

Is There a Flesh Without Body?

A Debate with Michel Henry

Emmanuel Falque

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXIV, No 1 (2016) 139-166.

Vol XXIV, No 1 (2016)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2016.720
www.jffp.org



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

Is There a Flesh Without Body?

A Debate with Michel Henry

Emmanuel Falque

Institut Catholique Paris

Is there a *flesh* [*chair*] without *body* [*corps*]?¹ This question seems abrupt, to say the least. Yet, it remains pertinent to the major claim of *Incarnation*, which is maintained from the very beginning to the final end: “defined by everything a body lacks,” the Introduction says, “flesh should not be confused with the body, but is indeed, if one may say so, the exact opposite” (4).² As the Conclusion repeats and sums up, a new intelligibility of the question of the body will be able to operate only “inasmuch as our body is not a body but a flesh” (256). In the phenomenological tradition going back to Husserl, “flesh” and “body” [*Leib* and *Körper*] designate two entities that are, if not separated, at least distinct. On the one side, there is the “body” [*Körper*] as a merely material substance in a natural, even naturalistic, sense of the term, and on the other side there is “the flesh” [*Leib*] as an organic, or better a living body, in that it has, or rather undergoes, the experience of its own body. As Husserl emphasizes in the *Krisis* (1935), “the expression (“in the flesh”) refers to the kinesthetic, to functioning as an ego in this particular way, primarily through seeing, hearing, etc.; and of course other modes of the ego belong to this (for example, lifting, carrying, pushing and the like).”³ The “body of flesh” [*Leibkörper*] is a unique German expression that is only cited three times by Michel Henry in this work (165, 238, 256). It will thus be one way of indicating, at least textually if not really, a certain unity between my *body* that will definitely constitute my cadaver [*Körper*], and the *flesh* that I am in that I experience a certain lived experience of my body in the ordinary experience of my everyday life [*Leib*]: to see, to hear, to get up, to know, etc. But, of course, the verbal indicator “the body of flesh” [*Leibkörper*] does not suffice to constitute this unity. And that is precisely the question that we want to pose to Michel Henry. Not in the sense that he retains, as we will see, a trivial exclusion of the flesh and the body - in this sense the question, “Is there a flesh without body” remains too abrupt - but rather in the sense that nothing indicates, beyond his masterful descriptive analyses, that there is a genuine *access* to the body through the flesh. Put otherwise,

everything happens as if the flesh, that is to say the experience of our own life, becomes so invasive here that we would come to forget that it is possessed and even experienced, at least materially and visibly, in and through a body.

Phenomenological questions, as one knows or at least as one comes to sense through Michel Henry's descriptive practice, are all the more radical when they are able to remain naïve. What does one experience in feeling "the difficulty the rise in the sloped lane brings", asks the author, in the "pleasure of a cold drink in the summer" or even in the pleasure "of a light breeze on their face" (3). These questions, childish as much as trivial, are ones that phenomenology must dare to ask today. Or rather, these examples seem implicitly also to concern the Son of man, even though he is not named here. Thus the relation to lived experience will concern the human as much as God, at least in his earthly pilgrimage. What does it mean to be "suddenly straining with fatigue, demanding a pillow," asks Michel Henry (is this not a reference to the Son of man who has no place to lay down his head?), "beginning to weep upon learning about his friend's death" (is this not Jesus crying over the death of Lazarus?) or "marveling at the perspicacity of a woman who has just sat down by his side to listen to him, leaving her sister to do the cooking" (the reference to Martha and Mary with Jesus in the house in Bethany seems quite clear in this case) (13)?

These questions will not remain unanswered, insofar as it is a question here of man purely and simply as well as of the Man-God. Or, to say it otherwise, phenomenological incarnation (2nd part: Phenomenology of the Flesh) reconnects to some extent with theological incarnation (3rd part: The Phenomenology of Incarnation). As with Thomas Aquinas many centuries before, Michel Henry will not escape from the famous argument concerning the double truth stated in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in a necessary unity between the "truth which faith professes and reason investigates."⁴ This is all the more so when phenomenology is explicitly presented in Michel Henry, even though it is said in passing, as a sort of *preambula fidei* that is necessary for theology: "Givenness; showing; phenomenization; unveiling; uncovering; appearance; manifestation; and revelation . . . these key words for phenomenology are also, in large measure, key terms for religion, or theology" (23, my emphasis). However, the connection between incarnation or being taken into a properly human flesh (the phenomenology of the flesh) and the incarnation or the exclusively divine coming into the flesh is not self-evident. The French language establishes a homonymy of the terms for expressing the one and the other (the incarnation of the human and the incarnation of God), whereas German distinguishes clearly between what is the case for the human as "taken into the flesh" [*Inkarnation*] and what is the case for God in his "becoming man" [*Menschwerdung*]. And that is the whole difficulty: nothing ensures, at least in reading Michel Henry's work, that the divine incarnation in a flesh pure and simple [*Inkarnation*] also

expresses the becoming human of God [*Menschwerdung*]. As we will show, only a theology of the body or of the purely organic, rather than a unilateral phenomenology of the flesh, will be able to produce the identification, frequently avoided by Michel Henry, between the carnal incarnation of God and his historical and corporeal humanization in the figure of the incarnate Word.

A course centered on the flesh in its relation to the body will avoid the all too superficial accusations against Henryan phenomenology, even though they are occasionally justified (I. The Panegyric of Fears). Only his well-founded descriptive phenomenology, which is rooted in a transcendental approach, will prove, to whomever would want still to deny it, the validity of a phenomenological approach to say at least what is the case for the flesh of man (II. The Phenomenality of Flesh). The essential question will then remain: how can this phenomenality also say something about the incarnation of God without disincarnating Him radically or better, dis-incorporating Him (III. The Impossible Incorporation)? In this sense, the sharp critique of the first part of this paper (the panegyric of fears) will have no other aim than to reveal the positivity of the second part (the descriptive power of Michel Henry's work). The third part of this paper will then mark the heart of our objection (the question of incorporation): the fact that there is a duality in the appearing of flesh and body does not actually explain how one can get *from the flesh to the body* – if it is the case that the body and the world themselves are not what constitute either the human or God, but only (and exclusively) flesh and life. In this sense, one will guard against a reading that is too partial or partisan. A respect for the entirety of the work also belongs to the concern for honesty, in particular, in matters of intellectual integrity.

The Panegyric of Fears

Three grievances, derived from an initial reading of Michel Henry's book, can be raised against it: 1) the dual rejection of Hellenism and Judaism; 2) the return of dualism; 3) the reduction of the entire history of philosophy, or most of it, to the model of seeing. Nothing here prevents these accusations from being false or unfounded, as we have said. But setting them aside here will suffice to indicate that they are not the essential originality of *Incarnation*. The panegyric will thus be understood at the same time as an "address to all people" (from the Greek *paneguris*) and as the praise of an author who, even if we are not in agreement with him on all his points, nonetheless has the merit of deciding and thus of thinking.

1. The Twofold Rejection of Hellenism and Judaism

As with the book *I am the Truth* which opened with the rejection of historicism, *Incarnation* opens up its own field by departing from Hellenism this time – and from everything that it considers to belong closely or even remotely to its domain: from the silt of the earth in the book of *Genesis* to being thrown in the world in Heidegger. This severe gesture opens the proposal and is repeated many times: John’s “astounding” claim that “the Word was made flesh” (*John* 1:14) is “incompatible with Greek philosophy” (6). This claim is based on three reasons. The first reason: the Greek language has distorted the meaning of the Christian incarnation. It thus becomes impossible, even absurd, to ask Greek concepts to have the intelligence of the most anti-Greek truth that there is (7). The second reason: Judaism itself has followed the path of Hellenism. The idea of an earthly body delivered over to death marks not only Greek philosophy but also the Jewish conception of the earthly body as a mortal body by its interpretation of the silt of the earth (7-8). The third reason: phenomenology itself, since Husserl and even more so with Heidegger, has also embarked on this path of a “Greek presupposition of contemporary phenomenology,” by considering the flesh to appear always in a body that is open to the world (intentionality) and unilaterally directed toward its end (being towards death) (21).

With regard to these three chief accusations – two for theological reasons (the distortion of Christianity by Hellenism and the transfer of Judaism to Hellenism) and one for a philosophical reason (the Hellenization of phenomenology itself) – it is thus important first to de-Hellenize Christianity, second to get rid of its Hellenizing Judaism (which is then conceived independently from John’s Prologue) and third to abandon the Greek source of all Western philosophy. According to Henry, the texts of the Church fathers, “against the *Jews* and against the *Greeks*” (8, my emphasis), will thus serve as a rescue device for a culture that is completely adrift, or to put it in older terms, marked by “barbarism”. The first two disputes fall within theology and have in reality already been played out in the history of texts and doctrines. Only the third, the phenomenological dispute, seems original and constitutes the true contribution of *Incarnation* to the philosophical debate.

a. The hypothesis of a de-Hellenization of Christianity already dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and, following Feuerbach, to Adolph Harnack: “it withdrew their minds from the simplicity of the Gospel, and increasingly transformed it into a philosophy of religion.”⁵ The conflict in the 1970s between Hans Küng (*On Being a Christian*, 1976) and Alois Grillmeier (*Comment être chrétien, la réponse de Hans Küng*, 1979) seems even today to have guided the dispute.⁶ To such a point, let us dare say, that Michel Henry’s reference to Bernard Sesboüé’s book – *Jésus Christ dans la*

tradition de l'Église – does not aim, it seems, to advocate in favor of the de-Hellenization of dogma (9, fn. 1), but quite the contrary. The repetition in the Nicene creed of the “Son of God born of the Father” into “that is to say consubstantial with the Father” is not an accusation in the theologian’s eyes. It refers instead to the fact that the first councils knew how to express in another language, that is to say in Greek concepts, something that was not Greek in the beginning: “The *that is to say* (of the Nicene council) puts two types of language into equivalence: that of Scripture and that of philosophy. Thus nothing is said that was not already there. It is not a new content that would have been invented. But a new language is put into the service of the authentic meaning.”⁷ The enculturation of dogma in Hellenization is thus not overlooked, but rather is the proof of its utmost success and can still provide a pastoral model today.

b. As for the rejection of Judaism, in the critique of the objectification of the human by the silt of the earth, there too the game seems to have been played already, at least in theology. Bultmann’s demythologization in his *Jesus: Mythology and Demythologization* (a collection of papers from 1926 to 1951) has no other aim than to strip Christianity away from archaic forms in its Judaic roots.⁸ To read the prologue of Genesis (the creation) only through the optics of the prologue of John (birth) is probably not sufficient: “The concept of *creation* now means *generation*, and the generation in absolute Life’s self-generation of that which happens to oneself only by coming in that self-generation” (183, my emphasis). The formula from the first council of Nicea (in 325) states the opposite instead. To say “begotten not made” with respect to the Son highlights the fact that birth is reserved to Him and that we ourselves participate in it only through adoption. By a reversal of the positive into the negative, there are thus creatures that are not identical to what is begotten. That is to say, as we shall see, there is a world that is not life but that is not, however, detestable, or a body that is not the flesh without thereby becoming execrable. The ontological difference of the created from the begotten does not imply any deficiency. The thickness of the one (the created) indicates instead the condition for the revelation of the other (the begotten).

c. Having established these theological givens, Michel Henry’s phenomenological path then seems to be what is the most original. That it is necessary to reject the silt of the earth out of which Adam is made solely as his corporeal component (his matter) and not as his flesh (his own experience of this matter), so be it. But what one would not expect is that Descartes’s “extended wax” is also a modality of this “mud” from *Genesis*, in an apt crossing between two traditions: “When, in his relentless polemic against Marcion [...], Tertullian assigns the flesh an origin in the silt of the earth, the phenomenological and ontological horizon that presides over this conception of flesh, its birth, and its reality, is the appearing of the world” (128-9). In short, one and the same reduction of corporeity to a *res extensa*,

that is to say of the flesh to the body, will be found in the (Yahvist) tradition of the book of *Genesis* and in the Cartesian concept of extension, inherited from Galileo (which is to be distinguished, according to Michel Henry, from the great Cartesian discovery of auto-affection in the act of the *cogitatio*). The benefit of the de-Hellenization and de-mythologization of Christianity thus appears, all in all, more phenomenological than theological. The author places himself on this terrain and that is where his most fundamental contribution is situated: “placing ourselves *still on a philosophical plane*, we will wonder whether the existence of Christ . . . is something other than a simple possibility – is precisely an existence” (15, my emphasis). A gesture of rejecting traditions that is far too radical, however, would be able to reactivate, at the very heart of its proposal, the very same thing it sought to reject.

2. The Return of Dualism

“And the Word was made flesh” (*John* 1:14). What is the incarnation of Christ about? Is it a pure material corporeality [*Körper*] or something else – a type of flesh [*Leib*]? According to a set of homonymous terms that would still have to be interrogated, the *sarx* of St. John would be the equivalent here to the *Leib* of Husserl: “John does not say that the Word took on a *body* . . . He says that it ‘was made *flesh*’ . . . It is a question of the *flesh* and *not of the body*” (11, my emphasis). By reading St. John, then, more than by rejecting the Greek or Jewish traditions of theology or all of philosophy (or almost all of it), it would thus be necessary “to dissociate what always goes together, *to separate the flesh from the body* . . .” (125). But is not the operation of this division precisely to re-inject into Christianity that which was rejected in Hellenism: not the unperceived opposition of the flesh and body (*sarx/soma* or *Leib/Körper*) – but dualism, which is so present in Hellenism’s distinction between the soul and body [*psyche/soma*]? Put otherwise, to suppress Hellenic dualism will not suffice to reject its most powerful return: a thought in the form of an opposition that is now transposed from the soul/body to the flesh/body. In abandoning Greek philosophy, Michel Henry would nonetheless retain what accounts for its originality, and which all phenomenology, at least since Husserl, has sought to abandon: thought in the form of opposition or separation.

This objection is weighty, for the “fundamental duality of appearing” or better its “duplicity” (111) entails precisely that the one – the world – remains irreducibly heterogeneous to the other – life: “according to the phenomenology of life, there exist two fundamental and irreducible modes of appearing: that of the world, and that of life” (94). In virtue of the divergence between these two modes of appearing, or rather these two ways (111), the “fundamental duality of the body” thus appears insurmountable, at least at first: the one is “the object of experience” [*corps*] and the other is the “principle of experience” [*chair*]. World and body are on the one side,

while life and flesh are on the other (113). This opposition cuts to the heart, to say the least, of a more classical conception (for example, that of Thomas Aquinas, to which we will return) that continues to recognize a real positivity in the world and in the body in virtue of the impossible identification, carried out by Michel Henry, between creation and birth. The Greek vision of the world that was demolished at the beginning of *Incarnation* has thus perhaps not said its last word, if it is the case that the author here reinvests a thought that is even more dualistic (flesh/body) than the one whose most Hellenic formulation it rejects (soul/body).

But such a dualism of the flesh and the body has a cost in reality. One would falsely lend Michel Henry the triviality of this opposition if it did not come, as much as it can, to be reabsorbed in a higher unity. If one must first depart negatively from prior phenomenological paradigms (which are imprisoned in the model of seeing and thus of the body or matter), the entire originality of the work would consist of bringing to light, positively this time, a third kind of flesh – an “original” or “auto-impressional” flesh (165) – which is anterior this time to the simple opposition between the flesh (called intentional) and the body (thing or purely material): “A theory of the constitution of one’s own body must take into view not *two elements* (the constituting body and the constituted body) but in fact *three*; the third is *the originary flesh* on which our entire reflection is concentrated” (155, my emphasis).

3. *The Disqualification of the Model of Vision*

Michel Henry’s surprising approach thus makes it very easy to reproach him – but again through a reading of his work that is too hasty – of a sort of *philosophical or theological exclusivism*, such that everyone or almost everyone would be wrong, either in the interpretation of the phenomenological flesh (from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty and with the exception of Descartes or Maine de Biran), or in the theological exegesis of the Gospel of John (not even Tertullian himself would be able to escape this accusation due to his corporeal realism). In short, outside of Descartes and Maine de Biran in philosophy, and Irenaeus in theology, there is no possible salvation of the flesh.

In spite of the fact that it truly does seem a bit rapid and arbitrary, the common error of this cohort of the stupefied really results, according to Michel Henry, from the irruption of the model of vision into philosophy and its “extension” or better its “empire” (32) over all of phenomenology as well as theology. No one can escape it, or better, get past it. Husserl, first of all, in the seeing of essences and the eidetic reduction (35), then Heidegger on the basis of the definition of phenomenology in terms of the model of light [*to phos*] (37), and even Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is vigorously criticized in the second part, for maintaining his touching-touched in the distance of an objectivity that reduces it to pure worldliness.⁹ “Every sense is a sense at a

distance," Henry emphasizes, and the substitution of the paradigm of touch for that of vision can only be carried out if, at the same time, it comes to be freed from exteriority. Put otherwise, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty each accomplish, according to different modalities or senses, what Eugene Fink will mistakenly seek in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*: the "disinterested spectator" whose transcendental life "is placed outside of itself, cleaves and divides itself."¹⁰

The radical condemnation of Hellenism and Judaism, first of all; the danger of a return to a dualistic schema nonetheless afterwards; and the disqualification of the entire history of philosophy (including phenomenology with only a few close exceptions) in the name of the model of vision - these grievances or fears do not constitute the heart of the work, even though they are founded on reason. There is something more, and better, in these pages, particularly in passing from the first part ("The Reversal of Phenomenology") to the second part ("Phenomenology of Flesh"). To focus on the one - the statement of the principles - would risk to prevent us from seeing the other: the power of a pure description rooted in a transcendental questioning concerning which the "phenomenology of the flesh" (second part) remains by far the most exemplary witness. Here one can discover, or better experience, positively what this "original flesh" is about (226), which alone is the basis of the "duality" or the "duplicity" of the appearing of the world and the appearing of life as well as of the material and substantial body [*Körper*] and the living and organic flesh [*Leib*].

The Phenomenality of the Flesh

There is thus not only a body (a material or thing), or a flesh (an organic or intentional flesh) but a third type of flesh (originary or auto-impressional): "In the process of their constitution, some of our impressions are referred to our *originary flesh*, others to the *organic body*, and others to our own *thingly body*" (164, my emphasis). In other terms, let us proceed this time back up the chain of corporeality. The materiality of my body [*Körper*] is paired with the lived experience of my flesh [*Leib*], which itself is rooted in the original pathos of a non-intentional flesh that is without aim or ekstasis because it originally does not involve an intention or a distance. It is an impressional flesh (169), that is to say the *hyle* of Husserl ("Lessons of Internal Time Consciousness") which is aligned with corporeality here (Ideas II, section 30). They thus belong together as a bundle to this other type of "flesh" through descriptive illustrations: the inner push that I experience in myself "under my skin" when, for example, I shake the hand of another person (164), the joy that I experience - and that I am - in the primordial sensuality of sexuality (208), or even the anxiety that grips me when, suspended between two ridges, vertigo overcomes me (189). More than three

“differentiated flesh”, these three layers of my carnal self constitute three superimposed strata of a single corporeity. The whole issue is then *to access* it – the impressional flesh for Michel Henry (the problem of incarnation) and the purely material corporeity or thing through this original flesh, which pertains to the debate that we want to engage here (cf. *The Impossible Incorporation*).

Henry is more of a philosopher than a theologian in this book on *Incarnation* than in *I am the Truth*¹¹ – in a probable attempt to avoid the theological that does not allow for the release of a real philosophical fecundity (it is surprising, nonetheless, how little theology there is in the part on the “Phenomenology of Incarnation”, which is introduced as follows: Salvation in the Christian Sense) (168). Here, in expressing this impressional flesh, Michel Henry attains a descriptive power that is unrivaled by most phenomenologists. It is thus necessary to justify, this time positively, what constitutes the truly original contribution of this work: to accede to *the most ordinary experience of the flesh of every person* – from the hunger of Peter to the anxiety of Yvette, from the other smelling a rose to me seeing this without feeling what the other smells, from the male dancer holding the female dancer to the fragility of the hands that touch each other without expressing, except in a carnal way, the anxiety of a love that is beginning or is refused.

In a methodological note made in passing, the phenomenologist indicates what would provide a just interpretation of his treatise in *Incarnation*. It is up to the reader to appreciate the meaning of “the body and the flesh that are the theme of this work” in accordance with “the phenomenological imperative: in relating them to *the phenomena of his own life as they are given to him in and through this life*” (184, note 1, Henry’s emphasis). The reversal of the Husserlian vein of phenomenology, carried out in the first part of the work, has already shown that “it is not thought that gives us access to life; it is life that allows thought to access itself” (90). We will only be able to speak about life in and through life, or better, only on the basis of our own life, of that which is proper to each one of us, since we only have and only know one life, or rather, we only experience this life – to the point that, as we will come back to, “living beings other than human beings (animals?)” will be left “outside of the field of the investigation” (3). First, there is the haecceity or the singularity of the flesh, then pathos or carnal auto-affection, and last, anxiety or the “night of lovers” will consecrate this flesh which is always only *mine* – neither “yours”, nor “someone’s”, nor even “ours” – as the site of my greatest passivity, and thus of my noblest receptivity (of my own life and of the absolute Life in me).

1. Haecceity or the Singularity of the Flesh

From the *tode ti* of Aristotle to the individuation of Duns Scotus, haecceity, or *haecceitas* in Latin, ordinarily refers in philosophy to the mode

whereby the same being is revealed as absolutely singular, irreplaceable, and irreducible. Without ever using this term, it is nonetheless a common thread that traverses all of Michel Henry's thought. Here again, Henry seeks to regain, or better, simply to gain what others have lost or never acquired, from a) Husserl to b) Heidegger to c) Galileo.

a. In *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Husserl's eidetic reduction missed the meaning of the singular judgments that he, if not discussed, at least perceived initially: "phenomenological judgments, if restricted to singular judgments, do not have very much to teach us."¹² That is the opposite of what Michel Henry discovers, or rather rediscovers (following William of Ockham, for example¹³), in his search for a determination of the flesh, that is to say, of an experience that cannot be reduced to the body as a thing nor to a common lived experience shared by everyone. The "red of the cup on my dresser" or the "red of this dress" cannot be reduced to the eidetic essence of red as their purest invariant. The just naivety of phenomenology here reconnects with the truth of childhood. To only seek community between objects (their red) is to lose *de facto* what makes them singular, the proper way in which I experience them through my originary or auto-impresional flesh: *this* red (of the cup on my dresser) and *that* red (of my wife's dress). The child knows this, and Henry reminds us, against Husserl, that "Peter is hungry" and that "Yvette agonizes in learning that she has a serious illness" (107). Today this is what should become the object of the phenomenologist's meditation. No longer universal judgments, but the rediscovery of the singular, up to the experience of a life that is mine and only mine (even though I may be hungry, I will never experience the hunger of Peter, and even though I may have anxiety, I will never share the anxiety of Yvette). There is a world, as the author underscores in the context of a phenomenology of anxiety, between knowing that one is stuck against the wall in the course of climbing and "to come to a halt on the ridge separating two chasms", "struck with vertigo", and paralyzed by the possibility of a fall that overcomes me (189). Likewise, it is something completely different to "know oneself" to be anxious about the arrival of the metro and to experience oneself in the gaping possibility of throwing oneself onto the rails (189).

The *phenomenology of haecceity*, which singularizes oneself in one's own affectivity, will thus be accompanied by a phenomenology of anxiety that will root one in one's corporeity: *this* red of the cup on my dresser and *that* red of my wife's dress do not really glue me "to my skin" any less than *this* paralyzing vertigo (during the climb) or *this* mobilizing aspiration (to throw myself on the rails of the subway). And there is more than Yvette agonizing or Peter starving, according to Henry, in the context of a phenomenology of incarnation (3rd part), that is, of a description of the mystical body of Christ. "Neither Paul, for example, can be or be called Peter, nor can Peter be or be called Paul," Cyril of Alexandria notes in his *Treatise on St. John* (248). This is

because Christianity more than other religions, as the phenomenologist rightly remarks, protects “its own irreducibly singular individuality” – even after the death of the body as a thing (248). Whence the importance that we have tried to show of reconciling “intersubjectivity and the communion of the saints.”¹⁴

b. The loss of carnal haecceity is accelerated in Heidegger and has its source in Galileo. This is something that has been known since the work of Emmanuel Levinas. For Heidegger, appearing remains “indifferent to everything that it unveils” (40) – whether it is a question of “the sky that is clouded over or of the equality of the circle’s radii, of a goat or a seaplane, of an image or a real thing . . .”, even “victims and executioners,” “charitable acts or genocides” (40). In short, in the appearing of the “there is”, the neutrality of that which “is there” or appears can be detected. But there is something even better, once again, in Henry’s critique of Heidegger – better because it is where his originality resides: “unveiling unveils, uncovers, and ‘opens’ but does not create [*macht nicht, öffnet*]” (40). The loss of haecceity, and thus also of the impressional flesh, if this is what singularizes us, does not only brings about the indifference of what appears (which the Levinasian critique of Heidegger). Moreover, in an explicit reference to Karl Marx (176), it brings about the absence of the work or of the praxis of what I go through when it appears to me – as if appearing should always be kept at a distance from the true experience of the self. In the grip of vertigo and paralyzed between two ridges (189), not only do I undergo anxiety (which is not identically a feeling of well-being), but also it *physically* freezes me against the wall; I am paralyzed all the way to the internal experience of my own body. In short, anxiety “creates me” in the sense at least that it makes *me* and transforms *me* [*macht*] in this flesh that is my own – it is as untearable and inseparable from me as my own life is. The benefit of this analysis in the context of a *phenomenology of incarnation* – salvation in the Christian sense (3rd part) – could have turned out to be immense. Every passion, even that of Christ on the cross, is not only an unveiling or a manifestation but also a transformation or an alienation: “Thus the living cannot cut itself away from itself, from its Self, from its pain or its suffering” (176). To condemn a person to crucifixion, Henry emphasizes, “presupposes other men, henchmen, soldiers, executioners, assassins, and in each of them, the ability to take, to grasp an object or body, to strike it, to knock it down or pick it up – an ability without no crucifixion would ever have taken place” (174).

But a phenomenological reading of the Synoptic Gospels, in my opinion, would have allowed this hypothesis to be pushed all the way to its end. *The avoidance of the theological*, which was supposed to be explicitly and completely treated in the third part of this work, is probably the result of the few references to what is truly human about Christ’s suffering in the Gospel of John (in contrast with the Gospel of Mark, for example). The fact that

every power has been “given from on high” – even the power of Pilate to “crucify” Christ (*John* 19:10-11) – does not only mean that the power to crucify (to take, to grasp, to strike, to knock down, or to pick up) comes from God himself, at least as a unique source of all the properly human kinaesthesis (173-176). It also indicates, in my opinion, that it is in the “*here below*” of *this world* that God experiences himself in his true humanity. This power from on high (to take, to grasp, to strike, to knock down, etc.), is something the Son undergoes and receives from “here below” – in his finitude – where the strongest encounter between humanity and God occurs.¹⁵

c. The loss of haecceity, in particular when it is rooted in the auto-impression of the flesh (suffering or enjoying), is due, according to Henry, to the “inhuman world” of Galileo, which is “frightening” in its reduction of the flesh to the body as a *res extensa* (102). The kiss lovers exchange, the author indicates humorously, cannot be reduced to the mere “bombardment of microphysical particles” (101). But Tertullian himself, long before Galileo, is not exempt from such a reduction of the flesh to the body, according to Henry: “the flesh is assimilated to the *material bodies* that are shown in the world, whose properties and objective structures presented in evidence are indubitable – ‘a flesh like ours, irrigated by blood, constructed by bones, traversed by veins’” (131). In short, the *res extensa* does not only run through the history of philosophy and get radicalized by Galileo; it also belongs to an entire theological tradition that is too Greek in the almost unilateral interpretation of the “silt of the earth” (*Gen* 2:7) and from which only Irenaeus will escape.

Even though, as I will show in the third part of this article, incorporation more than incarnation – that is to say Christ’s assumption of the human body quite simply (“irrigated by blood, constructed by bones and traversed by veins”) – remains the crucial problem for all Christology, the insistence on the lived experience of our body nonetheless has the merit of saying something about the most ordinary human experiences: “in the real world, there are neither lines, nor circles, nor triangles, nor squares but only what is round . . .” (106). The amphiboly of the “sensible body” in a original deviation of Descartes from Galileo that went unnoticed by Husserl in the *Krisis*, will thus lead us gradually from the body to the flesh and from the flesh to its pathos or its impressional lived experience: “the sensible body.” I am a sensible body not only as a *sensed body* that is purely material or thing-like (the table or the other on whom I place my hand) or a *sensing body* in the intentional lived experience of my corporeity (touching in order to caress), but also and principally as an *auto-affected body* in the impressional lived experience of my own flesh (which is felt almost under my skin). I am a sensible body (or being) in the sense that I let myself be affected internally, even transformed (*praxis*), by everything that I experience, both externally in my body and internally in my flesh.

2. Carnal Pathos

The discovery of this “new body” (148) or this “originary flesh” (165), the auto-affected body, thus discloses the flesh in its pathos: “*the sensible becomes the sensual, and sensibility is then called sensuality*” (200). An implicit and remarkable subversion of Heideggerian *Zuhandenheit* thus makes what is “at hand” [*zuhanden*] no longer the tool or the utilizable, instead it is precisely what is felt or “under the skin.” When our hands cross or touch each other, our impressions “relate to this inside that belongs to our skin as a practical limit of our organic body” (163): “*On the skin of the other, or more precisely beneath it . . . there takes place in front of the gaze, beneath the hand, of the one who questions: ‘Will he really hold out his hand to the magic object and place it on this living flesh that remains there next to him and seems there for the taking, and try to feel it where it feels itself. . . ?’*” (201). The Sartrean allure of this topic should not cover over its strict originality. Carnal pathos is not a matter of bad faith or self-deception. The young woman does not abandon her hand when she “does not notice that she is leaving it [...] because it happens by chance that she is at this moment *all intellect*” (Sartre, my emphasis).¹⁶ She is instead “all body,” or better “all flesh”, by letting herself be touched there where she herself feels [*se sentir*] – in her own feeling [*re-(s)entir*]. In Henry, a pathos and an anxiety are thus constituted in an entirely new way (in comparison with Merleau-Ponty, for example) in the act of crossing one’s hands: in the “pathos of suffering or enjoying” on the one hand, and in the “anxiety of differentiated flesh” on the other hand.

The analysis of carnal pathos, of the meaning of suffering and joy rooted in the flesh, is not born from phenomenology alone. The Husserlian attempts, and even more so those by Merleau-Ponty, seem to have failed, or at least to have been insufficient. Husserl entangles his analysis of the flesh in a purely intentional lived experience without relating it to the passive syntheses of the body rather than to consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” always remains anonymous, on this side of all haecceity and only refers in the end to “the flesh of nobody” (114). Descartes alone breaks carnal pathos out of its philosophical forgetting: “*Descartes’s analysis is a phenomenological analysis*” (104). The Second Cartesian Meditation bears witness to this indubitability: “it seems to me that I see [*a certe videre videor*]” even though everything could deceive me (70). Paragraph 26 of the *Passions of the Soul* confirms this point later in the impossible reduction of the feeling of sadness experienced in a dream, even if the dream itself were only a lie or an illusion (67). And the famous “Letter to Pamplius” dated October 3, 1637 is able to prove this through the “we feel that we see [*sentimus nos videre*]” that belongs to the phenomenological seeing of humans. In contrast with the ordinary seeing of animals, the human does not only see and feel that it sees, but feels itself seeing or feeling (117). But the auto-affection of feeling, which Henry already noticed in Descartes in the first chapter of *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (1985), must now “be embodied” [*prendre corps*]. The implicit

passage through *The Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* (1965) leads us to rediscover Condillac and Maine de Biran along the path of *Incarnation*. But make no mistake, it is not a question here of a mere repetition or of a legacy. The quasi-synthesis of the works or the major Henryan reference points in this book – we find Meister Eckhart, Descartes, Condillac, Maine de Biran, Husserl and Marx – make it a new work in another original perspective: the phenomenological expression (1st and 2nd Parts) explicitly claims to make a theological attempt (3rd Part), a terrain on which we will later question the author (“The Impossible Incorporation”).

The feeling of an irreducible experience of oneself, even if it is at the heart of doubt, is incarnated, or embodied, in the debate between Maine de Biran and Condillac: “the flesh does not lie” (182). Everything here is a matter of description – precisely, the description of a “statue” – in the context of this “phenomenality of the flesh.” If we present the other with a rose to be smelled and if the other smells it (and is able to feel himself smelling), as Condillac emphasizes in his *Treatise on Sensations*, it will then seem like a mere “statue that smells a rose” in relation to me. In short, I do not smell or feel anything that the other smells. In relation to the other, however, Condillac asserts that “it will only be the very smell of this flower . . . the smell of a rose, a carnation, a jasmine or a violet . . . In short, the smells are for it only its own modifications or states.”¹⁷ In short, the sensation of the rose that I myself do not experience leads the other to be lost in this “smelling”, even when I would reduce the other to only being a rock or a statue in relation to me. By analyzing sensations in this way, Condillac first came to “reduce our subjectivity to itself and to its pure impressions” (138). But, there is something better in his descriptive analysis of flesh. If the statue came to touch or caress its own body – as if an anticipation and radicalization of the Husserlian touching-touched – it would experience, Condillac indicates, a “sensation of solidity” (139): as if its own body were not only its own but referred also to the many bodies in the world, and as if its ego would not be able to discover itself in this pure material corporeity, but only in the thickness of an external resistance experienced in the face of this corporeity. At the very moment when the statue distinguishes its chest from its hand, according to Condillac, it “rediscovers itself in one and in the other, because it feels itself equally in both” (139).¹⁸ In other words, the auto-impression of its body in the solidity that it experiences in the flesh (its hand feeling its chest rather than forgetting itself in the world as in the case of the smell of the rose), now defines *originally* and *singularly* the statue in its selfhood: “originally” in a sensation of oneself that is prior to the ek-static distinction between the touching-touched (Husserl) and “singularly” in an emergence of the carnal ego that this time escapes from every reduction of one’s own flesh to the flesh of the world (Merleau-Ponty).

But it is necessary to go to Maine de Biran, rather than Condillac, in order to reveal, still in a descriptive way, what this “originary” or “impressional” flesh is. An “unthought presupposition” of Condillac’s entire analysis leaves this “sensation of solidity” unthematized (141). When the hand passes over one’s own body, it does not only discover *things* – even a chest that it shares in common with other organs in the same body. Through its movement or displacement, it discovers *within itself* its own power to touch. There is no need for the statue or the solid object to sense, or better to feel, “each of the movements executed by the hand, each of the positions that it has taken in traveling along the solid, *can be repeated voluntarily in the absence of this solid.*”¹⁹ A Biranian “resisting continuum” (147), which is purely immanent, now takes the baton from Condillac’s “sensation of solidity”, which was still too ecstatic or transcendent (139). And only such an “affective and immanent power” can define carnal pathos (143). The flesh does not act on things, even on the organs of its own body, but on itself. It feels, and feels itself, in the *resistance of itself to itself* (and not the external or “solid”) that is experienced within itself. The limits of extended things are thus no longer those of the perception of external object taken as always in the spatial dimension of the world (the “sensation of solidity”), but instead those of “our effort” or of “our practical limits” that define the very movement of our life – as in the case of the voluntary inhalation and exhalation of the lungs, which, under the guidance of the “physiotherapist” constitute both myself and the space in which I experience myself (149). If health or “the silence of organs” sometimes signals forgetting, this is because I continue to live as if I did not experience such a resistance – for “health is forgetful, as forgetful as life” (184). But suffering and joy have quickly led me back to this “new body” – this “third flesh” or this “impressional flesh” that has so often been sought after (163) – “before sensation, before the world (148). “He is dead,” Henry recalls ironically in citing Giraudoux, “because breathing annoyed him” (195; my emphasis). “The anxiety of death”, which has been studied so much by our contemporaries (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, etc.), is thus rooted in an “anxiety of the flesh” that is even more originary. It is not only the anxiety of knowing that one day I will no longer exist and then living with the consequences, but the experience that perhaps tomorrow I will no longer breathe and thus will no longer constitute the world or myself through my own breath. Carnal pathos discovered at the same time in its necessary haecceity (Yvette and Pierre) and its new type of corporeity (the example of the statue) will now find in its “anxiety”, particularly when it is addressed to the beloved other, the strongest root of its impossible defection (the lovers’ night).

3. The Anxiety of the Flesh

He left the dance hall, and on a large adjoining balcony he contemplates the night. Later one of his partners arrives, and like him, has put her hand on the balustrade. Are they

there to escape the suffocating heat of the room, the din of the music, or all the commotion? Or was it some anxiety for them too? It overtakes them on the balcony and doesn't let go. (190)

The example of the dancers on the balcony getting away from the ball and its guests, lovers or at least capable of becoming so, is a new guiding thread (after the haecceity of Yvette and Pierre and the statue of Condillac or Maine de Biran) traversing the entire third part of *Incarnation* ("Phenomenology of Incarnation"). Precisely where one would expect to find theology ("Salvation in the Christian Sense"), one actually finds a very high degree of phenomenology, without being disappointed by the depth of the topic. The Henryan description of eros (in particular sections 39 and 42) reaches heights that are rarely attained in the domain of phenomenology.

This time Kierkegaard becomes both the witness and the guide. But, quite originally here, the *Concept of Anxiety* is incarnated in the flesh (Sections 37-43). Everything occurs as if the "statue" were animated now, and properly speaking, exposed itself in its flesh. We can thus distinguish in succession: a) the anxiety of the flesh on the part of the dancer; b) this same anxiety from the side of his companion; c) the possible "union of the lovers" in their erotic relationship.

a) From the side of the dancer who is contemplating the night on the balcony, the arrival of his companion and her hand placed on the rail first awakens in him a fundamental difference: "sexual determination" (196).²⁰ But the gap here does not mark a non-resemblance of the sexes or of their organs. This mere corporeal difference would turn into the purest pornographic objectivism as a "collective profanation of life" (220). The distance is initially carnal: "the discovery of one's own body as an objective body - and even more as an objective body marked by sexual difference - is identical to an *affective disposition*" (197; my emphasis). Everything here has to do with the modesty of the flesh rather than corporeal consummation with the other. For what happens on this balcony is properly speaking invisible, in particular, the anxiety that generates the sexual difference of the other: "it is a question of life's invisible. *The phenomena of the invisible are describable*" (210; Henry's emphasis). What anguishes the dancer is not the other sex as such, but the impossibility of rejoining the other in the lived experience of the other's own sexuality - that is to say in the "suffering" or "joy" that constitutes the other's flesh: "where touching this body, this sex, would mean touching the spirit itself where it is spirit, and touching life where it undergoes experiencing itself in its own Self, irreducible to any other" (202). Desire is only possible "in anxiety" (202), due to an impossibility as well as a possibility: the irreducible *impossibility* of feeling the other "where it feels itself" (201) and the vertiginous *possibility* of being able "to perform each of these gestures, strokes, and caresses" (202). The dancer's true anxiety is not about touching *a body*, inasmuch as the

objectification of the body remains easy by identifying us with pure animality. Instead, it is nourished by the possibility of encountering “a body of flesh that a real life inhabits” (201). “Freedom’s possibility,” Kierkegaard says, “announces itself in anxiety.”²¹ The “magical body of the other” is both flesh and body, and the “anguished desire to reach the life within it,” (203). Due to its irreducible opacity, it will always remain opaque, unless the dancer, in order to overcome or flee this anxiety, accomplishes “the leap” and “takes hold of the young woman’s hand” (206).

b) From the side of his companion, things are not quite the same. For what would have only been experienced “on the skin” by the dancer – grasping the other’s hand as a simple object of a body – is felt “under the skin” by the young woman, there where she feels herself (201). Far from all of the objectifying undertakings of Heideggerian *zuhandenheit*, what is “at hand” directly encounters the pathos of the flesh here. The anxiety is not about grasping a body, but of encountering a “practical limit” for which the skin marks the ultimate passage from exteriority to interiority (163). But there is more to what Henry is saying. In the statement of claims that still remain to be verified, the woman shares with the man this “vertiginous anxiety of freedom” (to leave her hand there, to pull it away or to leave the balcony), but she is “more sensual than the man, and because she is more sensual, she is more anxious” (207). Regardless of whether or not this analysis is correct, the passivity of her touched hand can be contrasted this time by a “counter movement” or an “I can” to the activity of his touching hand – “when on the balcony our dancer has taken the hand of his companion and exerted pressure on it, it happens that she gives it to him” (210). But one will not expect this “counter movement” to express what is really happening in the touching-touched in the sphere of intersubjectivity. The “resisting continuum” that we have shown in the debate between Maine de Biran and Condillac would not be satisfied by the mere “sensation of solidity”, nor with the mere reaction to it. The dancing partners are not really “statues” or “solids” for one another in their respective fleshs. The fact that “the hand of the dancer presses her hand in turn against his” is, however, “only an unreal signification appended to the impression of the pressure he really undergoes, which is lived by him as produced by the hand of the young woman” (210). Once again, everything has to do with the invisibility and impenetrability of the other’s pathos for Michel Henry: “it is in the immanence of the drive that desire fails to attain the pleasure of the other where it attains itself; it is in the lovers’ night that, for each of them, the other remains on the other side of a wall that forever separates them. A proof of this is given by the signals lovers offer each other while carrying out the act, whether it is a question of spoken words, signs or varying manifestations” (211).

c. In the erotic relationship, the lovers would remain in some way in their respective “nights”. This is not a question of “the darkness that comes

over the world when the sun sets, or a room where one has turned out the lights. It is a question of life's invisible" (210). The night as invisibility and not as darkness would be constitutive of sexuality, therefore. The "possibility of feigning" always remains: "How many women have made the one to whom they give themselves, out of love or for another reason, believe that they take from him a pleasure they do not feel, and perhaps will never feel?" (211-212). Without reaching the other where the other reaches him or herself, in the other's incarnate "suffering" or "joy", the other thus remains for me a stranger in some way – enclosed as I am in the immanence of my auto-affectivity or my carnal pathos. The author wonders, however: "in the presence of these difficulties, a question arises: Would the failure—whether it be of the erotic relation or of the affective relation (that of the experience of the other in general) – not hold for the phenomenological reduction understood as a reduction to a sphere of radical immanence in the sense that we mean it?" (213). In other words, such a reduction "can indeed give access to essential phenomena unnoticed to that point, to the discovery of an original flesh . . . but this reduction would not for all that avoid solipsism" (213). The tension here is real, and a genuine question, although one would like to avoid "modern pessimism, and condemn in advance the great adventure of love, reduced to sexual desire, adversity and failure" (212, note 1). A true parricide, or rather ideological suicide (since it is the author himself who is in question here), seems to be carried out in Section 42 of *Incarnation* in the final attempt to save the encounter with an alterity that definitively breaks the duality of the world and life, of transcendence and immanence, of body and flesh. The Other suddenly, and in unexplained reversal with regard to the premises of the body and all of Henry's work, is given this time (at last, we might dare to say) in the appearing of the world or through the other's body:

To reach out her hand, to squeeze, to caress skin, to feel or to breathe in a scent, a breath, is to *open oneself to the world*. It is *in the world, in its appearing*, that the other is really there, and that *his body* (to which the other is united) *is there and is real . . .* what shows me this ungraspable 'within' of the other's thingly body is *its 'outside'*, and that is what occupies me, whether it be a question of ordinary experience or of the radical modification it undergoes when the sensible body becomes an erotic and sensual body. (214, my emphasis)

Everything happens as if, according to us, the Henryan determination of immanence or of the pathos-filled flesh now buckled under the weight of transcendence or corporeality, no longer being able to express the truth of the erotic relation without definitively renouncing its own solipsism. The formulations are radical, irreducibly authentic and yet contrary to the Henryan statements about the truth:

The possibility is wide open for each of them to touch the other at the most 'sensible' point of their body, the extreme point of its sexuality - 'there' which means on their own *thingly body* as it is shown in the world . . . The fact that this two-fold possibility constitutive of the erotic relation occurs *in the world*, and is indebted to it, *prohibits us it seems from circumscribing such a relation in life's sphere of immanence.* (215; my emphasis)

The author will indeed try to salvage the stakes, to distinguish between "the reality" and "the irreality" of the pathos of the flesh in order to protect auto-affectivity at the expense of hetero-affectivity²², but the damage has been done (which, all things considered, is actually a good thing): "the reduction to immanence has neither the aim nor the objective of challenging, in defiance of every phenomenological presupposition, the effectiveness of the world's appearing . . ." (215-216).

The Impossible Incorporation

Tracking a contradiction or at least a tension in a work - the return of the actuality and of the corporeity (Section 24) that are denied in the duality of the body and flesh in search of an originary flesh (Section 22-23) - can be due to either a misunderstanding by the interpreter or a turn taken by the author himself (which probably results from both of them here). The descriptive power employed by Michel Henry has, at any rate, led phenomenology toward regions that he himself did not anticipate. Depending on whether it is a question of phenomenology or theology, two divergent readings can then be performed on the basis of the question of corporeity: the *lectio facilior*, on the one hand, that every thing seeks its incarnation (in a carnal pathos), and the other hand, the *lectio difficior* that inquires into the meaning of its incorporation (in a thingly body). An initial review of our course will be, if not a proof, at least a sign of this. A) it does not suffice to recognize "the pain that is produced by climbing this sloping road"; it is also necessary to recognize the weight of our own body (with its kilos, we dare to say!) without which this pain would never be experienced and which is necessary to climb to the summit of this town or countryside. B) the haecceity or the singularity of Pierre and Yvette will not depend on their pathos alone (the hunger of the one and the anxiety of the other). They are singularized also by their matter. The Stagirite's lesson - of individuation not only by form but also by matter - cannot be so quickly denied. C) Condillac's "statue" will not be able to become only a flesh in Maine de Biran. The "sensation of solidity" of the rock or the body (Condillac) and not exclusively the "resisting continuum" of flesh (Maine de Biran) is also experienced in touching all matter - even that of my own body

or the body of the other. D) The erotic relation to the other in the “lover’s night” also arises from the difference between bodies and not only from the pathos of the flesh. Sexual determination is rooted in a differentiated corporeality that accounts both for its attraction and strangeness, without necessarily falling into some sort of erotic objectivism or pornography. E) Christ in his body shared what makes our own body. This fact must also be thought, but this time in theology. For it does not suffice to say that he “entered into our flesh” according to a somewhat unilateral interpretation of the Prologue of John. It is also necessary that “he is made body” *like us* – and in that respect alone, we will show that his “incarnation changes everything.” First we will proceed to the dis-incorporation of the flesh in philosophy, then the treatment of the incarnation as theological incorporation, followed by the thought of a kenosis of the flesh or a gift of the body in Christology which will then serve as a guiding thread for a “constructive criticism of *Incarnation*.” While recognizing its descriptive power (2nd part: The Phenomenality of Flesh), we will propose a completely different model (3rd part: The Primacy of Incorporation over Incarnation).²³

1. Dis-incorporated Flesh

The discovery of a third flesh – the “originary or impressional flesh” at the expense of the distinction between “intentional flesh” and “thingly body” (165) – seems to me to have been acquired at the high price of the body itself. The description of “invisible phenomena” in carnal pathos (210) forgets the power of the visibility of the body, without which no invisibility or carnal impression would be generated in reality.²⁴ Husserl himself retains the distinction between flesh and body, but nonetheless posits in a 1921 manuscript that this question of incorporation – and not only of incarnation or the invisibility of the flesh – is the most essential and most difficult question for the entire phenomenology of corporeality: “thus it is a *fundamental problem* to think through and clearly define how the flesh is also constituted as a physical flesh.”²⁵ The impossible incorporation, or rather the difficulty of thinking phenomenologically the body and the animality of the human in addition to flesh in its properly human pathos, thus remains the Gordian knot to undo today. A massive rush toward the flesh forgets its attachment to the body, to the point of sometimes disincorporating it. “It is very difficult to understand the possible meaning of an ‘outside of flesh’ [*hors-chair*],” attests Didier Franck with respect to Husserl.²⁶ The question is not initially theological or Christological, but phenomenological: how and why can we try to conceive a flesh without body – or at least a flesh that “experiences itself” independently from the “inert or external body” on which it yet always depends and also caresses without ever conceiving it (3)? By too quickly seeking the essence of humanity (the flesh), one forgets its most ordinary animality.²⁷

The “decision” to “leave living beings other than human beings outside the field of our investigation” (3) is not at all justified if that is what we are initially, we too, as organic and thingly lives before being an affective pathos. If the flesh is somehow “more easily known than the body” (4), to parody Descartes here, we must then carry our full attention to the body itself, even if it starts from the flesh. The discovery of the *cogito* in the Second Meditation does not forget to open toward the rediscovery of the world in the Sixth Meditation. Henry himself, like Husserl many years earlier, raises but never resolves the question: “But does our hand not cross an objective space to grasp the book resting on the desk, and open the pages with its fingers? Do our feet, solidly planted on the earth, or moving along the path, not collide with the stones – the stones situated next to each other, in this *res extensa* Galileo and Descartes speak of?” (151) . . . “the relation of flesh to body is thus an unavoidable question” (125).

A Spinozistic type of “carnal monism”, applied to the body this time, can explain the reason for this impossible incorporation in Henry.²⁸ The duality of the thingly body and the intentional flesh [*Körper/Leib*] is actually entirely absorbed into the impressional flesh. The discovery of this originary flesh as a “new body” forgets the old, to the point of being nothing, or almost nothing, of what belongs to the thingly body of the human being. For Henry, what anguishes the dancer in the “lovers’ night”, for example, is never the body of his partner as such, but only the flesh or the pathos that it will experience in its own contact. And yet the body of the sex of the other as such attracts and disturbs, precisely in virtue of the fact that it is other and different. Its strangeness also makes for its obscurity, and not only its invisibility (contra 200). Let us grant that one only constructs one’s own wall that separates oneself from the other. But the fact that sexuality can and must be stripped from all animality – that is something that is not said in the book of Genesis or the tests of Magisterium as such. Pleasure as such thus plays out in the encounter of bodies. And even when the “kiss of lovers cannot only be a bombardment of microphysical particles”, it is nonetheless also this, even if only in the organic pleasure that it provides. The correct analyses of sadism, masochism, voyeurism or partner swapping (Section 43) cannot and should not entail the whole of sexuality in an objectivism that is not its own. All “pleasure” as well as all “suffering” takes place initially through the body, without being reduced only to the lived experience of its originary flesh in its simple pathos: “Man is neither an angel nor a beast,” Pascal says, “and the misfortune is that he who would act the angel acts the beast.”²⁹ To welcome, this time explicitly, another Life than my own to break the solipsism or the wall that separates me from others probably belongs among the noblest of thoughts.

Yet this raises a question that was addressed previously to Jean Luc Marion but that could also be extended to the whole of French phenomenology, in that it is always marked with an “excess of revelation.”

What should we say and then do – including this quasi-Jansenist perspective of Michel Henry in his strict division between those who “reach toward Life” and those who “refuse” it – about the most ordinary humanity of our contemporaries, who are often agnostic or indifferent to God, unless it would be to reduce them to the simplest bestiality, in the sense of its massive “leap into sin” (202)? Does the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14) turn out to be only *reparative* in a Pauline re-reading of corporeity that is ultimately very classical (sin – incarnation – redemption) or does it not first derive, in John himself, from a *manifestation* of God through his incarnate Word? Henry says: “The order of analysis in this third section will thus be the following: 1) the original possibility of sin; 2) the nature of the Christ understood as the Incarnation of the Word; and 3) salvation in the Christian sense” (172). The impossible phenomenological incorporation now arrives at its theological implications. To return to the Church Fathers, “against the Jews, against the Greeks,” requires us to take seriously the famous statement by Gregory of Nyssa: “whoever has not taken up is not saved, and only someone who is united with God is saved.”³⁰

2. Theological Incorporation

“Man has *never been created*, he has never come in the world” (229; my emphasis). This concise formula from *Incarnation* sums up the force of the theological objection that we can make to it. There is a distance in the relation of the human to God, as we have stated, that is not identical to the distance of sin. Aquinas says that “creation is the dependence of the created being with regard to the principle that establishes it. It thus belongs to the genus of relation.”³¹ Whoever speaks of creation thus speaks both about dependence and relation, that is to say the relation between two poles that necessarily entail a certain exteriority toward each other, or at least a real positivity in their difference. This is what negates Michel Henry’s work as a whole, it seems, and renders impossible any true idea of corporeality as the thickness of the body and not only as a feeling of the flesh. “In every human incarnation,” according to the author, “each time a life enters into a body and turns it into a flesh” (231). And the entire Prologue of John, like the theology of Irenaeus, would have no other aim than to show that “at the time of Christ, the one who took on flesh in the Christ *was not an ordinary man* but the Word of God” (231; my emphasis).

Is this not, however, precisely the opposite of what the Fathers, even John himself, wanted to show in their quarrel with the gnostics and the widely rejected thesis of *Christos angelos*? Not a God of the extra-ordinary, but rather the incomparable incarnation of the Word in the ordinariness of our days and our simple material corporeality – with “a flesh like ours, irrigated by blood, constructed by bones, traversed by veins” (131). The parricide of Tertullian is not at all justified (*ibid.*) It even occurred to the Carthaginian, long before Husserl and against all the contemporary

phenomenological avoidances, to pose this question of incorporation – not only that of incarnation – at the core of his theological system: “where did his body [*unde corpus*] come from, if his body is not flesh [*si non caro corpus*]?”

3. *The Kenosis of Flesh*

“What sort of flesh can and should we recognize in Christ?” Tertullian asks.³² Only a flesh that is able to *give itself* can be incarnated, in my opinion. One of Henry’s formulations could lead us there, or at least suggest this: “what is proper to every conceivable flesh is to be emptied of its substance in the exteriority of an ‘outside’” (153). A “de-realization” of the body paradoxically renders this givenness impossible, however. It suffices, to do this, to repeat the example of seeing oneself in the mirror. The face that I see there is certainly not “a nameless thing, some mass of inert matter” (154). But from that, one could only infer that “on the smooth surface of the mirror,” where its sadness appears to me, “there is no real vision, no real sadness” (154) – unless, as Henry suggests, we were to consider only the auto-impressional flesh as “real”, experiencing myself only in myself and never in the reflection in the mirror (154). How can one maintain later that “no one has ever seen a man, but no one has ever seen his body either, at least if by ‘body’ we mean his real body” (155)? It is not a question here of reactivating some type of realism against some sort of essentialism or idealism. It is only a matter of recognizing that what is given in exteriority or in the world (on the surface of the mirror) is also what appears first to myself as well as to others. In short, I do not only undergo or experience myself alone, but also the world and its exteriority that first give themselves to me.

The consequence for the incarnation of Christ is then twofold. First, the Son does not only experience Himself only in His flesh, from before the creation of the world and even then Iraneaus’ perspective of a prefiguration of the incarnation in creation remains essential to contemporary theology (Section 46). The Son is also given in a body, an organic material that is properly human and shared with each and everyone – in the simple “history that arrived in the flesh and on the earth,” as Peguy emphasized.³³ The extra-ordinary of the incarnation of the Word is precisely its taking on the ordinariness of our human condition and being given in a body: “Who, being in very form God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very form of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Ph. 2: 6-7).

Second, and this is a hypothesis that we have developed elsewhere, he undergoes by incarnating not only Himself and His own divine pathos, but also the world and the most ordinary corruptibility in which it comes to be given. From this fact, one can see that the separation between Henry’s

Incarnation and what I myself have written in *Le passeur de Gethsemani* becomes the most manifest and patent:

'it is no longer a question of the passivity of man with respect to the world, but an entirely different passivity, the radical passivity of his life with respect to Life' (230), Henry indicates, to pass from this world to the Father amounts first of all, but not only, *to undergo the experience of it – to suffer from this world in its incompressible finitude and not to flee it in a fugitive passage.*³⁴

To suffer from life in life by the auto-impression of the originary flesh, on the one hand, and to suffer the world all the way to the mortal corporeality offered to the Father, on the other hand: the opposition between the two could not be any more clear. And because "strife among thinkers" is a "lover's quarrel concerning the matter itself" and not some type of eristic or *petitio principii*, we can wager that this debate helps to lead both authors "toward a simple belonging to the Same, from which they find what is fitting for them in the destiny of being."³⁵

And The Word was made Flesh

The greatness of Michel Henry's *Incarnation* is thus, as we have said and have tried to show, more phenomenological than theological. The descriptive power here is only rivaled by the power of the concept, and expresses very precisely what is essential about our life, in its most ordinary experience: struggling to climb a sloping road, becoming tired and asking for a pillow, being hungry like Pierre or having anxiety like Yvette, smelling the scent of a rose or seeing the other as a statue, caressing oneself or taking the hand of one's partner, entering into the lovers' night or rejecting eros. The questions of the rejection of Hellenism and Judaism, the return of dualism or the disqualification of the model of vision (I) seem to have little weight in relation to the descriptive genius of phenomenality on the one hand (II) and the very crucial problem of the impossible incorporation on the other (III). It is not, properly speaking, the case that there is a flesh without body but simply that any passage from the flesh to the body whatsoever remains unexplained in *Incarnation*. Everything has already been constituted on the basis of an originary flesh (the auto-impression), which explains the intentionality of the flesh (feeling) but not the thickness of the body (the felt). Michel Henry, besides, does not remove himself from this type of inquiry, even though it remains unresolved, in wondering whether every living being is "no more than a mode of it. In other words, it is something that has no consistency by itself, but only as a manifestation, modification, or peripeteia of a reality that is other than it" (178). A

monadism and a modalism of the Henryan flesh would thus become all the more dis-incorporated as the body would be destroyed and absorbed into it.

“The Incarnation changes everything,” according to Henry’s own words that cannot be denied now. From this, the philosopher adds (Merleau-Ponty), it follows that “since the Incarnation, God has been externalized” and “in this sense Christianity is diametrically opposed to ‘spiritualism.’”³⁶ With regard to such assertions, which are supported both by the entrance of God into exteriority and the refusal of spiritualism in Christianity, incarnation probably does not “change” anything, or almost nothing, in Michel Henry. “Is it not enough to recall a final time,” the conclusion insists, “that the Incarnation of the Word is not its coming in a body but in a flesh?” (258). Paradoxically, everything happens as if, according to us, God was never really incarnated in *Incarnation*, or at least not temporally and visibly in a body, on the earth, and in a history. It is precisely not, or is no longer, the newborn lying in a manger or the icon of the mother holding the Son that marks the incarnation, but the finger of the angel on the altarpiece of Issenheim. The incarnation is shown in Michel Henry, but there is somehow nothing to see because everything remains in “life’s invisible” (210), outside of the world’s field of visibility. The pathos of the flesh about which Henry has spoken would be ascribed to the “special or astral flesh” held by Apelles against Tertullian or to the “flesh of angels before the creation of the world” described by Jacob Boehme³⁷, rather than to the true corporeality of a Christ becoming in every way “being made in human likeness” (Ph. 2:7) – coming to share “a flesh like ours, irrigated by blood, constructed by bones, traversed by veins.”³⁸

Et verbum caro factum est – “And the Word was made flesh [*o logos sarx egeneto*]” (John 1:14). “Was made flesh” [*Inkarnation*], that is to say for us and probably counter to Michel Henry, “was made man” [*Menschwerdung*]. The mode of phenomenological incarnation in a flesh [*Leib*] also awaits its theological relay and its “aftershock”, due to God’s “becoming-human” in a “body” [*Körper*]. Thus our body is first a “body of flesh”, at least in the sense that there is never any “lived experience of the body” [*Leib*] independent from a “materiality,” or even an “organicity” that carries it [*Körper*]:

One will no longer be able to be satisfied now, as a philosopher, with the mere charms of the touching-touched, as we have noted with regard to Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, but also Michel Henry . . . The ‘body’ remains. Or rather, a ‘residue’ always remains with one’s own body, which is again and again only subjective: that of a corporeality which is, if not ‘extended’, at least according to us ‘splayed out’, and that can neither be reduced to mere subjectivity nor claimed as pure objectivity.³⁹

Caro cardo est – “the flesh is the hinge of salvation.” That is the untranslatable play on words from Tertullian’s *De Carne Christi* [*caro/cardo*], thus delivering the flesh “with” the body, and definitively opening the hinge by which incarnation “changes everything.” It will thus be necessary for Christ, to follow the Church Father once again, not only “to bear the cross” [*cruce[m] gestare*], but also “to bear the flesh” [*carnem gestare*]. “Flesh” [*caro*] does not only have the sense of what is experienced of life, but this time the more common sense of the term of *the weight of the body* or *the silt of the earth* (Gn 2:7).⁴⁰

Translated by Scott Davidson

[This article was published originally in French as Emmanuel Falque, “Y-a-t-il une chair sans corps ?,” *Transversalités* 81 (Jan-Mar 2002): 43-76. The English translation is published here with permission of the author. The text was later modified and reprinted in Chapter V of Emmanuel Falque, *Le combat amoureux: Disputes phénoménologiques et théologiques* (Paris: Hermann, 2014), 168-183. A counterpoint to Michel Henry’s perspective is developed by the author in Emmanuel Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, Body and Eucharist*, tr. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).]

- ¹ This paper was originally presented at a colloquium entitled “Phénoménologie et Incarnation: Autour du Professeur Michel Henry” in honor of the publication of Michel Henry’s book *Incarnation*. Henry’s response to the present study can be found in “À Emmanuel Falque,” in *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry*, ed. Philippe Capelle (Paris: Cerf, 2004): 168-182. This response has been reprinted recently in Michel Henry, *La Phénoménologie de la vie*, vol. 5 (Paris: PUF, 2015). I have added to my present remarks in another contribution: Emmanuel Falque, “Michel Henry théologien (à propos de *C’est moi la vérité*),” *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 57, no. 3 (Oct 2001): 525-536.
- ² Michel Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of the Flesh*, tr. Karl Hefty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015). Cited in the text in parenthesis hereafter.
- ³ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, tr. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 108. Translator’s note: Falque’s reference to the expression “in the flesh” is drawn from the French translation of Husserl’s text, which Carr’s English translation renders “through the living body.”
- ⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.9.
- ⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, tr. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Eastford, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011), 220. One can find a good summary of this debate in R. Gibellini, *Panorama de la théologie au XX siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 11-19.
- ⁶ See Bernard Sesboué, “Une déshellenisation du dogme,” in *Jésus Christ dans la tradition de l’Eglise* (Paris: Desclée, 2000), 100-102.
- ⁷ Sesboué, *Jésus Christ dans la tradition de l’Eglise*, 98.
- ⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scriber, 1958): 17-18: “for the modern man, the mythological conception of the world, the conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, are over and done with . . . This method of interpretation of the New

Testament which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions I call *de-mythologizing*.”

- ⁹ Michel Henry's formulations are not lacking any sharpness against the French philosopher. Anyone can see this with regard to his most trenchant statements. Merleau-Ponty is “absorbed in the constituted” and “cedes place to literary description that in a dangerous way returns to naïve realism,” “as with Bergson before him . . . was duped by his prestigious writing to the point of replacing philosophical analysis with a system of metaphors” (116), even the accusation of complete naivety: “we still have never seen a stone that is touched by my hand begin to touch it, feel it, and caress it, in turn” (116).
- ¹⁰ Cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 121, note 1.
- ¹¹ For this “theological” perspective (or reading) of *I am the Truth*, see the two headings of my article “Michel Henry théologien, À propos de *C'est moi la vérité*”: I. “*I am the Truth: A Theological Summa*” (526-529); II. *I am the Truth: Toward a New Apologetics*” (529-536).
- ¹² Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, tr. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 38; cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 107.
- ¹³ See Pierre Alféri, *Guillaume d'Ockham: Le Singulier* (Paris: Minuit, 1989).
- ¹⁴ Emmanuel Falque, “Origène: Intersubjectivité et communion des saints,” in *Intersubjectivité et théologie philosophique: Actes du colloque Enrico Castelli*, ed. Marco Olivetti (Milan: Biblioteca dell'Archivio di Filosofia, 2001): 540-560.
- ¹⁵ On this point, I refer to my book *Le passeur de Gethsémani: Angoisse, souffrance et mort: Lecture existentielle et phénoménologique* (Paris: Cerf, 1999). In particular, see the third part: “Le corps à corps de la souffrance et de la mort.”
- ¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Patterns of Self-Deception” in *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Citadel, 1956).
- ¹⁷ Condillac, *Philosophical Writings of Etienne Bonnot Abbé de Condillac* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982), 175. Cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 138.
- ¹⁸ Condillac, *Philosophical Writings* 175. Cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 139.
- ¹⁹ Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie et sur ses rapports avec l'étude de la nature*, vol. VIII, ed. Tisserand (Paris: Vrin, 2001), 408.
- ²⁰ Kierkegaard states that “*the sexual is the expression for the monstrous contradiction that the immortal spirit is determined as a genus*” in *The Concept of Anxiety*, tr. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 69. Cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 197 (Henry's emphasis).
- ²¹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 74. Cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 202.
- ²² “By tracing a rigorous line of separation between what appears in the ‘outside itself’ of this horizon and what reveals itself in life's pathos, by focusing on the latter, the reduction to immanence aims at a second division, which is no less decisive, because it rests on the first: the separation of the real and the unreal” (Henry, *Incarnation*, 216).
- ²³ See my *Les noces de l'agneau: Essai philosophique sur le 'corps' et l'eucharistie* (Paris: Cerf, 2011) as a book about “incorporation” that swings the pendulum from “incarnation” in Michel Henry, this time by a “backlash” of theology onto philosophy. Whence a necessary departure, at

least in part, from phenomenology at the opening of my book. See Chapter 1 “Philosophy at the Limit” (the “residue of the body” thus following from the “swerve of the flesh”).

²⁴ We refer on this point back to our article: “Michel Henry théologien (à propos de *C'est moi la vérité*)” and the reversal proposed by Paul Claudel on which it is based: “I would gladly change the adage and instead of *ab visibilibus ad invisibilium amorem rupiamur* (to be carried from the visible to the love of the invisible), I would say a *invisibilibus ad visibilium amorem aet cognitionem rapiamur* (to be carried from the invisible to the love and knowledge of the visible).” Paul Claudel, “Lettre inédite à H. Lemaître (1er août 1937),” cited in Lagarde and Michard,

Le XXe siècle (Paris: Bordas, 1962), 182.

²⁵ See *Husserliana*, Bd XIV, 77. Cited by Didier Franck, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*, tr. Joseph Rivera and Scott Davidson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 83.

²⁶ Franck, *Flesh and Body*, 84 (to whom I also owe this expression of the “impossible incorporation”).

²⁷ See Falque, *Les nocés de l'Agneau: Essai philosophique sur le corps et l'eucharistie*, 125-176 and 295-325.

²⁸ The accusation of “carnal monism” in *Incarnation* is the swing of the pendulum from the critique of the “monism of life” in *I am the Truth*. See my article “Michel Henry théologien,” 533. “The identification of God with the ‘one reality’ would indeed lead to turn it into the only substance, according to a well known version of Spinozism.”

²⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 358-678.

³⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Epistle 101,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 1994.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 18.

³² Tertullian, *De Carne Christi [Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation]*, XXII, 6.

³³ Charles Péguy, *Victor-Marie, comte Hugo* in *Oeuvres en prose complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 236. See my article “Incarnation philosophique et incarnation théologique: une histoire arrivée à la chair et à la terre,” *L'amitié Charles Péguy*, vol. 102 (avril-juin 2003): 164-178.

³⁴ Falque, *Le Passeur de Gethsémani*, 124.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 257.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Faith and Good Faith,” in *Sense and Non-sense*, tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 174-5.

³⁷ See Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, VI, 3. Also see Jacob Boehme, *Aurora: Day-Spring*, tr. Eric Bowers (Nashville: Historic Change, 2013), ch 1.

³⁸ Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, I, 5. Cited by Henry, *Incarnation*, 131.

³⁹ Falque, *Les nocés de l'Agneau*, 41.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, V, 5; V, 1 and *De resurrectione carnis [caro salutis cardo est]*; Cf. Emmanuel Falque, *Dieu, la chair et l'autre: D'Irénée à Duns Scot* (Paris: PUF, 2008), 251-288, especially 269-273.