

## **Jeffrey Hanson and Michael Kelly (eds): Michel Henry: the affects of thought**

**Continuum, London and New York, 2012, 192 pp, \$120.00,  
ISBN: 1441145230**

**Joseph Rivera**

Published online: 19 March 2013  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

This collection of essays, proficiently assembled by Jeffrey Hanson and Michael Kelly, is one of the first serious book-length engagements with Michel Henry to appear in the English-speaking world. What gives this work special value is that it is composed of some of the foremost contemporary continental thinkers with whom many in the Anglophone scene have not yet fully acquainted themselves. While the presence of Jean-Luc Marion's work has made itself felt for some time now in America and Britain, thinkers like Rolf Kühn, Renaud Barbaras and Raphaël Gély are, to varying degrees, seldom known, though, Kühn and Barbaras are especially well-known in their native countries, Germany and France respectively. While the author of several monographs in German that impart the virtue of sophistication into the interval between philosophy and theology, Kühn is to be noted here for his translation of several volumes of Henry's work into German. Five of the seven essays, then, are translations and the two originally English essays are excellent contributions in their own right, one from the perceptive and incisive pen of Kevin Hart and the other, rich in content, co-written by the editors.

Michel Henry (1922–2002), of course, has been enormously influential in France over the span of the last four decades, however, his reception in English, while slow for many years, is certainly picking up now, and this collection of essays is just one more sign of his ascension. Henry's work can be understood from several distinct perspectives: phenomenological, theological, ethical, political, cultural, aesthetic and theoretical perspectives are all thematized by Henry, even if always under the form of a singular apparatus. The variation of his work is stabilized by a purposeful and persistent interrogation of the subjective ground of Life that bears within it the essence of concrete action and embodied vitality that animates each of us from within and is displayed in each of us as an invisible or nocturnal disposition and capacity to enter into ourselves; just so, I concretely accede to myself in a silent

---

J. Rivera (✉)  
University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland  
e-mail: rivera30@gmail.com

embrace that gives me to myself with the permanence and absolute power of being incontestably in possession of myself, for here we are, claims Henry, permitted to alight upon the subjectivity of the subject. Ordering the grammar of the “invisible” over against that of the “visible,” Henry’s work appears to express a universal structure of existence that we may be forgiven for depicting, in crudely reductive terms, as the bipolarity between the “acosmic” and the “cosmic.” The phenomenological effectivity of such a duality grants priority to the invisible appearing of the life-force of the acosmic *over* the visible disclosure of the contingent vicissitudes of the cosmic, or to speak in Johannine terms as Henry is inclined to do in his final works, gives to the eternal logic of “light” priority over the temporal mutability of “darkness.”

The first essay, masterful in its interpretive skill, demonstrates the extent to which Jean-Luc Marion has considered the principal thesis about the essence of manifestation put forward by Henry in his inaugural 1963 tome. Deeply influenced by Henry, one may see Marion here simply attempting an exegetical enterprise rather than, say, an appropriation and modification of what he judges to be important phenomenological categories and conventions in Henry—the latter can be glimpsed if one carefully attends to the footnotes on Henry in Marion’s 1997 *Etant donné : Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation*. Of the essays we are inspecting in this volume, though, Marion’s is perhaps the best interpretive essay I have hitherto read on Henry’s thesis about the duplicity between the invisible and visible.

Marion brings into focus, by selecting choice quotes from Henry, the essence of the phenomenon of the invisible as it is set over against the visible. Metaphysics of the worst kind, Marion highlights poignantly, treats the visible and invisible fields of display as a seamless phenomenological and ontological continuum, whereas Henry, in sharp contrast to such a malevolent tradition born under the provenance of Greek metaphysics, places a caesura between the invisible and visible. The invisible is not homogeneous with the visible—for this would result in what Henry calls ontological monism, which means that the invisible phenomenon follows upon or is parasitic on the visible field of disclosure (i.e., the world). Ontological monism says that the invisible is manifest as a heteronomous immanence, an inner potentiality waiting just beneath the surface available at any moment to spring into the field of visibility. To avoid ontological monism, Henry claims that the invisible is a sublayer of phenomenality with its own structure of appearing that shall never appear in the visible world: the two fields are absolutely heterogeneous. According to Marion, the major achievement of Henry’s phenomenological trajectory so conceived is that, perhaps for the first time, it gives to the invisible its due recognition and articulates with great care and rigor the way in which the invisible may appear: auto-affection. The perfect coincidence of myself with myself is auto-affection, the event where I continually feel myself feeling without interference from the outside world or intercession from an intentional gaze. Fully with itself and lodged in the depths of feeling itself as it is submerged and overwhelmed with itself, auto-affection is obliged to never seek resources outside of itself or appear anywhere other than within itself. As Marion points out, Heidegger’s conception of being-in-the-world is the principal target of critique for Henry (Henry says that Heidegger’s work in principle, not by accident, amounts to the “murder of interior

life”<sup>1</sup>) but Marion also suggests that more work is to be done on the border between Henry and Heidegger.

The remainder of the essays are either critical in tone or, submitting to him as a loyal heir, welcoming of the novelties advanced by Henry. Renaud Barbaras, who typically incorporates Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Patočka, strikes at the heart of Henry’s theory of auto-affection. Considering auto-affection solipsistic or egoistic because it is preoccupied with a dry stasis manifest as an interior “drive,” Barbaras sets into play a theory of motility and movement, of “desire” as an alternative (52–59). But it is not just an alternative placed alongside of auto-affection, as if “desire” were a collateral movement attached to a more primal “drive.” Rather Barbaras elucidates a line of inquiry that proceeds exactly in the opposite direction of Henry. As such, Barbaras seeks with great urgency to displace Henry’s “drive” with a finely-articulated “desire.” While Henry’s theory of auto-affection yields a subjective self whose self-embrace gives way to self-presence without ever making passage into the exterior world, Barbaras understands “desire” to communicate an over-extended self, for “The subject of movement, the self that reveals itself in it, seizes itself only once it is disposed of itself” (56). Or better, “It is by passing outside of itself that it becomes itself, by alienating itself that it reassembles, by toppling into the world that it distinguishes itself” (56).

It is, certainly, of great importance to refine Henry’s thinking on this level and to determine how Henry fails to make possible a smoother transfer from immanence to transcendence or auto-affection to hetero-affection. But it is not clear how Barbaras, in an attempt to replace Henry’s dualism with a single mode of appearance without returning to ontological monism (57), is in fact not subscribing to ontological monism after all. And second, Barbaras’ contention that life of the subject, produced from within by an auto-affective drive, is static is simply overstated and perhaps hasty. Barbaras defeats his own argument by providing an extended excerpt from Henry, one we reproduce in full here. Henry writes, “The movement, which in its very movement, remains in itself, and itself gets carried away with itself, which itself moves in itself; the self-movement that does not separate from itself and does not leave itself, without allowing the smallest part of itself to become detached, to become lost outside of it, in some form of exteriority, in the exteriority of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Barbaras thinks this is a very “strange sort of movement,” a contention we do not necessarily contest. But Barbaras quickly adds that this “movement” is beset straightaway by false movement, or simply, immobility. One could easily challenge Barbaras on this point by demonstrating that, first, a strange sort of movement is not the same as no movement at all, and second, on more than one occasion, Henry clarifies the life of the subject as an interior ego who undergoes growth as it collapses under its own weight, imploding within itself endlessly and without restraint, which, without detour or mediation, intensifies the self within itself, inducing increase and growth, and thus, movement therein. Henry uses the word *accroissement* to characterize such dynamic growth, operating as it does on the

<sup>1</sup> Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Henry, *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 203.

basis of an affective power of myself manifest as a crushing against myself in and through auto-affectation.<sup>3</sup> Self-coincidence, for Henry, is not at all a static affair, just the opposite. What remains to be thought out with greater subtlety is whether Barbaras can figure a notion of desire whose movement achieved by going forth should be clearly preferable to an affective movement accomplished by inward descent.

The next two essays offer sensitive readings of Henry also from critical vantage points. Hanson and Kelly converge on Henry's 1990 *Material Phenomenology*, a densely woven text that intends to overcome fruitful, though fateful, missteps in Husserl's *The Idea of Phenomenology*. They set out to highlight for their readers Henry's sometimes violent reading of Husserl and thus, intend to rescue Husserl, in part, from Henry's powerful but idiosyncratic interpretation that does not investigate with enough care the distinction between *reell* and *reale*—and the definitions of immanence each German expression engenders (this is of course an important translation issue internal to Husserl's *Ideas I* that Paul Ricoeur dealt with in the 1950s and one which can be clarified with reference to Dorion Cairns' book on how to translate Husserl). Henry seems to think that immanence in Husserl is really transcendence in the sense that even the field of apprehension illumined by the intentional regard is transcendent, presumably because it does not allow for auto-affectation in its pure self-impressional drama to unfold purely within itself. But Henry's straightforward reading, Hanson and Kelly helpfully note, does not always account for the transitions Husserl makes with regard to immanence once the phenomenological reduction is performed.

Kevin Hart's essay is perhaps the most critical of Henry in the volume, and this from primarily a theological point of view. Hart's text is also one of the most interesting in that it connects Henry to Fichte, a heritage commentators on Henry rarely, if ever, take the time to uncover. Hart does think that the "inward life" Henry elucidates resembles Fichte's interest in the way toward the blessed life as well as the strong subjectivism for which Fichte is so famous. However, more could be done here to indicate more precisely how Henry's self is a "passive" ego given to itself (within Life's absolute auto-donation) in distinction from what appears to be Fichte's self-positing and self-constituting *Ichpol* (to borrow a phrase from Husserl). Hart's essay is also to be commended, too, for finally exposing to view what lurks just around the corner in so much of Henry's work, namely: that it is freighted with a Gnostic impulse, splitting the self between a pure inner oasis of divinity cleaved from an outer world of illusion and death, a breach within the self never to be reconciled.

Hart's essay is perhaps one of the most enjoyable to read simply because it lucidly synthesizes so much content, slipping in and out a vast range of authors with ease and with an irenic tenor that somehow combines both a spirit of radical critique and scholarly charitableness. Style and form aside, it is difficult to disagree with his contention that Henry's thinking on Christianity is amiss, even badly amiss. While

<sup>3</sup> Henry writes, En donnant chaque Soi à lui-même, il lui donne de s'accroître de soi dans un procès d'auto-accroissement continu qui fait de lui un devenir (le contraire d'une 'substance' ou d'une 'chose')—procès qui n'est autre en son fond que le procès de la Vie absolue. Henry, *Incarnation*, 357.

singular in its aim to restore Meister Eckhart and the gospel of John to decisive roles in contemporary philosophical theology, Henry's thinking here is objectionable because there is, by definition and decision, a great deal of eccentricity, if not heterodoxy, at play in his theological turn. Hart writes, "there is no doubt that Henry wishes to assimilate Christianity to his philosophical position... and that one way in which Henry does this trimming is by attending almost exclusively to Johannine Christology and only to particular elements in the fourth gospel" (103). Moreover, Henry "seriously departs from what Jesus teaches, so far indeed that one must question whether he is talking about Christianity at all" (105). While there is much for the theologian to appreciate and to be enthusiastic about in Henry's theological turn, there is just as much to be viewed with suspicion precisely because it appears to encroach on the most basic tenets of orthodox belief.

Which is why it is difficult to understand what exactly the last three essays see as worthy in Henry to be adopted wholesale and uncritically. Each of the last three essays approaches Henry without much anxiety about the license he takes with traditional theological concepts, such as the image of God, creation, incarnation, the cross, eschatology etc. These essays presume that Henry's thinking is wedded to a basic Christian discourse on the cosmos, excepting that Henry's critical eye toward the disclosure of the visible world is more fine-tuned than other theological anthropologies. The primary theological motifs investigated and promoted by Kühn, for instance, are the ones that bear on truth and concrete experience. For him, Henry remains a valuable resource for establishing the absolute apodictic truth of self-experience, that the inner sphere of auto-affection, whose invincible pathos is conceived as impenetrable to anything from the outside, can be the only site of divine self-disclosure as the Logos because it does not subject itself to the temporal variation and hermeneutical play of language games manifest in the visible world. As a straightforward endorsement of Henry's theory of auto-affection and the religious truth it hides within itself, this essay even seeks, if only too briefly, to dispose of the claim that Henry is a Gnostic. But what is interesting and very worthwhile about Kühn's essay is that it persists to broach the issue of the relation between philosophy and theology in Henry—and once for all, it dispels the notion that they are separate "disciplines." Too many who read Henry with appreciation and sympathy want to divorce him from his theological turn upon which so much of his work is predicated from his 1963 *L'essence de la manifestation* up to his final trilogy on Christianity. Kühn shows that philosophy and theology are so deeply integrated in Henry that no rupture between them may finally obtain. Those who want to save Henry from his theological deviation (usually they claim that philosophy is strictly separate from theology and that his theological turn is merely a final expression of life not necessarily intrinsic to the phenomenon of subjective life that Henry articulates), succeed in only showing their own ill-conceived assumptions: that they do not like theology so they do not want Henry to like theology either. One must take Henry, theological warts and all, if one is not to annul his imaginative depth and creative genius—and Kühn tries to do justice to the way in which Henry's work subsists philosophically *and* theologically (142–143).

The final two essays engage the reader on several levels but are to be improved upon. They are, in other words, and it may suffice here to put it bluntly, too

uncritical: Sylvain Camilleri thinks the dogma of salvation is the critical centrepiece that ties together Henry's final trilogy on Christianity, *I am the Truth: toward a Philosophy of Christianity* (1996), *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (2000) and *Paroles du Christ* (2002). A majority of the narrative contained in this essay tends to be boilerplate, for what is argued is that the thematic of soteriology unifies the trilogy in a way that perhaps no other theological doctrine could. That may be the case, but I'm not sure how this advances debate about Henry's pertinence in our contemporary context or about how Henry could be accommodated more fully, or even about how his work lends itself to being retrieved against, say, the hermeneutical turn of Derrida, Ricoeur and other post-Heideggerians (although that is briefly mentioned as a latent possibility, 116). Gély's essay is to be commended for its interest in marginal works Henry wrote about politics, communism and capitalism, etc., in the 1980s and early 90s. This is a rich trajectory in Henry, however, it is rarely tapped because it seems to reinforce what was already indicated in his work on Marx (in the 1970s). But like Camilleri's above, this essay reflects a steady and cautious exposition of its object of attention. Little to no critical comment is incorporated in an essay on what is perhaps a most polarizing and eccentric figure, one who summons forth critique and controversy, especially about the theme of collective and social action in the world. Does not Henry submit the world to a reduction of the most Gnostic kind? And if so, how is collective action or intersubjectivity possible? Henry addresses this theme, but in the most peculiar way possible, and in a way to be problematized. To accept wholesale what Henry achieved, on this and other topics, is like accepting without hesitation what Plotinus or what Descartes achieved: no one is a disciple of Descartes or Plotinus, even if several have been influenced by both through the ages.

This collection of essays keeps a steady pace that tends to be evenly dispersed. While the essays cover several disparate issues in Henry's thinking, most focus on phenomenology and theology and his relation to Husserl or Heidegger, or to Eckhart and the gospel of John. Only the last essay deviates from this general plan, but this is welcome. Perhaps one more essay could have been added: what Henry thinks about mass culture and late modernity, themes he takes up in *Barbarism* and the *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* as well as in his text on Kandinsky. Henry is certainly a demanding philosopher whose interest in theology bears testimony to the fruitful exchange still to be had by those to great meta-disciplines. But what proves also so profitable about Henry's thinking is its clarity, rigor, and most instructively, its development over against important authorities. The greatness of a work can be measured by the authority of the foes it invokes, and Henry takes on, with exacting clarity and careful elucidation, some of the most imposing figures in the West and does not hesitate to mark out his own position with vigour and enthusiasm, with a kind of prophetic determination that admits nothing of the vagaries and nihilisms so characteristic of our age.