

## Book Review

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Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XX, No 2 (2012) pp 203-207

Vol XX, No 2 (2012)  
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)  
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2012.558  
[www.jffp.org](http://www.jffp.org)



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Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly, eds., *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought* (London: Continuum, 2012), 177 pp.

Michel Henry (1922-2002) was a leading philosopher in France during the second half of the twentieth century. His literary productivity, which included the publication of four novels, extended from the 1940s until his death in 2002. The study of Henry's place in French philosophy in this period is only at its early stages, but his influence was undoubtedly significant. The evidence suggests that many at least knew something of his work. His defense took place in February 1963, with a jury comprised of Jean Wahl, Jean Hyppolite, Paul Ricoeur, Ferdinand Alquié, and Henri Gouhier, all significant figures from an earlier generation of philosophers. Another generation was in attendance too, among them Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Emmanuel Levinas. After his defense, a young Derrida would send a letter to Henry, and later his first two pieces of writing. *Cahiers Philosophiques* records an interview of Henry on the subject of moral normativity, by a young Alain Badiou, then an assistant in philosophy in the faculty at Reims. Henry and Foucault, both students of Hyppolite, once met by chance in Amsterdam, and would pass an amicable afternoon in conversation there. Much later, in 1976, Levinas would make Henry's *The Essence of Manifestation* the subject of his final course at the Sorbonne. Less trivial indications also suggest that Henry's reach was significant, though mostly inexplicit, and the themes that resonate throughout his work— affectivity, immanence, subjectivity, life, etc.—have become important areas of study in their own right.

The articles in this collection, edited by Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly, serve to continue the work of initiating a still-nascent debate over the philosophical writings of Michel Henry in the Anglophone world. The volume thus belongs to the early stages of Henry's reception, and the contributions it contains will advance discussion around a number of important issues. Gathered under the headings "Phenomenology," "Christianity," and "Theory and Practice," the foci of this volume are limited to a selected set of questions and debates. The articles are interpretive, critical, and comparative in nature. Contributions by Jean-Luc Marion, Renaud Barbaras, and the editors situate Michel Henry's philosophy within

the wider field of phenomenology. Articles by Kevin Hart and Sylvain Camilleri indicate the radically different assessments that one can make of the theological import of Henry's work. Rolf Kühn and Raphaël Gély complete the volume by explaining and expounding the theoretical shifts initiated by Henry with respect to the question of truth, and with respect to social action.

Jean-Luc Marion's contribution to this volume reinforces and repeats Henry's way of arriving at the invisible as the essence of phenomenality. Marion places Henry's position in relief against the history of philosophy and shows what is so distinctive and important in Henry's approach to the question of phenomenality; but Marion's contribution also amounts to an original development of Henry's position with respect to Marion's own philosophical project. He shows, first, how the history of metaphysics, as well as the history of phenomenology through Merleau-Ponty, has assumed the homogeneity of the visible and invisible, that is, the possibility of translating one into the other, or vice-versa. Marion demonstrates, on the contrary, the vital significance of Henry's decisive affirmation of the absolute distinction between visible and invisible, thus the impossibility in principle of arriving at the second by starting from the first. Marion shows that the historical enterprise known as metaphysics can be seen as a theoretical failure to the extent that metaphysics does not and cannot admit this impossibility. Alternatively, the preeminence of Henry's phenomenology stems from the way it grants phenomenality to the invisible, and at a more basic level, defines phenomenality as the invisible. The strength of phenomenology as a theoretical discipline consists in its power to articulate the invisible as such, bringing the invisible into the status of phenomenality, without supposing that this status borrows its privileges from the visible, whether as its ground, source, or destiny. Marion also brings Henry's 1963 text into dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*. Marion's remarks can be supplemented and extended by a consideration of Henry's 2000 work, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, where Henry continues and clarifies why he does not follow Merleau-Ponty down the path of "turning the sensible into an absolute" (§ 21).

For some readers, the contribution of Renaud Barbaras, who has written extensively on Merleau-Ponty, will offer a possible counterpoint to Marion's reading. Barbaras argues that Henry fails to show how immanence can lead to transcendence, that the connection and translation of the first into the second has not yet been achieved, and that the phenomenality of the body remains incomplete until this has been accomplished. What for Henry and Marion must remain heterogeneous in principle, for Barbaras amounts rather to a first moment. Because the body and its movement are also worldly phenomena, for Barbaras, this fact must still be clarified phenomenologically: "To refer [exteriority] to another regime of appearance is to avoid the problem, not to resolve it" (52). Barbaras proposes instead to

substitute for what he calls Henry's phenomenology of drive, a phenomenology of desire in which "Henry's dualities shatter" on the surface of life's "carnal movements" (53). "In desire," Barbaras writes, "it is always the being of the self that is lacking; in desire, the subject is always separated from itself" (59). For Barbaras, Henry cannot explain the relationship between life and the world simply because, for Henry, these two modalities are absolutely heterogeneous. Thus, where Henry and Marion find a solution, Barbaras finds a problem. The reader may find that Barbaras seems to force too much distance between himself and Henry in order to set up his position as an alternative. For Henry, the body as such does form a unity between two modes of phenomenality; for him the point is that only one of these modes is original, while for Barbaras, the unity itself must be original as well. Henry would agree, but would insist that this unity, as real, arises only in the light of life's phenomenality, not in that of the world.

Approaching this general problem of the relation of immanence and transcendence, but from a different perspective, the editors in their essay show, through Henry's reading of *The Idea of Phenomenology*, why Henry's notion of immanence is incompatible with that of Husserl. They ask whether, "in the end, Henry is attempting to valorize the *pre-reflective*, to rehabilitate its fortunes in reaction to a perceived slight against it committed by reflection and the overvaluing thereof, or whether he is ultimately affirming the *non-reflective*" (77). As Hanson and Kelly see it, if immanence does not exclude transcendence altogether, "if reflection is truly a function of life," then the question remains in what way reflection "might shed a light of its own upon the dark region of its birth" (80).

Kevin Hart, in this volume and elsewhere, has stated his desire for a more skeptical reception of the philosophy of Michel Henry. Specifically, in his article "Inward Life," Hart urges caution with respect to Henry's approach to Christianity. Not unlike Socrates' accusers, Hart is worried that Henry may mislead "some younger philosophers and theologians" (88). Hart claims, furthermore, that Henry's work is "a critique of received religion and a bold attempt to reconceive" and ultimately to "reformulate" Christianity (88, 94). Hart also suggests that Henry's *The Essence of Manifestation* "continues and extends Fichte's project of affirming the primacy of 'inward life.'" Many will disagree with Hart's characterization of Henry's project, and it is certain that Henry did not understand his work in this way. The main claims in Hart's article probably pass with less argumentation than would be required to make the accusations stick, given the magnitude of the charges that he levels. Hart's particular way of blending theology and phenomenology will strike some readers as problematic, and this instinct may lead him to read Henry less charitably than readers might prefer.

Nevertheless, Hart's essay does put into relief at least one hermeneutical problem that arises when one seeks to interpret Henry's

philosophy. On whose terms does or should this interpretation rest? For those inclined to read Henry on his own terms, Hart's words of caution will seem helpful, but not convincing. It will always be possible to argue, as many do, that Henry is selective in his reading of Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, or others. But Henry's choices of emphasis when commenting on his philosophical predecessors are not made out of a fidelity owed by right to the prevailing historical lines of interpretation or influence, or even by reference to what his philosophical predecessors themselves hold as their most salient insights. Henry's choices of emphases and principles of selection stem rather from what he regards as the most decisive and fundamental turns of argument in their work, even if these theoretical decisions passed largely unnoticed by those who made them. From this point of view, Hart's claim that Henry is selective, though perhaps a legitimate argument with respect to the history of philosophy or with respect to philology, will seem to many to be unconvincing as a criticism of Henry, who was nothing if not a close and incisive reader.

A careful and compelling treatment of Henry's relation to Christianity can be found in the contribution by Sylvain Camilleri, who argues that Henry's last three books "introduce into the philosophical scene the first serious linking of *phenomenology* and *soteriology*" (111). Camilleri's exposition of this linking, which for him is still only latent in Henry, follows from his attentiveness to the distinctions between phenomenology and Christianity. He shows in an effective way the key moments of Henry's philosophical path as they pertain to the meaning of salvation, especially as it arises in the New Testament. Camilleri's important study makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of how the theology of salvation might bear upon our reading of Henry, and how the phenomenology of life might illuminate the doctrine of salvation in the Christian sense.

In the final two essays, Rolf Kühn and Raphaël Gély show how Henry's phenomenology challenges basic assumptions about the very idea of theory and practice, and about the relation between them. Kühn's contribution is primarily descriptive and aims to develop in his own terms Henry's conception of truth as originary. Gély's essay, at once original and constructive, shows how the social dimension of human existence is not secondary or ancillary to the phenomenology of life, but is in fact essential to it. His contribution is important as a corrective to more cursory readings of Henry, which see him as excessively concerned with human individuality. Gély also shows how the connections between individual and social might be reconceived on the basis of Henry's work, and how the phenomenology of life also implies a phenomenology of social action. Against Hegelian social theory, Gély argues that, when the "fundamentally affective dimension of a single shared life-force is denied, norms cannot be lived as anything other than pure instruments of regulative action... When the radically singular life of individuals is denied in the very immanence of its

felt-experience [*pâtir*], it is the very meaning of normativity that is deeply changed" (173). For Gély, the foundations of normative practices are affective. "The relationship between the normativity of common action and the self-realization of individual freedoms rests upon a more profound experience of norms, that of their implication in the growth of life's affective participation in its own power" (ibid.). The force of normativity does not consist in its status as objective, in the third person, but in the increase of life's own force that life itself makes possible through it.

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