Michel Henry has always described his philosophical project as phenomenological. This “radical” or “material” phenomenology becomes, through its most specific developments, a “phenomenology of the body”, a “phenomenology of community”, a “phenomenology of incarnation” and even a “phenomenology of the Christ”. But Henry’s philosophical project is first and foremost a “phenomenology of life”.

Life—as Henry wrote at the age of twenty-two—“is what would need to be said and what is self-sufficient”. Life does not need to be said as revealed by something exterior. Life needs to be said as that which reveals itself. Phenomenology, therefore, is not only the exterior method that expresses life’s self-revelation, it is in itself such a revelation. Conversely, phenomenology does not need to manifest an exterior object—“Phenomenology is its own object” (Henry 1973, 56). But, to equal life, phenomenology must first overcome the morbid presupposition from which it has already exhausted the resources, and according to which transcendence is the one and only mode of manifestation (Henry 2008, 1). Only the radicalization of phenomenology as this “first” phenomenology, will ensure, according to Henry, the life of phenomenology.

45.1. Radical phenomenology

Today the renewal of phenomenology is only possible on one condition: that the question that determines it entirely and that is philosophy’s own raison d’être be renewed. This does not mean that it should be expanded, corrected, amended, or still less abandoned for the sake of another question, but that it should be radicalized in such a way that what depends on it would be overturned and, subsequently, everything would in fact be changed.

(Ibid., 2)

First philosophy and ontology

The radicalization of the philosophical questioning on which depends the renewal of phenomenology is, firstly, the radicalization of its fundamentality. In the first pages of The Essence of Manifestation, Michel Henry states the methodological requirement that any philosophical research must meet: its fundamentality.
Before claiming to obtain any results, every inquiry must first try to render itself transparent to itself. It must first try to determine whether the problematic which it inaugurates can be considered as original and fundamental or whether it is subordinated to a first inquiry upon which it proves to be dependent.

(1973, 2)

A philosophical inquiry is a fundamental inquiry whose questioning does not depend on other researches. Philosophy must be First Philosophy. And, the required fundamentality of this research implies its universality. Ontic inquiries, focusing on determined types of being, presuppose an inquiry into Being in general. “First Philosophy is universal ontology” (Ibid.) that seeks for the universal Being of any determined being, the “essence” of everything that is.

Three principles of phenomenology

Yet, Being equals appearing. Henry takes over what he calls the first principle of phenomenology: “Autant d’apparaître, autant d’être” (2003a, 123; 2000, 41), “the origin of Being, is appearing” (2000, 83), “being is coextensive with the phenomenon and founded on it” (2008, 3). Ontology is phenomenological. According to a second general principle, phenomenology is not about specific phenomena, but about their very phenomenality—not that which appears, but its appearing. The object of phenomenology, which makes its “originality” (Henry 2003a, 59), is the way things appear—the “Wie” or the “How” of their manifestation. “The theme of phenomenological ontology is in no way constituted by the determined, and in a certain way material, content of any manifestation whatever, but on the contrary, deals with the ‘how’ of this manifestation and of every possible manifestation in general” (Henry 1973, 39). The object of a phenomenological ontology is therefore the fundamental and universal “How” of manifestation—its essence or condition. Yet, this fundamental mode of manifestation can only be reached through itself. According to a third general principle, phenomenology not only seeks for the un-appearing essence of phenomenality, but aims rather at its own manifestation. Hence the question that guides The Essence of Manifestation: “How can the origin be raised to the condition of the ‘phenomenon’ in such a way as to become the ‘object’ of phenomenological inquiry?” (Ibid., 28). Henry does not only seek for the fundamental condition of manifestation—the fundamental essence of manifestation—but for the fundamental manifestation of this condition—the fundamental manifestation of the essence. Any inquiry focusing on a determined being or a determined region of beings implies that “Being has already appeared” (Ibid., 2). “How” does Being appear originally? How does appearing appear? Once crossed these ontological and phenomenological premises, the proper object of Henry’s “universal phenomenological ontology” can be disclosed: that is, the fundamental and universal phenomenality that has been forgotten by “historical phenomenology”.

Phenomenology of reason

Historical phenomenology is presented, in the introduction to The Essence of Manifestation, as a “Phenomenology of Reason”. “Phenomenology of reason” can be defined as the adequate and intuitive knowledge of essential modes of correlation. It implies two dimensions of Husserlian phenomenology: (1) its ontological dimension: phenomenology seeks for the formal and material essences of the objects; (2) its intuitionism: the essences that prescribe to objects their specific modes of being intuited must give themselves adequately in an eidetic intuition. Yet, according to Henry, such a phenomenology of reason fails to manifest the fundamental essence of manifestation. It misses its (1) universality, (2) its fundamentality, (3) its effectiveness or reality.
(1) As it rests on “intuitionism”, phenomenology fails to reach the universal essence of manifestation. Intuitionism is characterized by the orientation toward a determined being. Intuition limits itself to the intuited reality and comes to be confused with the particular content that shows itself in the intuition (Ibid., 19). This determination—which, according to Henry, marks a finitude or a limitation—still holds when it is not the particular beings themselves that are intuited, but their essential and “determined structure”.

Even when it has laid bare such an immediate ontic meaning in order to turn toward grasping an eidetic structure which belongs to a genus of Being, such a structure is always a determined structure, so that the ontological orientation of intuition remains fundamentally limited in principle.

(Ibid., 13)

Material ontology seeks for the different and essential forms of intuition. Yet, “the more numerous are the spheres of Being […] and finally the more decisive and inevitable is the forgetfulness in which philosophy moves about” (Ibid., 10). Universality is not generic or regional. It is the “absolutely original generality which constitutes its specific theme and which deliberately goes beyond every genus” (Ibid., 13). Phenomenology of reason is, whether limited to the determined being that is intuited, or to the general eidetic structures of intuition. But it fails in each case to reach the universal essence of manifestation. A formal ontology, however, would not be more suited to the task: if formal ontology pretends to reach the universal structure of being, this structure depends on existing material regions and fails to account for its own fundamentality.

(2) Intuitionism also fails to account for the fundamental character of the essence of manifestation. Intuition cannot be the fundamental essence of manifestation, since it itself presupposes a condition. Intuition essentially supposes an horizon that is not accounted for in its own possibility. Even though phenomenology of reason aims at a completely adequate intuition, it is an unattained ideal, and intuition is in fact essentially surrounded by empties intentions. Of course, horizon can itself be intuited in its essence. However, the intuition of the essence of the horizon presupposes itself an horizon. And the essence of horizon can only be intuited from within an horizon. “The horizon is precisely that which escapes thought at the very moment when it wishes to intuit its essence” (Ibid., 18). The essence cannot therefore manifest itself intuitively, in an horizon, unless it loses its fundamentality. And intuition is not the fundamental essence of manifestation. Phenomenology must not consider the “universal phenomenological horizon” as the essence of manifestation, but must seek for its very essence or condition; an essence that cannot itself be given in an intuition.

(3) Eventually, phenomenology of reason cannot account for the essence’s “reality”—for the effectiveness of its manifestation. Indeed, neither the universal character of the essence of manifestation, nor its fundamental character, signs its abstraction. The condition for the possibility of manifestation is not a “pure” or an “empty” possibility. It is not the empty and purely formal frame that one can abstract from any determined region of being, nor is it this regional frame itself. The universal is a “concrete terminus which each region of Being presupposes” (Ibid., 11). It is their Being itself in its effectiveness—in its effective phenomenological dimension. “The individual Being, the genus, the species are dependent upon it, not by virtue of a formal or logical regulation which would remain exterior to them, but in their very Being” (Ibid.)—that is, in their very appearing. It is the presence of any Being; that which realizes this presence. “The ontological possibility is the absolute reality” (Ibid., 39).
And the affirmation of this reality is its “realization”. This is the task of a phenomenological ontology that had not been carried out so far by historical phenomenology.

Michel Henry’s radical phenomenology results from this threefold radicalization. Radical phenomenology seeks for the universal and fundamental effectiveness of phenomenality. It is “radical” in the proper sense, as it returns to the roots of appearing—where appearing effectively appears to itself.

45.2. Phenomenology of life

A radical phenomenological thought must interrogate the manner in which transcendental power, which gives everything, is itself given. It is given to itself inasmuch as nothing but itself is at play here

(Henry 2008, 22)

Immanence

Manifestation has always been interpreted unilaterally as “transcendence”. To appear is to appear outside, in an exteriority, as a world. “Distance”, “alienation” or “transcendence” are one and the same condition of manifestation. Yet, this unilateral position that Henry calls “ontological monism” is unable to provide for a fundamental condition of manifestation. Intentional phenomenology sets forth the power of transcendence that conditions any manifestation but cannot account for this power’s own manifestation. To this ontological monism, Henry therefore opposes the heterogeneity of these two modes of manifestation that are transcendence and immanence—an immanence that owes nothing to any transcendent exteriorization. The intentional power of transcendence must first appear to itself in a self-impression prior to any ekstatik intention. Transcendence must appear to itself first and can only do so in an immanent manifestation. “Transcendence rests upon immanence” (Henry 1973, 41), and immanence, structured as auto-affection, is the essence of manifestation. “The original revelation is its own content unto itself” (Ibid., 40). “Self-manifestation is the essence of manifestation” (Ibid., 143).

Life

The fundamental identity between that which appears and its very phenomenality “is life itself” (Ibid., 41). Life is not an objective property that could be studied from outside as implying functions like motility, nutrition, etc. Life does not point towards these specific phenomena studied by biology. Biology rests instead upon the Galilean’s inauguration of modern science which precisely extracts the sensible and affective life out of its object—reducing life to physical and chemical processes (2003b, 37–38). In other words, life does not suppose Being—in order to “be”. It is Being, once equaled with appearing, that supposes life as the absolute identity between that which appears and its appearing.

Because life is the original phenomenalization at the core of being and thus what makes it be, one must reverse the traditional hierarchy that subordinates life to Being under the pretext that it would be necessary for life itself “to be”. As such, the being to which life is submitted is Greek being, the being of a worldly being. Such a being would still only be a dead being or rather a nonbeing, if the ek-stasis in which its
proper phenomenality unfolds were not auto-affected in the immediacy of the pathos of Life. So Life always founds what we call “being” rather than the contrary.

(Henry 2008, 3)

Henry’s concept of “life” designates the auto-affection that presides to any other phenomenality. Life is that which gives itself absolutely.

**Ego and subjectivity**

Subjectivity is the essential structure of manifestation. If Being implies subjectivity, subjectivity gains first a strictly ontological dimension: manifestation does not rest upon a “subject” as an ontic and determined region of Being, opposed to this other region of the world. This would fail to meet the universal criterion of ontology. Likewise, subjectivity gains a strictly phenomenological dimension: the Self is nothing but this fundamental mode of manifestation, that which constitutes itself in auto-affection. “The phenomenological Being of the ego is one with the original revelation which is accomplished in a sphere of radical immanence” (Henry 1973, 41). The original and immanent revelation is not equivalent with the ego itself, but rather with the “Being of the ego”—and, since Being equals appearing, it is equivalent with its mode of manifestation. As Grégori Jean wrote: “Thus it isn’t the subject who self-affects, but it is self-affection which determines the phenomenological sense of ipseity and makes this “how” a Self” (in Henry 2012, 41).

**Ipseity, individuality and birth**

The Being of the Self is “allowed”, “revealed” and “constituted” by auto-affection (Henry 1973, 465). “Affectivity is the essence of ipseity” (Ibid.). Being a Self is nothing but this feeling of self. And, it is not the universal essence of the Self that is as such constituted, but the concreteness of the individual Self; a Self that is not a pure act or an empty form of thought but the concrete and individual Self that is constituted by Life’s auto-affection. And, just like subjectivity, individuality must be understood from this proper ontological and phenomenological dimension. Such a generation of the living ego from life’s auto-affection gives rise to Henry’s “Phenomenology of Birth”. The living ego—or “Man” himself—proceeds from the prior essence of life which endlessly gives birth. Life generates the living by perpetually generating itself in auto-affection. And time must be redefined from this temporalizing process—not from the world’s ἐκστατικός and perpetual movement of losing itself, but from life’s perpetual and immanent movement of coming to itself. It is not a birth that happened once, but the endless process of life’s self-generation. “Birth is not an event but a condition” (Henry 2003a, 139)—that is, “Transcendental Birth”. Living egos are, as such, “the transcendental Sons of Absolute life”. This generation then supposes a distinction between two concepts of “Life” that will eventually give rise to Henry’s reading of Christianity.

**Philosophy of Christianity**

“A Life that is capable of engendering itself [is] what Christianity calls God” (2003b, 51). And, “If God is Life, then the first results of the phenomenological analysis of life makes it possible to understand the fundamental arguments of Christianity” (Ibid., 54). The generation that occurs from within life’s self-generation is twofold then. It is first the generation of the “First-Living” that Christianity calls “the First born-Son” or the “Christ”. The birth of the Christ is life’s self-
accomplishment and self-revelation. The Christ is generated in the very process of God’s coming to itself. “The Father eternally engenders the Son within Himself”. This generation, constitutive and contemporary to its own process, is what Henry calls an Arch-birth, giving birth to an Arch-Son. And this Arch-Son’s condition is extended to humans. In order to distinguish humans from the Christ and from God, Henry distinguishes between a strong and a weak concept of auto-affection (Ibid., 106). Whereas Life in God produces its own content, the living “man” is brought to itself through Life. “This self-affection that defines my essence is not my doing” (Ibid., 107). This is why the Christ is understood as an intermediary between “man” and God. The Christ constitutes the absolute auto-affection that generates him. “The Arch-Son precedes any Son as the preexisting and pre-established essence without which and outside of which nothing could be constructed that is anything like a Son, like a living Self” (Ibid., 110). “Man” is the “Son of the Son”. This generation is understood by Henry as an incarnation, and incarnation as the possibility of Flesh itself. “What comes before any flesh, is its incarnation—which is never its own doing, occurring only in the coming to itself of Absolute Life” (Ibid., 347). It is from this reference of the flesh to its prior incarnation that one can understand the relation with the other.

**The other, intersubjectivity and community**

The other does not give itself as exterior to me, like an object. Against Husserl’s fifth Cartesian Meditation, Henry claims that the alter ego is first an ego, and cannot therefore be given perceptively, through intentionality. An ego can only be given directly or immediately in the auto-affection that constitutes it—not perceptively and exteriorly but affectively and interiorly. The relation that relates the egos to each other is not worldly but lively—structured by life’s affective laws. As constituted by the same life as me, the other takes part in one and the same “pathetic intersubjectivity” or living community.

Thus, what the members of the community have in common is the arrival of life in oneself through which each one of them enters into the self as this particular self who one is. So they are at the same time selves in the immediacy of life and others in that this experience of life is each time irreducibly in one of them.

(Henry 2008, 133)

Henry then draws the foundation of a “Phenomenology of community”—understood from within life’s absolute, intersubjective and pathetic “Fond”. “The community is a subterranean affective layer. Each one drinks the same water from this source and this wellspring, which it itself is. But, each one does so without knowledge and without distinguishing between the self, the other, and the basis (Fond)” (Ibid., 133).

**Culture and science**

In La barbarie, Michel Henry thinks of culture as life’s self-transformation. “Culture means life’s self-transformation, the movement by which life never ceases to modify itself in order to reach higher forms of realization and accomplishment” (Henry 1983, 14). Life’s desire of feeling itself more intensely generates first needs as well as superior needs—art, ethics and religion. The world—that seemed to be excluded from life’s auto-affection—reappears as the cultural and aesthetics product of life’s self-development. However, life also has an essential tendency to self-destruction; which gives rise to an objective world that is neither lively nor cultural anymore.
The economic and technical modes of production—subtended by the principle of modern science—empty the sensible world from life’s affectivity that constitutes its sensible dimension. While Life’s absolute self-affection endlessly persists from underneath, creating unrealized drives, the objective world of modern science blindly condemned itself to its own loss.

From the emptiness and morbidity of the modern world, Henry aims at returning to that which constitutes the world’s life or reality—the effectiveness and materiality of its phenomenality. Henry’s radical phenomenology or phenomenology of life is, as such, a “material phenomenology”.

**45.3. Material phenomenology**

To radicalize the question of phenomenology is not only to aim for a pure phenomenality but also to seek out the mode according to which it originally becomes a phenomenon—the substance, the stuff, the phenomenological matter of which it is made, its phenomenologically pure materiality.

(Henry 2008, 2)

**Hyletic and material phenomenology**

The original matter of phenomenality results, in *Material Phenomenology*, from a radicalization of Husserl’s concept of “hyle”. Husserl rightly distinguished the intentional content of a lived experience from its hyletic content that belongs to it as its “real” element. The “reality” of a material content designates its immanence to the lived experience, the subjective impression that really pertains to an experience in a non-intentional sense. However, if Husserl acknowledges the existence of a material and purely impressive content of phenomenality, he does not confer its own power of manifestation upon this content. Phenomenality is understood unilaterally as the transcendental power of intentionality. In order for the hyletic content to appear, it must be apprehended and informed by a noetic intention. Hence the necessity for Husserl to reintroduce the intentional moment within the lived experience, opening both “matter” and “reality” to their own ekstatik loss. On the contrary, “matter” for a material phenomenology “no longer indicates the other of phenomenality but its essence” (Ibid., 42). Material phenomenology undertakes the radical exclusion of any intentional element from the material content of phenomenality, its reduction to a purely impressional dimension. (1) First, impression must not be confused with the object of which it is an impression, but understood in itself, as the impressional character of an impression. This impressional character is deprived of any transcendent intention and becomes strictly immanent. It is a pure auto-impression that holds from itself its own plenitude. “Reality” then comes to designate the plenitude of this auto-impression—“the auto-impression of the impression” (Ibid., 25). (2) Then, this impressional character is deprived of its sensuous dimension to become strictly affective. The sensuous dimension of an impressional content is always already the matter of a sensible perception: to sensuous contents always correspond objective sense-qualities. But a strictly affective auto-impression can be recognized, on the contrary, in its radical immanence. A feeling like fear, anxiety, pain or pleasure has no necessary objective correlate. “Here the specific phenomenological content of everything that is an ‘impression’ and everything whose internal phenomenality is affectivity as such can be discovered” (Ibid., 14). Any sensation supposes this prior auto-affection in which affectivity is given to itself. Affectivity is defined as “that which is felt without the intermediary of any sense whatsoever” (Henry 1973, 462).
Affectivity

In *The Essence of Manifestation*, Henry distinguishes three kinds of affection: (1) the ontic affection by which a determined being is given; (2) the ontological affection supposed by any ontic affection through which the world’s horizon is received; and (3) the auto-affection that this reception first supposes. Affectivity in the last sense is prior to any sensible perception and is, as such, invisible. Any sensible affection supposes an invisible affectivity. The original matter of phenomenality—its essence—is a pure affectivity that must be understood as life’s auto-affection. Affectivity is the very essence of manifestation—it is the proper materiality of efficiency. It is given to itself absolutely and incessantly in a radically passive way that Henry thinks of as suffering. From this unbearable pathetic self-affliction arises a first modalization of affectivity—as pain changes to pleasure. Affectivity is not a static auto-affection but the historial process of this absolute self-givenness.

The “unconscious”

Invisible auto-affection is “the invisibility of our night”, “thoughts un-thought”, that is, the genuine phenomenological sense of the “unconscious”. If, on the one hand, the Freudian’s concept of the unconscious is “the ultimate illusion of representational metaphysics” (Henry 1993, 318), it also escapes from this tradition as it is thought as the efficient activity, force or drive, prior to any representation. Drive designates “power and force”, “pure activity and the principle of all activity”, (Ibid., 298). It is the force that arises from the inescapable weight of auto-affection. “In the final analysis, Freud’s ‘drive’ does not mean a particular psychical motion but the weight and charge of actual, inescapable self-impression” (Ibid., 307). The possibility of its “repression” reveals the affectivity’s internal historiality.

Body and action

The “force” that emerges from this primordial and pathetic self-embracing is the origin of any power, including the power of the body. The body cannot simply be ejected out of the original manifestation—of a universal phenomenological ontology. If, on the one hand, the body is excluded from affectivity—which persists independently from any sensuous implication—it is from this auto-affection that the body must be thought of in its original experience—as the “original”, “subjective” or “absolute” body. Conversely, the body confers its “matter”, its effectivity or its absolute concreteness to the universal condition of phenomenality. “Corporeity is an immediate pathos which completely determines our body before its raises to the world. It is from this original corporeity that it holds its fundamental capacities, that of being a force and of acting” (Henry 1965, “Avertissement à la seconde édition”). Action or praxis must be thought of as well from this affective effort. This is, according to Henry, Marx’s genuine philosophical undertaking. Henry’s phenomenological reading of Marx intends to free him from its Marxist misreading—from the political fixations of his concepts into objective essences such as “productive forces” and “social classes”—to insist on his definition of reality as the affective and individual praxis irreducible to any objectification, in which social classes, productive forces or economic laws find their own reality.5

Art and cosmos

If the affective matter that constitutes the practical power of our body is invisible—irreducible to the light of exteriority—it can still be “seen” through art; not through figurative art, which remains attached to the realm of objective representations, but through abstract art which
“places before our wondering eyes an unexplored domain of new phenomena that have been forgotten” (Henry 2005, 20). Kandinsky’s theoretical and artistic work reveals affectivity as the essential matter of painting. “The content of art is this emotion” (Ibid., 18). But, emotion is not only the matter of art in this first sense of “content” or “subject-matter”. It is also its material means of expression. Once freed by abstraction from their representational function, pictorial elements—such as colors, forms, plans and supports—immediately express life’s affectivity. The force of a line is an affective force or a drive. And a color has an immediate pathetic materiality. The affective and original matter of phenomenality—this pathetic force—is revealed by art to be the matter of the world itself understood as “cosmos”.

By tearing colours and linear forms away from the ideal archetype of meanings that constitute the objective world and by taking them in their non-referential pictoriality, Kandinskian abstraction does not depart from nature but returns to its inner essence. This original, subjective, dynamic, impressional and pathetic nature—the true nature whose essence is Life—is the cosmos. (Ibid., 137–138)

Conclusion

A proper understanding of Michel Henry’s philosophical project can only be phenomenological. The publications and research works that have been carried out since the opening of the Fonds Michel Henry make it very clear that Henry cannot simply be accused of “hyper-transcendentalism” or absolute subjectivism. Subjectivity is not a realm of being opposed to the world as to this other realm of being, but the original mode of manifestation of any phenomenon, including that of the body, the other and of the world itself. Neither can Henry be accused of re-establishing another kind of monism than the one he denounces: opposed to this first mode of phenomenality is this other mode of appearing in the exteriority of an outside, as an object.

But, if a proper understanding of Michel Henry can only be phenomenological, so should be his critique. Even in acknowledging this strictly phenomenological dimension, questions still remain to be asked. Does Henry’s dualistic phenomenology not rest upon two uninterrogated and non-phenomenological presuppositions? The presupposition on the one hand, according to which one would need to account for an absolutely autonomous phenomenality? And the presupposition on the other hand, according to which otherness would result from an objectification? Would a Phenomenology of life not achieve further richness and density, by overcoming both the transcendentalist and the objectivist presuppositions of this dualistic conception of phenomenality? The life of material phenomenology, as well as its further developments, might well rest today upon such critical interrogations.

Notes

1 This claim appears indeed in the very first page of his war notebooks. These notebooks are at the Fonds Michel Henry of the Université catholique de Louvain. They are currently being edited.
2 As it appears for instance in the foreword of the sixth Logical Investigation, in the last section of the Ideas I or in the last chapter of Formal and Transcendental Logic.
3 Formal ontology is unable to meet the criteria of a “universal phenomenological ontology”, because the empty form of a region in general still presupposes the being of a region in general. Hence the essential dependence of formal ontology upon material ontology: “It is obviously in the realm of material essences that formal ontology finds its origin, because the pure essence of a region in general is necessarily relative to something like a concrete region” (Henry 1973, 11).
Michel Henry enlarges Husserl’s concept of “horizon” and the horizontal structure of manifestation beyond the region of material objects that appear in a sensible world. As he says in a note, eidetic objects also suppose horizons—as mathematical essences suppose a mathematical horizon. Henry’s concept of “horizon” is closer to the idea of a “transcendental horizon of manifestation”—a “universal phenomenological horizon”—that can be understood from Heidegger’s reading of Kant.

The use-value, for instance, is the direct expression of this lively and affective praxis. However, such an individual praxis also reveals to be the ultimate foundation of its own economic and political negation. As the transformation of the use-value into the exchange-value, capitalism—like any form of political totalitarianism (Nazism or Communism)—signs the objectification of the affective and subjective work that constitutes the genuine reality of any economic production.

References


