the original dimension of “opening” without which manifestation would be impossible. Henry thus introduces one of the fundamental concepts of his entire work; that of *receptivity*. It is because an appearance gives itself that it is necessary that it be paired with its condition—which implies that what first appears must be the horizon itself. Yet how can a horizon appear if it is the horizon that conditions the transcendental possibility that any appearance whatever may develop? For Henry, working within the framework of Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant,³ it is vital to think of an original receptivity that is constitutive of the horizon, insofar as this is its own pro-duct, and is caught in the movement of its passage toward manifestation. If it is the horizon that appears, then it is evident that its appearance cannot be related to anything but itself, since every other thing, as an actualized manifestation, already presupposes it. Consequently, in order to think of the appearance, we must think of the horizon as what appears originally. However, to think of the horizon appearing, it is necessary to think of it in its pure horizontality—not insofar as it is determined as something else. The horizon must encompass itself in and as a horizon as such. Thus, what appears must be the horizon itself in this appearance. It thus becomes necessary to think of a dimension from within the horizon that manifests itself as still more original than the horizon. Henry defines precisely this as “original receptivity.”⁴

We cannot further develop Michel Henry’s conception of receptivity here. It is already sufficient that we have made thematic this relation between the notions of receptivity and horizon, so as to put the final remaining concept presupposed in our argumentation into question. While we have spoken of the manifestation of the horizon, we have taken for granted that the manifestation implicates a related term, or, more simply, something “to which” it manifests or relates itself. We can see

³ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). [Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, in *GA III*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991)]

⁴ [Henry’s treatment of the “possibility,” “problem,” and “essence” of receptivity extends from §§ 22-27 of *The Essence of Manifestation*. The resolving concept of “original receptivity” can be found, e.g., at *ibid.*, 228 and 251.—*Trans.*]

then that this presupposition is dual: not only must there be a term “to which” the horizon appears, but this term, to which the horizon appears, must be itself *the same as what appears to it*.

Let us suppose the opposite hypothesis: imagine that the horizon relates to something different than itself. This something to which it appears should nevertheless appear as that “to which” the horizon appears. Yet to appear it must be presupposed that the horizon is already actualized; that within it there should appear something “to which” it appears—and so on and so forth, in an infinite regress. The only coherent solution concerning the idea of the horizon is that the horizon relates to itself: that the content of the horizon and that to which it appears are the same, and that thus the horizon receives itself just as it appears.

We have arrived at the focal point of the monistic conception.⁵ The identity of the same, thought of in terms of horizon, can only be thought of as a doubling between the two poles just determined; the content and its receptivity. In this case, receptivity is determined precisely as that from which and to which it appears. Now, is there a concept capable of including within itself the complexity of these relations? Henry’s answer is affirmative: he identifies such a concept with the idea of *representation*. Representation is the concept that permits all monistic conceptions to articulate themselves coherently, since it permits one to think of the doubling of a being that remains identical to itself; one that doubles itself in order to appear to itself. We have introduced the concept of “being,” because without a being that appears there would not be appearance—despite the fact that from the perspective of the being that appears, being itself appears and must appear as “nothing” in every case. Ultimately then, the conception of horizon indicates that with respect to a given being, being itself is “nothing.” Nonetheless, this “nothing” is precisely the original potency from which appearance pro-duces itself, or what appears.

The being that appears is thus the foundation of appearance, and this foundation is now revealed as an original potency of manifestation that brings itself to manifestation before all else. Thus “essence” indicates being as the potency that deploys itself in appearance. To say that being is the original “potency” from which appearance comes is to think of being as the “foundation” of appearance as such. In summary: essence is being that appears as the foundation of appearance, but to appear as such a foundation it must double itself into a content *that* appears and a term *to which* it appears. As we have just seen, however, the content is not just any kind of content whatever: rather, it is being—understood as the *foundation* of appearance. That to which it appears, in its turn, must certainly be the same, but *cannot be only the same, since otherwise there would not be a term “to which” it appears (that is, the original, essential receptivity of the appearance)*. Thus, *the appearance would not appear; it would not pro-duce any appearance*. Consequently, it becomes necessary to think a modality by means of which the

⁵ [Henry’s critique of “ontological monism” is contained, in a general way, in the entire First Section of the work, entitled “The Clarification of the Concept of Phenomenon: Ontological Monism,” and more particularly in §§ 27-28, on “The Ultimate Ontological Presuppositions of Monism.”—*Trans.*]

doubling of essence can be conceived—one in which this doubling of the identity with itself would not only be preserved in the appearance, but would on the contrary *find in the appearance the essential condition for its own affirmation*.

Monism imagined itself to have been able to resolve this problem by means of the general idea of mode or modality—more precisely, by means of the concept of *form*. The essence of manifestation is thus thought as a *relationship* established between being as *foundation* and being as *form*. The *foundation*, insofar as it is the origin and content of appearance, is thought of as the *essence* of the latter; but to the degree that essence must appear as remaining identical to itself in order to appear at all, to appear is thought of as the assumption of a *form* on the part of essence. This form is not extraneous to essence, but rather is that which essence itself produces in order to be able to appear, and thus to be able to affirm itself and present itself as it is. Thus there obtains a double movement here: on the one hand, manifestation is thought of as the *form* of essence, but on the other hand, such a form is not something extraneous or contingent with respect to essence. On the contrary, it is necessary to essence in order to affirm itself as such: that is, as foundation.

We may translate this reasoning in terms of “being”: being would not be possible—that is, it would not be *at all*—if it did not affirm itself as original potency of manifestation. For this reason, manifestation is necessary to being—that is to say, being could not be without the form necessary for its manifestation. In sum, *form* is *necessary* from a double point of view: 1) from the side of manifestation, insofar as it constitutes the fundamental ontological structure of the latter and therefore its transcendental possibility-condition, and 2) from the side of being, insofar as it is not conceivable outside of its determination as “essence”—that is, as potency of original deployment in appearance and as appearance.

This interplay between foundation and form, between essence and its manifestation, is thought of in the Western intellectual tradition under the form of the concept of *representation*. To say that essence manifests itself is to say that essence projects itself out of itself (pro-duces itself); that it presents itself to itself as manifestation. The metaphor of vision, an inheritance from Greek philosophy which modern philosophy collects and further develops, signifies that being manifests itself only in that which is positioned before an eye so as to be seen and understood. It also signifies that if there were not an eye to see a being, then it would not be, since it could not deploy itself in a manifestation that—as its manifestation—is indispensable to its affirmation and positioning.

For this reason, Henry designates as monistic a philosophical conception that on first view appears profoundly dualistic. The relation between subject and object, with all of the *aporiai* that are connected with it, is in fact only the declination into idealistic terms of a much more profound ontological structure that relates to the essential structure of manifestation as such. *The doubling between foundation and form is essential to manifestation in order that the latter can affirm itself in its unity with itself—and monism is precisely that form of thought which thinks the doubling between that which represents and the represented, between being and a being, as the transcendental structure of manifestation in its original*

unity. For this reason, Henry can succinctly affirm in a fundamental passage of his work that “between the philosophy of consciousness and the philosophy of being there is no difference”⁶—that is, insofar as both are characterized as falling within the structure of representation in the sense which we have sought to elucidate above.

While we have attempted to clarify the relationships between monism and representation, we must still clarify the other aspect of the question, concerning the relation between monism and transcendence. We said at the outset that Henry’s philosophy declares and articulates itself as a philosophy of immanence. For this reason we must ask ourselves: why cannot monism satisfy the requirements of a philosophy of immanence? And since monism is a philosophy of representation, the question becomes: in what sense does a philosophy of representation inevitably carry with itself a conception that thinks manifestation as a product of a transcendent origin? To explain this point, it will be helpful to address Henry’s interpretation of Fichte.

Fichte’s Monism, According to Henry

Fichte appears to play a fundamental role in the very definition of the concept of philosophical monism. Moreover, Henry’s interpretation is governed by the necessity of showing that Fichte plays a crucial part in the articulation of monism in the history of philosophy. This signifies that Fichte is inserted into a problematic that, according to Henry, found its most profound conceptualization in the phenomenological tradition between Husserl and Heidegger. In this sense, the paragraph dedicated to Fichte in the section on monism is at the center of Henry’s consideration of “ontological distance”; the ontological space which produces the site at the center of which singular entities situate themselves again and again. The concept alluded to here is evidently connected with that of a “horizon,” and this more specifically as a “milieu”—the original space that permits essence to differentiate itself from itself in order to manifest itself to itself. Without differentiation of essence, no manifestation of essence is possible. Moreover, because the manifestation is not of something else, but of essence itself, it is this latter that must differentiate itself from itself—instituting that space or distance between self and self, at the center of which it can produce something as an appearance.

Yet what happens in the moment in which essence appears in that space that it has itself produced as condition for its own ability to appear to itself? Essence appears to itself, but no longer as essence—rather, as essence determined in relation to the space in which it manifests. This signifies that being, as an original potency of manifestation, can appear always only as *a being*. This latter expresses being as an active potency in its carrying of it to manifestation, but at the same time it conceals or hides it, since it expresses it always only as *a being*; never purely and simply as being. The being that manifests itself is thus a being that subtracts

⁶ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 96 [118].

itself from its own manifestation, and that reveals itself in and by this very act of self-subtraction.⁷

Henry interprets this situation in a dialectical sense; as a reciprocal negative implication between being and beings, between essence and its manifestation. The fact that essence manifests itself in manifestation, that manifestation is necessary to the dynamics of essence's self-positing, implies that essence subtracts itself from what it nevertheless manifests. To manifest itself, essence must place itself on a level radically removed from that of its own manifestation. Nonetheless, it must also and simultaneously be thought of as coinciding with its manifestation, since there would otherwise be no manifestation of it, nor manifestation as such, at all.

This negative implication between essence and manifestation, which must exclude essence from manifestation in the same moment in which essence establishes itself, is what determines the movement of essence as *transcendence*. Transcendence is the origin of what manifests itself, since in its manifestation essence shows itself as an excess: literally a “nothing” with respect to the entity which is thereby posited. The immanence of essence in manifestation is thus always only an *apparent* immanence, in the sense that while it is always essence that appears in appearance, it appears there as *mere* appearance—that is, as a foundation that has always already been subtracted from the dynamics of appearance, one that is evinced only in virtue of the subtraction of it form through which it appears. Fichte's philosophy thus constitutes one of the decisive moments in the historico-conceptual articulation of this conception. It not only shows this double movement of implication and subtraction between the foundation and its form, it conceives this movement as arising from the necessity of essence manifesting itself in the form of representation.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly pause and consider the Fichtean conception of representation. As Henry rightly shows, representation is not conceived by Fichte in psychological and subjective terms, but as a properly transcendental structure of appearance. The work upon which Henry bases his interpretation is the *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*.⁸ In this work, published in 1806, Fichte exposed the new philosophical conceptions that he had developed after his arrival in Berlin following the so-called “atheism dispute” to an educated, but not philosophically trained audience. The fundamental modification is the function of the “Absolute I,” which in the Jena phase of his thought (particularly in the celebrated *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge* in 1794/5) had been presented as the foundational, unconditioned principle of all knowledge and

⁷ [The English-language reader may consult the author's treatment of Fichte's concept of “subtraction” within the context of self-consciousness in “The Speculative Structures of the 1807 *Wissenschaftslehre*,” trans. Garth W. Green, *Idealistic Studies* 37 (2007) 2: 121-42.—*Trans.*]

⁸ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben oder auch die Religionslehre (1806)*, in *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, vol. I/9, ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995), 397-580 [The English-language reader may consult *The Way Towards the Blessed Life; or, The Doctrine of Religion*, in *The Popular Words of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 2 vols., trans. William Smith (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999); vol. II, 291-496.—*Trans.*]

all reality. The decisive change in 1806 is that the Absolute I—that Fichte now prefers to term “absolute knowledge” in order to avoid any subjectivistic or psychologistic misunderstanding of the doctrine—is no longer the primary principle of the doctrine of science. It no longer coincides with the Absolute, but springs from the Absolute as its mere “form.” In turn, “absolute knowledge” (just like the “absolute I” in the *Foundations*) does not coincide at all with the personal or empirical I of any one of us, but constitutes the transcendental structure of consciousness “in general”: the universal and necessary condition of experience. In this aspect, Fichte sides with Kant.

Since I cannot here offer even a preliminary consideration of the question concerning the relation between Fichte and Kant, I will limit myself to pointing out that the way in which Fichte takes up the transcendental problematic bestows upon it a clearly ontological radicalization. Henry comprehends perfectly this change that Fichte impresses upon transcendental philosophy. Nevertheless, he locates it within his own reconstruction of monism as the tradition culminating in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. In this way, the transcendental implication between absolute and phenomenon, between being and its manifestation—which constitute the cornerstone of the conception espoused in the *Way Towards the Blessed Life*—is read by Henry in light of the “phenomenological distance” that constitutes one of the fundamental aspects of the thinking of Husserl and Heidegger.

Now what does reading Fichte’s transcendental philosophy within this context of “distance” signify? It signifies reading the relationship between being and manifestation in terms of *alienation*. Manifestation brings essence to appearance, but appearance remains drastically *other* with respect to the being that appears. Given the necessary implication that binds being to its appearance, this relation of alterity between manifestation and being implicates a relationship of *exteriority* in being’s self-relation. To appear, being must become estranged from itself, become other to itself. Manifestation is the product of this self-alienation, in which being gives itself to appearance. Yet in giving itself, it simultaneously reserves for itself an inviolable, *transcendent* space with respect to immanence; one that is always sought and never obtained. Manifestation tries to capture it in order to bring it fully to appearance, and thus be able to completely affirm itself as a *true and not merely ostensive manifestation of being*.

To support his reading, Henry makes reference to passages of the *Anweisung* in which Fichte defines the existence of being as a “being outside of its being,”⁹ specifying that this existence, insofar as it is a necessary form of being, coincides with its manifestation as a “consciousness, or representation, of being.”¹⁰ At this point, the question appears settled: to manifest itself being must give itself existence; that is, a determinate being. Yet to give itself a determinate being, it

⁹ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 67 [82].

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 77 [99]. [The English-language reader can consult Fichte, *The Way Toward the Blessed Life*, vol. II, 341-7, and Fichte’s general treatment of the “Definition of Being (*Seyn*) and Ex-istence (*Daseyn*).” For Fichte’s employment of the locutions analyzed in this paragraph, see *ibid.*, vol. II, 340-1.—*Trans.*]

must bring itself before a being that is able to receive this bringing forth of itself. The doubling of being manifests itself in the relation between a representing subject and a represented object, in and through which essence differentiates itself in order to manifest itself. In this self-differentiation, essence remains self-identical, while it is at the same time subtracted from the comprehensive structure of its self-representation.

In the *Anweisung*, the term that Fichte uses to express existence is *Dasein*. This corresponds well to the conception according to which self-manifestation is before all else a manifestation of the horizon of being as a pro-ductive disposition of the “place” (*da*) in which space is able to be made for the appearance of being itself (*Sein*). Situated in such a place, such being will become determined in relation to the place in which it finds itself—that is, it will necessarily have to transform itself into something determinate: a being. Yet if the being that situates itself in the *da* of its own manifestation is determined in relation to the delimitations that the space circumscribes, it is also determined in relation to that entity before which it is brought forth. Now, in complete conformity with Henry’s reading, what brings being forth is determined by Fichte as “representation” and “consciousness”: “representation” indicates the movement of a placing (*Stellung*) before (*vor*). “Consciousness” indicates that with respect “to which” the *vor* conceptually determines being as an object.

Yet let us observe more attentively the context in which Fichte employs the formula “being outside of its being.” Fichte uses an existentially empirical proposition: “the wall is,” in the very sense in which the wall that we have in front of us “exists.”¹¹ As previously discussed, in the *Anweisung* Fichte uses the German word *Dasein*. In the exposition of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that he held in Erlangen in the previous year (1805), Fichte explicitly uses the word *Existenz*. Even though Henry could not have known this text (published only recently in the critical edition edited by Reinhard Lauth),¹² his considerations are fully pertinent to this double register of the Fichtean concept of existence.

In fact, being deploys itself in appearance even before it does so with respect to one being or another insofar as it brings to appearance the space (the ‘*da*’) of each and every such being. Before appearing in and through this or that being, being must pro-duce a “milieu,” at the center of which the being can establish itself as that in which and through which being can manifest itself. Fichte designates this space as “visibility” and metaphorically as “light.” The introduction of any being whatever is impossible if the conditions by which any kind of being can become visible are not first pro-duced. Before any “thing” can be seen, a dimension of visibility must be opened within which each and every being can manifest itself as such.

¹¹ See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 67 [82]. [For Fichte’s full treatment of the theme of this paragraph, the English-language reader may see *The Way Toward the Blessed Life*, vol. II, 340.—*Trans.*]

¹² [See *Johann Gottlieb Fichte: Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-).—*Trans.*]

Conversely, what comes to light with the term *Existenz* is that this dimension of visibility implicates an exteriority; a springing-forth, and self-positing, of essence outside of itself that begins from essence itself. *Existenz* thus indicates both the origination from a source as well as the fact that this origination coincides with an exteriorization—a bringing of essence into a dimension of exteriority with respect to itself—which shows that it no longer exists as *being* in its absoluteness, but rather as essence in its manifestation. In bringing together the concepts of *Dasein* and *Existenz* we see that in order to exist, essence must establish itself in a determinate space, and that this determinate space results from an origin from which being emerges as the essence of manifestation. In this manifestation, being distinguishes itself at the same time from the manifestation in which it is manifest.

In this way, we have tried to describe the relation that Fichte establishes between the notions of the Absolute and absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge is the space of visibility within which each and every empirical entity is situated. The distinction between subject and object—between representing subject and represented object—is not the primary appearance of the Absolute. Rather, absolute knowledge is the primary form of the manifestation of the Absolute. If we remove this form of mediation—one that flows immediately from the appearance of the Absolute as the essence of manifestation—we eliminate what is for Fichte the particular character of transcendental philosophy.

It seems to me that Henry misses exactly this point in his reading of Fichte. Henry reads Fichte's formula as though the doubling between being and its existence were a relation of "becoming-other" between the Absolute and its manifestation purely and simply—as though the manifestation were a pure and simple alienation of essence. Yet for Fichte, the concept of exteriority does not in fact coincide with that of alienation: the difference within essence does not correspond to an estrangement of essence from itself. Even in the most radical formulations that Henry cites—those in which being "repels" or "expels" itself—the relationship of exteriority is not one of self-estrangement. In its manifestation, essence does position itself outside of itself. Nonetheless, this "outside," despite not coinciding purely and simply with essence, remains completely immanent to it.

The interpretation of the Prologue to the Gospel of John, to which Henry cursorily refers, is exemplary on this point. The Word is "with" God (*an Gott*), not "in" God (*in Gott*). This being "with" God does not produce an alienation from God. The "outside" is still within the essence of God: God cannot "exist" as essence without putting Himself in this "outside," which nonetheless does not render Himself "other" than Himself. Instead, the movement articulates His pure immanence to Himself. If we do not understand that God is this internal difference between Self and Self—in which He does not go outside of Himself in the sense of becoming other than Himself, but in which He manifests an "outside" that is radically internal or immanent to Himself—we cannot comprehend the transcendental conception of the Absolute as Life, which is the foundation of the entirety of Fichte's philosophy during the Berlin period.

It is not our intention to enter into detailed debate over Henry's interpretation of Fichte, but rather to verify whether the transcendental conception of Being as Life can be reduced to a monistic conception as defined by Henry. It would seem that this reduction is possible only if one equates the notions of difference and alterity on the one hand, and exteriority and alienation on the other. If we accept this equivalency, we must then accept Henry's reading that situates Fichte on the path from Kant to Hegel, in which manifestation is conceived as a becoming-other of the Absolute and as a reunification of the Absolute into identity with itself. On this reading, the latter occurs by means of the Absolute's manifestation and the reabsorption of this being-becoming-other in absolute knowledge.

If, however, we distinguish exteriority and alienation, we can imagine another reading—one truer to Fichte's thought, in this author's view. The Word of God is with God from eternity: this formula, translated into philosophical terms, signifies for Fichte that the Concept or absolute knowledge is with God from the time of its origin; that the Absolute is completely immanent to its existence as Concept, and thus that between the Absolute and the Concept there is a relation of exteriority, but not of alienation or estrangement. If we consider the matter closely, the Absolute's self-positing in the Concept should not even be read in terms of "process": for Fichte, the Absolute does not posit itself in the Concept via a process; rather, the Concept remains with God from eternity. Absolute knowledge is thus the existence of God from eternity, which is not other to or estranged from God despite its being outside of God. This is evident if we distinguish a dimension internal to God in which He exists purely in Himself from another in which He exists outside of Himself—the latter nevertheless remains an aspect of God. Already in speaking of the existence of God "in itself," we see that we are required to introduce the element of *Existenz*, and thus to formulate God in terms of an internal differentiation, of an articulation within His immanence. This relation of reciprocal implication between the Absolute and its existence is ingredient in the structure of the transcendental conception of the Absolute as Life. Nonetheless, I cannot further prosecute this point here. It is sufficient for me to have problematized Henry's interpretation, and to have shown that Fichte's thought can be interpreted—in my view, *should* be interpreted—in a perspective different from the one that permits Henry to position it within the monistic conception.

Nonetheless, there remains a final question for us to confront: what, according to our argumentation, about the problem of representation? What conclusions should we draw with respect to the theme of transcendence? Re-examining the Fichtean formulae in their proper context, these questions are amenable to a different interpretation. In the Fichtean example, "being outside of its being" does not refer to absolute Life as such, but rather to the relation between being and image insofar as it plays out within representation. Here we are not at the level of the Absolute, nor even of absolute knowledge—rather we are discussing that form of absolute knowledge that appears to itself and expresses itself in terms of representation. In empirical knowledge, being appears as object, and the subject appears as that to which objective being appears in the form of an

image. The subject conceives his or her own knowledge as an image of objective being, and the latter is presupposed as having been giving to him or her from outside, and independently of his or her own self.

What distinguishes transcendental philosophy is its conception of this doubling as absolutely necessary in immediate relation with absolute knowledge rather than the Absolute itself. It is the existence of the Absolute, in other words, that doubles itself into the duality of subject and object in its appearance to itself, into that which represents and that which is represented. However, this doubling, which constitutes the essence of representation, indicates neither an estrangement from the Absolute nor an alienation of absolute knowledge in empirical knowledge. From the perspective of transcendental philosophy, in fact, the structure of representation is permeated and made possible by the connection of the two elements that, to unreflective consciousness and dogmatic thinking, appear initially unrelated because they presuppose each other. The transcendental vision that comprehends these in their dynamic interplay removes their status as a presupposition, and derives each genetically from absolute knowledge as bound up reciprocally with one another. Absolute knowledge thus becomes the epistemological principle for their genetic derivation, and the expressive manifestation of this connection. In turn, representation is explained as a necessary articulation of the appearance of the Absolute: it is accomplished by means of absolute knowledge, which produces the contraries that oscillate between one another. Far from presenting itself as a philosophy of representation, Fichte's transcendental philosophy furnishes the instruments for its radical destruction— even if the instruments that it furnishes are profoundly different from those that are elaborated in the philosophy of Michel Henry.

The “Reversal” of the Monistic Interpretation: Is Fichte a Philosopher of Immanence?

Let us summarize briefly what we have said in the preceding section. In Fichte, the relation between being and existence is not a metaphysical relation: it is rather the translation of absolute being's immanence in the concept (as its existence) into reflexive terms. It is this immanence that John expresses in the Prologue to his Gospel as the relation between God and the Word. Fichte's philosophy cannot for this reason be interpreted as a philosophy of representation, because the latter is driven back to the conditions of possibility from which it originates, and is thereby destroyed in its pretense to be an adequate expression of essence. Essence appears transcendent with respect to the ambit of its manifestation only if that manifestation is confined within a philosophy of representation. It is with respect to representation that essence hides itself. Transcendental philosophy shows to the contrary that essence is immanent to representation. Yet to conceive immanence, it is not possible to remain in the modality of representative thinking, which presupposes subject and object as final and insuperable modalities of thought.

From the point of view of transcendental philosophy, absolute knowledge is the expression of the immanence of essence in the phenomenon in two senses:

on the one hand, insofar as it is the immediate existence of the Absolute, and on the other, insofar as that existence brings itself to manifestation in the constitutive doubling of representation. On this understanding, representation ceases to be opposed to essence; it is instead part of the unity that encompasses subject and object in their mutual relation. Each of these shares in the transcendental structural bond that unites each to the other.

Yet we are not condemned to know the immanence of the absolute in manifestation and as manifestation in only a reflexive mode. The philosophy of religion shows us that the immanence of the absolute can permeate the entire life of consciousness. The experience that attests to such a presence of God in the human person—confirming the unity with the Absolute that is active within him or her—is constitutive of divine love; of God’s love for humankind, of humankind’s love for God, and the love of each in and through the other.

This unity did not escape Michel Henry. Indeed, after having interpreted Fichte as a representative of philosophical monism, he takes his interpretation up again in § 38 (the second chapter of the third section of *The Essence of Manifestation*), and begins to develop positively his philosophy of immanence. The title, which repeats part of the title designated for the entire section, makes explicit reference to Fichte: “The Internal Structure of Immanence and the Problem of its Comprehension as Revelation: Fichte.”¹³ The very position of this paragraph already alerts us that the philosophy of immanence can find no more than a preliminary impulse in Fichte, however significant and important. In fact, for the positive development of this question, Fichte represents a beginning still opaque to itself—and it is for that reason that it is thoroughly contradictory. The only thinker in the Western intellectual tradition who fully seized upon the structure of immanence was in fact not Fichte, but Eckhart—to whom Henry dedicates the following chapter (§ 39); the only chapter in the work in which the title of the chapter coincides simply and wholly with the name of the author whom Henry is considering.

Now, how is it possible to reconcile the interpretation put forward in § 10, which we concentrated upon above, with that given in § 38? How can Fichte be considered one of the key exponents of the monistic conception—centered upon the relationship between alienation, transcendence, and representation—and simultaneously be considered the author who, however obscurely, opens a way toward the philosophy of immanence? For their necessary brevity, my answer and my conclusion may appear provocative and audacious. It appears to me that Henry projects upon Fichte an incoherence that is not Fichte’s, but is rather Henry’s own. According to Henry, Fichte modified his conception of existence in the course of the *Anweisung*: he passes from the idea of existence as representation to the idea of existence as the immanence of the absolute within its manifestation. The first conception situates Fichte within monism, while the second—which constitutes the Fichtean concept of divine love—shows the beginnings of a philosophy of immanence. Since this second conception is constructed on the basis of the first—

¹³ See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, § 38, 298-309 [371-85].

that is, since it presupposes the primacy of representation and the consequent hiding of essence from its appearance—it would appear that the theory of divine love would not allow Fichte to emancipate himself from his fundamental monism.

It is evident that we have here reached the key point in the divergence between the two thinkers—one that is not philological, but is rather theoretical and philosophical. Both aspire to a philosophy of immanence, and for that reason both oppose the primacy of representation. For Henry, however, a philosophy of immanence can be constructed only as a philosophy of identity. Each philosophy that proposes difference falls necessarily into a monistic conception: one centered on the nexus between representation, alienation, and the transcendence of essence with respect to manifestation. Transcendental philosophy instead attempts to construct a *philosophy of immanence* that is at the same time a *philosophy of difference*. This philosophy should be different from, and irreducible to, the dialectic interplay of the relation between identity and alterity, alienation and re-appropriation, truth and representation. To develop further this point, however, would take us far beyond the limits of this essay.

Translated by Marco Dozzi and Garth W. Green