

## FROM THE 'TRUTH OF THE WORLD' TO THE 'TRUTH OF LIFE'

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**I**t concerns us not what shows itself but the fact of self-showing, not what appears but the way of its appearing, not what is manifest but the pure manifestation, in itself and as such - or, to put it another way, not the phenomenon but phenomenality [...]. It is truth itself in its very deployment that makes something true; it is manifestation as it itself manifests itself that makes manifest; it is revelation in revealing itself that reveals.<sup>1</sup>

Phenomenology is the analysis of the structure of appearance. Traditionally, this has meant the appearance of a something *for* someone. Often overlooked in this process is the condition of subjectivity itself as 'phenomenon'. This paper analyses the phenomenology of subjectivity (a process whereby object-manifestation presupposes self-manifestation) in a key work by the French philosopher Michel Henry. Henry's phenomenology of Life (akin to that of Paul Ricoeur whose hermeneutics of the self attest to a 'perfect coincidence of self with itself') sets this process in train.<sup>2</sup> In Henry's view, subjectivity is absolute in the sense of being without relation, and completely self-affective in its radical interiority. 'Knowledge' of phenomenality (the 'fact of appearing' as Henry defines it) is not accessible through the intentional structure of consciousness. It

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Henry *I am The Truth. Towards a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emmanuel. Stanford (California: Stanford University Press 2003), pp. 24-5.

<sup>2</sup> (Ricoeur 1991)

is only made immanent in the sense that phenomenality manifests itself without ever leaving itself, without producing or presupposing any kind of fracture or otherness. The concept of relationality therefore is outside radical immanence, an immanence that is so saturated with self-manifestation that it excludes all else. However, as this article will illustrate, it is what Henry does with relationality that gives his phenomenology of Life its critical purchase. Henry does not jettison relationality; he radicalises it through a series of processes that include reductionism, self-attestation, self-revelation, *re*-presentation, and most effectively, 'auto-affectivity'.

Henry's phenomenology of subjectivity is theological and Christian. In his 2003 work *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, he addresses the relevance of Christianity in the world today. He does this not by asking whether Christianity is 'true' or 'false' but by asking what Christianity considers as truth. He explores how Christianity (in its catechistic principles and mysteries) communicates truth, not as a theoretical or definable truth, but as an *essential* truth that 'by some mysterious affinity' is appropriate to humankind. His thesis, based on a philosophy of Christianity founded on a phenomenology of Christ, is that Christ undoes 'the truth of the world' by providing a different access to an infinity of self-love, to a radical subjectivity that admits no outside, and to the immanence of affective Life located prior to the disjunction attached to all objectifying thought. It is an undoing that is encapsulated in his notion of the phenomenological 'Ipseity of Life'.

Before examining Henry's phenomenology, I want to explain his understanding of phenomenality because its significance impacts on the distinction he draws between the 'truth of the world' and the 'truth of Life', and on other debates relating to life and subjectivity. Firstly, truth for Henry is a twofold concept, indicating what shows itself and the fact of self-showing: 'What shows itself is the grey sky [...]. But the fact of self-showing has nothing to do with what shows itself, with the grey of the sky [...] and is even totally indifferent to what shows itself'(13). What shows itself as grey sky and its 'truth' as *threatening* owes its truth to a prior state of things, a previous relation with which the grey sky interacts and derives sense and meaning as threatening. It is this fact of the sky showing itself that constitutes the 'truth in the world': an object designates that which is placed *before* and the fact of being placed *before*

renders the object manifest. By implication, consciousness is this manifestation of being placed *before*. Being placed *before* is the same as being placed *outside*, synonymous with the external relation between consciousness and object. This is the framework for the 'truth of the world', whose truth is defined as a placing *outside* itself, 'casting the thing outside itself' (18). Henry states:

What is placed before is the object, that which is true, that which shows itself, the phenomenon. The fact of being placed before is the truth, the manifestation, pure consciousness. The fact of being placed before is equally well the fact of being placed outside; it is the "outside" as such. The "outside" as such is the world (15).

Self-showing is 'by its nature' different. Taking the example of the grey sky again, if we were to isolate that grey sky from previous grey skies to which it naturally relates then we would view this proposition for what it is, reduced to itself, conferring on itself its own truth. Henry makes two points based on this reduction. The fact of self-showing is a *phenomenon*, something that appears and is true: 'the fact of self-showing, considered in itself and as such - that is the essence of truth' (13). And therefore self-showing designates the concept of truth in its pure phenomenological signification. This reductionism is one stage in the radicalisation of relationality.

Henry's 'truth of the world' is a term used to designate the level of separation between subject (thing) and 'truth' in the world of material objects, as opposed to the 'truth of Life' where the truth of Christianity (in this instance) attests to itself without hindrance of separation. It is a separation in the 'truth of the world' that is revealed at historical, linguistic/textual levels and at the level of consciousness. On the historical level, Henry claims that one of the reasons for scepticism about Christianity today is the fallibility of historical truth (and history) and their incapacity as 'representation' to testify for or against the truth of Christianity. He states that this inability to 'testify' is due to the 'incapacity of texts themselves'<sup>3</sup> (7). For Henry, this construction of the 'truth of the world' as a world founded on separation and representation has thwarted the true phenomenological transmission of the truth of Christianity. In fact, and in spite

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<sup>3</sup> This is in complete distinction to the Ricoeurian position for example for whom biblical texts are lived experience and the 'naming' of God therein as a textual given is seen to instruct and resonate the living significance of this naming in speech and life (Ricoeur 1995). For Ricoeur, the naming of God in text/language and its activation in living speech is a speech Event and a force of immanence.

of the *evidence* of Scripture and the Gospels and their record of the existence of 'Christ' and the 'Word of God', Henry argues that the *text as representation* of the 'truth of the world' is nothing more than a text, unable 'to posit through itself the reality that it utters [...]. Within history, the powerlessness of the written document to posit the reality of the event to which it wants to testify in fact reiterates the powerlessness of the event itself to posit itself within being' (7).

At the centre of the powerlessness of the written document as testament is the powerlessness of language. Henry states: 'Language has become the universal evil [...]. What characterises any word is its difference from the thing - the fact that taken in itself, in its own reality, language contains nothing of the reality of the thing, its properties. This difference from the thing explains its indifference to the thing' (9). Language (in the 'truth of the world') is therefore illusory. It passes as the means of communication and the transmission of a 'truth', but the 'truth' it conveys and the way language imparts this truth is bound by the temporal and visible limitations of the 'truth of the world'. Time temporises that which is manifest in the 'truth of the world' because 'in time this coming-into-appearance consists in coming-outside where things are torn from themselves, emptied of their being, already dead' (19). Equally, the things that are deprived of themselves and emptied of themselves in their very appearing 'never give their own reality but only the image of that reality that annihilates itself in the moment they are given' (19). In simpler terms, language for Henry strips things of their true meaning, and creates a false reality of things 'being given outside themselves'. The description therefore of language as an 'evil' indicates its centrality for Henry at the root of the *re-presentative* logic of *before* and *outside* in the 'truth of the world' and of the condition of pure consciousness (and its relation to the object) of which being is *a priori*. However, by arguing that the word can just as well bring reality back to itself, Henry turns the logic of the 'truth of the world' on its head. He returns to language its phenomenological capability by collapsing the distance between word and object and by relocating reality in the word itself. The powerlessness of language is thus transformed into the powerlessness of language to posit a reality other than its own. And in order for this transformation to have its fullest effect, one of a number of key 'truths' must already be in place, most importantly the truth of Christianity. He states:

This is one of the most essential affirmations of Christianity: that the truth that is its own can testify only to itself [...]. This Truth that alone has the power to reveal itself is God's truth. It is God himself who is revealed, or Christ as God. More radically, divine essence consists in Revelation as self-revelation of itself on the basis of itself (10).

The truth of Christianity is the starting point for the second part of Henry's truth binary, namely the 'truth of Life'. But first, let us recapitulate how the truth of Christianity differs from the 'truth of the world'. The 'truth of the world' makes each thing seen by placing that thing outside itself. The crux, according to Henry, is that when truth is *understood as that of the world* a division in the concept of truth is opened up creating a difference between *truth itself* (which we can now call the truth of Christianity) and *what truth shows or makes true* (in the 'truth of the world'). The distinction is not only conceptual but phenomenological and it leads Henry to establish a first 'decisive characteristic' of the truth of Christianity:

The Truth of Christianity in no way differs from what it makes true. Within it there is no separation between the seeing and what is seen, between the light and what it illuminates. And this is because there is in that Truth neither Seeing nor seen, no Light like that of the world. From the start, the Christian concept of truth is given as irreducible to the concept of truth that dominates the history of Western thought (24).

Henry builds on the differences between the 'truth of the world' and the truth of Christianity. While the former consists in what shows itself, the latter is a fact of 'self-showing'. The former produces truth based on 'what it makes true', the latter is a truth that is prior to the 'truth of the world' and prior to language. The former produces truth from a function of language founded on separation where the object is placed 'outside', 'before', 'opposite us'. The latter constitutes its truth not in separation but in a phenomenological conjunction between the seeing and what is seen, between what shows itself and self-showing. The former transmits and demonstrates its truth, the latter '*is Truth itself in its very deployment*' (23). Understanding the truth of Christianity therefore in its phenomenological essence is for Henry not only the pre-requisite to the 'truth of Life' but the process of comprehension itself undergoes a self-radicalisation. Paradoxically, it is the irreducibility of this access to truth to thought or to forms of knowledge or science in Henry's phenomenological reductionism that is one of the major

insights of what is more broadly known as the theological turn of French phenomenology.<sup>4</sup>

Implicit in this radicalisation is the impotence that comes with trying to 'think' the truth of Christianity. For Henry, thought is only one mode of relation to the world, but it is also a condition of that world and as such a hindrance. He illustrates this 'irreducibility' of the truth of Christianity to thought and to other forms of knowledge in his Christian reference (in Matthew's Gospel) to wisdom and the fact it is revealed only to little children. He argues that the phenomenality of that which shows itself to thought is itself incapable of making manifest the divine revelation of truth 'because the phenomenality of this Revelation is never phenomenalized as "outside" the world' (27). The connection therefore between thought and the process of phenomenality as it relates to the 'truth of the world' deprives thought of access to truth. He develops this position by stating that the denial of access to truth is not because of a 'lack' inside *thought*. Rather, he argues that thought has to (literally) 'default' in order for access to the 'truth of Life' to be granted: 'It is only when thought defaults, because the truth of the world is absent that what is at stake be achieved: the self-revelation of God - the self-phenomenalization of pure phenomenality against the background of a phenomenality that is not that of the world' <sup>5</sup>(27).

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL LIFE

Truth is accessed through its irreducibility to thought and through what Henry calls 'phenomenological Life'. Phenomenological Life is not founded in the relational structures we have described in the context of the 'truth of the world'. As such, it is not what gives access to or what shows or reveals truth; it is

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<sup>4</sup> (Janicaud 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Defaulting thought is a common theme in what is known as the 'theological turn' of French phenomenology in the 1980s; it underpins Jean-Luc Marion's concept of gift as 'givenness' (2001), Jean-Yves Lacoste's notion of 'naïveté' (2004), John Caputo's theory of the lunatic (2007), Gianni Vattimo's 'weakness of thought' (1999) and most notably echoes St Paul's letter to the Corinthians: 'For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the Good News, and not to preach that in the terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed' (1: 10-13,17).

not a process of revelation nor is it an entity or an external appearance. It is the antithesis of a metaphysical principle. Rather, phenomenological Life for Henry is 'the Truth of Life'. If we assume, as Henry encourages us to, that what is at stake in the truth of Christianity is the self-revelation of God (what he calls 'the self-phenomenalization of pure phenomenality'), then access to this self-revelation can only be achieved through Life. He explains:

If the Revelation of God is a self-revelation that owes nothing to the truth of the world, and if we ask where such a self-revelation is achieved, the answer is unequivocal: in Life and in Life alone. Therefore we are in the presence of the first fundamental equation of Christianity: God is Life - he is the essence of Life, or if one prefers, the essence of Life is God. Saying this we already know what God is, but we do not know it through the effect of some knowledge or learning - we do not know it through thought, against the background of the truth of the world. Rather, we know it, and can know it, only in and through Life itself (27).

By implication, 'thinking' of God as a 'Being', defined in the logic of the 'truth of the world' and conceptualised thus, is superseded by God as Life, access to whom is through a phenomenology of Life distinct from the phenomenality of the world<sup>6</sup>. But how does a phenomenology of Life differ from the phenomenality of the world? To the extent that the phenomenality of the world and its truth manifests itself in its own exteriority to itself (outside), emptied of its own substance and in Henry's words 'unreal', phenomenological Life 'does not cast outside itself what it reveals but holds itself inside itself, retains it in so close an embrace that what it holds and reveals is itself [...]. Life embraces, experiences without distance or difference. Solely on this condition can it experience itself, *be itself what it experiences*' (30).

If God is Life and he reveals himself in Life, then the Christian phenomenological essence of Life is that one experiences oneself in one's living. This is a further fundamental facet of phenomenological reductionism for Henry. It cements Henry's move away from the 'truth of the world' and significantly *living as Being* in that world. However this transition from world to phenomenological Life depends on the resolution of an opposition between living and Life. Living is primarily associated with living in the world. Life, on the other hand, is truth and revelation. Not only does Life precede living, but

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<sup>6</sup> New insights into the 'conceptualisation' of God have surfaced in recent French critical thought. See in particular the special issue of *Critique* titled 'DIEU' (TOME LXII, no. 704-5, janvier- février 2006).

Life is also capable of generating its own living. With 'real living' not possible in the world, Henry takes *living in Life* as the starting point for a radicalisation of the Life/living relational structure and the beginning of a different post-subjectivity. With Life the place to experience oneself as living in Life, Henry usurps humankind as 'Being' (thought/cogito) and reference point of the world, and replaces it with Life and specifically living Life as a new 'experiential knowledge' of his post-subjectivity; Life is not just life, and not just the living of it, rather Life's phenomenological essence is God and therefore the living aspect of Life is commensurate with experiencing God himself.

### IPSEITY AND TRANSCENDENTAL LIFE

Henry adds to this Life-living-God trilogy and how it manifests itself in an experiential (as opposed to conceptual) knowledge of oneself by introducing two additional notions. The first is Life's self-generation, otherwise defined as Ipseity. The condition of life is that Life engenders itself: 'Life is not what gives access, what clears a path to [...]. *It is not life that gives access to itself*' (45). This is because for Henry, commensurate with his phenomenology of the 'truth of Life' without the aid of a relational binary, life is not in itself a power of revelation. Rather, life's power comes forth in itself. While life in the 'truth of the world' is endowed with a capacity to give and reveal, in the 'truth of Life' it is Life itself that achieves revelation and it is Life that is revealed. Henry states:

Ipeity is with Life from the first; it belongs to the first birth. It is contained in this Arch-birth, makes it possible, is only intelligible within its phenomenology. Ipseity is the Logos of Life, that in which and as which Life reveals itself by revealing itself to itself. Ipseity is there in the beginning and comes before any transcendental "me", before any Individual (124).

There are key aspects to Ipseity here which I will return to shortly. But I want to underline at this point the equation between Ipseity as self-generation ('the coming-into-itself of Life') and the Logos (knowledge defined here as 'the coming into the experiencing-of-oneself'). For Henry, Life's self-generation as Revelation of God is concomitant with humankind's 'knowing'/experiencing of this as the essence of his own life. It is an essential equation for two reasons. In a single gesture, Henry shifts the relation between 'truth of the world' and the

*cogito* as the template for knowledge and for the foundation of the subject, towards a 'relation' based on the phenomenological reduction of the experience (knowledge) of Life to the point of its self-giving. Secondly, the 'knowledge' or experience of the Ipseity of Life is not confined to the temporality of the point of its self-giving. Rather, Ipseity enjoins with an historical and ancestral phenomenology of Life (primarily through the process of 'Arch-ness'); this ancestral dimension to Life is what Henry calls transcendental Life.

Transcendental Life is the Life that does not exist in the 'truth of the world'. As a Life absent from the life of the world, it is also the only Life that truly exists and which, according to Henry, we share in its phenomenological essentiality with God. By means of transcendental Life, Henry constructs a transcendental pathway of living that connects humankind in his phenomenological essence to a living ancestry of the 'First Living', the 'Arch Son', 'Son of God' and 'Son within the Son of God'. In so doing, he differentiates between being born into the world as a physical entity or 'being' with a name, a father and a mother, and being born into Life. To be born into Life is to come into Life which means to come from life, 'starting from it in such a way that Life is not birth's point of arrival, as it were, but its point of departure' (60). By subverting the understanding of birth 'into' the world and transforming it into Life as the giver of Life, Henry connects humankind to a genealogy of the Life of God that offers new philosophical applications for his phenomenology of Christian Life.<sup>7</sup>

If we look at how Henry's transcendental Life actually works itself through, it is founded on the joint principle of being born into Life from Life and the phenomenological essence of Life as God: 'To come to Life from Life, and in this way alone, means to come to Life out of that self-engendering of absolute Life that is the Father' (64). Specifically, transcendental Life is not notionally retraced to Christ but is directly affiliated ancestrally and as a matter of phenomenological historicity to the first born Christ, whom Henry calls the transcendental Arch-Son. Christ is therefore seen as the essential *phenomenological* 'relation' as opposed to the *logical* 'relation' 'for the original co-belonging of Life

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<sup>7</sup> Broadly speaking, Henry's phenomenological Life bears comparison with some key phenomenological principles, for instance Lévinas's 'transcendental attitude', notions of inadequation, apodeicticity and the living present. There are also clear differences with Lévinas which I will highlight towards the end.

and the First Living' (88). If transcendental Life is the means by which Henry incorporates humankind into this original co-belonging, then transcendental Life becomes pivotal in connecting humankind to the essential Ipseity of Life. Henry explains:

The Son's generation co-belongs to Life's self-generation as what this self-generation accomplishes, as the essential Ipseity in which Life, in its self-embrace, becomes Life. Thus there is no way of reaching the Son other than in the course of Life's self-embrace, in the same way as there is no other way for Life to embrace itself except in this essential Ipseity of the First Living - no other way for it to reveal itself except in the Word (88).

Henry's logic would appear self-evident: transcendental Life equates humanity with Christ as first living, with Life's self-embrace and with one's experiencing of oneself in the phenomenological essence of Life. Transcendental Life opens up a way of re-casting subjectivity outside of 'Being-in-the world' and inside a Christology of Arch-Son, Christ, Son and Son of Son. The 'subject' and their newly acquired transcendental Life overturns 'worldly' conceptions of humankind in respect of birth and lineage, and resignifies them according to an alternative Christian transcendental phenomenology.

An example of this transcendental Life is explained in Henry's exegesis of his reference to the 'Son of God'. It is a title reserved for Christ but Henry has already reduced Christ to a transcendental equation with man. Not in the sense that man *is* God or Christ; the reductionism conveys the phenomenological essence of Life as God in which man co-belongs and has his essence through his transcendental subjectivity. For Henry, Life has the same meaning for God, for Christ and for humankind. This is because there is a single essence of Life that self-generates itself in God and that generates the transcendental Arch-Son as essential Ipseity. It is from this co-belonging to Life that humankind takes its transcendental birth - man becomes simultaneously the Son of Life and the Son of God. This is not to say that God *confers* the title of 'Son of God'. Henry eschews any difference, separation or power of conferral from subject to object (from inside to outside) because Life itself is the only measure of conferral. Similarly, intentionality and relationality are carefully elided in this transcendental phenomenology, although, conceding that God 'created' man, Henry qualifies this 'creation' as an essence 'in the sense that [...] in giving his own essence God gave man the living condition, the happiness of experiencing

himself in this experiencing of *Self* that is Life and in the radical immanence of this experiencing, where there is neither "outside" nor "world" (103).

### THE RADICALLY IMMANENT SELF

Henry's radicalisation of the structure of relationality operates at two critical levels: the 'Self' (as the substitute for the 'subject') and 'self-affection'. The phenomenological essence shared by God and humankind is interpreted by Henry in the form of a living transcendental *Self* that experiences itself in Life. And it is from the Self, as a register of perception, feeling and experience, that he establishes a wider Christian ethics. The Self emerges out of the self-engendering of Life as a 'me' and through the concept of self-affection. Henry refers to this as a *pathētikē*; the sensory point at which the self experiences its Self:

The self is only possible as pathetically submerged in itself without ever posing itself in some visible form (intelligible) or another. Such a Self, foreign to any apparition of itself in the world, is what we are calling a *radically immanent Self*, a Self neither constituted by nor the object of thought, without any image of self, without nothing that might assume the aspect of its reality (149).

The Self therefore experiences itself as a 'me': 'I experience myself [...] and the fact of experiencing myself constitutes my "me". But I have not brought myself into this condition [...]. I experience myself without being the source of this experience' (107). Henry draws a distinction between affection (in the 'truth of the world') that designates something that affects one, whether a sound or an image, and self-affection in the 'truth of Life' which has no external (worldly) referent and is therefore defined, in the context of the 'truth of Life', by Life that affects itself and is not affected by anything other than itself. If humankind's Christian essence is sourced in phenomenological Life, then the Self not only experiences itself in Life's self-affection but also in the Self's Life. Critically, self-affection is the self-manifestation of subjectivity as an immediate, non-objectifying and passive occurrence. It is for Henry inescapable, undeniable, unavoidable in its self-immanence, and even more so in that it does not pass through the 'truth of the world'. And in tune with its phenomenological (ir)reducibility, the Self's Life 'expresses itself in the accusative because it holds fast to its own experience, what is not that of being affected but of being

constantly self-affected, within itself, in a self-affection that is independent of external affecting or any relation with the world' (108).

This radical self-manifestation of subjectivity as self-affective and irrelational turns the tables on traditional phenomenological reductionism where no appearance is independent or self-reliant but rather refers to something different than itself. Dominique Janicaud and Dan Zahavi have questioned the authenticity of Henry's phenomenological methodology, and his wider contribution to the 'theological turn' of phenomenology.<sup>8</sup> At the heart of their critique is the idea that phenomenology and its methodology of reduction and free variation has traditionally been seen to lead to an essential intuition of truth (where the essence on intentionality is to be sought, by phenomenological reduction, in phenomenological immanence), and not in a presupposed given or absolute truth. This critique goes to the heart of Henry's first principle of the 'truth of Life', namely the pre-given truth of Christianity. However, for Henry and others (see footnote 2) 'givenness' and Ipseity are phenomena that are not only irreducible to knowledge or reflective experience but they are simply self-evident 'truths'. The immanence of self-evidence would appear to be sufficient in itself. For their critics, this position is unsustainable and indicative of a 'paradoxical revelation of transcendence at the heart of phenomenality'.<sup>9</sup> The critical difference, I would contend, in the case of Henry (and which gives his phenomenology its distinctive 'theological' integrity) lies in the unconditional primacy of the givenness of the phenomenon (for Marion 'God', for Henry 'the Truth of Christianity'). These are seen as phenomena/gifts (of faith) that give themselves free from any relation with the exterior experience that is already seen, objectivised and comprehended. That said, we return inevitably and crucially to how the phenomena are registered; Zahavi claims that Henry's subjectivity is characterised (and potentially flawed) by a complete self-presence that is without any self-transcending, temporal articulation and which tends to rely on a process of purified phenomenological reductionism<sup>10</sup>. This is a serious

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<sup>8</sup> (Zahavi 2007; Janicaud 2000).

<sup>9</sup> (Janicaud 2000: 23).

<sup>10</sup> Zahavi claims Henry's approach is problematic because 'it conceives of self-manifestation *in abstracto*, rather than accounting for the self-manifestation of the *self-transcending* temporal, reflexive, corporeal and intersubjective experience (Zahavi 2007).

criticism but it also assumes a *relational* interdependence between the self-presence and the self-transcendence of subjectivity which Henry's self-affection (as 'me' and as 'Life') refutes. I will address these concerns in the later stages of this article.

Returning to the self-manifestation of subjectivity in Henry, the Self's Life (defined as coming into the condition of a transcendental living 'me' that expresses itself in Life's self-affection) is only possible (if not truly fulfilled from Henry's perspective) through the original Ipseity of Life (the process by which Life's self-revelation engenders in it the 'First Living' which places humankind in the presence of his 'Arch birth'). Lévinas pursues a similar path in his 'affectivity of transcendence' expressed in love and vulnerability. Henry however is more reductionist in locating this transcendence in the pure *invisible* immanence of Ipseity. He says: 'There can be no self without the phenomenological substance and flesh of the Arch-Son' (116); and 'Man comes into his condition [...] only insofar as Life, in generating itself, has generated the originary Ipseity of the First Living' (112). Significantly, this 'condition' predetermines interaction with others. In what could be interpreted as the beginnings of a Christian ethics, Henry makes two key observations: first, 'without this Ipseity, no one would ever be. So if I have something to do with me, I first have to do with Christ. And if I have something to do with another, I first have to do with him in Christ' (117), and 'only one who has passed under the triumphal Arch of Arch-Ipseity can come and go out and find pastures, be one of those sheep grazing in the field' (125).

### THE 'I'/'ME'

The primordially of Ipseity predetermines the governance of Self and the actions of Self. The governance of Self is defined not only within the parameters of the 'truth of the world' and the 'truth of Life', but also as a function of the opposition between 'I' and 'me'. We have established that 'me' in the 'truth of Life' experiences power phenomenologically (as purely interior), whereas the 'I' in the 'truth of the world' possesses and exercises power actively. Both 'me' and 'I' coexist for Henry but he clearly attaches greater significance to the 'me' than he does to the 'I' because the 'me' *experiences* its power in Life's Ipseity (entering

into possession of it), whereas the power of the 'I' (meaning 'I can') is undermined by the fiction of an 'I' that bestows powerless power on its action: '*it is*' he states '*the absolute powerlessness of the "I" with respect to the fact that it finds itself in possession of this power, able to exercise it*' (137). By usurping the possessive logic of the 'truth of the world' in the suggestion that 'power and action cannot be deployed unless previously given to themselves in the self-giveness of Absolute Life' (138), Henry defines how his alternative subjectivity operates:

The "me" is engendered in the self-affecting of absolute Life and experiences itself passively against the background of the original Ipseity of Life, which gives this "me" to itself and makes of it what is at every moment; therefore this "me" finds itself at the same time much more than what is designated as a "me"[...]. *It enters into possession of itself at the same time as it enters into possession of each of its powers. Entering into possession of these powers, it is able to exercise them* (136).

The implication of this newly acquired ipseitic power of the 'me' is that the 'I' of power and action is rendered subordinate to Henry's absolute phenomenology of Life, making the 'I' dependent on the 'me'. This procedure works until the 'I', forgetting its new phenomenological condition as an ipseitic transcendental 'me', gets ahead of itself in the form of a transcendental illusion making it think it can concern itself directly again with the 'truth of the world'. In effect, this transcendental 'I' remains an illusion for Henry and one that can only be resolved by changing 'the life of the ego into the Life of the Absolute where there is salvation' (165). In other words, the 'I', as a construct of the ego, seeks to manipulate the 'truth of the world' by *performing* (from its own power base) Christian acts of mercy. But Henry, playing the Devil's advocate, anticipates this illusory trajectory by suggesting that the ego acts only with a view to itself and is therefore invalidated (or forgotten). Critically, however, in this forgetting of the ego, its power is transmuted to 'the hyper-power of Absolute Life': 'And in such a transmutation, the ego forgets itself, so that in and through this forgetting an essential Ipseity is revealed - not its own Self but precisely what gives this self to itself by making it a Self, absolute Life's self-giving in the Ipseity of which this Life gives itself' (169). The forgetting of the ego therefore gives expression not to the self of Ipseity but to that which gives this self to itself, namely Life's self-giving.

We revert thus to Life's self-giving as the ultimate arbiter in the construction of Henry's self-presence and subjectivity. It is what he means by that radically

immanent Self 'whose relation to self excludes any distancing, any putting at a difference, any "outside", any possible "world"' (169). In the context of forgetting, it is not just the implications of the abolition of the 'I' for the phenomenological emergence of Life's essential self-giving that concern Henry. Forgetting casts a wider net over the Self and his construction of a Christian ethics. If the radically immanent Self designates a self that is not concerned with itself and does not think of itself (in fact has no need to think of itself - a process anathema to reflective consciousness), then the fundamental condition of the radically immanent Self is one of 'forgetting'. Henry reinforces the centrality of this reduction as a fundamental of the relation between Self and the Ipseity of Life when he speaks of 'the Immemorial of its (self's) relation to Self in the Ipseity of absolute Life' (169).

### ETHICS AND THE OTHER

Forgetting of self in order to give way to Life's self-giving is the condition of Henry's ethical man. It is a position he shares to a point with his contemporaries Jean-Louis Chrétien for whom 'forgetting produces an ignorance of self that is positive [...]. It is the most proper name of our earthly condition, its restlessness and its impermanence' (Chrétien 2002: 33-4), and Jacques Derrida whose theory of active forgetfulness to avoid the trap of historical knowledge opens up a vista of a new philosophical 'present' (Derrida 1997: xxx-xxxiii). But how does this idea of forgetting play itself out in practical terms for Henry? Let us take relations with others (or in theoretical terms the relation between self and otherness). Henry argues that putting others first is a fundamental given of the recognition of originary Ipseity in the other, and entails the necessary forgetting of self, primarily as an 'I' but also as a transcendental 'me' (although this is not particularly problematic as the 'me' has been safely immemorialised in Life's pure self-giving). Henry defends this move on the basis of its ethical purity and as an example of what he calls the 'genius of the Christian ethic' (166). His argument is that in the process of forgetting of both 'I' and 'me' (including the latter's ipseitic self), what emerges is that 'an essential Ipseity is revealed' that places itself in the other and is recognisable therein. Power is thus transferred away from the 'I' and

also from the 'me's self towards the absolute power of absolute Life as the engendering of ethical empathy:

*Only the work of mercy practices the forgetting of self in which, all interest for the Self (right down to the idea of what we call a self or a me) now removed, no obstacle is now posed to the unfurling of life in this Self extended to its original essence (170, emphasis in original).*

Henry's ethical stance may reveal some inadequacies here particularly if we draw a comparison with the ethics of otherness espoused for example by his contemporaries Lévinas and Ricoeur. The comparisons are self-evident at a structural level where the very existence of the other throws into question the priority of the self and in the process opens up a new ethical relationship between self and other. But there are profound differences. For Henry, the forgetting of self (both 'I' and 'me') for the sake of the other is produced in such a way that it has no *direct* bearing on the self as a 'me' (who is forgotten but forgotten *safely* in his own Ipseity) other than to repeat the idea that it is 'no longer me who acts but the Arch-Son who acts in me' (169). We know also that this idea will find a safe haven in the other who is equally self-contained as an ipseitic other. It would appear that the forgetting of self ('me') in Henry's ethical phenomenology is designed to allow for the other to also reveal even more visibly and gloriously the self-affective Ipseity of Life itself. Forgetting of self therefore valorises Henry's Christian ethics enabling Life's self-giving Ipseity to take centre stage. This ethics of self-deferral fits neatly within Henry's subjectivity as absolute in the sense of being without relation and radical in its interiority. But it also points, paradoxically, to a radical dependence, akin to Aquinas's notion of subsistence; this is evidenced in the way that 'living' must always pass through the Arch of the Arch-Son to be validated, and that our Ipseity is first and foremost the Ipseity of absolute Life because of Henry's emphasis on human passivity in our status as living within Life's 'accusative'.

If ultimate deferral to Life's Ipseity revealed in the other defines Henry's ethics, direct human engagement between self and other constitutes Lévinasian and Ricoeurian ethics (with degrees of difference). For Lévinas, the existence of the other actually liberates the self from the slumber of primordially and egoism, making him confront as a matter of *reciprocal ethical obligation*, the other's and by extension his own self's existence. For Lévinas, the relation with the other legitimises the subject's emergence out of 'egological' space and into a self whose

existence is contingent on a transcendence towards the other. The nearest Lévinas comes (it would seem) to the consolation of a self-contained ordinary Ipseity is in his 'me-ness' of the self. But unlike Henry who can afford to forget the 'me' because of the automatic manifestation of essential Ipseity in the other and, in the process, not forgo his ethical integrity, Lévinas is obliged to redefine his self in relation with the other as a consequence of the *visible* effect produced by the other:

The Other tears me from my hypostasis, from the *here*, at the heart of being or at the center of the world where, privileged and in this sense primordial, I posit myself. But, in this tearing, the ultimate meaning of my "me-ness" is revealed. In the collation of meaning between "me" and the other and also in my alterity to myself, an alterity through which I can confer on the other the meaning of myself, the *here* and *there* come to invert their respective meanings.<sup>11</sup>

Lévinas's ethics reveals an otherness that gives responsibility to the self *outside* Ipseity. Ricoeur undercuts the return to self in Lévinas's position by placing greater emphasis on otherness as constitutive of selfhood ('living or acting the being of the other in oneself').<sup>12</sup> Henry's ethics reveals a mutual exclusivity between self and otherness *inside* and *because of* Ipseity. In fact, it is because of Life's Ipseity that Henry is able to develop his alternative programme of ethical Christian action. Defined in the language of 'genius' and 'second birth', his Christian ethics is distinct because of the difference he establishes between doing in 'the truth of the world' and doing in 'the truth of Life'. His phenomenology determines that action is predicated on the power or lack of it attributed respectively to the agent ('I') or to the passive subject ('me'). In the 'truth of the world', doing is described as leading to something objective: it is doing performed by an external Being/Individual who does in the knowledge given to him that he can. In the 'truth of Life' doing is situated in the dimension of life: as such, to do is life's doing. It is an action of transcendence that one does in the invisibility of life. To do is to make an effort to do in the sense that doing takes pains to do.

In this idea of pain and suffering (which gives Henry's ethics its unique Christological significance), Henry literally fleshes out a phenomenology of the flesh which is the essence of his phenomenological Life. Whereas in the 'truth of

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<sup>11</sup> (Lévinas 1991: 213).

<sup>12</sup> (Ricoeur 1992).

the world', the world appears as an outside and one can experience an ecstatic truth belonging to that world, it is a reality that pales in comparison to life in the 'truth of Life' where Life simply appears, 'grasping itself in its own pathos without ever putting itself at a distance' (194), and where truth is 'in-ecstatic-Life'. Crucially, for Henry, it is at this level of pathos that Life is revealed by feeling itself in the 'flesh of its own pathos'. Henry's Christian ethical man, through his selfness, me-ness, self-affection and radical immanence that is immemorial in its originary Ipseity, submits wilfully to this pathos of Life as his natural condition 'because "suffer oneself" is the structure of Life' and because the 'phenomenological substance of Life is pathos' (199). And far from being an experience of pain and suffering, it is for Henry one of joy and the culmination of phenomenological Life:

Suffering appears to be the path that leads to enjoying, and thus its condition. It is only in experiencing oneself in the "suffer oneself" that the life of the living Self comes into itself, such that suffering is veritably a path and a way. It is the test that life must pass so that, in and through that test, it attains itself and comes into itself in that coming that is the essence of any life, the process of its self-revelation [...]. This is the antinomic structure of life, its division into the dichotomy, between the opposed tonalities of suffering and happiness, such that the former can only lead to the latter, inasmuch as suffering takes place and does not stop taking place within happiness, as what gives it to itself, as its internal and insurmountable condition (201).

## CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

What is striking and provocative about Henry's phenomenology of Christianity is that it pre-empts and appears to safeguard itself against philosophical attempts to rationalise it, objectify it, and reduce it to a thought process that demonstrates how it functions. Its self-defence resides in a radicalisation of the notion of relationality that is founded in a theory of immanence as a self-evident truth. The concept of relationality is rethought in such a way that all relations are reconfigured to the Arch-Son (of God and Life) and that instead of the intermediary of a 'third person' who facilitates connectivity with Life, there is a primary 'One' or 'Life' itself (so to speak) whose very essence is embodied in Henry's idea of the 'corps-sujet'. As such, relationality does not disappear from Henry's phenomenology of Life but is

instead deepened via an historical embeddedness in (and indebtedness to) the Arch-Son of Christ, and also through the 'corps-sujet' which allows Henry to filter experience through the phenomenology of the body (flesh) as evidenced in modes of self-affection and the radically immanent Self.

But while this convergence of form and content underpins the internal coherence of this philosophical method, it also raises some questions. Foremost among these is the seemingly uncontested nature of the 'truth of Christianity' which, similar to the theological concepts of 'givenness' and 'gift', appear to make sense (and can only make sense) as a 'truth' inasmuch as 'it [truth] is its own and that can only testify to itself' (10). Explaining or justifying the 'truth' of Christianity through philosophy or metaphysics (or other means) might require greater reliance on conventional relational structures that Henry's phenomenology has radicalised. As such, it could be argued that Henry's phenomenology of Christianity preaches to and satiates the faith of the converted on the grounds that, by virtue of phenomenology, Henry's truth of Christianity does not have to justify itself outside itself but attests to its existence through a different set of philosophical modes of perception. The 'truth' of Christianity lends itself therefore to the very self-valorising function of the phenomenological method and, as Henry claims, the undeniability, inescapability and unavoidability of the phenomenolisation of divine essence as consisting in 'Revelation as self-revelation of itself on the basis of itself' (10). The question remains: could one not enlist this phenomenological method to aver the truth of any phenomenon?

A second concern, inextricably linked with the first, is the *equation* of the truth of Christianity with the self-revelation of God, followed seamlessly and problematically by conditional access to God through a phenomenology of Life. God as 'Being' (or source of knowledge) is substituted by God *as Life* and living Life becomes the means of experiencing (knowing) God. As with the theory of the pre-existence of a truth of Christianity, Henry's phenomenology of Life as God rests on a pre-given principle upon which he establishes the 'first fundamental equation of Christianity - God is Life' (27). The question mark over these equations within the phenomenological method is that they do not require testing or verification, but need only to attest to themselves as 'proof'. One of the paradoxes therefore at the heart of Henry's phenomenology of Christianity is

that, while it must rely on demonstrativeness for its exposition, it re-orientes the traditional process of objectification (separation between subject and object/truth) by radicalising the structure of relationality with an alternative set of self-affective processes. Henry's phenomenology would appear safe-proof in this respect on two levels: phenomenologically, the truth of Christianity is itself, not what shows or makes true, and transcendently, the 'transcendental 'I' is rendered powerless as a subject capable of experiencing action. As an illusion, the thinking subjectivity of 'I' is modified by a corporeal subjectivity of 'me', defined as 'entering into possession of itself' (136). In this sense, Henry's use of transcendence is radically inventive. It erases the ego on the one hand and advocates a transcendental of Life in the 'me' on the other hand. Henry's transcendental Life does not involve a metaphysical reflection on life; rather, transcendental Life is a way of overcoming the self in the 'truth of the world' and connecting with the radically immanent Self that experiences itself and Life as God. Transcendence is thus transmuted to become a register of immanence. We can conclude that phenomenology serves effectively and is particularly suited to Henry's thesis of capturing the immanence of the truth of Christianity and its self-affecting powers. Capturing the presence of this immanence as an evolving continuum is one of Henry's more innovative uses of phenomenology. Immanence as a continuum reinforces the historical trajectory of Henry's phenomenology of Life; sourced in corporeal self-affection, the permanence of this immanence is assured inasmuch as it is both timeless and unbreakable in its livingness.

In the wider critique of the metaphysics of subjectivity, Henry's use of immanence shines an important light on a simple phenomenological principle: the return to the thing in itself in its invisible immanence. One of the aims of his work *I am The Truth*, beyond its immediate phenomenological exposition, is to redress the decline of Christianity in the late Twentieth Century. Against a backdrop of Galileo's geometrics, scientific knowledge, Marxism and the sense of loss of what a 'beyond' might mean, Henry launches a steely defence of Christianity's phenomenological essentialism, based on a fundamental binary between an illusory 'truth of the world' and a genuine 'truth of Life'. His response to the decline of Christianity is to propose that there is one invisible reality ('Life') which is 'phenomenological Life'. This is the 'Life' that does not

show itself in the 'world', that eludes its 'truth' and which only reveals itself to itself in its *pathētik* self-revelation. Access to the truth of this 'Life' is through a combination of transcendental self-generation (Ipseity) with the First Living (Christ), and the submission of self to its radical self-immanence in the flesh of Christ.

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