

# Life Turned Against Itself: Is There a Theory of the Passions in Michel Henry?

*Jean-Sébastien Hardy*

## Preview

Michel Henry is known to be the contemporary thinker who has given the most privileged status and the deepest philosophical significance to affectivity. His whole work—from his interpretation of Biran's ontology of subjectivity to his reading of Marx's philosophy of human reality and his trilogy on the phenomenology of Christianity—can be read as a prolonged clarification of the foundational role of affectivity in life's manifestation to the living. This holds true both at an epistemological level (since all knowledge implies the immediate knowledge of one's own life) and at a phenomenological level (since the world and its objects can only appear through life's incarnate givenness), as well as at an anthropological level (since the community of men is primarily an affective community). Ultimately, *prima philosophia* itself must be expressed as a philosophy of affectivity.

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Because the feeling that our affective life is at one time the expansion and the very overflow of our own existence and at other times the experience of our dependence, of our finitude and our misery, *the Cartesian theory of passion has to do with the problem of existential alienation.*<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction: A Total Eclipse of the Heart?**

Michel Henry is known to be the contemporary thinker who has given the most privileged status and the deepest philosophical significance to affectivity. His whole work—from his interpretation of Biran's ontology of subjectivity to his reading of Marx's philosophy of human reality and his trilogy on the phenomenology of Christianity—can be read as a prolonged clarification of the foundational role of affectivity in life's manifestation to the living. This holds true both at an epistemological level (since all knowledge implies the immediate knowledge of one's own life<sup>2</sup>) and at a phenomenological level (since the world and its objects can only appear through life's incarnate givenness<sup>3</sup>), as well as at an anthropological level (since the community of men is primarily an affective

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 145 [Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps. Essai sur l'ontologie biranienne* (Paris: PUF, [1965] 2003), 201] (Emphasis in original). As we will point out in our conclusion, there is an ambivalence, or a shift, in Henry's position towards Descartes' concept of passion. Compare Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), § 53, 469 [Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF, 1963), 586-7].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 188: "It is *the most original knowledge of life as identical to it and to its subjectivity* which founds truth and the possibility of all theories..." (Emphasis in original) [See Henry, *Marx*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), vol. I, 479].

<sup>3</sup> Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, 58 [80]: "The body is given us in an internal transcendental experience; the knowledge which we have of it is thus truly an original knowledge and, consequently, the being of the body belongs to the ontological region wherein internal transcendental experiences are possible and take place."

community<sup>4</sup>). Ultimately, *prima philosophia* itself must be expressed as a philosophy of affectivity.<sup>5</sup>

One would assume, then, that Henry's writings contain multiple passages regarding feeling, emotion, passion, etc. But is that so? A simple overview of Henry's corpus reveals that this is not the case, on the very contrary. With the exception of *The Essence of Manifestation* paragraphs on Scheler's concept of "feeling" (*Gefühl*) and Heidegger's concept of "disposedness" (*Befindlichkeit*), there is no explicit description, analysis or interpretation of the concrete forms taken by affectivity in a psychological or even phenomenological sense to be found in Henry's texts.<sup>6</sup> And the same must be said of the unpublished notes and annotations that are available at the "Fonds Michel Henry" in Louvain-la-Neuve.<sup>7</sup> This lack of any distinct characterization of the universe of emotions and passions is almost breathtaking, especially as we know for a fact that Henry has studied Spinoza, Descartes, Schopenhauer and Scheler and, as a young student, to French psychologists Pierre Janet and Maurice Pradines, amongst others. Furthermore, Henry hails Nietzsche for having undertaken the task of a rigorous *philosophy* of our particular human affects: "the most remarkable trait of Nietzsche's analysis is that *it never tries to grasp some abstract essence of affectivity but only its concrete actualizations*, thus remaining on a phenomenological level from the start."<sup>8</sup> Hence, Jean-François Lavigne concludes rightfully that Henry's phenomenology has opened up a whole new area of research, that remains for future generations to discover:

In the end, Henry's phenomenology of feeling (*sentiment*) has paved the way for a transcendental and phenomenological inquiry into affectivity and its multiple modes, understood as the primary source of all intelligibility. It calls for a precise and diverse analysis of the universe of

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<sup>4</sup> Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 131: "Every community is essentially affective and based on drives. This holds not only for the fundamental communities of society—the couple and the family—but also for every community in general, whatever interests and explicit motivations may be." [Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 175]

<sup>5</sup> See Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, 41, 54 and 71 [56, 74 and 98] and *The Essence of Manifestation*, 2 [2-3].

<sup>6</sup> To a lesser extent, we could also take into account Henry's analysis of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud's conceptions of drive (*pulsion*, *Trieb*) in his *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) [Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse. Le commencement perdu* (Paris: PUF, 1985)]; see chapters VII, VIII and IX.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of: *a*) various notes on Descartes' *Treatise* and Spinoza's *Ethics*, *b*) an impressive and almost accomplished short essay on the passions, especially love, supported with multiple literary quotes (Henry, Ms. C 2-72-121 406-414) and *c*) a series of short uncritical notes on various philosophical opinions (Bossuet, Descartes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Blondel, Janet and Ribot) taken by Henry as he was a very young student (Henry, Ms. C 1-7 269-272).

<sup>8</sup> Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 231 [281] (Emphasis added).

the affects, which would be able to show the intelligence within affectivity, in a burgeoning state, in its original form.<sup>9</sup>

One of the philosophical tasks that Henry's thought has left us with seems to be that of plunging into (or, maybe, climbing back towards) the diverse manifestations of affectivity within human life. If we fail to do so, the various shapes and modes of affectivity that make life *our* life would remain totally eclipsed by the apotheosis of the immanent and radical revelation of affectivity.

In this regard, can a more meticulous reading of Henry's texts and manuscripts reveal such a hidden contribution of Henry to the philosophy of the *affects* (vs. affectivity in itself)? To answer this question, we shall take up one of the specific and specified forms of affectivity that has received a constant attention throughout the history of philosophy, namely *passions*.

But in order to do so, we need to proceed with a minimal and functional definition of "passion," which shall serve so to speak as a "clue" (*Leitfaden*), that transcends the various and sometimes contrasting meanings the notion has received throughout the history of philosophy. Following Kant's distinction between *affects* (such as anger, happiness or sadness) and *passions* (such as greed, jealousy and, in a sense, love),<sup>10</sup> we shall say that passions are characterized by the fact that they last or persist (vs. feelings and emotions), that they aim endlessly at an ideal object<sup>11</sup> (power, wealth, esteem, etc.) and finally that there is an essential multiplicity to them.

The latter point is perhaps of the utmost importance for our specific problem. The theory of the passions—in Aristotle, Galen, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant—has always taken the form of a *treatise*, that is, a description of the diverse passions according to their distinction and their relation to one another (foundation and combination). This multiplicity of passions, that goes back to a finite number of "elementary passions," has a particular significance to us since it justifies why we willingly refrain—at least at a preliminary stage—from considering Henry's analysis of the essence of "passion" (as the unity of joy and suffering, or the passage from the most extreme suffering to the perfect joy<sup>12</sup>)

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-François Lavigne, "Conclusions...en forme d'ouverture," in *Michel Henry. Pensée de la vie et culture contemporaine*, ed. Jean-François Lavigne (Paris: Beauchesne, 2006), 315-7 (Translation original).

<sup>10</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary G. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), Part I, Book III: "On the Faculty of Desire."

<sup>11</sup> Henry, in a manuscript that seems to date back to the early '50s, clearly states that: "[Under the influence of a passion] our sensibility, our intelligence and our will only remain preoccupied by one sole being or object. The miser only thinks of his gold, the gambler of his gains, the lover of his loved one. All he sees, hears, etc. only interests him in as much as he can discover a relation to it" (see Henry, Ms. C 2-72-121 406; translation original).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the description of passion *qua* "pathos" or "pâtir" in Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 231 [281] and *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 108 ff. [Henry, *C'est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 137 ff.]. In both these excerpts, and even when it concerns Nietzsche's philosophy, Henry's general use of the concept of passion cannot be cut off from its Christian connotations (i.e., Crucifixion).

as a theory of the *passions*. Instead, the function of this concept is to shed light on the general and ineluctable passivity of affectivity, namely “the self-experience of Being as originally passive with regard to itself.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, it is significant that Henry almost completely ignores the second and third parts of Descartes’ treatise, namely those concerning the “number and order of the passions and explication of the six chief or primitive” and the “particular passions,” as well as the descriptive content of books III and IV of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

Two hypotheses could be put forward to spell out the absence of any express theory of the passions in Henry’s work. On the one hand, we could think that the very concept of passion is unsuitable to grasp, or even belong to, the phenomenological and ontological meaning of affectivity. Among other texts, *The Essence of Manifestation* attacks Descartes’ preconception of passionate affectivity as formulated in the second article of his *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*: “I consider that we observe not anything which more immediately agitates our soul, than the body joined to it, and consequently we ought to conceive that what in that is a passion, is commonly in this an action.”<sup>14</sup> Henry’s comment is unforgiving:

The understanding of affectivity from the concept of passivity and especially as “passion” arises at a critical moment in the development of philosophical thought in such a way that the ultimate ontological meaning of the essential connection here perceived is quickly falsified and lost. Descartes, even though he threw together all affections under the common rubric of passion, thus seeking the explanation of their essence in the phenomenon of passivity, *had no adequate concept of passivity as an ontological and fundamental concept*.<sup>15</sup>

According to Henry, because passion is nothing but the effect on the soul of a corporeal event (the “movement of the spirits”), Descartes’ theory of passion is “unintelligible” and “completely useless.”<sup>16</sup> It would seem possible to conclude then that the traditional concept of passion has, by definition, naturalistic implications and that it is therefore inherently flawed. That could explain why Henry never really wandered within Descartes’ treatise and almost exclusively commented on § 2 and § 26.

However, this first hypothesis cannot satisfy a patient investigation since Henry knows full well that not all classical conceptions of passion are naturalistic (nor even Descartes’ own, as we will see), as opposed to moral or spiritual.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 469 [586].

<sup>14</sup> Article 2. See also Article 51: “The utmost and nearest cause of the passions of the soul is nothing but the agitation by which the spirits move the little kernel in the middle of the brain.”

<sup>15</sup> Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 469 [586] (Emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 470 [587].

<sup>17</sup> “The pure notion of Physics, that I tried to acquire, has been of a great help in establishing the sure foundations of moral philosophy” (Descartes, “Letter to Chanut of June 15, 1646,” in *Œuvres*, vol. IV, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery [Paris: Vrin, 1956], 441). This excerpt provides a first clue of the fact that Descartes and Henry’s true interest in a theory of the passions has little to do with a

Besides, even if it were the case, Henry could have chosen to reinterpret, or forge another, phenomenological concept to designate the passionate forms taken by human affectivity.

On the other hand, we could also suggest that passions represent, within the framework of Henry's radical phenomenology, *a secondary or derivative mode of affectivity* and that, in consequence, its interest is only accessory, if not accidental. If that is the case—and there are serious motives to think so—we could *nonetheless* imagine that Henry *could* have sketched out a conception of passion or even that he has indeed laid out the precise ground where such a project could establish its foundation. The laying out of this terrain should ultimately give us the chance to integrate the disparate and allusive indications that Henry sporadically makes about revenge, resentment, envy, love, pride, etc.

Because this hypothesis seems at first glance much more fertile, we will engage ourselves fully in this direction, to see how far it can take us. First, an overview of Section IV of *The Essence of Manifestation* will underline the *conditions under which a theory of the passions would be possible* within Henry's thought. Then, we will try to reconstruct a positive conception of passion from various remarks made by Henry, in particular in the context of the theory of love that he sketches out in his manuscripts regarding Hegel's dialectics of self-consciousness. Finally, by considering the figure of the reversal of life against itself, our aim will be to contemplate the "moral" aspect of Henry's theory of the affects.

### **Affectivity in Itself: What it is Not**

*The Essence of Manifestation*, §§ 52-70, are arguably the most important materials for any attempt to define, negatively and positively, Henry's position towards the concrete and "psychological" modes of affectivity (feeling, emotion, pulsion, etc.). They sketch out, in a systematic manner, the essential characteristics of affectivity *in itself*. In this section, Henry tries to highlight the fundamental determinations of revelation *as* affectivity, mainly by way of a "destruction (*destruction*) of all prejudices concerning it."<sup>18</sup> This negative moment is the springboard necessary to describe subsequently the internal structure of immanence in its different dimensions. In order to determine if and how passions, as a specific form of our affective existence, belong or not to this structure of pure affectivity, and not to a worldly development or understanding of it, we will highlight two of Henry's theses: *affectivity has no object (it is non-intentional) and affectivity is no object (it has a non-objective mode of being given to the Self)*.

The first definition of affectivity indeed takes a negative form:

The simplest experience, namely, that which it inaugurates before the ecstasy and in it, the immediate experience of self, the original feeling

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structured and clarified theory of the feelings of the soul in their relations to the body, but much more with a "moral" conception of our affective existence.

<sup>18</sup> Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 533 [667].

which the essence has of itself, can this not be recognized and grasped?  
THAT WHICH IS FELT WITHOUT THE INTERMEDIARY OF ANY SENSE  
WHATSOEVER IS IN ITS ESSENCE AFFECTIVITY.<sup>19</sup>

There is no sense-organ of feeling; affectivity is not given within or through any organ but by itself. On the contrary, every sense-organ implies a self-feeling that precedes any relation to a perceptual or affective object. In this sense, and contrary to Heidegger's understanding, affectivity must not even be understood as "openness" (*ouverture*). The phenomenon of affectivity is never that of a *reaction* towards something, or even the pre-determined affective "welcoming" or "disposedness" towards what is and can be. It is then evident that affectivity receives no determination from any object or environment (*milieu*). Henry would forcefully rebuke Sartre's claim that "if we love a woman, it is because she is lovable,"<sup>20</sup> not because affects blossom from the *ego*, but, more radically, because affectivity is the very immanent condition of all knowledge; intellectual, esthetical or emotional. That is not to say that affectivity is an autistic or hallucinatory confinement of the Self within itself, but rather that any object or situation—as well the subject itself—is given and constituted by its immanent and immediate revelation in the absolute stream of affectivity. A "woman is lovable" only inasmuch as there is an original affective givenness of the presence and absence of others, that can at any moment radically modify the Self's life without (or notwithstanding) one's consent and before any of one's interpretation.

This negative thesis thus has a "positive" counterpart: the fact that *feelings feel nothing*, i.e., that they have neither an object (they are not primarily intentional), nor any objective content, signifies that every feeling is a "self-feeling" (*se sentir soi-même*). *Stricto sensu*, expressions such as "I feel love" or "I feel a profound boredom" are phenomenologically equivocal, since affectivity for Henry is radically intransitive. Moreover, affectivity is not given as a *content* of consciousness alongside others (perceptions, sensations, thoughts, imaginings, etc.); rather, consciousness in all of its forms is purely identical to this radical mode of being affected by life's own and unconditioned manifestation.

Just as affectivity *has* no object, it *is* no object. Affectivity in itself is not given on any horizon; it cannot be gazed at. That holds important consequences; it implies that there is no hierarchy or system possible within the affective phenomena. Affects cannot be known outside of their immediate and passing experience within the Self. Therefore, no evaluation or classification of affectivity, such that we could identify certain affects to be at the foundation of human nature, could be accomplished. In this context, Henry takes aim at Scheler's idea of certain "metaphysical feelings of the Self" (hope, serenity, salvation, grace, etc.), but also at the Heideggerian typology of "existential affects" (boredom, angst, etc.).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 462 [577] (Emphasis in original).

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *La transcendance de l'ego, et autres textes philosophiques* (Paris: Vrin, 2003), 89 (Translation original).

<sup>21</sup> See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 465 [581], where Henry refers to Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines*

Affects do not differentiate themselves by their metaphysical or theological meaning, much less by their significance for our being-in-the-world or our being-towards-death. Instead, they are, according to Henry, immanently differentiated:

It is never the particular content of a feeling, the peculiar affective tonality that differentiates it and isolates it from every other, that can make of it the feeling of an ego; the ego is never the particular content of a particular feeling. The particular content of a particular feeling identifies itself with it, determining it now as “hate,” again as “love,” as “happiness,” “sadness,” or “despair.”<sup>22</sup>

Hence we should not consider that some feelings are closer to the core of the Self than others, or that some feelings are more vibrant or authentic than others: in each of his emotions, the Self is always radically and totally affective, which renders a theory of the various expressions of affectivity even more difficult.

We must conclude that, if affectivity itself knows no object (and has no temporality because of it is the very source of every present<sup>23</sup>), then the traditional conception of passions—understood as the lasting longing for different ideal objects (wealth, power, esteem, etc.), whose classification is made *more geometrico* or as a combinatory system—falls outside the scope of what Henry’s radical phenomenology tries to manifest and theorize as pure affectivity.

### **Keys to Reconstruct a Theory of the Passions from a Henryan Standpoint**

Both Henry’s published works and his unpublished manuscripts lack any explicit description of the realm of passion.<sup>24</sup> However, Henry establishes the ground upon which a phenomenological theory of the passions can be conceivable within his project of a radical phenomenology, as he outlines the *conditions* under which passions could belong to the immanent structure of life, as one of its powers. If passions are to be part of the sphere of immanent affectivity, passions ought to be non-intentional, and independent of any “ekstasis”; they should be an inner development of life itself. A philosophical psychology of the affects should then embrace the wider project of Henry’s *material phenomenology*: the challenge is that of describing passions in their impressional givenness, i.e., their pure immanent revelation—as the incarnate *overflow* of joy, the *tremor* of despair, the *chill* of insecurity, etc. that inhabits every passion and gives it its phenomenological substance. The question then is: what is passion in itself, in its immediate disclosure to the living; what is passion before the dawn of the world?

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ethischen Personalismus (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1954), V, 8: “Zur Schichtung des emotionalen Lebens,” 350 ff.

<sup>22</sup> See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 465 [581].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 594 [745]: “The existential ontological interpretation of affectivity as temporality brings about the disappearing of what properly constitutes the affective character of what is affective and loses this character in principle; it loses in principle the essence of affectivity as such.”

<sup>24</sup> An exception must be made for an eight-page manuscript entitled “Passions” (*Les passions*) that describes love, but also gambling and alcoholism. See Henry, Ms. C 2 72-121 406-414.

Keeping this orientation of the description in mind, we can now try to reconstruct a theory of the passions within Henry's framework.

As we have seen, the fact that passions ought to deploy themselves without and before any relation to the world means that we cannot understand them as being determined by any object, be it a person, a stimulus, etc. Any truth regarding the passions and their structure cannot come from a prior knowledge of their relation to an object (fame, power, wealth, etc.), since those objects lie outside the sphere of immanence and, moreover, since they are precisely formed and given by affectivity itself. For example, it would be vain to describe the passions surrounding power—political greed, patriotism, hatred, etc.—by analyzing first what they refer to, as if their “goal” were the key to catch their immanent essence. At most, one should instead make an inquiry into the “objet” of the object, that is, determine what is its significance or power within the immanent deployment of life itself. In this sense, the phenomenologist ought to find the inner affective *telos* shared by all passions and, from then on and as much as possible, the particularization of that *telos* in the specific passions.

This *critical* and *initial* consideration regarding any consistent theory of passions within Henry's thought quickly entails a genealogical moment or move: it does not suffice to establish the limits within which a theory is possible or not, one must also explain how the traditional formal characteristics of passion are rooted in life itself. In other words, Henry's project hands down to us the task of shedding light on how passions come to be lasting, to be diverse, and to be crystallized around an “object.” If the light of life knows no inner division, no object and no time, how come passions are experienced as a definite disposition? The genealogical clarification of this last point will be kept for our next section, but it seems already possible to elucidate, in a genealogical perspective, *a*) the *temporality* of passions and *b*) their *diversity*.

*a*) If passions can take up a person whole life to the point it occupies all of his thoughts as well as all of his actions, that could be because the living subject always runs the risk of becoming *attached* to its own affective intimacy. Any living can “give in” to the flow of affectivity, and this “giving in” is precisely what makes an affect lasts, what transforms a feeling or emotion into a passion. That is most easily perceivable in *nostalgia*, whose structure appears to be at the core of every passion:

Why can I not find afresh the past instant, for example the one of our declaration of love, in such a place, in such a time, in such circumstances (and even this sunset, these clouds and this temperature, and this wind that was rising)?... The circumstances indeed do not reproduce themselves as they were: this light that is playing in such a way in this cloud, that is uniqueness, the instant; but that doesn't concern the fact that our declaration of love cannot reproduce itself: I am throwing out on the world the responsibility and so I am trying to hide my inability (*impossibilité*) to *accomplish the repetition*. It is not the past that cannot live afresh, it is our

drought (*sécheresse*) that we have to blame.... [We should] show the illusion on which nostalgia relies.<sup>25</sup>

The lasting character of passions is based on a certain “clinging” to life itself, to such a degree that the pure flow of affectivity is so to speak cut short. This inner dynamic that consists in *trying to act on passivity* by controlling its flow is a possibility that pertains to the living, but is founded on an impossibility that pertains to life itself (the reversal or conservation of the “living present”).<sup>26</sup> That could be supported by an early manuscript, in which Henry describes passion as “a denial of time” (*refus du temps*), by attempting to show that “passions prefer present to future, and past to present.”<sup>27</sup> Passions are made to last because affectivity does not; as we will see in more details, passions hence represent a specific form of the denial of life’s inner essence.

b) It seems much harder to make sense of the fact that the absolute *unity of affectivity* comes to be transformed into a *multiplicity of affects*. Henry seems to struggle to explain why affectivity itself has different modes (feeling, emotion, passion, etc.) and tonalities:

*The principle of the difference which exists between our various feelings is identical to that of their unity. And, first of all, whatever this difference may be, it is clear that its origin must be sought in that which causes the peculiar tonality of each feeling, namely, its own reality. Our feelings differ in themselves; each is distinct of itself from all others, of itself, namely, by reason of the determined phenomenological content which it shows forth in every case in itself as being what it is. It is of itself, in itself, in its own, irreducible and irrefutable phenomenological reality that joy, for example, is distinguished from pain, pleasure, boredom, from the dismal “absence of feeling,” from indifference or all other tonalities which precede or succeed it in the course of our life. For this reason, viz. because the difference which arises among our feelings arises because of itself, starting from their specific and irreducible phenomenological content, starting from their reality, it itself presents itself as a phenomenological difference, as immediate and irrefutable.*<sup>28</sup>

There is indeed no clear genealogy of the diversity of affects in Henry’s thought; this differentiation of affectivity is taken as an inner process an inner dynamic by

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<sup>25</sup> Henry, Ms. A 6-8 4088 (Translation original). For an analysis of the temporality of revenge in Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche, see Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 599-600 [751-52].

<sup>26</sup> This thesis could be read in parallel with Henry’s description of Schopenhauer’s conception of evil: “Life is bad because it proposes itself as the tireless repetition of a desire that never attains its goal; it is the body, traversed and laminated by the desire that will hound it to its grave” (Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 167 [205]).

<sup>27</sup> See Henry, Ms. C 2-72-121 410 (Translation original).

<sup>28</sup> Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 557 [697-8].

which each affect poses its difference from every other, in a kind of phenomenological self-affirmation.

We could nonetheless imagine that, if there are passions and not only a passion, it might be because affectivity comes to be divided according to the domains that govern worldly, or more exactly *mundane*, life: need, money, esteem, fidelity, etc. However, these domains ought to be understood as modalities, not of the world, but of the “affective world” that Henry evokes in *The Essence of Manifestation*,<sup>29</sup> the vital origin of all realities: power, possession, reputation, etc. form an original structure in which life can fulfill and expend its potentialities in an intersubjective or cultural manner. If this hypothesis could be confirmed, there would be a diversity of passions simply because passions, as a *primary cultural transformation of affectivity* (that turns out to be sometimes noxious, sometimes not), follow the very affective divisions of reality.

This quest for a genealogical meaning of the temporality and multiplicity of the passions still seems to suggest that passions have an *adaptive* nature: passions, especially in their pathological expressions, appear to be a sort of infatuation of the Self with his own life, inasmuch as this life has been reduced to a restricted extent. Section 55 of *The Essence of Manifestation* tries to show the flaw that lies behind any such *functional (and pathological) pre-conception of passions and feelings*. It is worth mentioning that it is in this precise context, where Henry presents and criticizes Maurice Pradines’ adaptation model, that Henry gives his only explicit definition of passion in its concrete sense:

Such are, in the psychology which calls itself scientific, the functional theories which claim to clarify feeling and define its nature, starting with its “function,” its role, and these are what adapt us to things, what permit between the living organism and the universe the inauguration of an equilibrium essential to the maintaining of all life, even conscious life, and its development. In virtue of this ‘adaptive character’ and consequently of the “objective orientation” given it, it is therefore “normal” that “adapting itself to a thousand diverse objects,” aroused by them, varying with them. Feeling ceaselessly modifies itself, thus finding in its very nature the reason for this contingent and changing character which seems to define feeling; the contrary determinations, “stability” and “subjectivity,” being explained by a disturbance of this essential function, by a “defunctionalization,” a disadaptation wherein feeling, detached from the ambient milieu, now foreign to its fluctuations, ceases to modify itself in conformity to them and rather persists, after the fashion of a fixation, for example in a regression or some traumatic experience, as an anachronistic

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<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.* 487 [608-9]: “Because understanding is affective, what it understands is also affective, namely, the world itself and its horizon. By “affective world” we must first of all not understand, after the fashion of psychologists, a determined region of reality or existence, proper to each person, some secret and internal garden wherein the imagination, freely projecting its desires, would like to rest and live by itself apart from the world. It is the world itself, this external and “real” world of things and objects which is affective and must be understood as such.”

pathological feeling, which is subject to analysis and destined, in the best of hypotheses, to be done away with by analysis. *Passion, wherein feeling tends to affirm itself in spite of a historically defined situation and its moving requirements, as such represents in its permanence a typical example of disadaptation which can be understood only through adaptation itself, as a negative determination thereof and as its limitmode.*<sup>30</sup>

The principle of such an approach to affectivity is flawed because, even if it refuses any mechanistic interpretation of the mind, it still conceives affectivity to be a secondary process that follows or attunes our being-in-the-world. It fails to take into account that being-in-the-world is in itself affective; that any relation to exteriority has its roots and deployment (or *devenir*) within affectivity itself. But even though Henry rejects this adaptation model because it relies on the persistent idea of a duality between nature and *psychè*, Henry will borrow and reinterpret this idea of a *misadaptation*. The functional psychopathology of passions is, admittedly, insufficient to conceptualize the peculiar attachment to an unreal object that is constitutive of the passions, but it catches a glimpse of it when it describes the “detachment from the milieu”: passions might appear as a fluctuation between being in the world and being immersed in life itself.

### Life Turned Against Itself

After having examined broadly how a theory of the passions could be reconstructed through the essence of affectivity as exposed in *The Essence of the Manifestation*, passions now appear, hypothetically, as a phenomenological compromise, or an *irreducible oscillation of the soul* (*fluctuatio animi*), between belonging to the world and belonging to the flow of affectivity itself. In order to show how passions do not belong in full to the structure of immanence, we would like to show that they represent a *reversal of life against itself*. This conceptual figure—which is recurring in Henry’s work, and is explicated in more detail in *Barbarism*—can be described as the movement by which the living individual or community *devalues* life and becomes *actively estranged* from life. In *Barbarism*, the paradigm for thinking this reversal of life against itself is modern science and technology. But since Henry reaffirms in a Nietzschean fashion that even modern science is an affective configuration (and even a passion in the strictest sense<sup>31</sup>), it seems—as

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 494-5 [617-8] (Emphasis added in part).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 481 [601]: “The coldness of grasping, the indifference of contemplation and the theoretical look are affective tonalities,” and Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (London/New York: Continuum, 2012), 139: “Thus, for example, there is a specific joy to scientific discovery, a joy that belongs to seeing as such. According to the modalities, refinement and perfecting of this seeing, it is modalized and runs through the series of intellectual pleasures that are deposited at the basis of the mind as its original phenomenological potential. They are its innate ideas in a certain sense. Likewise, someone might follow the advice of Malebranche and try to make a circle in which all the rays are not equal. In so doing, one will run up against an impossibility. This intellectual necessity leads one to experience the pathos of a fact that constrains it. There is thus a pathos of being

other texts will show—that this concept can successfully be used to describe the affective structure of passions.

In that sense, a promising path to Henry's conception of passion can be found in his numerous manuscripts regarding love, since love seems to be the counterimage of the traditional passions (as *perversions*, “corruption of the feelings” [*corruption du sentiment*]<sup>32</sup>). As Henry says in a manuscript, “Rilke's lovers are free from jealousy, resentment. In that there is nothing left in them but their pure love.”<sup>33</sup> This pure overwhelming love is seen as the mere openness to the flow of life, completely *detached* from the Self (and thus from self-worth, etc.) and even from the Other (and thus jealousy, etc.), while yet being *riveted* to the life that lets the Self be. It is a figure of pure *contentedness*, both in the sense of the joy taken from the fact that “it is” (this moment, this smile, etc.) and in the sense of a pure “confinement” of the Self in his interior life. This radical independence towards the object<sup>34</sup> is at the very center of what could be a *positive* theory of passions in Henry's philosophy, as it is suggested in this other manuscript where Henry's philosophy of love culminates in daring consequences:

Dialecticians say: to love is to treat [the Other] as an absolute value; but that is false. Jesus saw John and *loved* him; that definitely does not mean that Jesus treats John as an absolute value; *to love someone is to be totally free from him...; I would not mind if you were not there anymore.*<sup>35</sup>

In this sense, what distinguishes pure love and mundane love (lived through the impassionate lenses of jealousy, envy, competition, mimesis, etc.) is not the *direction* of the feeling (love for the other vs. egoistic love), but more profoundly the fact that true love has no direction and is indifferent to anything outside the gratuity of its affective revelation. In other words, the joy of the living comes from a “love without alterity,” a love for life itself.<sup>36</sup> This astonishing thesis was programmed to be at the center of Henry's last project that he never had the chance to finish, *Le livre des morts*, and gives us an idea of the notion of “clandestinity” (*clandestinité*) that he wished to develop in this writing. Affective life is inherently clandestine because it is not attached to any object, it is free of any consideration

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constrained by evidence. This does not simply motivate in a tacit way the choice that mathematicians have made in life. In truth, it coincides with mathematical activity itself. It is a feeling experienced in front of what is given in such a way that it cannot be otherwise, the feeling of apodicticity.” [Henry, *La Barbarie* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1987), 120-1]

<sup>32</sup> See *Revue Internationale Michel Henry 2* (2011): 99.

<sup>33</sup> “Les amoureuses de Rilke échappent à la jalousie, au ressentiment. Car il n'y a plus en elles que leur pur amour” (Henry, Ms. C 9-471 2932; cited in *Revue internationale Michel Henry 2* [2011]: 93).

<sup>34</sup> Henry, Ms. C 2-88 639: “Derived affection (*Affection dérivée*)...In the human being, there is no link between his affections and the object of his affections. We will succeed in becoming the slaves of all world events” (Translation original).

<sup>35</sup> Henry, Ms. C 9-471 2962, published in *Revue Internationale Michel Henry 2* (2011): 95 (Emphasis added). See also Henry's critique of Sartre's theory of love: *ibid.*, 172 (Translation original).

<sup>36</sup> See Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV. *Sur l'éthique et la religion* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 63 (Translation original).

of its image or representation. A true passionate relation knows no clinging; it is positively forgetful.<sup>37</sup> It is only at this radical level (also named “underground” in the last chapter of *Barbarism*) that passions and feelings can receive a positive sense and not evade life’s immanent affectivity: “*The obscurity of the invisible opens up the ontological dimension wherein feeling finds its original existence; it is the place wherein it unfolds its Being and expands itself, the milieu wherein it becomes fruitful, wherein it is possible.*”<sup>38</sup>

Because mundane passions are in fact, and more often than not, a vain search for an ideal object (infinite wealth, everlasting fidelity, etc.), they reveal themselves to be a form of stiffening, a misunderstanding of the very nature of affectivity. Their ground seems to be the *insecurity* (*incertitude*, both psychological and epistemological) of the personal ego, despite the fact that life is in its essence well beyond any certitude or incertitude, since it has its own principle within itself:

The passions, the emotions, the will, in brief, subjectivity in all its modalities... have no place among things; they form the substance of our being. Things feel nothing and they do not feel themselves. The particularity of our sensations, affections, passions and desires is that they experience themselves (*elles s'éprouvent elles-mêmes*).<sup>39</sup>

Any who lets himself fall prey to his passion is not content to feel himself, but tries to find in the outside world the source of a more secure and permanent joy. Passions are therefore marked by a paradoxical oscillation between being exposed to the world and being immersed in radical affectivity, and feeling its inner expansion. To be more precise, passions do not constitute an *escape* outside of life—this is a transcendental impossibility—but a *refuge into affective objects that seem available, disposable, etc.* The impassionate Self is therefore in a constant need of its unreal “object,” since the relation to the object gives him the chance to withdraw from pure and burning affectivity.<sup>40</sup> Because passion is an affective (and

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<sup>37</sup> There is an important apology of forgetfulness in Henry’s thought, inspired in part by Nietzsche: “Nietzsche, however, means something quite different when he says that life is forgetting. For life, forgetting is not thinking, not by virtue of some distraction or occasional disposition that can be removed but because it does not contain the essence that holds the possibility of thinking anything in general, of remembering, for example. Life is forgetful by nature, as immanence, which insurmountably expels ekstasis and thus all possible forms of thought” (Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 211 [257-258]).

<sup>38</sup> Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 543 [680] (Emphasis added). This invisibility is even more evident in passions, because passions, vs. emotions, generally do not appear “*per se*”; they run silently through all of the subject’s emotions, actions, ideas, etc.

<sup>39</sup> Henry, “Souffrance et vie,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. I. *De la phénoménologie* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 144 (Translation original).

<sup>40</sup> Henry’s phenomenology could have rich implications for a theory of addiction, especially in regards to the experience of *withdrawal*, since the withdrawal is the moment where the subject liberates himself from the actualization of his dependency towards the object and where this relation is lived in and by itself for the first time, in its pure affective character. In other words, during withdrawal, the object is reflexively given in its pure affective deployment.

also intellectual) *action* that consists of setting up a distance between the subject and pure affectivity, passions can be thought of as a determinate form of the negation of life.

At the same time, the relation to the object is also a way to keep feeling, to stay alive: “the existence of the object of our hatred must be kept, otherwise hatred will crumble; one who hates somebody is attached to his salvation.”<sup>41</sup> The miser is constantly feeling his impossible relation to money or gold; the jealous is in every moment affected by the thought of his lover’s freedom—or, rather, this thought has become sensible, affective, it is no longer a “thought.” Passions quickly find an autonomous becoming: the affective flow of the Self is not anymore penetrated by that of life itself, but has a structure and a time of its own, free both from life itself and the “vicissitudes of life”<sup>42</sup> in the world.

Thus, in its essence, passion is a form of “turning away” from life; it is life, but turned against itself. But then,

Why life, which is a movement of self-development, self-growth..., why does this movement reverse itself?... How can this life, which in a sense gets blissfully drunk with itself, its development and this fabulous happiness, turn itself against itself and cease to be a force of construction?<sup>43</sup>

In the context of *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* and *Barbarism*, the answer to this question is finally clear: each passion holds a promise, the promise of increasing and even capitalizing a certain *power*. Passions *mimic* life’s tendency to self-growth (*auto-accroissement*). Passion is a *longing*, and it is a longing for *power*.<sup>44</sup> Even though at the heart of every passion lies a “bad” or unhappy conscience (*conscience malheureuse*), every passion nonetheless instills, even for a brief moment, a *sense of power*, a *euphoria*.<sup>45</sup> In this sense only is the

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<sup>41</sup> Henry, Ms. C 9-471 2941; cited in *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 2 (2011): 93.

<sup>42</sup> Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 493 [616].

<sup>43</sup> Henry, “Narrer le pathos,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III. *De l’art et du politique* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 311 and 313 (Translation original). See also: Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. II. *De la subjectivité* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 158: “A doubt persists. Do these analyses fully explain the possibility of weakness, its origin? Why does life turn against itself? Where can such an aberrant project of self-detachment come to life from within life itself?” (Translation original).

<sup>44</sup> This idea can be found in Henry’s interpretation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, especially proposition 54 of Book III: “The mind endeavours to conceive (lat. *imaginari*) only such things as assert its power of activity.” Henry comments this proposition in *Le Bonheur de Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 126. See also *ibid.*, 78-9, where the traditional immorality of passions seems to be revised by the fact that an authentic joy is sougheed through each passion, and that there might be a progression towards happiness in the *logic of passions*.

<sup>45</sup> A mere physics of the passions is therefore “insufficient.... Can miserliness be explained without the fear of tomorrow (*les lendemains*), without the joy of possessing, without the idea that we can dominate men with money, that money is a power? Passion supposes understanding and synthesis. Spirit” (Henry, Ms. C 2 72-121 409; translation original).

impassionate Self is an egoistic Self: “in the end, we love our desire, not what we desire.”<sup>46</sup>

The ultimate question is to determine the *degree* to which life can distance itself from itself. Wouldn't a full reversal of life against itself constitute a contradiction of Henry's whole philosophy? Henry answers this question directly in an interview:

– V. Caruana: Can we not admit that the will can be detached? Can we not want against life?

– M. Henry: Sure, but that takes place in immanence. It is not a will “against” in the proper sense of the word, that cannot realize itself in a detachment (*mise à distance*), because it concerns life. In this detachment there would be no life anymore. For example, if you could detach yourself from your suffering, if this suffering would simply be the object of a representation, you would not suffer anymore—that is what believed occidental ethics and psychoanalysis at their beginning.... Well, that is not true at all.... We must place salvation at the level of life itself.... [otherwise] action and life vanish. That explains the cry of Rilke (*Duino Elegies*) in front of the lovers' kiss: “O, how strangely the drinker then escapes from their action.”<sup>47</sup>

A complete absorption of the Self into the tendency or inclination of the passions would imply that the Self loses itself completely, that life would cease—and that is an impossibility. The reversal of life is inhabited by a self-contradictory teleology; it is a transcendental anomaly (*aberration*). A complete reversal of life against itself would mean an *internal alienation of life by itself* and not a form of alienation by exterior forces.<sup>48</sup> In the end, even the withdrawal from pure affectivity is a movement that takes place in immanence itself. This is why Henry can suggest a *positive conception of evasion* (with the metaphors of drinking and dancing), as a practical resistance against the tendency to forget or bypass life's own deployment. In the end, passions continue to belong to life's own expression; they are a form of its manifestation.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 229 [279], quote taken from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of morals*. See also Henry, Ms. C 2-88 640: “We never love anything but ourselves. Psychoanalysis sets us free from that when our habits become memories” (Translation original).

<sup>47</sup> “Entretien avec Michel Henry,” ed. Virginie Caruana, *Philosophique* 3 (2000): 74-5 (Emphasis added).

<sup>48</sup> See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 471 [589]. This immanent conception of alienation could be seen as a possible contribution of Henry's phenomenology to critical theory.

<sup>49</sup> Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. II, 161: passions, such as “revenge [and] cruelty, are nothing but figures of life; they distinguish (*séparent*) the interior constituents of Unity, in order to make them visible” (Translation original).

## Conclusion. The Moral Meaning of Passions

He who wants to save his life will lose it, he who  
wants to lose his life will be truly alive.<sup>50</sup>

By showing the conditions under which a concept of passion could gain phenomenological significance and substance, Henry offers or at least announces a positive and unforeseen contribution to the theory of the passions. And even though these considerations seem at first glance to reside on a psychological level—and they indeed could be useful to a phenomenological psychopathology and even psychotherapy<sup>51</sup>—they need nonetheless to be understood at a deeper level. Not only do they concern, as we have seen, a certain figure of mankind (modern and “postmodern”), but more importantly they represent, on a philosophical level, the danger that lurks behind the basic conception of philosophy. Philosophy is misguided, not by a “forgetting of being” (*oubli de l'être*), but by a permanent denial of the evidence of our affectivity, even when science (neurology or psychoanalysis) tries to approach the affective dimension or abysses of the Self.

In the end, the theory of passions that we can reconstruct within Henry's thought also holds a moral meaning. Duly founded or not, an explicit motive for Henry's rejection of Descartes' theory of passion is precisely the fact that, at first, it does not allow for a *moral* reflection on the status of passion:

But here we find Descartes asserting that the reason for our various passions is found entirely in the movements of animal spirits, blind movements without any purpose. From this it follows, on the one hand, that human passion is deprived of any species of meaning—and *this is the ruin of any moral science of man*—and on the other hand, that *man is no longer responsible for his passions any more than he is, for example, for the circulation of blood in his veins*—and this is the ruin of all morality in its reduction to a sort of “*savoir faire* of the mechanic.”<sup>52</sup>

Henry's evaluation of Descartes's *Treatise* evolves, or at least fluctuates, as does Descartes' own conception of passion within the *Treatise*. Henry is well aware of this fact:

Can we not think that feeling comes from an unconfessed participation of the thought to individuality? Descartes solves this issue by making, in the

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<sup>50</sup> Henry, “Cours d'Aix en Provence, 1953-1954: La communication des consciences et les relations avec autrui,” ed. Grégory Jean, *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 2 (2011): 172 (Translation original). This is a reference to Matthew, 16: 25: “Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

<sup>51</sup> See Rolf Kühn, *Patho-genese und Fülle des Lebens. Eine phänomenologisch-psychotherapeutische Grundlegung* (Freiburg im Breisgau/München: Alber, 2005). See also Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 465 [582], where he comes to the conclusion that psychotherapy cannot take the form of a *liberation* from affectivity. See also *ibid.*, 492-3 [615-6].

<sup>52</sup> Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, 145 [202] (Emphasis added).

middle of the treatise of the passions, a reversal of the relations he had prematurely stated between passion and action. After having said that an action in the body is a passion in the soul, Descartes finally conceives that the soul is active, and transmits its activity to affectivity. The primary passivity of the soul is converted in an activity. And the soul provokes an interest of the body to its own activity; the function of the body is not to produce in the soul a passive affection anymore, but to fortify its active operation. From there on, pure joy presents itself as an active affection.<sup>53</sup>

Henry praises this shift by which the Cartesian physics of the soul becomes a moral psychology, because only then “The original concept of passion surpasses the opposition of “actions” and “passions” and finds them all.”<sup>54</sup> As Henry notes on another manuscript, the intention of Descartes’ (and Spinoza’s) theory is, in this regard, to “transform passion into action,”<sup>55</sup> to regain an active affectivity.

Henry’s theory of passion would call, surely, not for a liberation from affectivity, but also not for such a transformation of passivity into activity. Rather, Henry would call for a transformation of passion into an even more passive form of affect, into pure affection. To the triumph of the ego he would substitute the triumph of life itself. That can only be accomplished by a radicalization of every petrified passion to the underlying affectivity that runs under it and that is in search of an augmentation of life’s potentials, not through the *fetichism* of pseudo-ideal or purely symbolic objects, but through the inner happening of our affective existence, as a struggle against “life’s metaphysical sickness.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Henry, Ms. C 2-98 777-778 (Translation original).

<sup>54</sup> Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 31 [41].

<sup>55</sup> Henry, Ms. C 2-105 858 (Translation original).

<sup>56</sup> Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 222 [274].