Existential and Phenomenological Conceptions of the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology

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Michel Henry and Metaphysics: An Expressive Ontology

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Abstract: There is an ambivalence and indecision at the heart of Michel Henry’s phenomenological ontology of life that this article seeks to resolve. Either “Being is a phenomenon only when it is at a distance from itself” or “the immediate is Being itself as originally given to itself in immanence.”¹ The decision is, simply put, between distance or immediacy. In order to address this indecision, I put forward an hypothetical expressive interpretation of Henry’s phenomenology of life, drawing upon Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of post-Cartesian metaphysics. The metaphysical language of expression is used (a) to make clear the internal structure of ‘auto-affection’ — a key concept for Henry’s phenomenology of life — as well as (b) to correct essentialist readings of this put forward by Dominique Janicaud and (c) broadly Hegelian interpretations put forward by François-David Sebbah. This expressive reading clarifies the ontological significance of life and auto-affection, showing more clearly the way the living self relates to Life or God as a dynamic movement and flux, without distance, gap, or transcendence. Through the clarification of Henry’s ontology of life in terms of expression a further ambiguity with regard to the theological significance and status of Life is revealed. The identification of an immanent and auto-affective Life with God in the early works appears closer to a Spinozist God than the later, Christian writings otherwise suggest. It is possible for the immediate, inner experience of auto-affective life to be as much secular as religious. I discuss this in the final part of this article.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Life, Metaphysics, God, Dominique Janicaud, Michel Henry

1 Introduction

In contrast to Henry’s later, more confessional Christian writings,² the early works carry within them a certain ambiguity with regard to the theological status and significance of Life and the living. While in these earlier works Henry outlines in greater detail the role God plays in his phenomenology of life than, perhaps, in later works, the focus of the early works is a specific phenomenological problem concerning the unity and integrity of inner experience that determines an ontology of life. Despite this ambiguity, the role of God in Henry’s early phenomenological works remains, however, undeniable. There certainly is, as Dominique Janicaud puts it, a “moment of atheism” in the earlier works, which is similar to Husserl’s “God without God,” but, in the end, for Henry, God plays an explicit role in his phenomenological works insofar as this term is identified with Life.³ God is synonymous with Henry’s phenomenological concept of life: “Being

1 Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 66 and 276.

2 Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of the Flesh; I Am, The Truth: Toward A Philosophy of Christianity; Words of Christ*.

3 Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*, 76; See also Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 429.

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and life,” Henry writes, “the life of God himself, an absolute life.”⁴ By the term ‘life’ Henry does not mean biological life but an immanent mode of appearing for feelings, such as suffering and joy. In the early works the phenomenological determination of life is approached through the question of the being of the *ego* and the body: “the meaning of the being of *ego* is the theme of this investigation”⁵ and “the body [...] belongs to a first reality whose study is the task of fundamental ontology.”⁶ The question of ontology in the early works is, therefore, significant. If life describes at once the modality of appearing and the content of this appearing, then this concept is fundamental to understanding Henry’s ontology. But the identification of Life with God does not appear to have any strictly phenomenological motivation. The relationship between Henry’s early phenomenology of life and the question of God appears more ambiguous than in his later Christian works.

The ambiguous character of this relationship is obscured by the language of revelation that Henry uses in *Essence of Manifestation* to characterise auto-affection. In order to draw out the stakes of this ambiguity, attention must first be paid to the language employed to describe auto-affection. This forms the basis of the first major claim of this article: Henry’s concept of auto-affection, which is fundamental to his ontology, is best understood in terms of expression and that this expressive concept forms the unifying principle to his ontology of life, binding the self to the dynamic movement of Life or God. In its unifying and expressive role, the concept of “auto-affection” receives a new meaning and content: auto-affection becomes life’s phenomenal mode of expression and its (expressive) content becomes the real and concrete *feeling* of absolute life. It describes a dynamic movement of expression that accounts for the integrity of the transcendent movement of intentionality. In other words, Henry’s concept of auto-affection describes the integrity and coherence of this movement alone, that is, without its formal correlative subject-object/noetic-noematic poles. An expressive interpretation thus resolves an ambiguity in Henry’s ontology regarding the ontological meaning and significance of life. It also corrects a possible misunderstanding in Henry’s use of the language of revelation. The term “Life” no longer designates simply the modality by which life reveals itself, which appears tautological in form, but also determines each and every modality of life as expression, as receiving its being through expression and movement. The clarification of the concept of ‘auto-affection’ will provide the basis upon which to address questions concerning the theological status of God in Henry’s early works. A response to such questions is not obvious. This God that Henry identifies with Life is not at all the Biblical God of Revelation. But it is also not straightforwardly the idolatrous ‘God of metaphysics’ that conforms to the onto-theological figure of metaphysics put forward by Martin Heidegger, something that the following part of this article makes clear.

2 Henry’s Phenomenology of Life and Metaphysics

Like most within the phenomenological tradition, Henry views metaphysics with suspicion and seeks to eliminate metaphysical pretensions from phenomenological inquiry. Henry’s critical relationship to metaphysics and phenomenology principally concerns the distribution of the visible and the invisible. Both metaphysics and phenomenology conceive the visible and the invisible in univocal and homogeneous terms. The visible and the invisible are two opposite poles at either end of a continuum. In order to counter this conception, Henry proposes an equivocal conception of the visible and the invisible, where the two terms are utterly distinct and without relation. Henry identifies the invisible alone as the immanent site for understanding the being of the *ego* and the relationship between the self and God, living and Life. The immediacy and immanence of this relation means that there are only two terms in Henry’s ontology: the self and God, living and life. This makes understanding Henry’s ontology difficult. It does not employ the usual mediating concepts, such as being-in-general, horizon, or object, and so on, that provide the conceptual scheme through which to interpret the being of and relation between the self and God, living and life.

⁴ Ibid., 670.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, 1.

If an interpretation of Henry's ontology cannot rely upon the usual ontological and phenomenological categories, then what interpretative and conceptual scheme should be used to describe Henry's ontology? In order to address this issue, I build upon François-David Sebbah's reading of Henry's concept of immanence to formulate an interpretation of Henry's ontology in terms of expression.⁷ My reading finds that Sebbah's logical analysis of the structure of immanence outlines the elements of the dynamic that comprise the pathos of life and the union of self with God, but does not provide a sufficient account of the unity of these elements. The elements of the structure are given, but the precise nature of its internal dynamic relation remains under-developed. In order to supplement Sebbah's account, I suggest the relation between self and God, living and Life, is an expressive one. An expressive interpretation provides an account of the internal dynamic within the structure of immanence.

2.1 The Univocal and Homogeneous Concept of the Visible and the Invisible in Metaphysics and Phenomenology

Life or God is, for Henry, invisible, so the way in which the visible and the invisible are defined and arranged is significant for understanding the self's access to and recovery of the link to Life or God. Before discussing how Henry arranges these two terms, I outline the way in which metaphysics arranges them in order to illustrate a key distinction between Henry and the metaphysical tradition. By the term 'metaphysics' I mean here Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy that conforms, broadly speaking, to Martin Heidegger's determination of the essence of metaphysics as onto-theology. The onto-theological definition of metaphysics understands the structure of metaphysics to consist of two fundamental parts: there is, on one hand, being-in-general, which determines the way in which an entity exists, and, on the other, a *summum ens*, which founds being-in-general.⁸ In Descartes' metaphysics, for example, the category of being-in-general is defined as *ens ut causatum* and the foundation of being is God.⁹ This definition of metaphysics provides the interpretative scheme for a theoretical understanding of being and its efficient basis. The foundation provides what Heidegger calls the *Grundung*, that is, the conceptual ground for interpreting entities and the supreme being, and the *Begrundung*, that is, the efficient causal grounding of being. I restrict the onto-theological definition of metaphysics to Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy on the evidence of Jean-Luc Marion's work on Descartes, which claims that the first lineaments of the key modern onto-theological figures of metaphysics can be found in Descartes' philosophical thought.¹⁰ This limits Heidegger's onto-theological definition of metaphysics to modern philosophy.

With this restricted definition of metaphysics in mind, let me outline the metaphysical distribution of the visible and the invisible. In this outline, I use Marion's characterisation of the way in which metaphysics arranges these two terms.¹¹ Metaphysics arranges these two terms in many different ways but can be broadly defined as follows: either (a) in terms of the accomplishment of a transition from the invisible to the visible or (b) in terms of a return of the visible to its invisible foundation. This definition is, of course, schematic and intends only to indicate a general trope in modern metaphysical thought. In both (a) and (b) there is an explicit or implicit assumption of a continuum running from the visible to the invisible that permits the conversion or transformation of one into the other (and back again).

The arrangement of the visible and the invisible can be done (a) in terms of a clarification of the visible in terms of the invisible, that is, a 'making seen' of the invisible. For example, in the work of René Descartes, the visible – that is, sensory data – initially appears in the form of clear yet confused ideas. This confusion stems from the impossibility of conceptually accounting for how one quality differs from another, which

⁷ Sebbah, *Testing the Limit: Derrida, Henry, Levinas, and the Phenomenological Tradition*.

⁸ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*.

⁹ Jean-Luc Marion outlines with great subtlety the causal scheme for being in Descartes' metaphysics in *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes*, 111–26.

¹⁰ See, for example, Marion, *Théologie blanche de Descartes* and Marion, *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes*.

¹¹ Marion, "The Invisible and the Phenomenon".

bears witness to an obscurity and lack of visibility in such ideas that only clear and distinct ideas could rectify. These clear and distinct ideas ‘translate’ qualities into terms of extension (i.e. shape and movement) and thus remove obscurity from the confused ideas of sensory data.

But these composite shapes remain invisible. They are not sensible shapes, but rational re-configurations of sensible data. These reconfigured shapes are, first of all, hypothetical from a physical point of view; second, these figures do not resemble very much their sensory effects. The obscurity thus remains. But this invisible or unseen aspect to (sensory) experience insofar as it does not fully yield to clarity and distinctness forms the basis for the visible. The visible arises from the unseen or invisible.

The converse of this arrangement is (b) the return of the visible to its invisible foundation. It can be a case of going back from obscure sensory data to the intelligible invisible in such a way that the clarity and visibility of the former depends upon the latter. The invisible concept makes it visible. Leibniz, for example, uncovers the unseen principles that govern logic and reason. Whether the conversion (a) ‘makes seen’ the invisible in the visible or (b) leads the visible back to its invisible foundation, “the visible and the invisible belong” as Marion puts it, “to the same world, hence to the world itself.”¹² The invisible and the visible are thus relative terms under a single univocal concept of appearing.

Whether the conversion turns from the invisible to the visible or from the visible back to the invisible matters little, perhaps, since, according to Henry, any difference in meaning between the two rests upon a single teleological direction:

The teleology which animates it [i.e., metaphysics and, as I will make clear, phenomenology] and whereby it defines itself is to render the invisible visible in such a way that the visible arrives only in the return of the contrary power from which it arises.¹³

The movement that animates metaphysics seeks to bring to light whatever lies in the shadows. Whatever is visible in the light of the world emerges from the “contrary power” of the night and the shadows. The world is thus a homogeneous chiaroscuro of light and shade.

It is not only metaphysics but also contemporary phenomenology that assumes that the visible and the invisible are univocal and homogenous. Husserl’s phenomenological project consists in two movements. There is, on one side, a movement away from the visible sensible impression of things and their conceptual or theoretical representation through a reduction that excludes all worldly and metaphysical transcendence. On the other side, there is a reverse gesture that seeks to account for the visible in terms of the initially invisible conditions for their appearing through an eidetic analysis. The phenomenological perspective thus yields a purer vision of the invisible essence(s) of visible things.

In order to acquire access to the constitutive foundation of phenomena, the phenomenological ἐποχή brackets out the objective world to reveal the “pure subjective processes” that comprise the transcendental life of the subject.¹⁴ The phenomenological reduction thus leads back from the objective world to this transcendental realm. This synonymous relation between ‘reduction’ (*reducere*) and ‘leading back’ motivates McKenna to compare the phenomenological reduction to Plato’s recollection of forms.¹⁵ This ‘leading back’ through reduction makes possible eidetic analyses, which outline the invisible ‘how’ of experience. Eidetic analyses describe the conditions for experience that otherwise remain obscure beneath natural consciousness.

A more recent example of the univocal and homogenous conception of the visible and the invisible can be found in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who defines the invisible as follows: the invisible is “what is not actually visible, but could be [visible].”¹⁶ There is a possible conversion from the invisible to the visible.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 446.

¹⁴ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 20-21.

¹⁵ McKenna, *Husserl’s “Introductions to Phenomenology” – Interpretation and Critique*, 180.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 257.

Meaning is *invisible*, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membre*), and the in-visible is the secret counter-part of the visible, it appears only within it, [...] one cannot see it there and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line* of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it.¹⁷

The teleology that Henry considers to animate phenomenological inquiry is present in this passage. Here, the invisible appears “in the line” of the visible and constitutes a “virtual focus” for meaning, thought, and vision. The continuity between the visible and the invisible means that they do not stand opposed to one another; rather, the invisible forms the counter-part of the visible and only ‘appears’ within it. This suggests that the invisible, far from being a distinct mode of appearing, borrows its mode of appearing from the visible itself. “When I say that every visible is invisible [...] One has to understand that it is the visibility itself that involves a non-visibility.”¹⁸

The univocal and homogeneous concept of the visible and the invisible, as Marion observes, “arises out of metaphysics, but phenomenology assumes its legacy, at least in its most decisive historical figures (that is to say, all the way to Merleau-Ponty and in conformity with Edmund Husserl).”¹⁹ We add that this legacy continues to be evident in recent ‘minimalist’ phenomenological projects. Dominique Janicaud, for example, attempts to formulate a minimalist phenomenological method that ‘translates’ the invisible into the visible.²⁰ Jean-Louis Chrétien, who adopts a similar methodological approach, makes similar claims regarding the emergence of the visible from the invisible and the ‘visibility’ of the invisible in the visible.²¹ My description of this continuity from the metaphysical arrangement of the visible and the invisible in terms of conversion or passage to similar conceptions of the conversion of these terms within phenomenological inquiries as different as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and recent developments in contemporary phenomenology makes clearer the terms within which Henry’s own phenomenological description of the invisible operates and its unique character in the history of phenomenology.

2.2 The Equivocal Concept of the Visible and the Invisible in Henry’s Phenomenology

The way Henry’s phenomenology arranges the visible and the invisible differs radically from the metaphysical and phenomenological tradition. In contrast to the univocal and homogeneous concept of the visible and the invisible, Henry formulates a radically equivocal concept of these terms. There are at least five stages in the determination of the equivocal concept of the invisible and the visible. The invisible is (a) not antithetical or contradictory to the visible. This lack of contradiction does not indicate a homogeneity between the visible and the invisible, but rather that (b) the invisible is a distinct mode of appearing. The distinction between the visible and the invisible indicates (c) an absolute difference that amounts to a complete “indifference” between the two terms. In order to avoid any indeterminacy in the concept of the invisible resulting from this indifference, (d) the invisible receives the name ‘life’ and designates (e) an invisible domain of phenomena in terms of feeling, pathos and affections.

The first step is that (a) the invisible is the fundamental determination of appearing, that is, of the visible. The nature of this determination means that the “invisible is not the antithetical concept of the visible.”²² But this claim does not mean that the invisible remains involved in the univocal concept of appearing; rather, the invisible is not antithetical or opposed to the visible due to the fact that, for Henry, appearing does not resolve into the visible alone but refers more originally to the invisible.

If the invisible determines the visible in an original manner, then this is not due to some latent visibility or preliminary non-visibility within the invisible; rather, it defines the essence of the visible. It indicates that

¹⁷ Ibid., 215.

¹⁸ Ibid., 247.

¹⁹ Marion, “The Invisible and the Phenomenon”, 22.

²⁰ Janicaud, “Toward A Minimalist Phenomenology”.

²¹ See, for example, Chrétien, *Promesses furtives* and *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*.

²² Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 444.

the invisible is (b) a distinct mode of appearing in its own right. “The invisible phenomenalizes itself in itself as such; it is phenomenon through and through, revelation, and even more, the essence of revelation.”²³ The invisible does not borrow its appearing from the visible, but attains within Henry’s phenomenology its own manner of appearing. It is, therefore, always and already a distinct mode of appearing in its own right.

The notion that the invisible attains the status of phenomena or even mode of appearing seems *prima facie* to be a contradiction in terms. But this apparent contradiction only stands if the invisible is understood to be homogeneous with the visible. If the invisible attains its own phenomenal status, then this does not implicate it in the appearance of intra-mundane phenomena, since these phenomena would appear only in the light of the world. The invisible attains the status of full phenomenon to the extent that it constitutes an entirely different ‘object’ for phenomenological inquiry that is outside or beyond the visible horizon. This invisible is not made visible through phenomenological inquiry, that is, it is not brought into the light of the world, with its conditions, injunctions and parameters. The invisible remains a distinct ‘object’ for analysis.

A consequence of (a) and (b) is that (c) the invisible and the visible cannot enter into common kind with one another. “The invisible and the visible would not be able to transform themselves into one another, and no passage, no time binds them together, but they subsist apart from one another.”²⁴ Their distinct subsistence without passage or transition between one another marks an “absolute difference” between the invisible and the visible. It is an absolute difference that reaches the point of establishing the invisible in “indifference” with respect to the visible and, conversely, the visible with respect to the invisible.²⁵ There is no relation or connection between the invisible and the visible; there is no antithesis, no conflict, which would permit any direct or oblique form of contact between the two modes of appearing.

The “indifference of this difference” establishes a radically equivocal concept of the visible and the invisible.²⁶ The visible is the mode of appearing by which transcendent phenomena appear in the world. By “transcendent phenomena” I mean here the otherness of visible objects in the world. The visible mode of appearing also includes the invisible in the univocal and homogenous manner outlined above. The invisible captures an entirely distinct and fundamental domain of phenomena: the immediate and immanent *pathos* of life that the self feels in, for example, suffering and joy. But this “indifference” of an “absolute difference” that the equivocal concept of the visible and invisible establishes raises the following question: how does an indifferent absolute difference form the basis upon which to propose a mode of appearing (the invisible) that challenges another (the visible)? The supposed ‘non-relation’ between the two makes it difficult to understand how Henry can assert the essential status of the invisible with respect to the visible. In order to prevent the invisible from becoming simply another mode of appearing amongst others, Henry designates the invisible, not as a theoretical or rational object, but as (d) life: “all life is by essence invisible; the invisible is the essence of life.”²⁷ I take this identification of the invisible with life to mark a fundamental characteristic of the invisible upon which the visible depends but cannot articulate.

The designation of the invisible as life means that life does not relate in any manner to the univocal and homogeneous concept of the visible and the invisible. Without any relation between the two modes of appearing, it is not possible for life to appear in accordance with the conditions of possibility that determine this univocal concept of appearing. Life or God remains completely hidden from the transcendent horizon of phenomenal experience, not in the shadows, but the darkest night.

The invisible is nothing which might be beyond the visible, it is nothing ‘transcendent’, it is the original essence of life such that, since it takes place in a sphere of radical immanence, it never arises in transcendence and, moreover, cannot show itself in it.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 439.

²⁴ Ibid., 448.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 443.

²⁸ Ibid., 453.

With the determination of the invisible as “the essence of life” Henry provides the terms and parameters within which to understand our access to life. This determination of the invisible as life, and vice versa, means that the self’s access to life – that is, the life the self possesses and is – is not mediated through the visible transcendent horizon of the world, but occurs immediately in a sphere of radical immanence. Its immediacy and its immanence place the living self in direct contact with life. Life and the living self coincide completely to the point that there is no distance, no gap, and, therefore, no means by which it might come to me from outside via some third-term, for example, the horizon of the world wherein objects appear to me. Put simply, in the sphere of radical immanence there is only absolute life and the living self.

The exclusion of the invisible from the phenomena of the world risks evacuating any content from the invisible and from life. But there is, according to Henry, a species of phenomena that appear immediately, without distance, and thus remain invisible: feelings. For example, suffering, pleasure, joy and pain. “No one has ever seen a feeling, a feeling has never caused anything to be seen.”²⁹ Suffering and joy do not appear in the visible horizon of the world, but nevertheless manifest themselves in an immediate and inescapable experience. Life designates, therefore, (e) a domain of invisible phenomena. These coincide immediately with the self and manifest themselves without being intended; hence, such feelings appear, without requiring the element of visible, in the original feeling of affection.

The way in which Henry’s phenomenology arranges the visible and the invisible provides the self with the conditions for access to Life or God. In making the comparison with the distribution of the visible and the invisible in metaphysics and classical phenomenology, I have shown how Henry’s distribution of these terms marks a radical departure from these traditions. There is not a univocal concept of the visible and the invisible that permits the passage from one to other. Henry formulates, instead, an equivocal concept of the two terms. The visible designates the mode of appearing by which objects and beings appear in the world and the invisible designates the mode of appearing of immanent phenomena of life. There is thus, on one side, the univocal concept of the visible and the invisible, wherein the light and shade of the world appear, and, on the other side, the invisible night of affection, feeling, and pathos.

But an outline of the phenomenological conditions for access to the world, on one side, and life, on the other, leaves under-determined the ontological character of this access and the link between the self and God. What is the ontological significance of the equivocal concept of the visible and the invisible? What does this mean for the being of the *ego*? These questions matter, for, despite the fact that the recovery of the invisible essence of appearing emerges within the ambit of the question of the meaning of the being of the *ego*, Henry hesitates before them: either “Being is a phenomenon only when it is at a distance from itself” or “the immediate is Being itself as originally given to itself in immanence.”³⁰ In the following part of this essay I attempt to provide an answer to the question of the ontological significance of the equivocal concept of the visible and the invisible through an interpretation of Henry’s ontology of life in terms of expression.

3 Henry’s Expressive Ontology

The univocal and homogenous conception of the visible and the invisible falls under what Henry calls “ontological monism,” which, as the name suggests, only considers being in these terms. What does “ontological monism” fail to express? The short answer is life and living. But this is not simply a question of formulating a novel phenomenological region of expression. The significance of Henry’s concept of the invisible is much broader than the delimitation of a novel domain of phenomena. Beyond the methodological and stylistic potential of Henry’s phenomenology of life there is hidden what I call an “expressive” ontology. I take the concept of philosophical expressionism from Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of post-Cartesian philosophy, in particular Spinoza and Leibniz.³¹ Such an expressive ontology defines being neither in terms of modern metaphysics – e.g., entities and objects – nor in the relational terms of contemporary

²⁹ Ibid., 543.

³⁰ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 66 and 276.

³¹ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.

phenomenology – i.e., openness or transcendence toward the world, intentional objects, etc. – but in terms of expressions or modalities of life. The decision to use the language of expression found in post-Cartesian metaphysics finds its motivation in Henry's early engagement with Spinoza's *Ethics*, in particular the experience of life *sub species aeternitatis*.³² This third species of vision could be seen to provide Henry with an early model for thinking an immanent phenomenology of life.³³

An expressive ontology defines existence or reality as expressions of Being or God. An expressive relation indicates that the expression explicates or unfolds the expressed in some way, so that, while not an essential element of the expressed, the expression is nevertheless involved or implicated – that is, *implicare*, 'to en-fold' – precisely through their explicative – that is, *explicare*, 'to out-fold' – function. Explication does not, however, indicate here a rational operation that is external to the *explicandum*, that is, the thing *x* that is explicated, but rather a dynamism, development, and unfolding from within the thing *x* itself. The expression does not simply designate the expressed in the way a signifier signifies the signified. Explication ('out-folding') is always self-explication ('self-out-folding').³⁴ Conversely, with the dynamic definition of explication, implication is not the opposite of explication: whatever explains thereby implies ('en-folds'); whatever develops or unfolds also involves.³⁵

By interpreting Henry's ontology in terms of expression, I seek not only to clarify the relationship between life and lived feelings and affections but also to modify and extend the scope of his work by rectifying a shortcoming in the language of his phenomenology. A key term in Henry's phenomenology is revelation. This can be seen from many of the quotes and citations used so far. By revelation Henry always understands self-revelation.³⁶ This distinguishes revelation from representation. Representation is the *re*-presentation of another term through the medium of its image. Like revelation, expression is always self-expression and distinguishes itself from representation along similar lines. The language of expression does not, therefore, depart radically from Henry's language of revelation. I do not, consequently, regard the language of expression to inflict too much interpretative violence upon Henry's work. On the contrary, it broadens the scope of Henry's ontology and its significance. The decision to use expression as the guiding term for an interpretation of Henry's ontology corrects a needless impoverishment and limitation of its practical and ethical potential.

The language of revelation implies a single valence in the manifestation of life from life to living, that is, a unilateral movement from life to the living that renders the subject almost completely passive. But the language of expression indicates more clearly the involvement of the living self in the expressive work of life and its immanence. On an expressive understanding of the invisible, there are two valences: the self-expression of life and the work of expression undertaken by the living self. This expressive interpretation will make it possible to clarify two important points in Henry's phenomenology of life. An interpretation of Henry's ontology in terms of expression will, first of all, allow me to counter Janicaud's formal, static, and essentialist interpretation. On Janicaud's interpretation, the essence of manifestation – the invisible, life – possesses only a formal coherence that amounts to a tautological and internal self-reference. Thus Janicaud claims, "the structure of immanence, then, is its pure auto-reference [...] [but] this is not a structure: it is a tautological interiority."³⁷ The phenomenological suspension of all transcendent phenomena retains little more than the originary and internal, thus accomplishing "the most fantastic restoration of essentialism."³⁸ Contrary to any essentialist or tautological interpretation of Henry's ontology, however, my expressive interpretation attempts to describe the living character of being through the expressive function of affections. The language of expression, in place of revelation, not only broadens the sense of auto-affection but also, second, makes way for a discussion of the theological significance and, importantly, ambiguity of the formula equating Life with God. On the one hand, auto-affection responds to a specific

³² See Henry, *Le bonheur de Spinoza*.

³³ See, for example, Longneaux, *Étude sur le spinozisme de Michel Henry* that follows *Le bonheur de Spinoza*.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 68.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Henry, "Qu'est-ce qu'une Révélation?"

³⁷ Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, 73.

³⁸ Ibid.

phenomenological problem concerning the unity and integrity of experience. On the other, it forms the basis for the link between living and Life, the self and God. It is, from this last point of view, a fundamentally religious concept insofar as auto-affection articulates the relation between the living self and Life or God. I will return to this second point later.

In order to put forward an expressive interpretation of the living character of being, the principal concern at this stage of our discussion is to provide a sketch of the meaning of being in Henry's ontology of life. The living character of being cannot simply be stated but must be arrived at through an interpretation of Henry's ontology. There are five key elements to my interpretation of Henry's ontology of life. The first element is (a) auto-affection. I understand auto-affection to be the unifying concept in Henry's ontology. I identify two aspects to Henry's concept of auto-affection: on one hand, it determines the (b) absolute situation that defines selfhood and, on the other, it describes the (c) dynamic movement of life. The (b) absolute situation describes how the (c) dynamic movement is (d) conditioned by what Sebbah calls a 'link'. But I argue that Sebbah's description of (a) in terms of (b) does not sufficiently take into account (c) the dynamic movement. I propose, therefore, to interpret (c) as an expressive component to (a) auto-affection. I conclude that the (e) expressive relation accounts for the unifying function of (a) – that is, auto-affection as link *and* movement.

In our discussion of the equivocal concept of the visible and the invisible, the invisible was found to be the essence of life and the essence of the appearing of appearance. But I did not determine the precise mode by which life appears, only that what appears is life itself. The mode by which life appears is (a) auto-affection. Auto-affection is key to understanding the appearing of life, for, as Henry makes clear, "auto-affection determines the essence of manifestation as that which makes it possible."³⁹ 'Auto-affection' is, as the term suggests, the affection of the self by the self. But this self-affection does not imply any movement outside of itself in order to return to itself. There is no mediating term in this self-affecting relation. What is affected is what affects in a sphere of immanence. Because that which affects is the same as that which is affected, auto-affection conditions self-reception. "Auto-affection is the internal structure of the essence whose property is that of receiving itself."⁴⁰ Auto-affection thus describes how life affects itself and how it receives its affect.

The auto-affection of life is key to understanding the structure of immanence and the essence of life. Auto-affection designates two aspects to the mode of appearing of life. It marks, first of all, the perfect adequacy in auto-affection between appearance and reality. It indicates, second, the dynamic principle that sets life in motion through auto-affection. The first aspect defines (b) selfhood. The second aspect ensures that the term 'auto-affection' and its self-referential structure do not, contrary to Janicaud, designate an empty tautological and monotonous mode of affection, but (c) a dynamic, productive, and expressive one.

In and through auto-affection, reality and appearance coincide in a sphere of absolute immanence. The affection and reception of life by itself excludes any transcendent 'beyond' of life. The absence of any beyond marks, according to Henry, the adequate character of phenomenal appearance itself. This adequacy is the coincidence of the mode of appearing with the content of appearance. It marks the "strict overlapping of reality and appearance"⁴¹ that defines the structure of absolute life. This absolute coincidence determines "the impossibility of its breaking the bond which attaches it to itself, of tearing itself away from itself and of existing outside of itself" that defines selfhood.⁴²

The adequacy and coincidence of life with itself does not render it immobile and static, rather auto-affection marks (c) the continual coming into self of life. In order for the invisible essence of life not to lapse into a self-referential and tautological mode of appearing that is formal and static, there must be an internal 'principle' that permits this endless return into self. Auto-affection performs this function. Sebbah describes the conditions of this function in terms of (d) a link that makes possible this continual return to and within itself. This link, according to Sebbah, preexists the terms that it connects: "what is first is the

³⁹ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 235.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 236.

⁴¹ Ibid., 290.

⁴² Ibid., 292.

link itself that in itself preexists all the poles it connects and then causes them to connect.”⁴³ In order for life to come into itself, there must be, first of all, a link that makes this movement into itself possible. It is the immanence of this connection through auto-affection, which, in some sense, precedes the connected terms, that accounts for the coherency and unity of absolute life.

I argue that the decision to describe auto-affection in terms of a link introduces spatial imagery that raises unnecessary problems in the interpretation of Henry’s ontology. The link implies, according to Sebbah, that within immanence there is an “internal gap” that makes this “*connection as connection* possible, with itself.”⁴⁴ What makes possible the movement of coming into and returning to self is this internal gap. This marks, for Sebbah, a wound or cut that life inflicts upon itself. “Life can be conjoined with itself only by cutting into itself, in the same movement, the gap that disjoins it and permits it – thus – connects it to itself.”⁴⁵ There is initial confirmation of Sebbah’s view in Henry’s illustration of the “perfect adequateness” of the irremediable and inescapable bond between life and self through the image of wound and laceration:

[T]he perfect character of this adequateness and of what it signifies in general for the universal structure of Being that Kafka has again expressed when he spoke of the arrows fitting exactly in the wounds they have made [...] the laceration of a wound, joy or suffering or even both at the same time, such is in any case the structure of Being in unity, its indissoluble unity with itself.⁴⁶

The perfect adequacy of appearing and reality is not, therefore, a serene and immobile coincidence, but rather a dynamic and self-lacerating one. This forms a tragic coincidence, where the inescapable bond is not simply an inert relation but one that inflicts wounds upon itself. In its perfect adequacy, life lacerates itself like arrows that fit into the wounds made by them. The wound finds its immediate suture in the endless return of life into self.

Henry appears to permit Sebbah’s spatial interpretation of life. But if this is the case, then a problem immediately arises. There is, on one hand, perfect coincide of appearance and reality and, on the other, a continual movement of self-laceration that suggests, perhaps, a certain non-coincidence. This suggests, according to Sebbah, that the endless repetition of the ‘coming into itself’ of absolute life, that is, its continual affirmation, is marked by a “non-affirmation” that indicates not a negative moment of the essence (Hegel) or its destruction, but an un-fillable ‘hole’ in the midst of absolute life that conditions its endless return to itself.⁴⁷

But is this a problem internal to Henry’s account of the movement of auto-affection or a problem with Sebbah’s interpretation? I suggest the latter. While Sebbah’s suggestion that in order for absolute life not to be rendered an immobile *plenum* there must be a ‘hole’ of some sort is logically coherent, it nevertheless overlooks two important factors. The focus on the wound and ‘hole’ in life, first, (α) places too much focus on one aspect of life’s continual return to itself and overlooks the fact the coming into self and reception of self in the auto-affection of absolute life is already and always a full phenomenon. Henry’s use of Kafka’s image of the arrow that fills the wound makes this clear. Life is at once wound and arrow, tear and suture. The dynamic movement of auto-affection is not merely a third-term in a logical relation, albeit a tautological relation between life and life, but, first and foremost, (β) a *movement* or *passage* from life into life within life. A movement may logically entail a gap into which it moves, but, ontologically, Henry’s unique concept of auto-affection seeks to capture the being of this very movement, not simply the fact of the link itself.

I address (α) first in order to make clear that the continual return of life into itself is always and already life’s movement. Henry describes this movement using the concept of auto-affection. Whatever is shown in this movement shows life. Suffering reveals itself through auto-affection. The feeling of suffering, therefore, reveals life.

⁴³ Sebbah, *Testing the Limit*, 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁶ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 291.

⁴⁷ Sebbah, *Testing the Limit*, 225.

Suffering reveals the absolute [...] the absolute originally reveals itself in suffering.⁴⁸

What does it mean for suffering, for example, to reveal the absolute? The revelation of the absolute is nothing exterior to the feeling itself, to the revelation in the feeling of its own content, *it is this revelation*.⁴⁹

The feeling of suffering reveals at once suffering and absolute life. There is no separation, gap or distance between the feeling of suffering and revelation of absolute life. Absolute life is not exterior to suffering; rather, suffering is the revelation of the absolute.

The feeling of suffering does not simply reveal itself, but reveals itself to itself and insofar as such is (β) the accomplishment of an act, that is, a real and concrete movement. This conforms to Henry's definition of revelation as self-revelation. But this is also where the language of expression helps clarify the dynamic character of the relation between suffering and life. An example of where the language of expression can clarify this relation is found in Henry's description of the supplementary and excessive character of suffering, which, note above, is the original affective mode by which absolute life reveals itself:

Before being loaded with the weight of its [i.e. the affection's] own tonality, the *supplement*, the *excess of power* which it lets burst forth and which it liberates as that which is permanent in it even when suffering culminates and is broken in extreme pain and grief.⁵⁰

Terms such as "supplement" and "excess" trouble Henry's characterisation of the relation between life and suffering in terms of revelation. These terms suggest, perhaps, the inessential nature of affection in the essence. If suffering, for example, is a supplement to and surplus of absolute life, then how does this cohere with self-revelation? Does not precisely *self*-revelation exclude supplement and excess from its concept? I claim that the language of expression helps account for the supplementary and excessive character of affection whilst preserving the 'self-revelatory' aspect to Henry's definition of revelation. It also identifies that particular affections, while inessential, remain nevertheless the fundamental and necessary content of life. In order to demonstrate how this is the case, let me draw attention to the following passage concerning the dynamic character of suffering,

In the unity of its radical immanence [...] suffering does not merely surpass itself toward itself, toward its own content in order to be what it is [...] It is first toward this surpassing that it surpasses itself, toward the surpassing as identical to the non-surpassing.⁵¹

I understand this paradoxical identification of surpassing with non-surpassing to rest upon the claim that the terminus of this surpassing is the very movement of surpassing. This means that the movement of surpassing never reaches its terminus, never accomplishes the act of surpassing, and so never surpasses itself. From this, Henry draws the conclusion that surpassing is identical with non-surpassing.

The dynamic character of suffering indicates (e) the unifying function of the explicate-implicate expressive relation. What suffering expresses is nothing exterior to the feeling itself, that is, it does not mediate between absolute life and the sufferer, but rather it is the very content of life that is expressed. Thus the expression of the essence through suffering at once explicates and implicates it. On one hand, the essence originally expresses itself through suffering and, on the other, this suffering is not an external manifestation of another but the very content of what it expresses; thus, the essence involves, that is, implicates and enfolds, suffering into its own explicative expression. In this way, the tonality of suffering thus *expresses* absolute life. It at once explicates or unfolds life insofar as it reveals its essence and involves or 'en-folds' life within itself insofar as suffering remains absolute life.

Even though suffering is inessential, it remains intimately bound to the essence in an explicate-implicate relation and, therefore, a necessary expressive component of the absolute situation. Terms such

⁴⁸ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 668.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 669.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 668 (my emphasis).

⁵¹ Ibid.

as “supplement” and “excess” now indicate the inessential yet expressive character of affections without undermining the integrity and unity of life. Suffering (and other fundamental tonalities) are not additional components to the essence but modalities of its expression. Indeed, Henry himself characterises suffering as supplement *and* expression: “Suffering which, finding its paroxysm in pain, can still, at this extreme point of its oscillation, *express itself [...] as a supplement of power [...] namely the Logos of life.*”⁵² I will leave a discussion of the meaning of the “logos of life” until later but the main points stands, namely that suffering is an expression of life.

My interpretation of Henry’s ontology in terms of expression does not, of course, avoid spatial metaphors. The explicate-implicate expressive relation relies upon the spatial metaphor of folding and un-folding. This is a problem of articulation and exegesis, rather than a theoretical problem internal to Henry’s ontology. While this image retains an unavoidable representational and metaphorical element, it nevertheless captures more closely the dynamic character of the relation between absolute life and feeling than Sebbah’s spatial imagery of links, gaps and holes. The latter implies a static set of relations within which the movement of auto-affection takes place rather than the expressive relation that characterises the intensive character of this movement.

The expressive interpretation of Henry’s ontology that I have put forward accounts for the saturation of life within its own dynamic movement of coming into self and receiving self by identifying this very movement as expression. What permits this unity of life and suffering (and other affections) is precisely the intensive movement of this excess itself, not the space within which this movement operates nor the poles that mark the origin and terminus of this movement. The focus on the movement of surpassing as opposed to the origin or terminus of this movement leads Henry to identify this surpassing with non-surpassing in the way described above. In making this paradoxical identification Henry seeks, I think, to draw attention to the coherency and unity of this movement with itself. The movement of surpassing never reaches its terminus nor leaves itself. The movement of surpassing is, therefore, identical to non-surpassing (“[...] toward the surpassing as identical to its non-surpassing”). In this seemingly paradoxical surpassing that is non-surpassing, Henry attempts to isolate the very movement of life itself.⁵³ It is neither that from which life moves nor that into which life moves, nor even the link between them, but the movement itself that defines Henry’s ontology of life.⁵⁴

I am in a position now to respond to the ambiguity noted above in the ontological significance of the invisible. The interpretation of Henry’s ontology of life and the reconstruction of the self-revelation of the invisible in terms of expression lays the basis for a definition of the being of absolute life in terms of movement and expression. I conclude from the foregoing discussion that the meaning of being in Henry’s ontology of life resolves itself into the expressive relation of auto-affection that binds suffering and other affective modes to life in the absolute situation and at the same time describes the dynamic movement that produces affective modes. Life is, in short, expression.

4 Henry’s Expressive Phenomenology of Life and the Question of God

What the foregoing shows is that auto-affection neither conforms to the language of revelation — that is, a process of unveiling something otherwise hidden — nor a dialectical logic of consummation — that is, a process of fulfilment or completion. There is nothing hidden from the immanent auto-affective movement of Life and the living. There is no gap or fissure in auto-affection to refill or suture. The language

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ This claim places Henry in close proximity with French Spiritualists such as Félix Ravaisson, Maine de Biran and Louis Lavelle, who in different ways define being in terms of movement, *δύναμις* and pure act. Exploring the relationship between Henry and French Spiritualism, both their proximities and differences would be a fruitful avenue for further research in phenomenology and theology. See my forthcoming work *Le grammaire de l’âme* on precisely this topic.

⁵⁴ This dynamic movement toward itself within auto-affection and self-revelation remains in later works, where Henry describes this surpassing that does not surpass itself in similar terms: “In the eternal fulfilment of this process without end, life plunges into itself, crushes against itself, experiences itself, enjoys itself, constantly producing its own essence, inasmuch as that essence consists in this enjoyment of itself and is exhausted in it.” (Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 55)

of revelation seems, therefore, less apt than my own expressive interpretation in this regard. If such a language of expression is, indeed, more appropriate, then this raises a crucial question concerning the theological significance of Henry's identification of immanent Life with God. The early works pose a unique problem in this regard. They are not theologically committed in the same way as later works, not least from a confessional perspective. There is no engagement with the Incarnation, the Gospels, or the precise mode of divine revelation in the Word to be found in the pages of *Essence of Manifestation*. When Henry equates Life with God, there is, instead, more than a mere echo of the Spinozist equation of Nature with God.

This reveals a certain ambiguity with regard to the theological status and significance of Life in Henry's early works. Recall that Henry identifies Life with God: "Being and life [...] the life of God himself, an absolute life."⁵⁵ But the near total suspension of transcendence and distance from within the heart of auto-affective life and the proximity to Spinozist immanence in the early works closes off Henry's phenomenology from a theological engagement with divine transcendence. There is no 'outside' or dimension of alterity within immanent auto-affective life. The living self is seemingly incarcerated in its own self-affecting life. This renders problematic Henry's own nomination of Life as 'God'. Unlike Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and others, there is no responsorial structure to the relation between the living self and Life or God in this early work. There is no thread of transcendence punctuating the immanent life of the self, thus releasing it from its incarceration and opening it to the world, only the immediate and expressive movement of auto-affective life within an absolute sphere of immanence. In this regard, the phenomenology of life put forward by Henry is distinct from other figures in the theological turn, owing, above all, to its commitment to absolute immanence over and against any notion of transcendence, distance, and limit.

If the equation of Life with God is, indeed, Spinozist, then a similar, classical criticism of Spinoza's formula *Deus sive Natura* can also be raised against Henry's own equivocation: could not 'Life' simply be a secular experience of inner embodied life, without God? Could not such an immanent experience be closer to a Nietzschean conception of life (that is, after the 'death of God') than a Christian understanding of the living God? Could not the expression of life through suffering articulate simply the profound bond riveting the self to itself in a profoundly passive relation to the *pathos* of life, like the early phenomenological works of Emmanuel Levinas? References made by Henry to Nietzsche and the equation of Life with Dionysus in later writings, *before*, importantly, the Christian ones, grant a certain legitimacy and force to such questions.⁵⁶ This indicates that the precise nature of the divine in Henry's ontology of life remains, at the very least, undetermined in these earlier writings. The ambiguous theological status of life is thus revealed.

Recall that the purpose of Henry's formulation of auto-affectation is precisely to determine the unity and integrity of experience. It is first and foremost a *phenomenological* concept that responds, at least in the early works, exclusively to a *phenomenological* problem concerning the ontological status of immanent life. This is something that the foregoing hypothetical 'expressive' reading of Henry sought to elucidate. Seen from a purely phenomenological perspective, the equation of Life with God can appear, then, to be almost an act of faith, that is, an assertion *ad extra* that such an auto-affective immanent experience is the *crux* of the relation between Life and the living understood precisely in terms of the relation between God and the soul. Such an act warrants Henry's inclusion amongst members of the theological turn, certainly, but it is at times an uneasy one. Henry must respond to a similar problem Jocelyn Benoist poses to Marion.⁵⁷ Where Henry sees God in auto-affective Life, thereby rendering them synonymous with one another, someone else may see and feel only a secular experience of passive bondage to life and the *pathos* of a Dionysian rhythm. There are, then, other possible names to grant auto-affective and immanent life: God, Dionysus, or even simply Life.

There is thus another, deeper ambiguity at the heart of Henry's ontology of life. While my expressive reading clarifies the inner unity of auto-affective life, thus resolving certain ambiguities with respect to its ontological significance, another ambiguity thus reveals itself this time in relation to precisely the theological status and significance of the equation of Life with God. This ambiguity is, of course, decisively

⁵⁵ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 670.

⁵⁶ For such references, see, for example, Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*, *Le commencement perdu* and, later, "Sur la parole de Nietzsche : « Nous les bons, les heureux ... »" (originally published in 1991).

⁵⁷ See Benoist, "Le « tournant théologique »".

addressed in favour of the Christian faith in later works. But this decision comes at the end of a long itinerary, starting from Pierre Maine de Biran's account of inner experience through Nietzsche and Marx, only to finish with Christ and the Incarnation. Henry's inclusion in the 'theological turn' debate can often elide this long road, reading, as Chrétien does, for example, the later works as the consummation and completion of the earlier ones.⁵⁸ The problem in the early works concerns the precise scope and extent of the identification of Life with God, if such is at all permissible, something that remains undecided in *Essence of Manifestation*, from a confessional point of view at least.

By returning to the early works in this article, however, where ambiguities remain and where the game is not already decided in advance for the benefit of more theological concerns, other possibilities can be drawn from Henry's phenomenology of life. The early works discussed in this article leave open the possibility for a more conciliatory, rather than polemical, approach in the debate concerning the relation between phenomenology and theology. It is certainly possible, as Henry does later, to construct a more straightforwardly confessional phenomenological theology on the basis of auto-affective life.⁵⁹ But this is not the only direction that an immanent phenomenology of life can be taken. The ambiguity with regard to the theological status of Life found in the early works and brought more fully to light through my hypothetical expressive reading of auto-affection could form a common site for phenomenological and theological debate over embodied life and inner experience. This additional ambiguity regarding the theological significance of life places Henry's early phenomenology of life in a liminal zone between the secular and the theological. Life can be a non-confessional experience of auto-affective expression and *pathos* in the early works and a moment of divine revelation of the Word in the later ones. The concept of auto-affection underpinning my expressive reading of Henry's phenomenology of life can be at once secular and confessional, that is, explicative for the atheist with respect to the unity of immanent experience and, later at least, for the faithful in relation to the Word and the Incarnation. Such a possibility cannot be explored within the confines of this article.⁶⁰ Let me close with the simple suggestion that this could, perhaps, form part a response to the call from the Church for "a common 'grammar' with those who see things differently [i.e., atheists] and do not share our assumptions, lest we end up speaking different languages even though we may be using the same tongue."⁶¹ The expressive reading of auto-affective life put forward above loosens the bonds of the language of revelation that limits its potential and paves the way for utilising it within the context of a 'common grammar' of experience that is serviceable for secular and theological phenomenological approaches to life.

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⁵⁸ Chrétien, "La parole selon Michel Henry".

⁵⁹ The theological insights found in Henry's later confessional writings are outlined in Emmanuel Falque's very lucid "Michel Henry théologien (à propos de C'est moi la vérité)".

⁶⁰ For further discussion of the role Henry's early phenomenological works can play as a 'common site' for debate between phenomenology and theology see Sackin-Poll, "Phenomenology and the Spiritual Ordeal".

⁶¹ John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Bishops of Western Canada on their 'Ad Limina' Visit" Sunday 30th October 1999, cited in Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderland of Philosophy and Theology*, 133.

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