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To Grasp Praxis Subjectively

Simone Weil and Michel Henry on Marx's Living Labor

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For what is life but activity?[1]

What is there still left to say about Marx's notion of living labor? I suggest that if we follow the work of two French philosophers, Simone Weil and Michel Henry, we find a surprising and unexpected contribution: a contention that an important aspect of Marx's philosophy of labor has yet to be uncovered. Both offer novel readings of Marx that consider living labor the key to his philosophy and the primary dynamic through which to understand *human activity*. Much like Enrique Dussel's *Toward an Unknown Marx*, Weil and Henry argue that few scholars have considered the import of the notion of living labor.[2] Both also affirm that this living labor has been obscured by Marxists and the philosophical tradition. The main argument of this work is that Weil and Henry each provide novel—and somewhat similar—interpretations of Marx's labor that allow for considering human activity more subjectively.[3] We will see that this need to rethink living labor is for both a response to the problem of abstraction—an issue that Marx identified not only with Capital, but also with philosophy.

This work addresses how Weil and Henry appropriate these two key insights from Marx—the critique of abstraction and the possibility of living labor—in order to philosophize the human *actively*. Amidst a number of important contemporary interpretations of Marx (whether Karatani, Negri or Pikkety), our two thinkers—often understudied, especially in the Anglophone world—provide a different emphasis.[4] While most interpretations of Marx focus on dialectical history and the material socio-economic conditions that engender exploitation, Weil and Henry remind us of his emphasis on labor, considered as a transformative human capacity. I suggest that their works offer a sustained phenomenological account of living labor that sheds new light on the notion of Marx's praxis; one that insists on grasping it subjectively, as a dynamic self-relation.[5] For both, the emphasis is

on the experience of living/laboring as an *occurrence* that evokes the simultaneous production of one's self and the world through human activity.

To begin, I suggest that there is an uncanny correspondence in the two philosophers' readings of Marx, which could, perhaps, be due to a similar *patrimonie*. Both attended, albeit years apart, the prestigious *Lycee Henry IV* and the *École normale supérieure*, thought along with Descartes and Spinoza, and offered heterodox readings of Marx and Christianity.[6] Their styles, however, differed. Weil's writing, the less systematic of the two, was cut short by her untimely death. As Blanchot observed, her work nevertheless offered numerous provocative philosophical assertions.[7] I am suggesting that one of those assertions regards her contention that Marx's materialism is an "untried instrument."[8] Henry might agree with that sentiment. His work, too, provides a revised materialism but offers a more sustained engagement with the western philosophical tradition and with Marx.[9] I am putting the two thinkers in conversation not only because both of their works suggest a previously unthought dimension in Marx but also because both are understudied figures, especially in terms of their philosophies of labor. This work, then, attempts to fill a lacuna in terms of scholarship on both figures in the Anglophone world.[10] The connection between Weil and Henry (regarding their philosophies of religion) is discussed by Rolf Kuhn in his *Leere und Aufmerksanmkeit. Studien zum Offenbarunsdenken Simone Weil*.[11] Alain David, in a review of Kuhn's book, suggests another link—that of the topic of labor and their uses of Marx.[12] That is the issue I take up in this work.

I will begin by briefly discussing their criticisms of Marxism and of philosophy for ignoring what in the *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx called *human activity*, or *praxis*. Weil and Henry criticize both for their tendency to objectify praxis and, in the process, ignore what is most human, activity. I then explain their understanding of how this activity is constituted and why it is conceived in terms of living labor. In the second section I turn to their problematizing of the philosophical tradition for being rooted in what Henry calls a *knowledge of consciousness*. The issue they identify is that much of philosophy is rooted in observation, or seeing, which too often objectifies praxis. In response to this criticism, our philosophers focus, instead, on a *knowledge of life* that emphasizes experiencing. And it is here where I develop the operative distinction in my work: the difference between a philosophy that objectifies praxis by relying on a *knowledge of consciousness* and a philosophy that attends to *experiencing* and depends upon a *knowledge of life*.[13] Finally, I delineate the specific way philosophical abstraction ignores praxis: by creating theories and thereby subsuming living labor under a general form that deadens praxis. We will see that Weil and Henry avoid this form of subsumption by offering a different method for philosophy that focuses on the quotidian, or the very practical capacity of every-day laboring. In the concluding section I discuss how both thinkers' interpretations of Marx provide a different modality for

philosophy: the possibility of considering praxis more subjectively by focusing on the singular dimension that is living labor.

Critique of Marxism and the Possibility of Grasping Praxis

> *Marxism is the interrelated set of misinterpretations that have been given concerning Marx.*[14]
>
> *The materialistic method—that instrument which Marx bequeathed us—is an untried instrument; no Marxist has ever really used it.*[15]

What unites the thought of these two philosophers is a reading of Marx that is neither Marxist nor materialist in any traditional sense. Weil is clear, and I think Henry would concur, that "(t)here is nothing in common" between Marx and other philosophers.[16] I do not have the space here to do justice to their criticisms (which would prove to be an interesting project on its own) and can only provide a very brief outline of their positions. For Henry, Marxism has "misinterpreted" Marx by "divorcing" him from what is most originary in his thought—a radical material philosophy. Marxism, he suggests, collapses "Marx's thought into pseudo-scientific positivism."[17] Like Henry, Weil, too, is critical of Marxism for "neglecting" what she considers unique and generative in his thought: a "real" materialist method. "We find in Marx a different conception from that Hegelian doctrine turned inside out, namely a materialism which no longer has anything religious about it and forms not a doctrine but a method of understanding and of action."[18] We will see that this difference—between doctrine, or theory, and method—roots both thinkers' appropriations of Marx.

Instead of providing another *counter*-theory, their *oeuvres* identify in Marx a *method* for considering materialism differently: i.e. by grasping human activity. It is this method that they consider more materialist than any of the well-known materialisms. What differentiates their philosophies, then, is a focus on *praxis,* a word ripe with numerous meanings in the history of Marxism.[19] Most notably, it is often conceived as the opposite of theory. Crucially, however, this is not how the word will be employed in this work. I will be following Henry, who suggests that praxis is **not** the opposite of theory. Rather, praxis is primordial; it is the "foundation" of life and even of theory itself. Although the language of praxis in Marx disappears after 1844, the modality it encompasses—human activity—remains central to his work. Henry observes the connection between praxis and labor, noting that in Marx's later works, the terminology of praxis is replaced with "concepts that more clearly underscore this dual character of life as subjective and as a force. Let us cite them: "inorganic subjectivity," "living body," "living work," "labor power," "Subjective labor power," "subjective labor," etc."[20] For Henry's Marx, praxis, labor, and subjectivity point to one and the same

phenomenon—what the *Theses on Feuerbach* refers to as *human activity*. In this work, I will use the terms *praxis* and *human activity* interchangeably to designate Weil's and Henry's understanding of what is most determinative of any person: the capacity of living labor.

In order to explain both the problem and the possibility of philosophizing human activity, I turn to our two philosophers' readings of Marx's *First Thesis on Feuerbach.*

> The capital defect of all materialism up to now (Feuerbach's included) is that the object (*Gegenstand*), the actuality (*Die Wirklichkeit*), sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*), is grapsed only under the form of the object or of intuition (*Anschauung*); but not as *sensibly human activity (sinnlich menschliche Tatigkeit), practice (praxis);* not subjectively. Hence the active side developed abstractly, in opposition to materialism, by idealism — which naturally does not know actual, sensible activity as such.[21]

What concerns Marx here is the ability of philosophy to consider actuality (*Die Wirklichkeit*), or sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*), not just as something the human being senses over against itself, but rather as a meaningful activity of sensing oneself, or *practice*. One might say that it is the *occurrence* of this practice this is important. What we should hear, therefore, in this *actuality* (*Wirklichkeit*) that Marx aims to recover from Feuerbach's one-sided approach is the resonance of the human *acting* or *effecting* (*wirken).* At stake here is no less than a proper understanding of what it means to *be* human.

To attend to praxis involves something very specific: grasping (*fassen*) actuality in terms of a formative activity—one that is rooted subjectively. Marx's claim is bold: that philosophy, in its materialist and idealist modes, is unable to do so. Materialism only grasps it objectively, "under the form of the object" and idealism does not even "know" it "as such." The question to ask, and the one our two thinkers ponder, is what it would mean to grasp human activity *subjectively*. In other words, how does one not make activity an object of thought or of intuition but rather consider it in terms of its occurrence, as a self's practice. To do so will require a consideration of the *actuality* of *doing*, understood as a simultaneous transformation of self and world through labor. It is this possibility that Weil and Henry recognize in Marx and then appropriate. We will see that doing so involves not only rejecting materialism and idealism but, moreover, situating the human in terms of Marx's praxis—that is, grasped subjectively. Henry explains that this praxis "designates the internal structure of action as it excludes from itself the objectification process."[22]

To begin, it is important to understand how Weil and Henry take Marx's assessment of materialism and idealism. Regarding the two, Weil observes that "(i)t is simply a case of two different expressions of the same fundamental thought."[23] That "same thought" is their one-sidedness. For Weil, materialism and idealism only ever consider a single dimension, either

thought or matter. Henry has a similar, but much more detailed, observation when he notes that the import of the *Theses on Feuerbach* lies in Marx's identification of a "common inadequacy" in both "with respect to what is to be thought."[24] He offers a fascinating interpretation here, when he suggests that Marx dismisses both materialism and idealism for similar reasons: they reduce praxis to an object. For Henry, both philosophies objectify and thereby make static what should remain active and subjective—praxis. In other words, praxis is not conceived *qua* human activity. Henry concludes by noting that human activity is "neither a representation of consciousness nor a material reality—it is not conceivable as an object."[25] In fact, as we will see later, this kind of philosophical objectification is one of the abstractions Marx identifies and Weil and Henry consequently appropriate.

What is crucial to note is why, according to Henry, praxis cannot be conceived as an object: because it consists of the subject's self-relation, or what Henry designates lived subjectivity. Kristien Justaert explains: "Henry's insight into Marx's thought, namely, that Marx was first and foremost a philosopher of subjective life more than he was a materialist, let alone a dialectical one, is not common at all."[26] What Henry means by subjective, however, is unique. It is not subjective in our normal parlance—something private, for example. Rather, subjectivity consists of a self-relation best understood as living labor: how the self experiences its becoming while living/working/creating in the world. This activity is grasped subjectively as a kind of working that transforms the world and along with it the self. Notably, this is both an individual, or singular, capacity and the primary modality for engaging the world. No two persons ever engage, or to use Marx's language—produce—in an identical manner. As such, praxis is irreducible to generalizing, objectifying, or theorizing. This is why Henry emphasizes the importance of grasping praxis subjectively. To do so points to the active and transformational capacity that defines any person: Marx's sensuous human activity.

In order to understand this activity *qua* activity, Weil's work offers an intriguing suggestion: substituting "*Je peux, donc je suis*" for Descartes' *je pense, donc je suis*.[27] This *je peux* can translate as *I can*, or *I am able* and signals to an active capacity. Doing, for Weil, replaces thinking. What *I am able to do*, is to engage the world in producing the means of subsistence. Weil explains: "To exist, to think, to know are only aspects of a single reality: to be able to do something."[28] This doing (we will see below) is primordial and multi-faceted, encompassing a wide variety of human activities. For Weil, as for Henry, praxis *preceeds* or *underpins* existence, thinking and knowing. As such, it is the transcendental condition of life itself. To be human is "to do." What Robert Chenavier says of Weil could apply to Henry as well: "This schema is the form of all our actions in the sense that it is a condition of all our actions to be labor."[29] Both Weil and Henry offer quotidian examples to illustrate this labor: laying a pipeline, performing a surgery, baking bread, constructing a

building, composing a sonata, pushing a plow and even the feel of a lover's kiss!

How is it that all our actions are labor? In the *Ninth Thesis*, Marx asserts that *Sinnlichkeit* is practical activity. This activity involves the possibility of transforming the world to meet our needs: what Marx calls production. Henry explains: "Of one and the same nature as praxis, production is the consequence of subjectivity and of it alone; the objective conditions of production become effective in production itself; living labor is the condition for the entire process and for its objective conditions which, like the world in general, belong to praxis."[30] Simply put, human activity involves the *labor* of meeting our basic needs for food, shelter and clothing. More specifically, however, for Henry and Weil, there is a capaciousness to the activity of fulfilling needs. Human beings do not just feed, clothe and protect themselves. We design, decorate and create cuisine! This creative capacity is what Marx designates living labor.[31] It points to the ability to engage and attend to what it is at hand, how one *is* active. And it is here, in this kind of creative activity, that I would locate our thinkers' materialism.

Praxis is thus both practical and creative. Phenomenologically speaking, praxis defines a self-relation: one's engagement with the world to transform it in order to meet ones needs. Living labor is not just life that labors, but life that lives from laboring and lives in laboring. In producing the world, we produce ourselves, and that production is meaningful in its *occurrence* as well as in the structures it creates to sustain life beyond the present. Henry explains:

> Life, in turn, cannot be disconnected from what constantly holds it in its grasp: from the air that it breathes, from the ground that it treads, from the tool that it uses, or from the object that it sees. The original co-belonging of the living individual and the Earth is essentially practical. It is located in life and based on it. The force of life is the force through which the Individual and the Earth cohere in this ageless origin. Living labor is the implementation of this force.[32]

For Marx, Henry, and Weil, *living labor* is the co-belonging of the individual and earth. As such, it is a unique and singular capacity. No two people engage, or change, the world in the same way. Considering human activity subjectively means beginning with this quotidian co-belonging: the air, ground, and tools that we engage in transforming life. Living labor is the capacity to freely sense and engage the world productively—practically, creatively, and attentively.

To summarize, Weil and Henry highlight praxis as living labor in order to point to the creative and productive capacity of any given individual's *doing*. Taking praxis as living labor allows for grasping human activity subjectively as a productive and transformative self-relation. One might object that this kind of praxis is too individualistic. I suggest, instead (as we

will see shortly) that living labor always occurs communally: praxis is a self relation experienced amidst others' self-relations. It is never an isolated endeavor. Although my subjectivity remains my own (uncapturable by interpretation), as does yours, we are always already living and working together. Another objection to Weil and Henry's emphasis on labor would be that an emphasis on labor remains too wedded to economics, and in particular, to Capitalist notions of work. I suggest that living labor cannot be equated to what Capitalism calls "work" or "wage labor." Under Capital, work is often externally imposed upon one and considered a "chore" to complete. Living labor is not to be confused with any kind of forced labor. Importantly, this is not the labor of global Capital, where exploitation runs rampant.[33]

The Limits of Philosophy and the Possibility of *Experiencing*

Weil's and Henry's readings of the *First Thesis* assert that both Marxism and much of philosophy ignore what is most salient in Marx: an attention to praxis, understood as living labor. To illustrate the limitations of this kind of philosophy, both thinkers offer a similar and surprising example—that of a runner. Weil explains: "Philosophy (including problems of cognition, etc.) is *exclusively* an affair of *action* and *practice*. That is why it is so difficult to write about it. Difficult in the same way as a treatise on tennis or running, but much more so."[34] Observing a runner, or offering a treatise about them, is categorically different from the experience of running. And it is this difference, between observing and experiencing, that roots their criticisms of traditional philosophy. What, exactly, is the difference? Weil tells us that experiencing involves *action* and *practice*, two words used by Marx in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. This kind of action points to the experience the runner has of running. It is invisible: no one can *see* or *sense* my experience. It is an affective and subjective dimension: how I feel while running and the experience I have of my feet hitting the pavement, or my lungs inhaling cold air, or my body sweating. Henry designates this immediate experiencing *knowledge of life* and differentiates it from *knowledge of consciousness.* The contrast is critical: to live life differs from thinking life.

The contrast to Weil's experiencing is observation, which ignores the self-relating productive activity of praxis. Instead, the process of observation objectifies its subject matter. Henry refers to this attitude as *knowledge of consciousness* or *knowledge of science*.[35] When writing a treatise, for example, one describes *what* is seen in the race: the color of the runner's jacket, or how long their stride is. It all seems fairly straightforward. However, our two thinkers contend that in this kind of account lies the problem Marx identified with traditional philosophy: it only considers the runner objectively, as a thing to be seen, thought, or described. In other words, philosophy has been organized around objectifying its subject matter—whether the world, an idea, or, most

notably for my purposes in this work, human activity. It has thereby made of the individual some *thing* to think or to theorize (this is what the *First Thesis on Feuerbach* referred to as "grasping under the form of the object"). Writing treatises about these observed subjects (who think) constitutes much of the history of philosophy.

The problem is that philosophy is rooted in representation: *seeing* an object, or presenting it to oneself, in order to explain it or understand it. Henry makes a radical claim: that this kind of objectification is the default position of western philosophy. "It has always been the case, in the West at least, that subjectivity permits beings to be inasmuch as it proposes them as objects. . . It has always been the case from the time of ancient Greece, that the subjectivity of the subject is but the objectivity of the object."[36] He refers to this kind of reduction of being as the problem of *ontological monism*. It is a criticism he sustains throughout his *oeuvre*, arguing that western philosophy only ever considers one kind of manifestation where *being* is represented as some *thing* to be seen or observed.[37] Human activity is thereby objectified and taken as a thing to be thought, analyzed, evaluated, or theorized. In the process, human beings are reduced to things that think (for example, Descartes *Je pense),* and denied their active capacity. Henry concludes: "In Marx, transcendental philosophy ceases to be a philosophy of transcendental consciousness in order to become a philosophy of reality."[38] That reality is what I designate praxis.

To illustrate the difference, Henry provides the example of a biology student sitting in a library and reading about the genetic code. The contrast he draws is between the student's subjective and objective modes of knowing (one could, equally, consider other examples our thinkers give noted above: a baker, construction worker, or musician). The genetic code is an object the student studies. It is presented to her in the book as a theory to understand. Reading and studying the code requires a knowledge of consciousness, which implies sight, or looking at something.[39] In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with this kind of knowing. However, Henry contrasts this with the student's knowledge of herself, which cannot be reduced "to a representation or to a product of thought."[40] There is nothing to see or represent when it comes to her praxis. In other words, the student's knowledge of life—sitting, or getting up to get a drink of water, or reading—cannot be objectified. Praxis cannot be made into a theory, not even a theory of the subject. Philosophy, however, creates these kinds of theories about the subject, which *seem* to operate much like the genetic code. Scott Davidson summarizes the import of Henry's position for philosophy: "As a consequence, it is not sight anymore that provides the ultimate basis for knowledge, but experience in the sense of an immanent and invisible *épreuve*."[41]

The question to ask is how philosophy might account for this experiencing modality without objectifying it? How might we grasp activity subjectively instead of objectively? The place to begin is where Marx does: with actuality and real individual activity. It is this attention to activity that

marks both of our thinkers' methods and their departure from traditional philosophy.

> The premises from which we start are not arbitrary; they are no dogmas, but rather actual premises from which abstraction can be made only in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of life, those which they find existing as well as those which they produce through their actions.[42]

In this section of the *German Ideology* Marx clearly distinguishes the activity of *real* individuals and contrasts it with dogmas, or abstractions, that are made regarding the human. We will see below that the difference between Marx and much of the philosophical tradition is his rejection of abstraction and dogmas in favor of a method—one that Weil and Henry happily appropriate.

The Problem of Theory and the Possibility of a Method for Grasping Praxis

> *But life, in turn, does not exist as a concept or a general being, inasmuch as it experiences itself and only "exists" as this experience of itself.*[43]
>
> *Our so-called scientific culture has given us this fatal habit of generalizing, of arbitrarily extrapolating, instead of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon…*[44]

The other definitive feature of Marx's philosophy for Weil and Henry, besides living labor, is his critique of abstraction. In the *German Ideology,* quoted above, he refuses *abstraction* and rejects dogmas as incapable of attending to *activity* and to *real individuals*. There are numerous instances where Marx criticizes abstraction, from the early appraisals of Hegel to the later ones in Capital. The most notable example occurs in his analysis of dead, or abstract, labor, also referred to as *general, homogenous, or social, labor*. *Capital* begins by distinguishing concrete human (living) labor from labor in the abstract. There, individual living labor is transformed into a thing, or commodity, that is valuable in the marketplace—this is dead labor.[45] In the process, the individual worker is abstracted from their concrete living labor: they no longer control how they work and in the process experience alienation. With the abstraction of labor, workers become things, or cogs, in the industrial machine—objects—that can easily be exchanged. Their labor is determined externally, by the economy and they are valued according to time and money, their work equalized into measurable quantities.

Weil notes the import of this analysis and the reduction of living to dead labor when she observes that Marx "discovered a formula impossible to surpass when he said that the essence of capitalism lies in the subordination

of subject to object, of man (sic) to thing."[46] Henry's work, too, finds an extended critique of this kind of subordination. He writes:

> We immediately understand, then, what the economic world is, we understand that the whole economy is nothing but a vast system of substitution, that it is the entirety of the ideal equivalents that we attempt to have correspond to what is most intimate in our personal lives. One speaks of a day's work, of skilled and unskilled labor, where, between sunrise and sunset, there is only the unqualifiable unfolding of a singular life.[47]

This *system of substitution* objectifies the worker and neutralizes living labor. The quality of the individual is ignored in the face of dead labor's quantifying and homogenizing tendencies. According to Henry, philosophy, too, has its own *system of substitution*.

Both our philosophers suggest that just as Capital generalizes individual labor, philosophy neutralizes human activity. For Weil and Henry, philosophical *ideas* about the subject depend upon a problematic equalization that universalizes what can never actually be compared: human activity. This philosophical form of abstraction occurs via the production of ideas, theories, or dogmas—systems that Marx, too, rejects. Henry observes that Marx's "*Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* is first and foremost the radical critique of all subsumption, namely the subsumption of the particular under the universal, the belief that reality is really explained, exposed in its being when it is exposed in the light of the *Idea*."[48] In this case, the subsumption that occurs is of the individual, or particular, to the State, or Universal. Likewise, in much of philosophy, praxis becomes intelligible only in light of an *idea.*

Weil observes a similar dynamic. "Marx's primary and decisive discovery consisted simply in that he went beyond Feuerbach's *abstract* man."[49] It may seem *simple* to Weil, but to claim that there is no *abstract* human is a radical assertion. What does it mean? She is referring to the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach* which proclaims that "the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual."[50] Essences, in this case, concern abstractions, or theories, about what a *general* or perhaps *generic* human might *be.* Marx refers to these theories as "dumb generalities."[51] Our thinkers would agree: there is no such *thing* as a human essence that applies to everyone in the same way. Henry, too, is clear that his Marx rejects a philosophy "of the essence of man"[52] in favor of an emphasis on "the subjective life of individuals."[53] This is a crucial distinction. Human activity concerns the experiencing capacity of the single individual laboring. There can be no generalization when one begins with practical activity and production, as does Marx in the previous quote from the *German Ideology*.

Weil and Henry, then, agree that philosophy, like Capital, has its own system of substitution, which they name theorizing. Both are clear that philosophy, like Capital, abstracts what should remain an active modality—

praxis. Both assert that just as Capital deadens workers and their living laboring capacity, theory deadens the individual. Weil explains the problem with theorizing when she observes that it ignores *how one knows*. "(I)f you want, not to construct a theory, but to ascertain the condition in which man is actually placed, you will not ask yourself how it happens that the world is known, but how, in fact, man (sic) knows the world."[54] How one knows is through their laboring.

Theory is deemed insufficient because in its construction, it neutralizes the most human of activities. Henry explains: "Because practice is subjective, theory, which is always the theory of an object, cannot reach the reality of this practice, what it is in-itself and for-itself, precisely its subjectivity, but can only represent this to itself in such a way that this representation necessarily leaves outside itself the real being of practice, the actuality of doing."[55] Praxis is not observable, the way theory would want it to be. In fact, when theory tries to contain praxis, it deadens and neutralizes what is *really* practical. It is an idea repeated in the *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*. There, Marx dismisses philosophy for only ever "interpreting" the world (or, might we say also theorizing it?). Instead, he suggests, the focus must be on praxis, how individuals *change*, or transform the world through their labor.[56]

Having rejected theory, both thinkers focus on Marx's method—an attention to praxis, understood as living labor. I return to Weil's assertion from the Introduction: "We find in Marx a different conception from that Hegelian doctrine turned inside out, namely a materialism which no longer has anything religious about it and forms not a doctrine but a method of understanding and of action."[57] I suggest that it is this crucial difference—between Marx's method and traditional philosophical theory—that roots Henry's and Weil's approaches. This method is notable because it distinguishes praxis as a singular dimension and not, as so often occurs, as the opposite or counterpart of theory. We saw that earlier, Henry proclaimed that praxis is "*not* the opposite of theory."[58] In fact, praxis resists theorizing. Living labor is an individual and singular activity that cannot be captured via theory. It is, rather, for Henry (and possibly for Weil, too), the transcendental condition of life. Henry concludes: "Because the essence of praxis is a living, individual subjectivity, the exploration of the universe of labor necessity leads to the recognition of a wide number of concrete, subjective, individual, specific, and qualitatively different labors."[59] I suggest that our philosophers' emphasis on method recognizes this wide number of different labors by attending to the individual subjectively and to the cultures that foster praxis. In other words, they attend to grasping human activity subjectively.

Conclusion: Grasping Praxis Subjectively

I have been arguing that Weil and Henry agree with Marx that the problem of abstraction prevents theory from recognizing praxis. Both accept Marx's criticism of abstraction and contend that its objectifying tendencies deaden what is most alive, *living labor*. "Physics, chemistry, biology, social, or human sciences, political economy—you *know* so little about the human! And that is not because you still have a lot of progress to make but because life is not situated *where you are looking* or within your field of vision."[60] Henry here asserts that theorizing ignores what is most human. Marx, however, does not. I conclude with the contention that Weil's and Henry's methods *know* more about the human than more traditional philosophy because they *look* in the right place—to Marx's praxis, understood as living labor. I argue that what differentiates their philosophies is an emphasis on praxis as a practical, aesthetic and individual phenomenon: Weil's *experiencing* and Henry's *knowledge of life*. Their methods reorient philosophy to human activity as the basis of both philosophy and community. Weil does so with her idea of *attention* and Henry, with the development of his *material phenomenology*. Important for both will be an emphasis on the individual that is not individualistic. It is always situated socially, amidst various cultures.

What they mean by culture, however, is very specific. Weil is clear that society as a whole must try to foster a *culture ouvriére*, a society attuned to the needs of individual workers. Both Henry and Weil position living labor practically, as a primary *need* of the self. We must produce to survive. Most notably, this production is always creative: it is generative and that which orients us toward culture/s. Henry explains: "(b)ecause culture is the self-fulfillment of life, it is essentially practical."[61] That culture is practical appears an odd sentiment. But Henry asks us to consider culture in very basic terms: taking care of life's necessities, whether providing food, shelter, or clothing. In other words, culture entails quotidian laboring. As noted above, living labor involves the active capacity to create—cuisine, architecture, and design. Markedly, there are "cultures of food, shelter, work, erotic relations or relations to the dead—such relations provide an initial definition of the human."[62] The human is thus defined by this kind of living labor; the meeting of our practical needs along with others. In other words, culture provides the necessary roots for laboring creatively.

What determines *living labor* is the ability of humans to engage in cultural productions, not just individually but as part of communities. Praxis is thus never isolated. Rather, it is always situated amidst a milieu—a culture. Social life is thus characterized by individuals producing culture together; living laboring with one another. Notably, subjectivity does not imply an isolated, or autonomous, individual. The living labor in which we are alive is both unique to each individual and always shared. The living that each person does brings them together with others in sharing various communal/cultural productions—of food, shelter, work, erotic relations and relations to the dead.

This could be the student studying, the chef cooking, or the carpenter building. However, Henry argues (and Weil would concur) that this kind of culture of living labor has "ceased to be the foundation of society."[63] Weil discusses how this lack produces the suffering of modern life and prevents the development of what she calls a *culture ouvrière*. The cultures Henry describes exist, but unfortunately their aesthetic, practical and individual characteristics are ignored by the abstractions of modern society as well as by many philosophical systems.

The final point to make is that Weil and Henry insist that the individual is the basis of culture and not vice versa. My argument has been that prioritizing human activity and living labor is a method that situates their philosophies in a different register because it allows an attention to praxis. This assertion is critical for their respective philosophies. Frederic Seyler observes that Henry's emphasis on subjectivity requires a "reversal of the part-whole relation."[64] This is exactly what Marx was getting at in the *First Thesis*. The way to grasp praxis subjectively is to value individual life rather than either the general/universal or the whole, or collective (which are prone to multiple forms of abstraction). It is this focus on the individual and their living labor—without being individualistic—that ultimately determines their methods. Weil illustrates this when she proposes a society rooted in the spirituality of work.[65] For her this would be a society "in which collective life is subject to men as individuals instead of subjecting them to itself." She continues by stating that it requires us to

> visualize a form of material existence wherein only efforts exclusively directed by a clear intelligence would take place, which would imply that each worker himself had to control, without referring to any external rule, not only the adaptation of his efforts to the piece of work to be produced, but also their coordination with the efforts of all the other members of the collectivity.[66]

She concludes by noting that this form of culture values the individual and thereby resists objectifying its members.

Henry, too, asserts that the goal of culture can only be to help one "realize one's own individuality."[67] His affinity to Marx on this point is clear: "Just like the concept of society, the concept of the people has never been noticed in the process of laboring or of performing a surgical procedure. To do those things, as Marx said, human beings are necessary."[68] He and Weil draw attention to the reality of this human surgeon—singular, and unique, living practically and creatively, fostering culture by performing surgeries. The focus, then, should be on a philosophy and a society that attends to the living labor of each individual. A kind of inversion is called for: rather than asking how to structure society, or what the right program, theory, philosophy or politics might be, Weil and Henry put laboring first. In other words, their fundamental assertion, like that of Marx, is that praxis is

considered subjectively when cultures attend to the needs of individuals. Raphael Gely, commenting on Henry, explains this social dimension:

> When collective action is constructed with attention to the singularity of the life of each, when individuals are led to experience the fundamental solidarity of their life-forces, one can no longer oppose people's radically singular lives to the reality of their collective action. To the contrary, collective action permits individuals to experience and to intensify what founds the radical singularity of each, namely, the originary inventiveness of life. For participation in life increases as it is shared.[69]

To consider the *inventiveness of life* is to attend to how it is shared with others. And this requires a focus on the quotidian: the cultures of food, shelter, work, erotic relations or relations to the dead. In fact, it is this emphasis on the quotidian, that differentiates Weil and Henry from other philosophers. Their method draws attention to grasping praxis subjectively and suggests that philosophy reconsider Marx's praxis, and each individual's capacity to live laboring in a new light.

By suggesting a method, rather than a theory—experiencing rather than observation—they reorient philosophy toward an active subjectivity that cannot be contained theoretically. This method resists abstraction and considers life in all its singularity. In addition, this method shifts philosophy to a more practical and creative dimension—that of culture, which will have radical political and social implications (as the authors note in some of their other works). Both emphasize the aesthetic dimension because creativity is key to praxis. Value is no longer placed on concepts, general ideas, the universal, or the social, but on life—and any one individual's *knowledge of life*. The focus is (in the words of Henry) materially phenomenological: on what one "is" already and how one knows, whether food, work, erotic relations, or relations to the dead. The way to philosophize is to allow for this activity by attending to living labor as a cultural praxis; one that is aesthetic and most notably, subjective.

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[1] Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 62. I would like to thank my colleague, Jason Winfree, for reading a first draft of this essay. His insightful comments encouraged me to clarify Henry's notion of subjectivity and provided me with the language of *occurrence*. His comments and those of the two anonymous reviewers helped reframe the article to better express the contributions of these two underexplored thinkers.

[2] Enrique Dussel, *Toward an Unknown Marx*, trans. Yolanda Agulo (London: Routledge, 2001).

[3] We will see below that this language, of grasping human activity (or praxis) subjectively, comes from Marx's *First Thesis on Feuerbach*. See Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, 98.

[4] See: Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2014); Kojin Karatani, "Beyond Capital-Nation-State," Rethinking Marxism 20, no.4 (2008), 569-595; Thomas Pikkety, and Arthur Goldhammer, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Antonio Negri, *Marx in Movement : Operaismo in Context,* trans. Ed Emery (Cambridge: Polity, 2022). See also Jason Read "The Potentia of Living Labor: Negri and the Practice of Philosophy" in Jason Read, *The Production of Subjectivity: Marx and Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[5] It is important to note that phenomenology is here used as Henry understands it: as non-intentional and determined by affective immanence. As such, it differs markedly from traditional phenomenology, which depends upon the category of intentionality. For more on Henry's phenomenology, see: "Editor's Introduction" in *The Michel Henry Reader*, eds. Scott Davidson and Frederic Seyler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019),143-167 and Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology,* trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham, 2008).

[6] Although this article focuses on their interpretations of Marx, a similar study could be made of their readings of Christianity. For biographies, see: Frédéric Seyler, "Michel Henry," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/michel-henry; Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil: a Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) and David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

[7] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 108.

[8] Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* 1973, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 46.

[9] His *Marx, A Philosophy of Human Reality,* is a close and provocative reading that argues for uncovering the *philosophical* import of Marx's works. On this topic, see: Michel Henry, *Marx, A Philosophy of Human Reality,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Frederic Seyler, "Forward," in Michel Henry, *Marx: An Introduction*, trans. Kristien Justaert (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), vi-xxvi and Gregori Jean and Jean Leclercq, "Sur la situation phenomenologique du Marx de Michel Henry," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* VolXX, No2 (2012), 1-18.

[10] There seems to be more work produced on Weil's notion of labor. This includes—but is not limited to—the following: Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil, une philosophie du travail*. Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 2001), Nadia Taibi, *La philosophie au travail: L'expérience ouvrière de Simone Weil* (Paris: L'Hamattan, 2009), Emmanuel Gabellieri, *Penser le travail avec Simone Weil* (Bruyères-le-Châtel :Nouvelle Cite, 2017). Lawrence Blum and Victor Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2010); Robert Sparling, "Theory and Praxis: Simone Weil and Marx on the Dignity of Labor" *in The Review of Politics* vol 74, no. 1 (2012): 87-107.

[11] Alain David "Simone Weil avec Michel Henry: Sur un Livre Recent de Rolf Kuhn," *Cahiers Simone Weil*, XXXVIII:2 (2015), 111-119.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Continuum, 2012), 10-14. In this work, Henry contrasts *knowledge of life* with a more traditional philosophical epistemology characterized by the *knowledge of consciousness* (and its corresponding *knowledge of science)*.

[14] Michel Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, **1.**

[15] Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 46.

[16] Ibid., 31.

[17] Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 6-7.

[18] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 45. See also Simone Weil, *Oeuvres Completes II:2*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 36.

[19] For an excellent summary of the history of the various uses of Marx's praxis, see Joel Wainwright, "Praxis," in Rethinking Marxism, 34:1, 41-62.

[20] Michel Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism*: *Theory of a Catastrophe*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), **16.**

[21] There are a few different translations of the *Theses*. I have chosen to use Carlos Bendana Pedroza's translation because I think it more accurately reflects some of the German: *activity* (instead of reality) for *Wirklichkeit* and *grasping* (instead of conceiving) for *fassen*. Karl Marx, *Thesen uber Feuerbach/These on Feurbach,* trans. Carlos Bendana-Pedroza, (Bonn, 2022). For Henry's reading of this thesis, see *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Chapter 5 and 139-142. For Weil's reading, see *Oppression and Liberty,* 31.

[22] Henry, *Marx*: *A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 160.

[23] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 155. In the same work, she also writes: "Generally speaking, the mental juxtaposition of an idealism and a materialism, each equally superficial and vulgar, constitutes the spiritual character—if one may be permitted this term—of our time" (154).

[24] Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 154.

[25] Michel Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism. Theory of a Catastrophe*, 22.

[26] Kristien Justaert, "Translator's Note" in *Marx: An Introduction*, xxvi. For Henry, this involves considering "what we mean by 'I' or 'me' whenever it is a question of ourselves" (Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), 1.

[27] Simone Weil, *Formative Writings, trans.* Dororthy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 78.

[28] Weil, Ibid*.,* 59. She also notes*:* "the thoughts formed by men in the midst of given technical, economic and social conditions correspond to the way in which they act upon nature by producing their own conditions of existence" (*Oppression and Liberty*, 31).

[29] Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes I*, *Premiers écrits philosophiques*, eds. André Devaux and Florence deLussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 154. The quote is translated by Aedín Ní Loingsigh in Robert Chenavier's "Simone Weil: Contemplating Platonism through a Consistent Materialism" in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, eds. Jane Doering and Eric Springsted (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 65. For a longer discussion, see Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil: philosophe du travail* (Paris: Les Études Cref, 2001), 441-517.

[30] Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 262.

[31] For living labor, see Marx, "Chapter I: The Commodity" in *Capital, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin, 1990), 125-177, esp. 128. For the difference between living labor and dead labor, see also 125-77, 283-306, 320-329, 438, 681, 716, 992, and 1020.

[32] Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 70. For more on Henry's use of Marx's living labor, see "Being as Production" in *The Michel Henry Reader*, eds. Scott Davidson and Frederic Seyler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019),143-167.

[33] This way of thinking has similarities to Negri's reading of living labor. See Jason Read "The Potentia of Living Labor: Negri and the Practice of Philosophy."

[34] Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 362 (italics mine). For Henry's example of the runner, see *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 155.

[35] Henry, *Barbarism*, 12-14.

[36] Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*. 142. On this topic, see also Henry's "The Critique of the Subject" in *The Michel Henry Reader*, 71-82. The critique is related to Henry's broader criticism of phenomenology's notion of intentionality as too "outwardly" directed (for more on this, see the *Essence of Manifestation*).

[37] On the problem of *ontological monism*, see Section I "The clarification of the Concept of Phenomenon: Ontological Monism" in *The Essence of Manifestation,* 47-130. On this topic, Henry offers an interested reading of Hegel. He claims that action for Hegel "allows for" being to emerge, whereas for Marx action "is" being (*Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 149).

[38] Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 155.

[39] Henry, *Barbarism,* 11-12.

[40] Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism,* 21

[41] Davidson and Seyler, *The Michel Henry Reader,* xiii.

[42] Marx, *Selected Writings,* 106.

[43] Henry, *Barbarism,* 116.

[44] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 47.

[45] On dead labor, see Marx, "Chapter I: The Commodity" in *Capital, Volume I*, 125-163, esp. 128. The difference between living labor and dead labor appears throughout Capital and especially Chapter I. See Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I,* trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin, 1990), 125-77, 283-306, 320-329, 438, 681, 716, 992, and 1020.

[46] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 155. Weil affirms: "Pungent dicta abound in Marx's writings on this subject of living labor being enslaved to dead labour, "the reversal of the relationship between subject and object."" (*Oppression and Liberty,* 41). See also Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 262-263.

[47] Henry, *The Michel Henry Reader*, 163.

[48] Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 21.

[49] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 125.

[50] Marx, *Selected Writings,* 100.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Henry, *Marx: An Introduction*, 10.

[53] Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism,* 22.

[54] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 31.

[55] Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality,* 155.

[56] Marx, *Selected Writings,* 101.

[57] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 45.

[58] Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality,* 155.

[59] Henry, Ibid, 193.

[60] Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism*, 109 (my italics).

[61] Henry, *Barbarism,* 125.

[62] Henry, Ibid., xv.

[63] Henry, *Barbarism,* 120.

[64] Frederic Seyler, "Forward," in *Marx: An Introduction*, xvii.

[65] The subject of spirituality is an important one in both authors, but there is no space here to elaborate on it. I suggest that for both Henry and Weil spirituality is not primarily a religious category (although both authors have fascinating interpretations of Christianity). Rather, it points to the use Marx makes of *spirit*. Weil explains: "… it would not be difficult to find in Marx quotations that can all be brought back to the reproach of a lack of spirituality levelled at capitalist society" (*Need for Roots*, 97). This kind of spirituality references living labor, which allows the self to access the most human and creative of capacities. For more on their respective spiritualities, see my articles: "Simone Weil on Labor and Spirit," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 45:2, June 2017, 291-308 and "Keeping Life Living: Thinking with Michel Henry," forthcoming in *Political Theology Reimagined*, ed. Alex Dubilet and Vincent Lloyd, Duke University Press, 2024.

[66] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 93. See also: "This lack of balance can only be remedied by a spiritual development in the same sphere, that is, in the sphere of work. . . .A civilization based upon the spirituality of work would give to Man the very strongest possible roots in the wide universe, and would consequently be the opposite of that state in which we find ourselves now, characterized by an almost total uprootedness. Such a civilization is, therefore, by its very nature, the object to which we should aspire as the antidote to our sufferings" (*Need for Roots,* 95).

[67] Henry, *Barbarism*, 122.

[68] Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism,*104.

[69] Raphael Gely "Towards a Radical Phenomenology of Social Life: Reflections from the Work of Michel Henry" in *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought,* eds Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly (London: Continuum, 2012), 175.