Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology

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The Option for the Poor and the Phenomenology of Life

<https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2018-0031>

Received May 30, 2018; accepted August 28, 2018

Abstract: Recently, Catholic teaching and theology have given much attention to “the preferential option for the poor.” Gustavo Gutiérrez, OP, who has popularized the phrase, also defines theology as a “reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God.” The praxis of the option for the poor is therefore indispensable to the theological task, for theology must always be “enfleshed” and concrete in the life of the people. This is particularly the case of Latin American theology and strongly emphasized in the magisterium of Pope Francis. The option for the poor has its foundation in *who* God is and *how* God is for the people (cf Exod 3:8-15). The option for the poor is grounded in *life*. Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life provides a logical approach to theological reflection on poverty, justice, and solidarity with the poor. The people of God, the Church community, live the option in concrete praxis. The God of life has a special love and concern for the poor. The poor, and those in solidarity with them, mysteriously experience the divine love and grace in their everyday lives and *la lucha por la vida* (the struggle for life). In the living, religious experience is intimately grounded.

Keywords: Theology, Michel Henry, the Poor, Praxis, Ethics, World, Life

“[L]iving and acting define reality.”¹

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...” (Luke 6:20)²

“It is the phenomenological structure of absolute Life that the Beatitudes enunciate.”³

Have you heard the great opera singer Jessye Norman perform the traditional African-American spiritual, “Give Me Jesus”? If not, it is well worth the effort.⁴ *Listen* with your heart. She reverently, gracefully, full-heartedly, gives her all—“Dark midnight was my cry, dark midnight was my cry, dark midnight was my cry, give me Jesus. Give me Jesus, give me Jesus, you can have all this world, give me Jesus.”

African-American spirituals are expressions of an enslaved people living the darkest oppression and injustice. They are the cries of the poor. In “Give Me Jesus,” we hear a people thirsting for life (“Jesus”) in the midst of suffering and oppression (“world”). “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Not only in Christianity but also in all people of good will, life is sought. Life in the midst of its joy and pain, in all its *pathētik* human experience and *pathos*, as French phenomenologist of life Michel Henry says. Life in its Self-Givenness.⁵

¹ Henry, *I am the Truth*, 228.

² Scripture quotes from New Revised Standard Version.

³ Henry, *I am the Truth*, 205.

⁴ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-W5H1mdUsc>

⁵ This essay is an exercise in “phenomenological theology.” It is necessarily written from the viewpoint of Christian theology. My hope is that readers from other traditions will feel at home here, for Henry’s phenomenology of life is as inclusive as Life itself.

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1 A theological hermeneutic of the “world”

When first studying Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life, I struggled with what could be interpreted theologically, very wrongly, as a glaring dualism —between “Life” and “world.” I now see how off the mark a dualistic interpretation of Henry is. The supposed “dualism” comes from a misconstrued conception of the Christian life, particularly from modern times onwards.⁶ What Michel Henry calls the “phenomenology of life” is (hopefully!) adopted by the Christian world-view. Life is that which is absolutely “real.” The reality of the world cannot be denied, maintains Henry, but what is “real” is the “content” of the world. He gives the cogent example of the economy in the philosophy of Karl Marx. The concept “economics” comes from the human mind. By asserting a concrete word traditionally associated with economics, Marx postulates that labor is, instead, an integral part of human life. Traditional economy “thingifies” labor, mistaking it for economic exchange rather than something knit into the fabric of life itself as human praxis. Marx sees the irreparable damage caused by a “world” that turns labor, and thus the human worker, into a thing, an object to be used, simply another economic commodity.⁷

This Henryian insight is important in the context of the Mexican immigrant community in the United States. Their labor is indeed “thingified.” They accept work that is rejected by the dominant community, work that is often undignified and even dangerous. I once worked with a group of Latino immigrants who had been hired for HAZMAT chemical cleanup in a construction area. They were not properly trained, equipped very poorly, and dangerous details of their work were withheld. Many began to notice burns on their feet, despite the fact that they were wearing shoes. Some became nauseous and had difficulty breathing. Others experienced a number of other alarming symptoms. One died.

Added to economic and labor injustice is the tragedy of the broken and unjust immigration system in the United States, in dire need of radical reform. But there is little hope of any under the present administration. Recently this has been played out with tragic consequences at the border between the United States and Mexico, where children (sometimes even infants) have been separated from their parents and sent to special facilities (read detention centers). It is thought that up to 3,000 children have been affected. While there has been an outcry in the United States forcing political action on the part of those who have initiated this policy, (there is presently a court order that the administration must reunite the families), little progress has been made concretely to bring families back together. The forced separation of children from parents has been compared to the racial policies of Nazi Germany.

Marx’s analysis of injustice was in fact the root “intuition” of Christianity from the start, says Henry, concretized in the words of Jesus.⁸ What is “unreal” is the reduction of humanity to economic categories—precisely why the poor suffer at the hands of the powerful. This is the “world’s” fatal interpretation of reality. It is, in fact, based on an illusion.

Henry then reflects on the Self and “Ipseity.” The self, grounded in the absolute living Self who is Jesus Christ, knows the other as thusly grounded. If I am Christ, the other is Christ because of the Life we share. Nothing is more concrete and real. My “*pathos*” is the *pathos* of the other and the consequent responsibility I have toward the presence of Life in abundance. Henry adds a new phrase to the phenomenological lexicon—“Being-in-common.”⁹ Referring back to the Parable of the Sheep Gate (John 10:1–10), a critical passage for Henry, he says that the one who does not pass through the Gate does not *live* and has little sense of *who* he or she is at core. If that is the case, the other can hardly be known. I do not pass through that Gate alone, says Henry. Being in the sheepfold gives me a sense of the life shared by others as well. Being-in-common is Being-in-life—the only real existence we can have, and it is “had” in community.

⁶ See especially Henry, *I am the Truth*, 232–58. In a brilliant chapter entitled “Christianity and the World,” Henry directly addresses the question.

⁷ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 243–47 and *Incarnation*, 176.

⁸ Pope Francis recently said in an interview that Marx’s philosophy of the dignity of human labor was “robbed” from Christianity!

⁹ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 254–58.

In Henry, the “world” is based in Greco-Roman civilization and the techno-scientific-economic Western model of philosophy (and theology!). Life, in this “ontological”¹⁰ world, is reduced to “objects” that phenomenologically “appear,” thingified into a conceptual database of the “phenomena,” and then “disappear” into nothingness. There is little consciousness of the true self and less of the neighbor, of “Being-in-Common.” Life and the content of the world are divorced and dualistic. In short, we suffer a “forgetfulness” of Life and our ground in absolute Life. For Henry, Life is the “interiority” of the First Living (Jesus) that is all-encompassing of the “exteriority” of the world. Theologically, we can say that the two “hands” of God—Jesus and the Spirit (St. Irenaeus of Lyon)—embrace the universe.¹¹ Outside of this divine embrace, there is no life. The world (and its content for Henry) so deeply loved by God (John 3:16) is enveloped by Life and absolutely “enfleshed” there. Life is not dualistic but of one undividable fabric.

When Henry speaks about Life as Reality and the world as illusory, this is the theological meaning. Life is the *only* reality. It radically includes the contents of the world in its phenomenality. Life is sacred because life is divine. That is why Henry’s “world” is so accurately and phenomenologically described in its unreality. It simply is *not* and cannot be in the Life created by absolute Life, in the image and likeness of the God of Life.

2 Life

Recently, I preached at a Mass in Spanish in a parish with a large Latino community. The people were largely immigrant or had immigrant roots. A number had crossed the dangerous border between Mexico and the United States, a border that has been militarized by the present administration with National Guard troops. Despite the calls on the part of the ultra-right for a border wall, the border is already fortified because of the border patrol (now also with the troops), the existing wall, and the dangerous desert where many have died in the attempt to cross. The community gathered at Eucharist needed to hear about the border injustice and what it means for their *life*. It concretizes the reality they live. They also wanted to hear about the life of the good news of Jesus that confronts the death of immigration injustice. It was the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ—*Corpus Christi*—an important feast day in the Hispanic-Latino community. Stressing St. Augustine’s preaching on how the Eucharistic bread and wine make *us* the Body of Christ, I preached how Jesus’ words at the Last Supper (the gospel reading was Mark 14:12–16, 22–26) identify us as the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is a *living* body with a *living* Face.¹² What we do to the least, we do to Jesus. The people listened attentively and could readily identify with the words because of their experience as immigrants. The Body of Christ is a life-giving body, a living body of real human beings suffering real injustices in the life-giving “flesh” of Christ.¹³

Life is *the* most precious gift. Without Life, nothing counts, nothing matters. Life is the absolute given. It is to be lived with justice and dignity. Phenomenological appearance, givenness, reduction, *epoché*, impression, all have their ultimate meaning in Life as lived in its fullness, in its abundance. Henry’s *pathêtik* human experience, its *pathos*, embraces the joys and pains of life, inviting us to look at its fullness, how it is authentically *lived*. It invites the “I,” the “me,” the “Self,” to reflect deeply on what is real and what is illusory. What is real is Life, life in abundance, life worth living.

Like many post-modern phenomenologists, Henry believes that Western philosophy, rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, is primarily interested in questions concerning “being.” This is true even of

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, like Henry, is critical of Western philosophy’s preoccupation with being (including Heidegger), especially manifested for Levinas in Western ontology. See, for instance, the Levinasian discussion of consciousness, cognition, and being regarding “allegiance to the other.” Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 23–26.

¹¹ Irenaeus uses the “hands of God” image to refer to the work of creation. It is the Triune God who creates—the Father and the hands, whom he calls “Word” (Son) and “Wisdom” (Spirit). See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 4, Chapter 20, Paragraph 1.

¹² Jon Sobrino, SJ, rightly says that it would be “idle” to talk about the Body of the Crucified Christ without giving it a concrete face. See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 264.

¹³ Henry refers explicitly to the “fleshiness” of Jesus by relying heavily on the work of Tertullian. See Henry, *Incarnation*, 126–31.

phenomenology. Heidegger, for instance, wants to break free from the fetters of metaphysics but becomes more deeply entrenched in being. Heidegger's phenomenology of "being-there" and "thrown-ness" approaches the phenomena from the question of subjective and objective being; his "being-in-the-world" is consequently objectified. Traditional phenomenology brackets everything else for the sake of the reduction. Instead, Henry proposes a "counter-reduction" where, practically speaking, it is "being-in-the-world" that is bracketed. Life is proposed as the "phenomenon" that is not only studied but *lived* and experienced, in all its joys and hopes, in its sorrows, sadness, poverty, and injustice—in all its fleshy *pathētik pathos*:

To be incarnate is to have flesh, and, perhaps more precisely, to be flesh. Thus incarnate beings are not inert bodies that neither sense nor feel anything, conscious neither of themselves nor things. Incarnate beings are suffering beings, shot through with desire and fear, feeling all the impressions that are bound together with flesh because they are constitutive of its substance—which is thus an impressional substance, *beginning and ending with what it feels*.¹⁴

For Henry—as well as the mystics and apophatic theology (Henry is fond of Meister Eckhart)¹⁵—God is "beyond" being. God, Henry says, is absolute Life. Jesus, the "Arch-Son," is the self-generation of the God of Life. Thusly Henry posits, in what is often called "radical phenomenology," the phenomenology of *life*. God is not concerned, as is ontology, with abstract being. Rather, God's primary concern is *life itself*, since God is Life and Jesus, God's beloved and the Incarnate Life of God, is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

If God's primary concern is life as *lived concretely* by God's daughters and sons, God desires life that reflects the *divine* life. Injustice *does not* reflect the living God.

3 The Other

To the extent that I become aware of my "true self," as twentieth-century mystic Thomas Merton has it, I understand that the self can only be "real" if it participates in absolute Life as given through the self-revelation of the "First Living"—Henry's favorite phrase for Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One. I become aware of Life and my ethical responsibilities to live the true self from its foundational Source. I also become deeply aware of the "web of life" in which I partake, that is, the "others" who are part of the gift of life and to whom I have an absolute responsibility. The essence of the phenomenology of life is that I become aware of Life in its *interiority*, which embraces all things and all people, particularly the poor. Edith Stein, who develops and expands Husserl's empathy as a condition of intersubjectivity, expresses this in different words but with the same intentionality. Intersubjectivity is spoken of often in the Husserlian corpus. But it is given special emphasis in his later work, particularly regarding *Lebenswelt*—"Life-World," a combined word that must have affected the phenomenology of Michel Henry.¹⁶ Husserl maintains that it is within the *Lebenswelt* that intersubjectivity and interrelatedness occurs, that is, in the concrete situations of everyday life as it is manifested in the world.¹⁷ And what, asks Husserl, of deeper reflection on this concrete, everyday, ordinary *Lebenswelt*?

Yet there can be a completely different sort of waking life involved in the conscious having of the world. It would consist in a transformation of the thematic consciousness of the world which breaks through the normality of straightforward living. ... Let us now shape this into a new universal direction of interest; let us establish a consistent universal interest in the "how" of the manners of givenness ...¹⁸

What Henry calls Life—in contrast to Husserl's *Lebenswelt*—is primarily "moved" by *pathētik* life-experience, by *pathos*—and the accompanying "empathy" (Husserl, Stein) of these deeply human "enfleshed" feelings. Empathy as a feeling, when analyzed phenomenologically, leads to ethics. When I empathize with another

¹⁴ Henry, *Incarnation*, 4.

¹⁵ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 309–35.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Henry, *Incarnation*, 151.

¹⁷ See especially Welton (ed.), *The Essential Husserl*, 363–78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 376.

and know that they share the same *pathētik* Life, I am led to act ethically. I participate in the praxis of Life. Edith Stein expresses life-giving empathy in speaking of the human experience of joy that makes us aware that we are, at core, *community*:

I empathetically arrive at the “sides” of joyfulness obstructed in my own joy. This ignites my joy, and only now is there complete coincidence with what is empathized. If the same thing happens to the others, we empathetically enrich our feeling so that “we” now feel a different joy from “I,” “you,” and “he” in isolation. But “I,” “you,” and “he” are retained in “we.” A “we,” not an “I,” is the subject of the empathizing. Not through the feeling of oneness, but through empathizing, do we experience others. The feeling of oneness, and the enrichment of our own experience become possible through empathy.¹⁹

Without empathetic community, without this sense of the other, Life is not real but is, rather, illusory.

In the phenomenology of life, ethics then—concern and empathy for the other—is of the utmost importance. One of Henry’s primary phenomenological concerns—like Emmanuel Levinas—is the ethics of Life. It is very similar to how Dietrich Bonhoeffer interprets ethics. Bonhoeffer lived his theological “ethic.” He believed that ethics was at the heart of theology. He considered *Ethics* to be his masterwork but wrote it largely “on the run,” during his resistance to the Nazi regime. His approach is experiential. The best way to “do” theology is to *live* it. Theory can have no meaning outside of lived experience. Bonhoeffer says that ethics has little to do with what philosophy calls “good” and “evil.” Western ethics has always started there, as if we could determine good and evil as they “appear” in an ontological world always valid. Rather, Bonhoeffer maintains, ethics does not start from metaphysical questions about good and evil. Instead, it begins with the concrete question of life: “What is the will of God?”²⁰ But this is no easy thing. Bonhoeffer will say that the will of God “lies deeply hidden within thousands of possibilities.”²¹ We discern, then, among these many possibilities, what is “God’s will.” What is it that nurtures Life?

Henry intimately associates God and God’s “will” with *Life* to the point of identity. God is absolute Life. In a powerful chapter on ethics from *I am the Truth*,²² Henry asserts that Life itself is the Commandment.²³ Henry’s is an ethics of life. The Commandment of Life is intimately related by Jesus the First Living to the “self-revelation of absolute Life,” to *love*. Love is praxis in action. Praxis is only action within life, action for life. Absolute Life is manifested through the way we act as disciples of Jesus, always loving as he has loved us (cf. 1 John 4:19). Love is only lived in the concrete stuff of life, how we treat ourselves (love of self) and the other (love of neighbor). Love is concrete praxis.²⁴ Life, love, and praxis, insofar as they spring forth from the Word, *are* our salvation:

The majority live like idolaters: They hardly care at all about the power that gives them life, and live in it only for themselves, and care, in all things and in others, only for themselves. To the members of his body, to each of them who, given to themselves in the self-givenness of the Word, will live only from the infinite Life that is put to the test in this Word, *to those who love one another in Him in such a way that it is Him they love in them, Him and all those who are in Him*, eternal Life will be given, so that in this Life that has become theirs, they are saved.²⁵

4 The poor

Henry maintains that revelation (the “self-revelation” of the First Living) always reflects back on the concrete praxis of life in discipleship (the following of Jesus) and in the praxis of justice. Gustavo Gutiérrez, OP, expresses the same concept in his definition of theology as a “reflection on praxis in the light of the

¹⁹ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 18.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 47.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, quoted from Doblmeier, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*. See also Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

²² Henry, *I am the Truth*, 171–90.

²³ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 188 ff.

²⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, 252.

Word of God.”²⁶ For both Henry and Gutiérrez, life, praxis, and Word are intimately intertwined and cannot be reflected upon disconnectedly, as if in a vacuum. Real praxis is lived in real Life in obedience to the real Word (Bonhoeffer refers to Jesus as “the Real One”²⁷). Henry, Gutiérrez, and Bonhoeffer cannot conceive of any ethical praxis “outside” of real, concrete life directed toward the other—and in the case of the primary option of which we are speaking theologically, the poor. For Henry, things that are “exterior” are always those things that in the traditional phenomenology of Heidegger and others “appear,” “make themselves known,” in the “world.”²⁸ Rather, true knowledge can only be “known” in Life, which is “interior.” But it is the interiority of life that radically “includes” everything in its loving embrace. Concrete Life is the true manifestation of that which is Real. The “most real” is the other and the ethical demands placed on me as a consequence. The most real, the most concrete, is the poor other who places the demand of absolute Life upon me. God’s qualities—or if I can be so bold God’s “energies”—are how we come to “know” God, who cannot be known in the divine essence, as St. Maximos the Confessor says, but only through the divine qualities.²⁹ One of these qualities, I believe, is the option for the poor.

But how do we “know” an option? An option is an idea. We know that which is concrete and enfleshed. To take the option God takes is to know the poor as enfleshed man and woman. Or, better said, it is the poor who *know* because they know Life in all its *pathos*, Life in the flesh. It is in their flesh that the poor live and suffer:

The analysis of the body can never become an analysis of our flesh, or eventually its explanatory principle; rather, the contrary is true: Our flesh alone allows us to know, within the limits prescribed by this inescapable presupposition, something like a “body.” Thus the contours of a strange inversion already stand out before our eyes. The man (or woman) who knows nothing, nothing but the hardship of all the suffering in his (her) bruised flesh—the poor and the “little ones”—probably knows much more than an omniscient mind situated at the end of the ideal development of science ...³⁰

In knowing Life, the poor know and are known. It is through Life that we know the option for the poor, for absolute Life—God—can only be known through God’s qualities.

Recently, Catholic teaching and theology have given much attention to “the preferential option for the poor” (Gutiérrez). This is particularly the case of Latin American theology and strongly emphasized in the magisterium of Pope Francis. The option for the poor has its foundation in *who* God is and *how* God is for the people. If the option for the poor is a fundamental “quality of God,” then the people of God, the Church community, are obliged to live it as integral part of our religious experience if we are to be the “icon” of the living Holy Trinity.³¹ Put in another way, it is a *phenomenological necessity* to take an option for the poor, for in so doing we experience the God of Life and know the true meaning of St. Paul’s “in Christ Jesus.”³²

The living God takes an option for the poor. Praxis, for Latin American theology, is so much more than “action” or “practice.” It is “living action” (Henry) at the heart of the poor, an integral part of life and, therefore, integral part of who God is at core, a “quality” of God, in the words of St. Maximos. If God is Life itself, if God’s primary concern is Life in the concrete, in the “flesh,” “en-fleshed,” then God as absolute Life is absolutely concerned about injustice that “appears” in the world and adversely affects the life of the poor. Really it is not “injustice” that appears, but the *unjust actions* of the powerful and the wealthy. Injustice (the option for the poor is its opposite, Life, as opposed to sin and death) as it appears in the “world” is diametrically opposed to absolute Life. Humanity and the poor can only appear within Life. There is no place in Life for injustice, which appears in the world and, like evil in the theology of the Fathers and Mothers, does not really exist. Injustice “is not” in Life. It cannot be a part of Life and has no commonality with Life and the flesh of the poor and humanity.

²⁶ See especially Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15. But the phrase is implicit in the entire Gutiérrez corpus.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 261–63.

²⁸ See Henry, *Incarnation*, 36–41, for a concise summary of his insightful critique of Heidegger. The sub-title of the section speaks for itself: “The Crisis of Phenomenality in Heidegger. The Ontological Destitution of the World’s Appearing.”

²⁹ St. Maximos the Confessor, *Philokalia*, 69.

³⁰ Henry, *Incarnation*, 5.

³¹ See Forte, *La Iglesia: Icono de la Trinidad*.

³² Maloney, *Prayer of the Heart*, 9.

The option for the poor “appears,” in the phenomenological sense, as “self-revelation” of Who-God-Is-for-Us and how the God of Life *acts*. God reveals God’s Self as integral part of life, as Life itself. Life is then called to make manifest who God is at core and how God acts on behalf of God’s beloved people. It is particularly made manifest in the “First Living,” the Incarnate One who takes on the flesh of all humanity and, most especially, the flesh of the poor.

The option for the poor as expressed in absolute Life is not an ontological phenomenon that appears as an object. Nor is it presence that becomes absence as it moves through historical time. It is “beyond” historical time and being, an integral part of Life that appears there, not as a “phenomenon” but in the process of the phenomenality of Life itself, in its divine appearance in Life. The option for the poor is an integral quality of the God of Life. Theology in the first centuries was the “contemplation of the Holy Trinity.” God’s essence cannot be known. Hence the “qualities” of God become the center of theological contemplation. God is “experienced”—contemplated—through God’s qualities, God’s “attributes,” and the option for the poor is a primary characteristic of the God of Life:

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... (Exod 3:7-8 NRSV)

God, in God’s very essence, in God’s very “being,” is especially concerned for the poor. If that is how God is, then how much more God’s beloved people are called to be. This is covenantal ethics, the ethics of Life. God’s people are called to “imitate” in life how the God of Life *is*. The imitation is praxis, the “action for life” by women and men who follow Jesus Christ, the First Living, absolute Life enfleshed. Michel Henry and his phenomenology of life open up ample space in post-modern continental philosophy for profound theological reflection on the living God of the poor and the living praxis of the ecclesial community of faith animated by the breath of the Spirit.

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