

Book Review

EKIN ERKAN (New York)

The Call of Being: On Pure Phenomenality and Radical Immanence

Michel Henry. *The Michel Henry Reader*. Edited by Scott Davidson and Frédéric Seyler. Evanston, Illinois: 2019, 266 p.

Michel Henry is perhaps most often cited by contemporary Laruelleans such as John Ó Maoilearca, Katerina Kolozova, Anthony Paul Smith and Alexander Galloway – indeed, François Laruelle's system of non-standard philosophy and its univocal radical immanence is highly indebted to Henry's non-representationalism. Admittedly, in contrast to Laruelle's "heretical" Christology, Henry's theological-realist determination is astricted by the idealist paralogisms of a cogitativist Ego, which transpires most markedly in Henry's account of Faith – after all, Henry is a Jesuit phenomenologist following in the tradition of Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chretien. Nonetheless, Henry's work on immanence – deanthropocentrized and universalized as generic – takes us much further than both Spinoza's speculative immanence, which is diluted by the necessitarian world of negative determination, and Deleuzian immanence, which is characterized by multiplicitous difference. In *The Michel Henry Reader*, editors Scott Davidson and Frédéric Seyler weave together a comprehensive anthology of essays that survey Henry's phenomenology of life, stitching together an oeuvre that spans Marxist political philosophy, phenomenology of language, subjectivity and aesthetics, and ethics qua religion.

Rather than analyzing *specific* objects and phenomena, phenomenology is tasked with disclosing the structural manifestation and conditioned appearance of objects. Drawing primarily from Husserl and, consequently, Heidegger, Henry examines a kind of "pure phenomenology" that, contra intentionality and the inert world of visible objects, examines affectivity's "radical invisibility" (Henry 2019, xii). Whereas Husserl and Heidegger's analyses emphasize the self-transcending nature of appearances, for Henry appearance is never independent or self-reliant but, instead, genitive and denotative. Insofar as his work concerns the visible world of object-manifestation (or that which, in Kantian parlance, is

deemed "phenomena"), Henry's philosophical interest prioritizes the bodily power to act, or affectivity, and its relation to the subjective experience, which is always precluded from epistemic access. Thus, self-manifestation is a precondition for manifestation and a given state beyond control. Furthermore, for Henry appearance is dyadic, both a subjective appearance and, simultaneously, referencing a plurality of contingent appearances (*horizontality*).

Henry's analysis of the duality of appearance may remind readers of Laruelle's "dualysis" – indifferent to language, which seeks to mediate and correlate its exteriority, Laruelle's "dualysis" enacts a "cut of the real," imposing a critical distinction that affirms how language and thought mediate the transcendental incursion of philosophy, "cloning" and "fictioning" the Laruellean real vis-à-vis the diktat of transcendental thought. For Henry, the foundation of (self-)intentionality is *within* affectivity, which is clarified via the relation between immanence and transcendence, as intentionality is phenomenologically dependent upon affectivity and determined by horizontality, duality and transcendence. Thus, Henry's approach to ontology implies the primacy of affectivity, as "Auto-affectation" determines the condition of possible appearances. Thus, Henry's central query is such: if we reject the Kantian position of "pure transcendence," how is it that we can know anything about "pure affectivity," given that it escapes consciousness and, therefore, descriptive/representational conceivability?

Rather than ascribing to a transcendental deduction of pure affectivity, Henry's notion of pure immanence denotes "ipseity," or the conceptual possession of subjectivity: "[i]n order to be affected by something other, subjectivity first has to affect itself" (*ibid.*). For Henry, the phenomenology of life can never access radical affective immanence explicitly *because* the phenomenology of life makes life the object of its reflection, thus introducing an impenetrable distance between life and the philosophizing subject. Consider the phenomenological tradition that spans from Descartes to Husserl and Heidegger. Heidegger's explicit thesis delineates that life has its own kind of Being that is essentially "accessible only in *Dasein*" (*ibid.*, 32). For Henry, such a conception of singularization is preceded by an originary "*Ur*-generation," or a fundamental and enactive auto-affectation that "defines my essence" and "is not my doing" (*ibid.*). Whereas philosophy makes itself content with an "*image* of life," Henry's auto-affective immanence is, at its core, non-philosophical.

Despite Henry does not use the term "non-philosophy" or "non-standard philosophy," his approach to phenomenology greatly informs Laruelle's conception of "philofiction" qua the Transcendental Decision. According to Laruelle's account, the "real" is all-

determining and physicality is categorically independent from its representations; thus, the "real" is irrevocably indifferent to the thought that seeks to signify it. Similarly, Henry's account of affective knowledge is infra-intentional and barred from theoretical conceivability, albeit it unfolds within the experience of life itself (the invisible *épreuve*). For Henry, auto-affective transcendence-in-immanence occupies a theological nexus, akin to the "purity of absolute Life," which is carried out "without thought, without representation, without imagination, without perception, without conception...without being preceded in any way" and, thus, "without showing itself in any world" (ibid., 252-253). Radicalizing Henry's auto-affectation, Laruelle will eventually disrobe Henry's absolute "Archi-phenomenality" from its constitutive determination, attributing immanence as non-thetic gnosis, whereby the "real" corresponds to the indeterminate and unpredictable superposition of quantum mechanics.

Preceding Laruelle, Henry's formulaic account of subjectivity quite possibility establishes the most comprehensive precedent of phenomenological immanence and, therefore, is entirely novel. Rather than determining ontology vis-à-vis philosophy, for Henry phenomenology *is* ontology. In the essay "Incarnation," Henry distinguishes between two fundamental modes of appearance: "the appearing of the world" and "the appearing of life" (ibid., 46). For Henry, the concept of incarnation is truly critical, as it introduces the question of possessing "a flesh" and distinguishes the foundational content of phenomenology from the horizon of pure exteriority and inert appearances. Unlike Heidegger's *ek-stasis*, the determinate Event of *Dasein's* exceptionality, for Henry the distinction between pure phenomenality and phenomenon does not exist "in life," albeit the former provides access to the latter.

Problematizing phenomenality's representational latticework, Henry demonstrates how, repeating Galileo's analysis, Descartes, in the oft-referenced "Second Meditation," examines radical reduction via the piece of wax to determine an extended body stripped of color, sound, odor, etc. By revealing the wax's sensible and axiological "layer," deracinated from its subjective constitution, Descartes' *cogitatio* reveals how affection "comes from somewhere else than its ek-static structure" (ibid., 49). Henry describes how, via Descartes, every sensible body presupposes another body that constitutes and makes representation possible by presupposing an extra-experiential "transcendental subjective body" without which the "body-object-of-the-world would not exist" (ibid., 49).

For Henry, the fundamental fault of classical phenomenology, particularly in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, is that the nature of this transcendental body is silhouetted

against the horizon of representation which remains tacitly subordinated to the world. Despite this body cannot be reduced to an object of perception, in traditional phenomenology Being is recognized in appearance. For instance, in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, *Dasein's* ipseity is reduced to the process of "Self-externalization," as it is both discovered in and contingent upon the world. Contra Husserl and Heidegger, Henry's radical immanence avoids confining itself to an identity relation. Henry illuminates how Husserl's phenomenology unwittingly repeats Kant's analysis of transcendental subjectivity vis-à-vis the *a priori* conditions of possibility – much like Kant, Husserl was "constrained to take the allegedly 'immanent' intentional object as a transcendental guide of his subjective, and notably noetic, descriptions" (ibid., 99). For Husserl, the passing object's temporal presence – its retention and protention – constitutes subjectivity, itself, such that the Husserlian reduction identifies "consciousness with the consciousness of the world," or "*cogitation to cogitatum*," and "phenomenality to ek-stasis" (ibid., 102).

Henry's approaches the arrival of subjectivity via that which is "in itself" and, therefore, conceives of subjectivity *as auto-affection*; opposing Ricoeur's hermeneutic rendering of the implicit and thematized unconscious, Henry's univocity is sympathetic to the Dionysian drive-based fundamental Ego that transpires in Schopenhauer (and Nietzsche's) Will and Freud's unconscious Ego. However, unlike Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud, Henry does not presuppose that the unconscious can be assimilated into the structure of representation. Analyzing internal modes of apperception, Henry is particularly attendant to Freud's 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, where the nervous system's excitation is determined via the representation of affection. Henry's dirempted qualification re: dyadic-appearance transpires once more, as it corresponds to Freud's two-pronged conception of ontological receptivity within the organism – on one hand there is exogenous excitation, which maps onto "transcendental receptivity" with respect to the world, or the unfolding of *ek-stasis*; on the other hand, endogenous excitation denotes "transcendental receptivity with respect to oneself," or the self-receptivity of absolute subjacent auto-affection (ibid., 127). For Henry, drives and affects are concomitant to the theory of passive genesis and, more broadly, phenomenology's active and noetic consciousness.

For Heidegger, the essence of representation is the essence of Being. Much like La-ruelle's antimony towards philosophical decisionism, Henry's conception of subjectivity is that which first produces the conditions of contingency, upon which mathematization and scientifism are then constructed. Thus, measurement and the mathematical realm do not provide univocal knowledge of the real world, "for this real world itself...can only be expe-

rience and intuited within subjectivity" (ibid., 85). The body's auto-impressionality is conceived of as flesh, upon which sense-experience is a secondary product; it is the intermediary moment, before sensation, where auto-affection is manifest: affectivity, therefore, has nothing to do with sensibility. This conception of pure (auto-)affect becomes quite clear in Henry's literature and is a position shared by other philosophers of immanence such as Deleuze (and even Spinoza) but has been muddied by "affect theory's" re-rendering of affectivity qua emotion/sensation.

Henry is explicitly interested in the Marxian essence of technological exploitation. Revisiting Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," Henry's interest in the essence of production is how it is complicit in *aletheia*, with technology giving form to unconcealment. This will also greatly influence how Laruelle eventually identifies technology with philosophy's alloying thought. In "The Concept of Being as Production," Henry remarks that contemporary theory "no longer gazes at truth" but, instead – in the words of Max Planck – aims at achieving mastery over the real through morphology, exhibiting causal and computational determinability that makes phenomena predictable by structuring objects in accordance with categorical subsumption. As Henry remarks, "[n]ature is no longer *phusis*; it is...a complex of computable forces" (ibid., 146). Henry's mention of automatization anticipates Chris Anderson's infamous remarks re: data science's outpou- ching theory, making philosophy obsolete. Confronting Feuerbachian materialism and Hegelian idealism, Henry recalls the originality of Marxian thought, as it preserves the originary essence of being. Despite Marx's essence of work is steeped in the (Hegelian) process of objectification, Marx's conception of praxis fundamentally opposes the visible objectification of intuited action, universality, and exploited surplus.

Henry's Marxian critique is to the extent that praxis designates a *real action* and is autonomous from the gaze of intuition, which "occurs somewhere else, outside action" (159). For Henry, Marx's truly original contribution (and his departure from Hegelianism and Feuerbach's thought) is in demonstrating that the process of "coming into the objectivity of a world" is not contingent upon the will to production and, thus, "lets the originary essence of being escape" to a radical "Outside" (ibid., 155). For Henry, praxis is an immanent act; in intuition we do not *act* and, conversely, in action we do not *intuit*. Henry prioritizes praxis, enjoining theory as a product of praxis, such that "the object given to intuition" is merely the generative process of technological and economic determination. Contra Hegel, Henry affirms that the empirical intuition of work resides in subjectivity and *not* in objectivity: "[w]ith Marx, we must say: machines do not work...for they have their site

within objectivity, where there are only third person processes; the movement of a piston no more qualifies as work than the water falling in a cascade" (ibid., 162). Henry preserves praxis as subjective and, therefore, beyond the philosophical interpretation and representational duress of mechanization – for Henry, it is with Marx that all of philosophy is dissolved. Once again, Marx's non-philosophical contributions will also be critical for Laruelle as, opposed to the auto-referential postulation of exchange value, Laruelle's "non-Marxist" formulation is grounded by the principle of physicality being independent from representation/mechanization.

Throughout *The Michel Henry Reader*, we are reminded of Henry's prescience. Prioritizing praxis as the actualization of bodily subjectivity, Henry describes a future scenario of unbounded automatization and Artificial Intelligence; this has become the subject of today's "accelerationism." Henry recounts an asymptotic "absolute limit of capitalism" that finds itself manifest under the instance of "[a]n entirely automatized system of production" (ibid., 164). The full scale of automatized production signifies the decline and ruin of capitalism, as capital is stilted upon "value and surplus-value," both of which "are produced exclusively by subjective labor" (ibid., 164). Henry brings to surface the question of what would happen when the productive forces of use-value become entirely object-based, as they coincide with an instrumental network realized by elaborate technology that extinguishes the subjectivity of individuals. Rather than retreat into pessimism, Henry's humanist idealism thus unfolds, as he remarks upon a viable alternative "future life" that, opposing the possibility of a generalized "great malaise," reinscribes itself within "spiritual life." Henry's Marxism is not only determined by praxis but also the communitarian ethos, as radical immanence is stilted upon the transcendental possibility of "being-in-common." Henry is a thinker of the commons via the universal conception of conceivability: the singularity of the "we" is determined as "Selves and egos" (ibid., 260) but the condition of possibility establishes an inter-subjective community of the "living who share Life in common" (ibid., xx).

For Henry there is a "transcendental me" (*moi transcendantal*) so long as the experience that it "has of itself is not its own doing" but, instead, is directed by self-giveness (ibid., 219). Henry's auto-affection qua pure phenomenality – over-throwing representation and language – is often cited when speaking of Laruelle's real but so, too, should we recall Chretien's Immemorial, from which thought is also fundamentally foreclosed. Henry reminds us in "Speech and Religion" "[t]hat there is no memory of the Immemorial," meaning that we cannot represent it, form a memory of it, or relate to it "by any thought

whatsoever." Much like Laruelle's "real," with Chretien's "Immemorial," the "Archi-ancient never turns towards thought" (ibid., 255). The Immemorial is the antecedence of life to living and, thus, indexes an "absolute past"; despite Chretien's theological fixture, the Immemorial is akin to time-without-becoming qua non-being, akin to Meillassoux's atemporal "hyperchaos."

Unlike Laruelle, Henry's theological patheme spatializes the real, giving it an ethereal presence and terming this exteriority "Oblivion," whereby the Self's relation to life is preceded; the Oblivion is constitutive of the ipsiety of the Self in its absolute immanence: "it is only because no image of itself is interposed like a screen between it and itself that the Self is thrown into itself without protection," and, therefore, no memory will ever refer to its image and nothing separates it from itself, such that "it is this Self that is forever" (ibid., 256-257). All-determining, this is univocal immanence of the One, the same radical immanence we will see radicalized and made atheistic in Laruelle's quantum superposition. Nonetheless, non-intentional, Henry's *apparaître pathétique*, as pathos-filled auto-affection, demonstrates a non-conditional revealing that exists prior to any subject-object division (in opposition to *ek-static* appearing). As a comprehensive review of Henry's work, *The Michel Henry Reader* provides an astute selection of newly translated and curated essays that illuminate an exceedingly original philosopher to whom many of today's most radical thinkers are undoubtedly indebted.