

Suffering and Ipseity in Michel Henry: The Problem of the Ego's Transcendental Identity

Jean-François Lavigne

Preview

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The Problem of Personal Identity in Husserl's Phenomenology

The double expansion that Husserl's phenomenology imposed on subjective experience posed, among other difficulties, a new and particularly difficult problem for Husserl; that of the trans-temporal identity of the transcendental subject, the "ego." This problem involves also, and still more fundamentally, the question of the ontological status of the *ego*. Beginning with his descriptive-psychological understanding of consciousness and its intentional acts in the 1901 *Logical Investigations*, Husserl had first identified the subjective *ego* with the empirical person, and considered it sufficient to determine the flow of acts experienced by consciousness as a "bundle" (*ein Bündel*) of subjective phenomena devoid of altogether devoid of any internal principle of unity, except a mere formal synthesis.

This solution, however, thereafter proved untenable. Indeed, the inter-subjective character of the constitution of everyday empirical reality required the recognition of a structural reference, within all intentional acts and all pure lived phenomena, to the "*ego ipse*," either as the agent of the act—as in the case of an intentional act, in the strong sense of an "active synthesis," such as a categorical apprehension, a judgment, etc. or as an egological center of affection, as in the case of the processes of the "passive synthesis." From this resulted, simultaneously, both a new radical problem and the possibility of new discoveries within pure phenomenological anthropology. Let us begin by specifying the nature of these discoveries.

On one hand, this opened the way towards a theory of transcendental constitution of the various elements that make up the human being as a concrete anthropological essence: soul, flesh (*Leib*), person, psychological personality, social person, "spiritual" person (i.e., the cultural and historical person, in the sense of the "*Geisteswissenschaften*," or "human sciences" according to Dilthey's understanding of this concept). All of these dimensions of the human individual could receive not only a fundamental clarification of their sense, and essence, in

the context of the appropriate eidetics, but could also, and especially, regain a legitimate ontological-metaphysical foundation that neither neglected nor set aside the immediate *experience* that makes every concrete, living *ego* singular and empirical, the experience in which and through which *alone* this *ego* is originally *given* to itself, and, so to speak, *revealed* to itself for the very first time, in the originary and absolutely unsurpassable evidence designated in Husserl's expression "pure *ego*." Therefore, one no longer had to fear the affirmation that, before existing as the "soul" of a "body," as a psycho-physical unit, I am, as *myself*, originally present to myself before being present to anything in the world. Husserl's reflexive analysis of the transcendental constitution of all objectivity and its possibility-conditions thus found, by another path, the originally *Cartesian* evidence of the essential *non-worldliness* of the *ego*.

The Self-Constitution of the Ego

On the other hand, however, this new foundation that phenomenology could provide to philosophical anthropology would imply a new difficulty. The *ego*, although undeniably a necessary moment of the internal structure of any intentional act and passive originary experience, also finds itself caught in the originary flux of conscious living, that is to say, in the originary flow of pure temporality. If the pure *ego*, conceived as the immediate self-consciousness of the "I" that I am, were accepted phenomenologically as that which is implicated in the living present as a temporal modality of the originary impression, this same *ego* would also find itself, for this same reason, subject to the inexorable dynamic law of the flow of transcendental life. Consequently, it could not be identical to the *I*-subject of the *totality* of the flux of consciousness—unless it were possible to *traverse* the continuous series of successive impressions that become, in the continued progression of passive synthesis, retentional contents. However, this implied, for the pure *ego*, the demonstration of a new property, which is neither given nor givable within the limits of available evidence specific to the "living present" and whose phenomenological legitimacy therefore remained in first instance at least, problematic: the *trans-temporal identity* of the pure *ego*. What ontological status could such an identity enjoy, assuming that it could be demonstrated phenomenologically?

Husserl thus found himself compelled to form a new and paradoxical hypothesis, that of the self-constitution of the *ego*.

This process of self-constitution revealed itself gradually, and as implying two-levels. First, it was necessary to analyze the process of retentional acquisition of new noetic capacities and their correspondent noematic potential correlates: the famous "*Urstiftung*," the originary establishment of an intentional *habitus* (*Habitualitäten*). Second, however, one had to distinguish from this constituted *ego*, which is potentially related to a world with its objects and its objective situations, the *ego that acquires* this *habitus*. This latter must necessarily be conceived of as the originary *ego*, continually *co-present* with its own constituent transcendental life, and with each new "originary impression." In such a scheme,

the very idea of a constitution effected by temporal synthesis implies this latter *ego*, the genuine “I,” present to itself. The self-constitution of the *ego* therefore had to include *also* an appropriate constitutive process at this ultimate and radical level, and be described thus, as the self-constitution *of the pure ego itself*. For this reason, as Husserl wrote in the fourth of his *Cartesian Meditations*:

The ego is himself *existent for himself* in continuous evidence; thus, in himself, he is continuously *constituting himself as existing*. Heretofore we have touched on only one side of this self-constitution, we have looked at only the *flowing cogito*. The ego grasps himself not only as a flowing life but also as *I*, who live this and that subjective process, who live through this and that cogito, *as the same I*.¹

It is phenomenologically true that, in the experience of pure living, yielded by the transcendental reduction, the *ego* does not experience (*éprouve*) its presence, active or passive, in its successive experiences with all of their noetic-noematic moments, as a simple coming-to-be of a flowing life, but rather as a presence-*to* this life, and therefore in full distinction and phenomenal *duality* between the content of the originary impression and the *ego to whom* and *for whom* this content appears and is gradually transformed. I am involved in my pure transcendental life, but I am still always, for myself, essentially distinct from it. However, if from a descriptive point of view, the trans-temporal permanence of the identical *ego* is an undeniable given of transcendental experience, it is uncertain whether we can satisfactorily account for it in terms of *self-constitution*.

A Deficit of Presence

The very concept of constitution always implies, indeed, that the *ego* be determined as a *result* of the constitutive process. And this remains applicable even if we grant—following such authoritative interpreters as E. Fink or R. Bernet—that Husserlian transcendental idealism should not be understood as a *productive* idealism, as if transcendental subjectivity were the principle of a real genesis, but solely as an idealism of *sense-giving* (*donation de sens*) and the establishment of *sense* (*institution du sens*). If indeed the pure *ego*, pervading, insofar as permanent, through the continuous passive succession of pure temporality, must be understood as a pure unity of *sense*, and as established by a continuous passive synthesis of identification, it is, *a fortiori*, necessarily thought of as a result of the process of constitution. Thus, regardless of the ontological interpretation that may be proposed of the Husserlian process of constitution itself, it will remain true that, if identity occurs to the pure *ego* by means of a “constitution,” the *ego* thus experienced as *one* and *enduring* will always be dependent on an operation of *identification*. Whether this identification is “passive,” as Husserl adds, changes

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), § 31, 66 [Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, in *Hua I*, ed. S. Strasser (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 100].

nothing, and therefore owes its *identity* to an operation of *identification*, its identity can only have the meaning and scope of an intentional identity which is true only as posited and recognized. *It is therefore in no way an originary ipseity*: Husserl's scheme of transcendental constitution, even in the attenuated form of a passive identifying genesis, thus inevitably leads to the rendering of the personal identity of the *ego* as a subtle form of transcendental *illusion*; a roundabout way to confess the inability of the theory of transcendental constitution to account *positively* for subjective evidence—namely, that of the *self*.

Moreover, the Husserlian theory of the constituted *ego* implies that the latter is always *late* to the advent of the originary impression and the “living present.” It is always an “*P*” that has already come-to-be, that is, so to say, past, that receives its existence from the actuality of a first *retention*—which, then, is not anyone's act. In other words, there is no one to receive, now, in an actual, living modality, the originary affect of the impression. The intentional scheme of “constitution,” valid for *objectivity*, demonstrates therefore its theoretical insufficiency with regard to the problem of the *originary identity* of the living *I*. The formal reason for this failure lies in the fact that any constitution (whether “passive” or “active”) is a synthesis, and therefore occurs as a *noetic* process, which in turn implies a gap, a *distance* between the operation and its result, as between noesis and noema. Passive synthesis also reproduces, in its way, the structure of the division or the distention of the intentional act, and its process of objectification.

The Impossible Self-Foundation of Originary Noetic Life

To appeal to this structure would entail, directly, the problem of the phenomeno-logical substrate of the being of noesis itself, the necessity of determining the mode of phenomenalization of the synthetic operation in which the originary passive synthesis of self-identification, which was supposed to perform the genesis of the *ego*, consists. If the *I* owes its being to a constitution, the constituting noesis—the originary passive self-identification—cannot be *experienced* by the *ego*, which, as constituted, is rather the result of that originary noesis. Thus, the trans-temporal permanence of the “*I*,” a fundamental characteristic of our experience, ends up having to be interpreted as an intentional illusion. The Husserlian theory of the *ego's* self-constitution does not effectively succeed, therefore, in accounting for the eidetic and descriptive state of affairs that Husserl himself identifies in the passage of the *Cartesian Meditations* cited above.

This failure (*échec*) reflects a certain insufficiency with regard to the issue of subjectivity: the impossible self-foundation, within the paradigm of the *objectifying* constitution, of originary noetic life. Indeed, if *noetic* life, that is, the giving of meaning by intentional synthesis, were in fact the *radical*, ultimate form of the activity of consciousness, all noesis should, in order to be—that is, in order to *appear* in the pure transcendental temporality as a *lived* act of the *ego*—receive this phenomenal being from its intentional appearing in the constitution operated by another identifying noesis, of which it would be the correlate. There is a need,

therefore, for the *actual* noesis, effective in the mode of the living present, to *already have been preceded* by a founding noesis, of which it would be the correlate, which is absurd. Worse still, this requirement would have, in turn, to apply to this founding noesis itself. One cannot escape the *regressus in infinitum*. One in this way can conclude, clearly, that the *intentional* concept of synthesis is, by itself, unable to determine the originary phenomenality proper to transcendental subjectivity, and to the *I* living in this radical mode.

Michel Henry: The Radicalization of Transcendental-Phenomenological Experience

This impossibility of a phenomenological self-foundation of intentionality was first discovered, and explicitly thematised, by Michel Henry in *The Essence of Manifestation*.² His critical diagnosis underscored the fundamental inadequacy of the scheme of the noesis-noema correlation, as raised to the rank of general ontological paradigm by Husserl, and as employed toward the comprehension of the *continuity* of the being of the *ego* in the immediacy of its relation to itself. This diagnosis led to the demonstration of another form of phenomenality, *another mode of appearing*, more originary and more fundamental than that of constituting consciousness; the radical phenomenality of *life*, as self-experiencing, as that ‘feeling-oneself-living’ which underlies all lived experience of something other.

However, by showing that all transcendental activity of constitution is based on the non-intentional and radically *immanent* event of this originary affectivity that is pure life itself, Henry radicalized the phenomenological experience of the *ego*. He simultaneously referred the entire ontologically fundamental sphere of absolute originary givenness to *transcendental affectivity*. He discovered, in this way, a more fundamental stratum of subjective experience; the result was a new expansion of phenomenological experience. In this way, the general “law” governing the development of phenomenological research since Husserl is verified: the expansion of the field of experience is necessarily accompanied by the identification of new laws of appearance. This involves at once the illustration of a new form of phenomenality, and thus the releasement of a new type of rationality.

Ego and Ipseity: The Problem of the Ego’s Identity in Time

If now, in adopting the attitude of this radicalized phenomenological reduction, which gives access to immanent pure life, we place ourselves in the scheme of this originary immanence of “absolute life,” in order to explore the structure of the new phenomenal laws that characterize it, we discover that originary life is characterized fundamentally by the non-distance, and the absence of any dimension of ek-stasis, of any openness to externality. Absolute immanent life is *self-affection*, the identity of the affecting and the affected. Henry writes, in the

² Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) [Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation*, 2 vols (Paris: PUF, 1963)].

Introduction to *Incarnation*: “‘To live’ means to undergo experiencing oneself. The essence of life consists in the pure fact of undergoing experiencing oneself, and, on the contrary, everything pertaining to matter, or more generally to the ‘world,’ is devoid of this”³ In *I Am the Truth* he also states:

Life does not cast outside itself what it reveals but holds it inside itself, retains it in so close an embrace that what it holds and reveals is itself. It is only because it holds what it reveals in this embrace, which nothing can pull apart, that it is and can be life. Solely on this condition can it experience itself, *be itself what it experiences*⁴—and, consequently, be itself that which experiences and which is experienced.⁵

This is why the self-affection of life is a radical form of phenomenality, absolutely originary, the essence and principle of all manifestation. It is self-revelation, the revelation of itself; it is thereby, and simultaneously, the condition for the revelation of everything other (in an intentional ek-stasis). As such, it is the revelation of anything that can appear, in general: “in the self-revelation of Life arises reality, all possible reality.” If the essence of subjective life is the originary event of affective self-experience which life forms of itself, it cannot fail to have an extremely close relation, the closest possible, with the self-identity of the *ego*, thus with its ipseity. And indeed, Michel Henry establishes a relation of substantial identity between the continuous outpouring of life as self-affection and ipseity itself, as a condition of the originary “Self”: “This identity between experiencing and what is experienced is the original essence of Ipseity.... Ipseity is not simply a condition of the process of life’s self-generation: it resides within it as the very way this process is achieved.”⁶

If, therefore, *being self for oneself*; the immediate coincidence of the conscious subject with itself, or subjective *identity*, is the concrete form in which the process of transcendental life takes place, the problem concerning the lack of being that characterizes the Husserlian conception of *ego* may appear to be resolved. Yet, there remains a major difficulty; the absolute and originary process of self-affective life is defined by Henry as *identical* to the process of self-feeling of life as immanent to the *flesh*. He indeed posits the phenomenological axiom that: “the flesh is precisely the way in which life makes itself Life. No life without flesh, but no flesh without Life.” The sensitive flesh, flesh in the phenomenologically radical sense as understood by Michel Henry, is the concretely lived dimension in which the process of the “coming into itself” of life as self-affection is

³ Henry, *Incarnation. A Philosophy of the Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2015), 19 [Henry *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 29].

⁴ Emphasis by the author. The identity thus underlined is evidently the crucial point for our investigation here.

⁵ Henry, *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 30 [Henry, *C'est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 43].

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56 [75].

accomplished. And as a result, it is also the concrete mode of realization of the ipseity of “oneself.”

Thus emerges a difficulty concerning the *temporal* character of this “coming into itself” of life. In other terms, the necessarily temporal form of the process of self-affection is at the same time the *birth* of the transcendental “self,” in its ipseity, the generation of the Self in the generation of the flesh. Henry writes for instance in *Incarnation*: “Life reveals flesh by generating it, as what takes birth in it, being formed and edified in it, and drawing its substance (its pure phenomenological substance) from the very substance of life.”⁷ If, therefore, the *I* that I am can only *receive* its ipseity from the originary process of a carnal self-affection that unfolds through the duration of transcendental temporality, the being of the *ego* remains permanently dependent on a temporal event, which is just as contingent as was the emergence of the new “living present” in Husserl. And so, the identity of the *ego* does not seem any better secured through Henry’s self-affection than it was through Husserl’s “passive synthesis.”

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The Ego in the Face of Death as a Concrete Event

Michel Henry’s radicalization of phenomenality thus allows us to approach the problem of man’s identity in its most radical dimension. Let us leave aside the most evident aspects of human being, in order to focus on its problematic identity, as phenomenologically reduced to the eventual *core of being* which is the pure *ego*, as reflected in our relationship with the lapse of time, and our own death. One’s own personal death, as a concrete event, appears to the living *ego* in the form of a horizon of possibility. Such a horizon signals and signifies precisely this same radical dependence of the *ego* with respect to the originally contingent *gift* of life. The ontological contingency of such a gift—that is, of the *effectual* event of self-affection—Henry interprets as “absolute passivity,” the radical passivity of the *ego* with respect to absolute Life that bears, and sustains, it from the inside. However, the same radical contingency of the emergence of immanent life manifests itself in the form of consciousness of time. The consciousness of time is already, in fact, the experience of the subject’s finitude. “*I am, I exist, that is certain*” exclaims, almost triumphantly, the Cartesian *ego*, which otherwise risks sinking into a bottomless abyss of metaphysical doubt. It must add almost immediately, however, now sober after the drunkenness of that first apodicticity: “*but for how long?*” To this Descartes replies, according to an irrefutable logic; “*so long as I think.*” What is most important for us here is the way in which this direct link between the temporal being of the *ego* and the continued exercise of the *cogitare* is made explicit: “*for it is possible that if I stopped thinking, I would cease at the same time to be or exist.*” If we put to good use the profound interpretation given by Michel

⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, 121 [174].

Henry of the Cartesian *cogitatio* as a self-affective phenomenon, we arrive directly at a clear formulation of our problem: *I am-* that is to say, I have the ontological constancy and *identity* with myself (ipseity) that the word “*I*” implies, *as long as* the originary affect of life’s self-affectation is given to me in my flesh. Thus we arrive at the point where the essential query of man, of all men facing this finitude, can no longer be held back: Am I not therefore, *myself*, but a mere temporary phenomenal effect? In my actual existing, and in its simple phenomenality, am I dependent on an anonymous, contingent and unpredictable process, which can, at any time, let me fall back into nothingness?

A Peculiar Existential Experience: Suffering

To address that question regarding the being of the *ego*, it is necessary to conduct a precise phenomenological analysis of the *originary reception* of life—or, in Henry’s terms: of transcendental birth of the “Self” in life and from life—at the very moment that it is this reception. It is an absolutely passive reception, whose structure is the *passio* itself, the essence of “πάθος,” or rather “πάσχειν” in act, the radical submission by which I undergo, within myself, the new impetus (*élan*) of the new self-affectation of each moment. The experience in which the radical passivity of the *ego*, with respect to life, manifests itself, should be analyzed phenomenologically. Michel Henry locates this experience in *suffering*. It is for this reason that he chooses, in *Incarnation*, the phenomenon of suffering as a phenomenological paradigm that enables us to determine the essence of originary impression. On this point, he writes:

The passion of suffering is its gushing forth in itself, its being-grasped-by-itself, the adherence of it to itself, the force in which it coheres with itself and in the invincible force of this coherence, of this absolute identity with itself in which it afflicts itself and is revealed to itself, its revelation—its Parousia.... We said that no impression brings itself about as such. This is the first meaning of the radical passivity we are talking about. The impression, the pain in its suffering, feels itself passive in the depth of itself in as much as it is not for nothing that it has come in itself, in the powerlessness that brands every impression, like a seal stamped on an envelope that receives, in a singular way, its content.... Of what does this coming in itself consist, which every conceivable impression in it precedes? It is life’s coming in itself. For life is nothing other than what undergoes experiencing itself without differing from itself, in such a way that this trial is a trial of itself and not of something else, a self-revelation in a radical sense.... Life undergoes experiencing itself in pathos; it is an originary and pure Affectivity, an Affectivity that we call transcendental.... Life’s self-revelation takes place in Affectivity and as Affectivity. *Originary Affectivity is the phenomenological material of the self-revelation* that constitutes life’s essence.... It is an impressional material undergoing experiencing

impressionally and *doing so unceasingly*,⁸ a living auto-impressionality. This living auto-impressionality is flesh.⁹

Suffering and Self-Affection

From this both carnal and passive character, as marks the impressional birth within immanent life, we would be tempted to conclude, perhaps too quickly, the simply momentary and temporary character of the being of the *ego*. And in fact, Henry examines, immediately afterwards, the possibility of such an interpretation. He dismisses it on the ground that this coming-into-itself of life is an *incessant* process of *continuous* self-affection. On the page following the one quoted previously, indeed, he points out:

In support of Husserl's thesis, we asked whether it was not true that every impression, as soon as it arrives, disappears... And yet *do we not live in a perpetual present?* Have we ever left it? How could we if we are living beings, invincibly *joined to themselves*¹⁰ in a Life that never ceases being joined to itself—undergoing experiencing itself in the enjoyment of its life, and in the untearable flesh of its originary Affectivity—inexorably weaving the flawless thread of its eternal present?¹¹

The Fundamental Theses of Material Phenomenology

From these texts, Henry's essential theses with regard to the problem of the being of pure *ego* emerge clearly. First: the *ego* is not originary. I *receive*, in the absolute passivity that is the essence of transcendental affectivity, the life that *gives me* to myself, and that makes—that is to say, dynamically arouses—my *being*. The Cartesian "I am" means that "I live," that I am a living being—and that I thus am living only insofar as I *am born*, at any present moment, out of the *autonomous* event of the self-emergence of absolute life. Second: Life springs forth, effects itself—in the words of Henry, "comes into itself," occurs to itself and in itself—in

a *present*, determined by Michel Henry as "*perpetual*," a perpetuity meant to guard us definitively against the annihilation whose threat is inscribed, at every moment, in the Husserlian vanishing of the originary impression.

These two theses immediately imply two consequences of great significance for contemporary philosophical anthropology: 1. The most originary mode of being of the transcendental living *ego* that *each* of us is, is not what we denote by the use of the personal pronoun "I," but is instead that which this pronoun designates *in the accusative form*, as an object, "Me." The strictly originary form of the *ego*, its *nascent* form, is that which, since its invention by

⁸ Emphasis added.

⁹ Henry, *Incarnation*, 61-2 [89-90].

¹⁰ Emphasis added.

¹¹ Henry, *Incarnation*, 62-3 [91].

Pascal, our language calls “the self.”¹² Before being in a position to posit myself before myself, and especially before being able to posit myself before others—as before another, as a “*Me*,” a “*Myself*”—I must be *engendered* in and by primordial affection which arouses me from within Life—and therefore in the accusative form, as passively affected, as “me.” In contrast to its initial phenomenological status, Henry conceives the *ego* (that is to say, that which, within me and from itself, designates itself as “*P*”), then, as derived—in fact, as a tertiary phenomenon. It is only when it has gained possession of his powers of consciousness and action, through the experiencing-of-oneself of originary Affectivity, that the originary “self” can seize these powers, received affectively from life, *as if they were its own*, as if it had given them to itself. Only then can it come to say and think “*P*”—a term which always indicates “I can...”

The second consequence is even more decisive: it is the distinction between ipseity and *egoity*. Indeed, according to Henry, ipseity is nothing but the structure of the self-affection of life, its concrete form. This is why it *precedes* any “self,” or “*ego*,” which is only its derivative. It is the originary ipseity of Life that establishes the possibility of both. Henry gave to this ontological axiom, which defines his phenomenological ontology, a formally Christian expression: all finite human subjects, all of those “*egos*” generated in the originary embrace of Life’s self, are “sons in the Son,” since they receive their ipseity from the originary and primordial ipseity which is the Self of absolute life as such, as infinite life, the First Self or First Living Being, Christ as the only Son of Life—whom Henry identifies with the Father of the Christian Trinity. The originary movement of absolute immanent Life, which generates itself by coming into itself—which thus, according to Henry, justifies its identification with God—necessarily realizes itself in the concrete form—*incarnate*—of a fundamental and primary Ipseity—the First Living. It is in the flesh of the First Living that all finite flesh takes a form of ipseity, *ourselves*, as subjectively living individuals. With respect to the singular *ego*, this means that it cannot have any ontological consistency of its own, other than as a *secondary* ipseity, derived from that of the First Living Being, and from the absolute originary self-affection in which it is generated; the singular flesh of the finite *ego* that I am, this flesh in which “I” receive my originary status of generated transcendental “self” from Life, is therefore but a partial and particular phenomenalization of the only originary *egoic* flesh, that of the First Living Being, which is the *Ipsé* of absolute Life.

The Decisive Issue: The Problem of the Personal Ego’s Identity in the Flux of Originary Affective Life

To Henry’s spectacular deepening of Husserlian analyses of the phenomenality of transcendental immanent life, we can now ask the question that has been our concern since the beginning of this essay: is it the case that the identity of the pure

¹² On the historical origins and transformations of the concept of the “self,” from Descartes to Husserl, cf. the well-documented and remarkably precise recent book of Vincent Carraud, *L’invention du moi* (Paris: PUF, 2010).

ego that I am—and whose pure experience I cannot deny having, is actually established, and made intelligible, by setting forth this process of perpetual “gushing-forth” (*jaillissement*) of life as self-affection? It seems that, unfortunately, this is not the case. Several objections and difficulties, in fact, become apparent.

The first is that one can hardly support—from the phenomenological point of view—the thesis of the “eternal” character of the living present. Although it is true that we live always and only in the mode of the present, which is the *actuality* of being-affected, this is only a *partial* aspect of the full experience of pure temporality. The enigma of temporality consists precisely in that, under this indeed *perpetually* renewed mode of the actual present, identical and invariable modally, different temporal contents continue to emerge, and come to be, continuously. Thus, if one pays attention, as is ordinarily the case in the conduct of action in its existential context, to the *content* of what gives itself as to-be-lived, the event that affects me never remains, itself, perpetual, but loses subsequently all the living actuality that the present mode, for a moment, had lent it. It is characteristic of the structure of *temporality* that the very content that proposes itself now, presently, to *me*, with the power to affect that it receives now from my present—and presenting—life, *passes, and passes away*. And so does its actuality. The integral structure of temporality is not, as Henry’s assertion of a “perpetual present” presupposes, an alternative that could be formulated as: *either* the fixed immobility of an immutable present, *or* the spiralling flight of depthless moments, similar to mathematical temporal points that are destroyed as soon as they appear. The integral structure of temporality is, on the contrary—and this is precisely the puzzling point—the *synthesis* and connection in actuality of these two aspects, *within* their phenomenal opposition.

Moreover, Henry’s expression of life’s “eternal coming into itself” implies a contradiction: if life “comes” (*vient*), comes to be (*advient*), if it has the form of an *event*, it cannot be “eternal.” The phenomenon described by Michel Henry justifies the adjective “perpetual,” in the precise sense of being “continuously repeated.” But no repetition can ensure *a priori* its indefinitely renewed continuance in the future. On the contrary, the necessity of a *permanent* to maintain its being in the form of a *repetition* testifies to its incapacity to perdure in a *continuous constancy*, to endure by itself so to speak, and to its insurmountable need to *begin again*, anew, serially, in order to effectively exist across an extent of time. If life actually has the originary structure of a *recurrent* self-affection, in accordance with the Cartesian scheme of *continuous* creation, the continuity remains irreducibly temporal, an irrefutable proof of its essential *expiration* (*caducité*). Thus life, conceived and described as originary self-affection, has, insofar as it is an event, the structure of a perpetual “gushing-forth” (*jaillissement*). As such, it necessarily retains the character of a *temporary* event—that is to say, *a priori* and in essence, *subject to* an end. Nothing in the originary appearing of self-affection can ensure that the *actual* process of this self-affection repeats itself *again* beyond the particular present content. The identity of the living “self,” if it can

only live in that life, remains forever, for ontological and structural reasons, under the permanent threat of its disappearing (*évanouissement*).

However, and worse still, Henry's absolute life does not come in *me* strictly speaking, but in itself, in the concrete form of an originary Ipseity that *I am not*. The "self" that "P" am can come to be, can be given to itself, only secondarily, as *participant*, indirectly receiving *a partaking* of this Life. Thus the self-identity of the *ego* that "P" am, as a singular human *ego*, is thus not grounded in its own being. It is only brought back to an extrinsic foundation. My identity, as thus derivative, is denied on principle any ontological autonomy, and is therefore thought of as only *apparent*, phenomenal.

However, even if Henry's conception of the transcendental origin of the *ego* partly falsifies the basic phenomenological data, this partial falsification certainly does not annul the value of Henry's fundamental intuition according to which our being is essentially affective, and grounded in life's self-affection. So if we must preserve this fundamental basis of material phenomenology, another more faithful and rigorous description of the relationship between the singular *ego* and originary self-affection, as is experienced from within the former's own life, should be proposed. We must therefore return to the analysis of suffering, as the eminent experience of the *ego*'s originary passivity with respect to self-affection. Let us, then, examine the phenomenological description of suffering proposed by Henry, as exemplary manifestation of the essential *pathos* of life:

Pure pain is pure suffering, it is this suffering's immanence to itself—a suffering without horizon, without hope, entirely occupied with itself because it fills the entire place, so that there is no other place for it but the one it occupies. It is impossible for it to leave itself, or to escape itself....

As soon as suffering is there, it is entirely there indeed, as a sort of absolute. For the one who suffers, nothing infringes upon his suffering. Suffering has neither doors nor windows, and no space outside it or within it that would allow it to escape.... Between suffering and suffering, there

is nothing. For the one who suffers, for as long as he suffers, time does not exist.... Suffering is driven back against itself.... Suffering is not affected

by something else, but by itself; it is *a self-affection* in the radical sense that suffering is what is affected, but it is by suffering that it is so. It is at once affecting and affected, what makes it hurt and what hurts, without distinction. It is suffering that suffers.... Suffering feels nothing other than

itself.¹³

In this remarkable descriptive analysis, Henry brings to light and accentuates that which is, according to him, the self-affective structure of suffering, by two characteristically paradoxical affirmations, in which are condensed the essence of his thesis: (1) "For the one who suffers, as long as he suffers, time does not exist," and (2) "It is suffering that suffers." By means of these formulae, Henry intends

¹³ Henry, *Incarnation*, 58-9 [84-5].

primarily to emphasize the *negative* meaning of the prefix “*self*” in the expression “self-affection.” He intends to suggest that suffering is not experienced as bound to any external source, to the intervention of any given extrinsic power. It does not present itself as *hetero*-affection, but as an autonomous phenomenization that arises from itself, and imposes itself by means of its own dynamics, as a result of its own spontaneity. Yet these two statements, if we understand them literally this time, are completely contradicted by phenomenological experience. (1) It is not true that for the one who suffers, “time no longer exists.” It is precisely the opposite: in the experience of suffering, minutes are interminable, and more exactly, there are no longer “minutes,” as elementary parts of a *period* that could be *traversed*, but rather an endless renewal of new punctual moments, indefinitely multiplied, of renewed pain. Suffering, then, imposes on consciousness the structure of a *repetition*, of time, with a dramatic intensity that no other human experience contains. Suffering is the *pathetic scansion* of time; it exemplifies and clarifies the latter’s structural law in a particularly powerful, implacable way. Suffering thus acts as the revelation (*révéléateur*) of the immanence of the new present moment and accentuates it in proportion to its expectation of the future. (2) But above all, it is untrue that *suffering* itself suffers, and suffers (or affects) itself. On the contrary, when the pain settles in me, it is always “*me*” who suffers! (The accusative form of the pronoun according to French usage is particularly appropriate here.) For suffering is the most intense possible experience of the being of *myself*, not only as that which is affected by an “impression,” but more properly as *aggressed* by a hostile enemy, or an adverse and unbearable quality.

We must now further specify this analysis by highlighting two principal phenomenological aspects of the act of suffering. Suffering has the structure of an *aggression*, and involves an immanent *conflict*. Feeling aggressed in the flesh and as flesh, the *ego* reacts to maintain its affective identity, that is to say, the constancy of a positive affective relationship with itself. Even if the *ego* can do nothing but *endure* the pain, this endurance itself has neither the structure nor the phenomenality of a pure passivity: it always rather has those of an immanent effort, of an affective *tension* entirely directed towards the sensible and affective maintenance of a certain balance, of what is usually experienced as the autonomy of that which is sensed even within sensing: the sufferer is not invaded by suffering, he does not vanish in it. Far from disappearing in it, as Henry’s thesis would have it, the sufferer *is opposed* to it. In his powerlessness—and this opposition is *constitutive* of this experience of powerlessness—he opposes himself, in an internal and invisible way, to his suffering. This implies that he *sustains* (*porte*) it, even if he cannot “bear” (*supporte*) it.

Secondly, although suffering occupies the entire space of consciousness as a sensing power—as Henry rightly notes—it does not *invade* the *ego* that suffers. Indeed, if the suffering *ego* were to disappear (in the case of a loss of consciousness, for example, or a deep coma), there would no longer be any suffering either. The appearing of suffering thus *implies* the permanent presence of the suffering *ego*. But this permanence is not an indifferent “assisting,” either: since the *ego* is radically *affected*, and thus changed by the emergence of renewed

pain, the *ego* can *neither* be detached in relation to the painful affection, *nor* erased by it. It is *affected*, and it is at once essentially altered by it, and confirmed in his appearing as *distinct* from it. In suffering, self-affection has the structure of a self-*differentiation*. It is for this reason that suffering always presupposes, and in fact never fails to contain, an immanent space of *non-coincidence* between that which affects (pain) and the affected (*ego*). This space of negativity is at the same time the transcendental possibility of judgment and free choice. It is in this phenomenological and ontological *gap*, which preserves the conditions of inner freedom, minimum and all the more essential, that man must be able to *bear* suffering; that is to say, to adopt an *attitude* with regard to that which, imposed as it were in the conflict, gives itself to be lived. This attitude oscillates between two poles, of consent or refusal. The possibility of *offering* one's own suffering is a possibility that is grounded transcendently on this characteristic structure.

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Conclusion; The Problem of Personal Identity in Henry's Phenomenology

The preceding observations treat all too cursorily the phenomenological structure and temporality particular to suffering. But despite this brevity, they clarify some eidetic characteristics of the immanent event of self-affection, and its relationship to the pure *ego*'s identity. These lead us already to propose—subject of course to further analyses—two conclusions. First, we can see that the trans-temporal persistence of the *ego*, its enigmatic ability to *traverse* a series of originary affective presents, and thus to experience its temporal condition as a limitation and a trait of *finitude*, is not the effect of an operation of memory, as common sense naively believes. For if that were the case, the identity of the *ego* would already be adequately assured by the passive identification synthesis, as Husserl's theory of intentional self-constitution of the *ego* would have it. However, we saw that such an intentional self-constitution fails to capture, and leaves as a presupposition, that which is in question and requires grounding. Conversely, the investigation of the immanent temporality of self-affection, in the paradigmatic example of suffering as interpreted by Michel Henry, demonstrates that reducing the finite *ego* to a derived product of the absolute self-affection of Life faces a double contradiction: an internal contradiction on the one hand, and a contradiction with the phenomenological data on the other hand.

This first negative conclusion leads to a second, albeit positive conclusion. If the transcendental immanent existence of the *ego* is not a product of the originary event of self-affection, it is because the latter *cannot* be so. Indeed, as the structure of suffering demonstrates in exemplary fashion, affection—that is to say, any self-affection, since all affection contains in itself the structure of self-affection—always presupposes a center of receptivity susceptible of reacting to it, by opposing it. The existence of an *egoic* center *capable of being affected*, capable of receiving

the aggression of the affect (pain, pleasure or both) is a necessary condition of possibility *for affection itself*.

One will perhaps ask whence comes, then, this double theoretical inability, in both of the phenomenologies that we examined, both the constitutive transcendental phenomenology and the material phenomenology of transcendental affectivity. This remarkable failure with respect to the question of the condition of possibility of the *ego's* identity may, in my view, be the result of the radical presuppositions regarding phenomenological method, as adopted by our two authors. At the stage of extreme radicalization, which the phenomenological problem of the being of subjectivity has reached today—in particular, and precisely, thanks to the work of Husserl and Henry—it is perhaps time to consider seriously the possibility that the *I* is, though given, irreducible to the conditions of phenomenal objectification recognized to date—that is to say, according to the final view of Michel Henry, to the conditions of self-affective experiencing of oneself. Is the evidence of sensing-oneself in fact the true measure of the being of the *ego*? Should we not question the supposed phenomenological convertibility of being and appearing? If, indeed, the pre-phenomenal being of an *Egoic* core of potential receptivity is a transcendental condition for the possibility of the originary impression, and for the formal affect that is the new living present, and if all pure temporality is grounded in the phenomenon—the source of this originary impression—how then is it a surprise that the *I* *traverses* time? The phenomenon of the trans-temporality of the *ego*—that seems enigmatic in the context of the reductive phenomenality customary in phenomenology—signifies simply the independence of its being with respect to temporality itself, due to a transcendental precedence that cannot be thought of without an aporia save through a prior dissociation of being and appearing. The *ego* thus reveals itself as an *originary pre-immanent transcendence*, which owes its being neither to the temporality of any phenomenal appearing, nor to the emergence of carnal life.

Translated by Elvira Vitouchanskaia and Garth W. Green