

Religion as the Ethical Form of Self-Regulation: Reflections after Michel Henry

Jean Leclercq

Preview

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Introduction: Christianity and the Work of Accomplishment

Among thinkers¹ and philosophers who have hazarded a non-theological and non-rationalistic approach to Christianity, Michel Henry's published work—along with what remains unpublished and all that it harbours—imposes itself as a site of subtle expertise and audacious creativity, especially as it pertains to the relation of reason and faith. However, it is in fact unclear whether the reception of this work has really been accomplished, especially in theological and religious studies settings. Nor is it clear whether an openness to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures has been reasonably considered in philosophical settings, an openness nevertheless characteristic of Michel Henry, following many thinkers, especially of the German Idealist tradition. This undoubtedly accounts for all the ambiguity of the present and paradoxical position this thinker occupies in the complex and diverse plane of twentieth-century French philosophy.

Whatever the case may be, the goal of this essay is above all to attempt to take Michel Henry's work on Christianity seriously, or at least to understand it and situate it by highlighting certain major themes. Hence I will lay out some of the basic structures of his philosophical system, before showing the way in which he departs from Greek thinking in order to bring to light a specifically Christian logology that attempts to speak itself through the expression of 'Life;' thereafter I will then evoke the themes of truth, speech (*parole*), and its incarnation in the historical figure of Christ, in order to then conclude with the challenges of the reworking of those themes in the horizon of a phenomenological Christology that attempts to lead to an ethic of transcendental filiation.

Before filling out this hermeneutical program, I would like to raise a point that is not merely anecdotal or biographical. Michel Henry's relation to

¹ The title of this essay refers to the notion of the "pre-ethical forms of self-regulation" found in Edmund Husserl's "Fünf Aufsätze über Erneuerung," in *Hua XXVII. Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937)*, ed. Thomas Nenon and Hans Reiner Sepp (The Hague: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1988), 3-94.

Christianity has very often been hypostasized (in both a positive and negative sense), to the point that some commentators would mark a clean rupture between that which is properly philosophical and that which could no longer hold such an honorable title. Such a rupture would no doubt come with the release of *I Am the Truth*, a work from 1996 that would mark the beginning of another kind of thinking and that would carry a trace of anti-philosophy—admittedly, this final observation might not be entirely erroneous. Although it is difficult to imagine acting ‘as though’ Henry had never written his works on the phenomenology of Christianity, it is nevertheless important to not forget that Henry was 74 years old when he wrote his first essay on the Christian religion, and had thus not only retired from his academic career but had also achieved a real international notoriety. This is not useless to remember!

The Effect of a Late Re-Reading: Christianity and Phenomenology

In order to articulate the major themes of Henry’s work, I will call on an affirmation made in an interview with Sabrina Cusano in January 2002 a few months before his death in order to recapitulate the problematic—even if, as is always the case with interviews, one can reconstruct one’s own intellectual path:

It was quite late, while rereading the texts of the New Testament, that I discovered with a certain emotion that the theses implied in these texts were those that had driven the internal development of my own philosophy—namely: 1) the definition of the absolute (God) as Life; 2) the affirmation that the process of life, as a coming into oneself and as an experience (*épreuve*) of oneself, necessarily generates in it an Ipseity in which it experiences itself and thus reveals itself to itself—which is its Word; in such a way that the latter does not arrive at the end of this process but belongs to it as constitutive of its accomplishment and is thus contemporaneous with it. “In the beginning was the Word;” 3) that which we call man, that is to say the transcendental living Self that each of us is, cannot be understood except according to this immanent process of life, never according to the world. For me, the ‘theological turn’ in contemporary phenomenology is not a ‘deviation’ or a denaturation of phenomenology, but its accomplishment.²

² Michel Henry, *Entretiens* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2004), 154: “C’est tardivement, en relisant les textes du Nouveau Testament, que j’ai découvert, avec une certaine émotion, que les thèses impliquées dans ces textes étaient celles auxquelles m’avait conduit le développement interne de ma philosophie—à savoir: 1/ la définition de l’absolu (Dieu) comme Vie; 2/ l’affirmation que le procès de la vie comme venue en soi et comme épreuve de soi génère nécessairement en elle une Ipséité en laquelle précisément elle s’éprouve elle-même et ainsi se révèle à elle-même—qui est son Verbe; de telle façon que celui-ci n’advient pas au terme de ce procès mais lui appartient comme constitutif de son accomplissement et lui est ainsi contemporain. ‘Au début était le Verbe’; 3/ que ce que nous appelons l’homme, c’est-à-dire le Soi transcendantal vivant que nous sommes chacun, ne peut être compris qu’à partir de ce procès immanent de la vie, jamais à partir du monde. Pour moi, le ‘tournant

Thus we can affirm that for Michel Henry Christianity ultimately imposed itself as revelatory of his own research only after a rigorous phenomenological itinerary, and that his inquiry is therefore executed with notions common to the phenomenological and theological or mystical approaches.

If one had to say a few words regarding this itinerary, one would recall the crucial fact that according to Henry the historical privilege accorded to intentionality had modified the early history of the phenomenological method (which had been at the heart of his philosophical education) by not allowing it access to a “more fundamental appearing” that is for him transcendental Life, whose manifestation is affectivity. This analysis of the forgetting of the phenomenality proper to what he calls ‘being’ and describes as ‘Life’ clearly positions Henry in the field of philosophical thinking and consequently leads him to think a first phenomenality, by a method of radical immanence, in the sense that it differs from and precedes all relations in the world insofar as they are objects of a phenomenology of perception. Furthermore, this absolute and originary entity that is Life possesses a power equally originary: the power of founding itself, such that it is a bedrock that precedes Being (*Être*), and such that the ontology of a living being curls itself up into that of an existent.³ What is more, in this sense the whole question of onto-theology, so long and stimulating, can (and certainly attempts to) be escaped since God is himself living and experiencing himself before being.

Let us return to this Life that Henry affirms to be a ‘process’ and whose movement is ‘radically immanent.’ He explains that “in this immanent coming into itself of life in its ‘self-experience’ without which no self-experience would be possible, an Ipseity establishes itself (*s’édifie*)” and, following that logic, concludes that one must affirm that there is “no Self except in the life that engenders it as that in which it becomes life.”⁴ This is not the place to return to the harsh propositions Henry pronounces against a certain totalizing and reductive scientific discourse, even if he does so following a hermeneutical lineage in phenomenology. But one reflection that denounces such discourse, itself not without virulence, is paradoxically interesting because Henry both thematizes Life from a perspective that is not biological, and brings to light the idea of an ‘epiphany,’ a significant concept for our remarks:

Biologists themselves know what life is. They do not know it in their capacity as biologists, since biology knows nothing about it. They know it like everyone else, since they, too, live and love life, wine, and the opposite sex: they get jobs, have careers, and themselves experience the joy of new

théologique’ de la phénoménologie contemporaine n’est pas une ‘déviation’ ou une dénaturation de la phénoménologie, mais son accomplissement.”

³ [*Vivant* will be translated as ‘living being’ throughout. However, since Leclercq, following Henry, explicitly intends to ground being in life, the term ‘living *being*’ becomes somewhat redundant, if not misleading. As a result, in order to keep the planes of life and existence/being separate, ‘*étant*,’ sometimes rendered ‘being,’ will be translated ‘existent’ throughout.—*Trans.*]

⁴ Henry, “Eux en moi: une phénoménologie,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. I. *De la subjectivité* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 201-2: “...pas de Soi sinon dans la vie qui l’engendre comme ce en quoi elle devient la vie.”

departures, the boredom of administrative tasks, the anguish of death. But these *sensations* and *emotions*, these *desires*, this happiness or resentment—all those experiences and *ordeals that are just so many of life's epiphanies*—are in their eyes only ‘pure appearance.’⁵

“Appearance,” is a major concept, but difficult to interpret when Henry applies it to Christianity; one seems either to interpret it according to the rigorous categories of material phenomenology, or to interpret it from a gnostic perspective. On this point, about which we can say only a little, we recall that for Henry, who intends to neutralize it, the world is constituted by *praxis*, the expression of the living sensibility of the subject that cannot therefore be reduced—as we know—by the objectivism of perception. Without being able to develop this very interesting point, I will simply say that it is according to precisely this argument that Henry rightly refuses the assimilation of his project into that of Gnosticism, because he intends to establish a strong equation between *praxis*, understood as the reality of the world, and the concreteness of life. And if he is sometimes reproached, in his conceptual understanding of Christianity, for pushing the latter towards Gnosticism, it suffices, following an attentive reading of his texts, to recall that he insists on the fact that God hid His revelation from “those who have science and knowledge” (*Matthew* 11:25), giving it instead to ‘little children,’ the ‘*nepiois*,’ following a gospel passage that Henry frequently translates as “the sages and intellectuals” in order to express the “*sophon*” and the “*suneton*.”

Thus we understand that there is a kind of rupture between revelation and wisdom that is not without effect on the understanding of what a conceptual philosophical operation is, and, therefore, on the comprehension of the particular phenomenological method that takes as its object the notion of ‘life.’ We also understand how Henry could then affirm that

The phenomenology of life thus means everything except the application of the phenomenological method to such and such an object that would be life. It is not phenomenology that will give access to life. On the contrary, it is this life, revealing itself to itself, that gives us, in this self-revelation, access to it.⁶

Whatever the methodological effects, we see the degree to which Henry refused to set limits on a corpus of supposedly ‘philosophical’ texts within a tradition, and just how similar, before any interpretive work, the religious or sacred or mystical texts are to all other texts, having their own functional textual principles, and

⁵ Henry, *I Am The Truth*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 38 [Henry, *C'est moi la vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1998)].

⁶ Henry, “Le christianisme: une approche phénoménologique,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV. *Sur l'éthique et la religion* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 103: “Phénoménologie de la vie, cela veut donc tout dire sauf appliquer la méthode phénoménologique à cet objet particulier qui serait la vie. Ce n'est pas la phénoménologie qui va donner accès à la vie. Tout au contraire, c'est la vie qui se révélant à soi nous donne dans cette autorévélation, d'accéder à elle.”

finally just how capable they are of bearing an ‘other’ Speech (*Parole*) which, it must be recognized, is not valid for Michel Henry except if it enters into the problematic internal to the critique of ontological monism.

The Life of Life as Immanent Religion

Through the lens of these first analyses, we can now attempt to approach, in an explicative mode, what Life is. The citation we gave above—that distinguishes it from biological life—expresses with clarity that Life is on the side of sensation (that Henry relays in a complex philosophical tradition marked by Biranism and Cartesianism) and that it has been, in a kind of *mimesis* of the history of Being, forgotten in western philosophy. This forgetting provokes, in turn, a kind of ‘dissimulation of phenomenological Life,’ and a drawn out process of the occultation of its historical effectuations, namely the forgetting of the experience of every living being’s life, and the incomplete understanding of life by the phenomenological method Henry refers to as ‘historical.’ This method does not accomplish the nature of its own gesture, and indeed leaves it obstructed at the level of a phenomenology of perception that functions according to the categories of the world as an ek-static entity. Consequently, the living being becomes a mere existent, who appears and disappears in the world and engages with other beings in particular relations, in a spatio-temporal modality, according to the extremes of worldly birth and death, like a coming and going. According to Henry, the analysis of these modalities takes place according to their own categories and objective criteria of description in order to ‘see and seize’ these objectivities.

This is not the place to explain Henry’s critique of this state of affairs that he contests; however, because our remarks concern the question of the relation to the religious, one must note that one part of Henry’s response to the state of the phenomenological method is found in his understanding of the notion of the ‘flesh,’ the experienced subjective body and Life’s mode of manifestation. He remarks that

As soon as the flesh is brought into life, it ceases to be this objective body with its strange forms and incomprehensible sexual determinations that suffice to arouse our anxiety, thrown into the world, indefinitely subject to the question ‘why?’ But, as Meister Eckhart saw, life is without a why. The flesh that carries in itself the principle of its own revelation asks for nothing else to shine on it.⁷

⁷ Henry, “Phénoménologie de la vie,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. I, 75: “Dès que la chair est rendue à la vie, elle a cessé d’être ce corps objectif avec ses formes étranges, sa détermination sexuelle incompréhensible, propre à susciter notre angoisse, livré au monde, indéfiniment soumis à la question ‘pourquoi?’ Mais comme l’a vu Maître Eckhart, la vie est sans pourquoi. La chair qui porte en elle le principe de sa propre révélation ne demande à aucune autre instance de l’éclairer sur elle-même.”

If Henry's understanding of the flesh as the seat of affectivity is too complex to be tackled here, we will simply insist on two singular characteristics: that of the necessity to 'return' (*rendre*) it to life, and that of its ontological autonomy.

In effect, Life is a site of power and thus of *praxis* (we can therefore bring the essence of the world back to its originary sensibility through work), which is of the utmost importance if we recall that Christianity is also understood by Henry as a power, and therefore as an action and not a thought. Salvation is not of that order, as we shall see. Nevertheless, Henry does—insofar as he is a thinker of Life—seek to identify discursivity and, to be sure, *episteme*. Thus that which he calls the 'knowledge of life' is a knowledge different than worldly objective knowledge, it is a knowledge he calls absolute in the sense that it is not taken into totalizing relations. It is indeed for this reason that Henry makes it a knowledge of a 'religious kind,' in a very particular sense, in the form of the belief in the relation of one \times instance to a transcendental instance, under an essentially passive and non-reciprocal modality:

Religions are nothing but different ways of expressing this fundamental non-power that is inscribed in the very passivity of my life. "I am in life" means that this life passes through me, and that is the mystery.... On the phenomenological level, this passive givenness of life to itself is that which places the question of life with that of God. Because to live one's life as something received is to necessarily feel (*éprouver*) an infinite respect for oneself. It is already a religion.⁸

After having evoked a few apparent links between the revelation proper to Christianity and the phenomenological work undertaken by Michel Henry, we will work this link through the different points announced above.

The Truth in the Originary Saying of He who Speaks

It is clear that Michel Henry is seduced by the fact that, in repeating his reading of the Christian Scriptures, he could find therein a system where the Greek *aletheia* and its Logos would no longer be an ideality but would be rather a concrete existential. The Christian God, understood by Henry—who undoubtedly forgets the efforts of human dialogical reasoning and the positive effects of cultural exchange, from which comes the necessity for a Greek speech of the Semitic God—cannot be reduced to a concept of Greek provenance, which Henry assimilates, by taking a famous shortcut, to the history of western theologies. In sum, Henry accuses Greek thinking of having only ever reached the plane of

⁸ Henry, *Entretiens*, 108-9: "Les religions ne sont que les différentes façons d'exprimer ce non-pouvoir fondamental, qui est inscrit dans la passivité même de ma vie. 'Je suis dans la vie' signifie que cette vie me traverse et c'est cela le mystère.... Sur le plan phénoménologique, cette donation passive de la vie à elle-même est ce qui met la question de la vie avec celle de Dieu. Car vivre sa vie comme quelque chose qu'on reçoit c'est éprouver nécessairement un respect infini de soi-même. C'est déjà une religion."

intelligible knowledge, whereas he intends to seek out an originary truth—hidden, veiled, and forgotten—capable of giving to thinking something other than the common truth or the theoretical truth inherent to scientific discourse.

However, in order to leave behind the circular pretensions of historical truth, one must hold that the truth proper to Christianity cannot be satisfied with the truth of the said (*le dit*), but must bring itself to the place where the said is truly the saying (*le dire*), that is to say to the place where *He* who says *it* truly is it (*là où celui qui le dit l'est vraiment*). Thus it is a process of overflowing the said of the saying by a truthful subject. The truth of Christianity therefore plays itself out on one essential question—one quite irreducible to that of the quest for the historical truth—namely, the question of the divinity of Christ. It is to that more originary truth that the possibility of Christ returns, well before the problematic of the truth of historical events and of the texts that claim to record it, be they subsequent or contemporary to such events.

Despite the fact that Henry does indeed think of this originary truth as that of Christianity itself, it is above all what he most often calls a “pure phenomenological truth.” In effect, in the truth of the world it is the outside-oneself and exteriority that allow one to see, even if there is a difference between the Truth and that which it shows—that is, that which it renders true. Hence there is sensible vision, intelligible vision, an ‘in-face’ and an ‘ob-ject,’ but also objective and scientific truths. By contrast the Truth of Christianity does not generate this difference, because it does not differ from that which it produces, insofar as it does not play out in a worldly light.

In this way, systematic Christianity—that can accede to the status of a ‘program’—will become the transposed expression, in the field of the religious, of Henry’s theory of the phenomenological dualism of appearance. And it is equally from here that a reflection will unfold on the structures common to these two orders which he will never confuse, but the conjunction of which he will audaciously attempt to think on the phenomenological and existential plane, transferring concepts and categories from one field to the other. If he does not confuse these fields, it is because he always held that a religion cannot be reduced to its philosophical expression, which would be contrary to the understanding of philosophy and Life around which his personal philosophy moves.

Before evoking the corollary question of phenomenological dualism, one should note that Henry does not consider Christianity to be a monotheism ‘in the ordinary sense of the term,’ which insists on the unicity of God; for Henry, monotheism is more precisely the unicity of the link between absolute life and the singularity of each living individual, that link in fact being religion itself, understood ultimately as the “absolute link.” Hence he can claim that “Christianity is not a monotheism except in the sense that it affirms that there exists but one Life constitutive of the absolute, one sole and unique life in every possible living

individual.”⁹ It is in this sense that he connects his view with an etymological definition of the word ‘religion:’

Religion—*re-ligare*—offers us a path: it is the link, the link between my life and absolute life. It is this very link that opens up the ethical because the way of living this same link determines human life, and ethics is nothing other than that... The *raison d'être* of our life is to welcome this life in us and to live from it, which can be done in various ways, in the effort of creation, in the solitude of the cloisters, or in the simplicity of devotion.”¹⁰

We see, then, that for Michel Henry the origin and normativity of fundamental ethics is found in religion, because it comprises a link between the living and life.

To be sure, religion is here presented as a way of life, but it is also an aesthetic and affective experience; however, it is not the only one, and one must not focus on it to the point of hypertrophy. Nonetheless, in religion acting is primordial in the sense that it is understood in terms of an experience of oneself, since the “truth is linked, for reasons of the essence, to individuality.”¹¹ The question, then, becomes that of the link between this subjective entity and the absolute, whose modalities of revelation are the very moments of its subjectivization, if indeed all revelation is also a process. Thus the dogmatic and confessional dimensions of religion have absolutely no priority, a fact which is affirmed all the more radically because Henry distinguishes the revelation from the speech (*parole*) itself, the consequences of which we shall return to later.

On this point Henry notes, while giving a serious methodological warning that sounds both like a limit for philosophy and an act of distinguishing orders, that

Christianity claims that the essence of reality is Life. According to John, God is Life. If, then, Christianity organizes itself around this reality that is life, no phenomenological approach will be possible. For from being able to give us access to life, that is to say to the reality of Christianity, the phenomenological method of intentional elucidation misses it in principle. There is no other access to life except in and by life, that is to say in conformity to the mode of original phenomenization according to which life phenomenizes itself, according to which it experiences itself and

⁹ Henry, “Éthique et religion dans une phénoménologie de la vie,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 54: “Le christianisme n’est un monothéisme que parce qu’il affirme de la Vie constitutive de l’absolu qu’il n’en existe qu’une, une seule et unique vie en tout vivant possible.”

¹⁰ Henry, *Entretiens*, 141: “Religion—*re-ligare*—offre une piste: c’est le lien, le lien entre ma vie et la vie absolue. Or ce lien même ouvre l’éthique parce que la façon de vivre pareil lien détermine la vie humaine et l’éthique n’est rien d’autre... La raison d’être de notre vie est d’accueillir en nous cette vie et de vivre d’elle, ce qui peut se faire de multiples façons, dans l’effort de la création, dans la solitude des cloîtres ou dans la simplicité du dévouement.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131: “[L]a vérité est donc liée, pour des raisons d’essence, à l’individualité.”

nothing other—it is accomplished therefore as an auto-donation and auto-revelation.¹²

This philosophical declaration allows us to proceed a step further in the understanding of Henry's exegesis of Christianity, because the passage through this religion creates a considerable epistemological reversal. It allows us to think the Logos no longer in the horizon of the world, but in the horizon of Life, that is to say no longer according to the worldly body that is the object of habitual perceptions, but according to the flesh that is the specific way in which each living being comes into Life, according to what Henry calls 'incarnation.' Consequently there is a clear distinction between that which pertains to creation (on the plane of the world) and to generation (on the plane of life), the latter indicating the transcendental immanent process proper to life that allows each ego to be an ipseity. As an aside, we should also recall that for Michel Henry Christianity is not bothered by a soul/body dualism, since there is in fact no reality but that of the living Self or the body that is a 'dwelling' for life, the 'place of its incarnation,' where the material of life is nothing other than the pathic and living flesh. This anthropological understanding means that "man is not profiled in the world, like that always inaccessible, vacillating silhouette. He is invisible—he is fixed to himself, crushed against himself, charged with himself and supportive of himself in his pathetic corporeity and untearable flesh."¹³

La Parole et les Paroles: Power versus Performativity¹⁴

Having explicated this point, we should now like to insist on the fact that Michel Henry seeks a genealogy of the theo-logic—what he calls the "original Word (*Parole*) of God"—that speaks even before the Scriptures. In effect, he believes that this revelation is so originary that it can claim to be able to precede everything including the Scriptures which, in terms of understanding, would remain impossible without it, since it creates the very conditions for the transcendental structure of the call. Thus the written word (*parole*) can achieve the status of the Word of Life (*Parole de la Vie*) because it allows for a revelation other than that

¹² Henry, "Le christianisme: une approche phénoménologique," 103: "Le christianisme pose que l'essence de la réalité est la Vie. Selon Jean, Dieu est Vie. Si donc le christianisme s'organise autour de cette réalité qu'est la vie, aucune approche phénoménologique n'en est désormais possible. Loin de pouvoir nous donner accès à la vie, c'est-à-dire la réalité du christianisme, la méthode phénomé-nologique d'élucidation intentionnelle la manque dans le principe. D'accès à la vie, il n'en est que dans la vie, et par elle, c'est-à-dire conformément au mode de phénoménalisation originelle selon lequel se phénoménalise la vie, c'est-à-dire selon lequel elle s'éprouve elle-même, et non l'autre— s'accomplissant ainsi comme autodonation et comme autorévélation."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106: "L'homme ne se profile pas dans le monde comme cette silhouette vacillante et toujours inaccessible, il est invisible—rivé à soi cependant, écrasé contre soi, chargé de soi et se supportant soi-même dans sa corporéité pathétique et dans sa chair indéchirable."

¹⁴ [The word play at work in the following sections, which involves variations on '*parole*,' '*verbe*,' '*dire*' and their cognates, is difficult to translate. The equivocity of the term '*parole*,' especially, poses great difficulties for the translator. In order to avoid awkward constructions, I will translate it variously as 'word' and 'speech,' indicating the original when necessary.—*Trans.*]

of the world, with its own kind of appearing that is radically different from any worldly monstration under to the laws of perception and exteriority. Thus Henry can affirm

How then does God reveal himself to us? It is here that the question of theology joins the fundamental question of phenomenology and identifies itself with it, in such a way that theology is only possible as phenomenology. The question of phenomenology: how do things give themselves, manifest themselves in such a way that it never concerns what shows itself, what gives or manifests itself, but only the how of their givenness, this constitutes the proper theme of phenomenology and thus of theology itself.¹⁵

Revelation is, then, indeed at the heart of the inquiry. But Henry, in his search for a kind of transcendental genesis of the originary Word, limited to be sure by the refusal to reduce Life to a being—since it is what founds and maintains being—underscores the degree to which Life’s language is not ‘worldly’ language, which is a language of saying and showing. Consequently, one needs an understanding of speech, and a hearing of what it is in its essence, since it never speaks except according to itself. Hence Henry speaks of a “speech (*parole*) of finite life” and a “speech (*parole*) of infinite life,” according to a precise epistemological axiom: affect = speech (world and life) = the sentiment that is religion. The living being is thus he who speaks that originary Word (*Parole*), the referent having been brought to the side of life as a normative ethical instance. In this sense we can say without the least doubt that the power of speech (*parole*) is in its power of conversion, of “*metanoia*,” insofar as the speech is capable of trans-forming.

This signifies, then, that Henry understands speech as an auto-referential power, to be sure, but also as a power of auto-designation that is a kind of performativity. Nevertheless, we must note that he understands it in a way different from the understanding of the normal theory of performative speech, for which it is in speech that the sign operates because of the power that constitutes it. Indeed, every speech of God is a power that speaks itself and shows itself in the effective speaking of the Word (*Verbe*), but it differs radically from human speech that always refers to the world and to what it shows therein. Finally, we must recall that it is not even necessarily a question of language, since the speech can be without speech, which is something other than silence for Henry.

Therefore, performativity is not incipient of the nature of the speech that can claim this effective and epistemic status, but of the originary power that

¹⁵ Henry, “Acheminement vers la question de Dieu,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 72: “Comment donc Dieu se révèle-t-il à nous? C’est ici que la question de la théologie rejoint la question fondamentale de la phénoménologie et s’identifie à elle, en sorte que la théologie n’est possible que comme phénoménologique. La question de la phénoménologie: comment les choses se donnent-elles, se manifestent-elles, de telle façon que ce n’est jamais ce qui se montre, se donne ou se manifeste, mais seulement le comment de la donation, lequel constitue le thème propre de la phénoménologie et ainsi de la théologie elle-même.”

constitutes it and that in reality confers upon it this effectivity and efficiency. But if Henry links every speech to that which he calls its “hyper-power,” he must, then, make a link between saying (*dire*) and power, a power that must have recourse to the authority of the originary Speech and, in each case, to the effective and concrete authority of Christ himself (who is the incarnation of the Word, close to God). Christ’s authority is his performativity, which gains value and acts only through him and not through the status of the speech (*parole*). Hence we see that for Henry speech speaks “in” the living being and puts him, through its power, in a kind of co-belonging with its origin, since there is, in a sense, only one single plane of constitution, so that it is indeed on the plane of speech that the question of generation, which Henry firmly opposes to creation, plays itself out.

We see, then, how belief is of the order of dwelling (close to the Johannine understanding of the act that is an active word), but we also see that this hypothesis on the use of speech plays out on an immanent plane, since, due to its constitutive self-revelatory character, this speech speaks without any mediation other than that of the power inherent in it. Nevertheless, he who says power says sign. For this reason Henry will constantly insist on the precise schematism that holds that every speech of Christ—as man—allows, by his exceptional character and his own authority, for a return to his status as Word, which is the transcendental origin of the effects of his power which give themselves to be seen in particular signs and phenomena. The “who” of he who speaks—and especially the manifestation of the authority of such a speech—is therefore decisive for Henry, because it is that which demarcates the difference in nature between the Living being and the living beings (*le vivant et les vivants*), and also that which authenticates the true speech and the speech of Life as Speeches of the Origin (*Paroles de l’Origine*).

On this point we can furthermore observe that Henry applied the methodological principal of duality, of which we spoke above, to his philosophical Christology. In fact, it is an ordinary and common speech, addressed to men qua men *via* customary, worldly language; but it one that is addressed to men insofar as the Word speaks a language of an originary, divine nature. It is in this language that Christ speaks to men, insofar as they are ‘living’ and are sons. This is what a phenomenological Christology dares to think and articulate.

Christology: The Phenomenological Turn in Theology

These brief considerations on speech illustrate the degree to which Michel Henry gives absolute power to the person of Christ, such that an originary power inhabits his speech. Taking up the hierarchies employed by Henry’s particular semantic field, we can say that Christ’s incarnation—that is to say, the becoming man of the Word—is a coming into flesh that he calls an ‘arch-flesh,’ since it is the originary flesh of every living being. We can also say that Christ is an ‘Arch-Son’ who testifies to the foundational anteriority of the Father and thus to the primacy of the Son engendered by him, since he is the only one capable of engendering him. But it is doubtless on the plane of the application of the “world/life” schema that Henry’s Christology is the strangest and most ambiguous, because insofar as he

insists on the non-relation of Christ and the world, Henry highlights the quasi-incognito character of Christ in his veiling, in his kenoses, in the mystery of his invisibility.

Nevertheless, the truth of Christianity still plays out on the essential question of the divinity of Christ—but decidedly apart from every quest for the historical truth. Henry’s Christ is egocentric: when he says “Me,” he says a “Me” of which the absolute of the predication is the truth, the way, and the life; he thus carries in himself an ontology, an epistemology, and an anthropology. But Henry, who never ceases to put subjectivity at the heart of his contemporary ontological project, does not think of Christ as the depository of a morality, a doctrine, or even as a master of wisdom or the teacher of a path. Rather, his Christ is a knowing and a power; such that the problem of the “kingdom” is less a question of speech as it is of power. Hence this power is nothing like an organic or bodily power, but a power that makes death pass into life, an “inconceivable act”¹⁶ around which the whole corpus is oriented. In an unpublished note, written in preparation for *Words of Christ*, he writes:

When God dies on the cross, he takes himself out of the visible. Salvation consents to the invisible* *that gives itself when God takes himself out of history*. The Incarnation calls for a reflection on the death and resurrection of Christ. Do we gain a theology of the incarnation only by way of the Pascal Mystery: the ineluctability of the relation between philosophical truth and theological truth? But [there is] Arch-intelligibility. [*In the margin*]: How does it give itself?¹⁷

The central act, then, is indeed that of the resurrection, which allows us to balance those critiques that claim Henry never thought the tragic element of Christ’s life, or that he had avoided the torments of the death and crucifixion.

On a more fundamental level of reflection—even if it claims to be separate from the dogma that Henry designates as “an incomprehensible and unexplained mystery”—in order to speak the double nature of Christ, Henry holds that “the Word and man are juxtaposed in the person of Christ.”¹⁸ But this hypothesis, contestable enough from a theological point of view, allows him to make this rather audacious contestation:

Does Christ therefore have two fleshes? Undoubtedly: one, identical to ours, that knows hunger, fatigue, suffering, and death, and that was nailed

¹⁶ See Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 8.

¹⁷ Henry, Ms. A 27299-27300, now published in *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 5 (2014): 52: “Quand Dieu meurt sur la croix il s’absente du visible. [Le] salut [revient à] consentir à l’invisible* *qui se donne lorsque Dieu s’absente* de l’histoire. [L]’Incarnation appelle [donc une] réflexion sur [la] mort et [la] résurrection du Christ. Nous ne gagnons une théologie de l’incarnation qu’à partir du mystère pascal: inéluctabilité [des] relations de [la] vérité philosophique et [de la] vérité théologique? Mais [il y a] Archi-intelligibilité. [*En marge*]: Comment se donne-t-il?”

¹⁸ Henry, “L’incarnation dans une phénoménologie radicale,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 153: “Verbe et homme sont juxtaposés dans la personne du Christ.”

to the Cross. But also an Arch-Flesh—the Bread of Life—that to which the just unite in their deification that is their salvation.

He follows this logic, in conjunction with an application of his theory of language, in order to explain that:

Since Christ has two fleshes, one which founds the other, which gives each flesh unto itself, our human flesh like his flesh of man, he also has two languages: that which asks the Samaritan “give me to drink,” and which, in its radically immanent phonation, utters that speech. And another Speech, that of the Word in which, before giving all flesh to itself, absolute life embraces itself in the infinite love in which it loves itself eternally in the Word—the Speech that says: “Before Abraham, Me, Life (*Avant Abraham, Moi, la Vie*” (John 8: 57; 14: 6).¹⁹

This last phrase reveals with precision the way Henry intends to link his Christology to his fundamental theses on subjectivity. In effect, according to Henry, Christ provokes a radical reversal in the intellectual history of the concept of the truth, since he cracks it against itself, while at the same time he provokes a strong assimilation in affirming “I am the truth,” which is yet another way of expressing and unveiling the radical origin of his divine nature. But apart from the fact that he is an ego, he is also a self that testifies that he himself is the Truth; not at all a universal, impersonal or even scientific truth, but a truth that is a living Self, as the Johannine text says (John 8:14). In this sense, the arrival of the truth is not announced according to exteriority or visibility, that is, according to the most universal Greek modalities of being-in-the-world (be it given, thrown, or open); rather it is announced on the plane of interiority, that of the transcendental Arch-Self who can constitute every self and above all place the self into its own capacities and powers. Thus, on a dogmatic level, this amounts to saying not only that Christ preceded the arrival of all other sons, but that he is that which renders each one them possible, in the same way that He is the Self without which no Life would be possible. Christ is the Arch-Son not only in a temporal sense, not even because he would have come before time itself. He is the Arch-Son who holds in

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154: “Et comme le Christ a deux chairs, l’une qui fonde l’autre, qui donne chaque chair à elle-même, notre chair humaine comme sa chair d’homme, il a aussi deux langages: celui qui demande à la Samaritaine ‘Donne-moi à boire,’ et qui, dans sa phonation radicalement immanente, a proféré cette parole. Et une autre Parole, celle du Verbe en lequel, avant de donner toute chair à elle-même, la Vie absolue s’étirent elle-même dans l’amour infini dont elle s’aime éternellement elle-même dans ce Verbe—la Parole qui dit: ‘Avant Abraham, Moi, la Vie’ (Jean 8, 58; 14, 6).” [Henry here combines the two scriptural verses referenced, and liberally translates the Greek text of the New Testament that reads “*prin Abraam genesthai, ego eimi*.” Henry removes both instances of ‘being’ from the text (*genesthai* and *eimi*), allowing him to change the first person singular pronoun from nominative to accusative.—*Trans.*]

his own Ipseity all those who could not be called to Life except in that Ipseity and by it.²⁰

Moreover, such an affirmation reveals why, for Michel Henry, “Christ is not the mediation between man and God. Christ is the mediation between every ‘me’ and himself, the self-relation that allows every self to be a ‘me.’” Following this logic he adds that:

This relation... has a phenomenological concreteness, a flesh... My flesh, my living flesh is that of Christ... One’s access is only possible through Christ. And it must be understood just what such a proposition signifies, strictly speaking... In effect to come into to this ‘me’ means to borrow the way of that prior arrival in him of which the result is to pass through the door, to cross the incandescent wall of this original Ipseity in which the fire of life burns.²¹

This is why, for Henry, there is a Christologization and a Christification of the realities of life and all the modalities of existence, such that in Christianity all ethics should, imperatively, be preceded by this originary Depth (*Fond*). Hence he writes:

Such is the abyssal intuition of Christianity: Ipseity as the condition of both the Individual and life, such that the former is not possible without the latter any more than the latter is without the Ipseity of the former. But Christianity did not establish this decisive connection with respect to any particular individual or any particular life, it grasped it in the beginning, in the first fulguration of life, where it engenders itself in its essential Ipseity.²²

²⁰ Henry, “Archi-christologie,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 126: “Le Christ n’a pas seulement précédé la venue de tous les autres fils, mais qu’il est, en chacun de ceux-ci, ce qui le rend possible, au même titre que cette Vie, Lui qui est le Soi sans lequel aucune Vie ne serait possible. Le Christ est l’Archi-Fils non en un sens temporel ou même encore parce qu’il serait venu avant tous les temps. Il est l’Archi-Fils qui détient en son Ipséité tous ceux qui ne seront appelés à la Vie qu’en cette Ipséité et par elle.”

²¹ Henry, “Le berger et ses brebis,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 167: “Ce rapport... a une concrétude phénoménologique, une chair... Ma chair, ma chair vivante est celle du Christ... D’accès à chacun, il n’en est de possible qu’à travers le Christ. Et il faut comprendre ce qu’une telle proposition signifie en toute rigueur... En effet accéder à ce moi veut dire emprunter la voie de cette venue préalable en lui de laquelle il résulte—franchir la porte, traverser la paroi incandescente de cette Ipséité originelle en laquelle brûle le feu de la vie.”

²² *Ibid.*, 173: “Telle est l’intuition abyssale du christianisme: l’Ipséité comme condition de l’Individu aussi bien que de la vie. En sorte que le premier n’est pas possible sans la seconde, pas plus que la seconde sans l’Ipséité du premier. Or cette connexion décisive le christianisme ne l’a établie à propos d’aucun individu particulier ni d’aucune vie particulière, il l’a saisie au commencement, dans la première fulguration de la vie, là où elle s’auto-engendre en son Ipséité essentielle.”

Filiation and Subjectivity: The Effects of a Hyper-Transcendentalism

If it is clear that filiation is a constitutive dimension of the ego, it nonetheless remains a transcendental conception that carries real consequences for the understanding of life and living beings, and especially for the source of their relation. For this reason, Henry systematically avoids all reflection on biological filiation. Meditating on Matthew 23:9 in a preparatory note for *I Am the Truth*, he writes:

The impossibility for a living individual, for any man whomsoever to be a Father is the immediate conclusion of the following claim: [being] a Father, in a radical, strict sense, means to give life. However, every individual is a living being and is in life, far from being able to give it or to be able to have given it to oneself: the living being depends on life and only life engenders, no living being is able to do it. If God is said to be living, it is a whole other sense, insofar as he is capable of giving himself life and of giving it, and of giving, of being the essence as absolute life. Cf. the two concepts of self-affection.²³

To be sure, on the plane of effectivity, the consequence is undeniable, and he pursues it in another preparatory note for the same work:

The relation of filiation is not reversible, like human paternity: there, every son of a father becomes the father of a son, whereas Jesus comes from David, against chronology. And chronology reigns as master, like with biological organisms: one after the other. In transcendental filiation, Life/living, this order is broken, reversed. Mark 12:35-37. Antecedence of Life. Condition of Son. Negation of biological paternity.²⁴

Therefore, for Henry who thinks that every reader of Scripture should enter into the Letter of the Christic ego, this condemnation is also against every son: “To call God one’s Father is to make oneself the equal of God: to be of the same essence. This is true of Christ and is the cause of his condemnation: but it is also

²³ Henry, Ms. A 23697-23698: “L'impossibilité pour un individu vivant, pour un homme quelconque d'être Père ressort immédiatement du constat suivant: [être] Père en un sens propre et radical veut dire donner la vie. Seulement, un individu quelconque est un vivant et il est dans la vie, loin de pouvoir la donner ou de pouvoir se l'être donnée: vivant il dépend de la vie et seule la vie engendre, aucun vivant n'est capable de le faire. Si Dieu est dit vivant, c'est en un tout autre sens, en tant que capable de se donner la vie et de la donner, et de donner, d'en être l'essence comme vie absolue. Cf. les deux concepts de l'auto-affection.”

²⁴ Henry, Ms. A 23699: “La relation de Filiation n'est pas réversible, contre la paternité humaine: ici chaque fils d'un père devient le père d'un fils, alors que Jésus vient de David, contre la chronologie. Et la chronologie règne en maître, comme dans les organismes biologiques: l'un avant l'autre. Dans la filiation transcendante, Vie/vivant, cet ordre est brisé, renversé. Marc 12, 35-37. Antécédence de la Vie. Condition de Fils. Négation de la paternité biologique.”

true of all Sons of God, of each and every one who would have the force to designate himself as such.”²⁵

Thus we see the degree to which Henry’s deictic is marked by an irresistible tragedy, and also to what degree the reflection on generation allows him to posit a strong equation between the invisible life of God and the invisible essence of the soul of man. Indeed it is this dimension that allows him to rework the whole language of image and creation with the transcendental language of filiation. Thus he explicitly writes:

“God created man.” Without, strictly speaking, being a heretic, such a proposition is frankly dissonant.... It is totally foreign to Christianity and even incompatible with it. If we imagine that man is a game of nerves, neuronal, perhaps we could allow it: but if God = Life and if man is Son, then all of creation is out of play. Generation is different than creation.²⁶

We know, of course, how Henry tries to bypass metaphor and the reign of analogy. To that extent, filiation cannot be understood analogically either, even if it would make matters, and the understanding of Christianity, easier. He notes, still in preparation for his work from 1996:

The analogy of God with any kind of human father, and thus the whole of Freudian analysis, falls to the supposition that there is some kind of empirical psychological signification in what concerns the metaphysical condition of man as Son of the Father (God) as from the human Father (the one that slept with the mother), it amounts to a pure absurdity.²⁷

And in a contemporary note, he again comments, even more forcefully: “The idea of God the Father as an unreal projection of human paternity is one of the major stupidities of Freudianism, such that Oedipus is a flagrant expression of the coarsest naturalism and objectivism of modern ‘thinking.’”²⁸ In short, Henry imposes himself truly as a thinker of the transcendental ego, and the cardinal use of the concept of filiation that he makes is for him a simple operation of the

²⁵ Henry, Ms. A 23658: “Appeler Dieu son Père, c’est se faire l’égal du Dieu: être de la même essence. Cela est vrai du Christ et la cause de sa condamnation; mais aussi de tout Fils de Dieu, de tout un chacun qui aura la force de se désigner ainsi.”

²⁶ Henry, Ms. A 23780: “‘Dieu créa l’homme.’ Sans être à proprement parler hérétique une telle proposition est franchement malsonnante.... Elle est totalement étrangère au christianisme et même incompatible avec lui. Si l’on imagine que l’homme est un jeu de nerfs ou neuronal alors on peut; mais si Dieu = Vie et si l’homme est Fils, alors toute création est hors jeu. La génération est différente de la création.”

²⁷ Henry, Ms. A 23794: “Tombe l’analogie de Dieu avec tout père humain, donc toute l’analyse de Freud, à supposer qu’elle ait quelque signification psychologique empirique, en ce qui concerne la condition métaphysique de l’homme comme Fils, du Père (Dieu), comme Père humain (lequel a couché avec la mère), il s’agit d’une pure absurdité.”

²⁸ Henry, Ms. A 23799: “L’idée du Dieu Père comme projection irréaliste de la paternité humaine est l’une des stupidités majeures du freudisme, tant l’Edipe est l’expression flagrante du naturalisme et de l’objectivisme grossier de la ‘pensée’ moderne.”

transcendental reduction, where every concept and especially that of image must be “emptied of every phenomenological, ecstatic, worldly signification.”²⁹

Conclusion: Savage Phenomenology

We must conclude. We have seen how a new condition of man himself appears, for Michel Henry, in the realm of Christianity. It is surely obvious that he wanted to link his understanding of the condition of man to that of Christ, in the prism of the reality of his transcendental filiation, this being a kind of originary condition of which the key term is nothing less than deification. Consequently, filiation—as an existential condition—is the operative hermeneutical principle that allows the Scriptures to be read—at least in so far as they are the Speech of Life—and therefore of recognizing oneself doubly in the speeches spoken. In this sense, while thinking the most originary events (which remains a mythological state of thinking) and their meaning, and in insisting on the fact that we are not separated from them by the distance of history or by textual hermeneutics, Henry furthermore intends to apply his phenomenological analysis to a philosophy of the event, since it carries in it the repetitions which are its constant actualization and the way by which Scriptures are filled out.

Thus Henry equates, albeit in the spirit of a transfer that we evoked with the first epigraph, the logos of Life and the logos of God, as opposed to subverting it to the philosophical logos, since they both speak a language different than that of Reason bound to its faculties of nomination, signification, and of course representation. For Henry, the problematic of representation (worldly monstration, visibility, sensibility, and the laws of exteriority) is rigorously deconstructed by an understanding of the Christian system and the structures proper to the call that constitute it, all of this under a transcendental modality.

We recognize of course that this is a very peculiar reading of the Scriptures—essentially the New Testament—and an attempt to apply to them a philosophy of immanence, but also a firm will to contest the notions of finitude and individualism, above all when they function according to the structures of recognition, of gift and counter-gift. It is these very structures that provoke the forgetting of the immanence of life in every living being, in such a way that they mask the essential function of Christianity as a monotheism that is, as Henry explained above, an internal link between the living being and its originary principle. A working note, preparatory for both a conference in Rome and *Words of Christ*, is very stimulating in this respect. It is the Levinas of *Otherwise than Being*, and also the Paul Ricoeur of *Oneself as Another*, who are at the heart of this reading and reflection. Here are a few extracts of this reading note:

You would love God and your neighbor as yourself and not as God! The Other (*autrui*) or God... It is that we cannot replace the love of Christ with that of others, as if we were to say: It is in loving the other that we realize

²⁹ Henry, Ms. A 23824: “...vidé de toute signification phénoménologique, extatique, mondaine.”

our relation to God, as if God were nothing greater than the others; this would be an atheism (death of God) replaced by charity; but it is upon the relation to God, in this alone, that the other exists; and myself, I do not relate to the other except in God. The other can unsettle me because he is carried by God, who can also unsettle me directly. He is foundational of the Self, of me as of the other: *Oneself as another*.³⁰

Like all major thinkers in twentieth-century French philosophy, Henry did not undertake a philosophical analysis of a subject facing different forms of the absolute. It is, in my view, essentially from within his theory of an affected subjectivity that one must read and attempt to understand this reflection on Christianity, because God, in Henry's understanding, is a God who experiences himself (*s'éprouve*), and a God of whom the believer has a corollary experience (*fait l'épreuve corollaire*). We find here a certain similitude with romantic Christologies, for which the feeling and pure experience of affectivity constitute at once the heart of its theoretical project and of its existential weight (in the sense of the Letter to the Hebrews 5:8), which usually become an anti-philosophy. We might say, then, that this phenomenological Christology is almost soteriological, and that revelation audaciously takes the form of an inner hearing, where the most originary Words (*Paroles*) are incessantly repeated—those of an absolute Before. In any case, it is certain that Michel Henry's reflections have more than provocative aspects, and can collide with the patient efforts of Reason. Moreover, he made no effort—doubtless, by design—to take under consideration the history and results of philosophical projects that had this same pretention. His undertaking is absolutely radical, and carries the consequences of a phenomenology in the first person, indeed in the singular. The same can be said with respect to theology, of which, it must be recognized, Henry took little notice, something for which he has often been reproached.

Words of a philosopher, or words of a theologian? We shall not risk giving an answer, because it is not necessary to situate, in this alternative, the effects of this free and savage thinking. I mean “savage” in its noblest sense, as that which lives in the woods, on the margins, on the limits also, and evidently beyond all commitments and groupings. In the library of this philosopher, in Montpellier, that city in which he lived as if in a place of beatitude, distanced from everything and on the margins of any particular cultural space, there is a copy of the 1998 papal encyclical “*Fides et ratio*.” The first ten pages are marked with underlines and question marks, and the reading was then abandoned.

Translated by Daniel Gillis

³⁰ Henry, Ms. A 27285: “Tu aimeras Dieu et ton prochain comme toi-même et non pas comme Dieu! Autrui ou Dieu... C'est qu'on ne peut remplacer l'amour du Christ par celui des autres, comme si l'on disait: c'est en aimant l'autre qu'on réalise son rapport à Dieu, comme si Dieu n'était plus que les autres; il y aurait un athéisme (la mort de Dieu) remplacé par la charité; mais c'est sur le rapport à Dieu, en celui-ci seulement, que l'autre existe; et moi-même je ne me rapporte à l'autre qu'en Dieu. L'autre m'ébranle parce qu'il est porté par Dieu, lequel peut aussi bien m'ébranler moi-même directement. Il est fondateur du Soi, du moi comme de l'autre: *Soi-même comme un autre*.”