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A Reconsideration of the Question of Intentionality in Michel Henry's Ethics

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Through his radical phenomenology, Michel Henry renews our understanding of life as immanent affectivity. Life cannot be reduced to what can be made visible, since it is – as immanence and as affectivity – radically invisible. Furthermore, individual life is always grounded in absolute Life, a thesis that is developed strongly by Henry in his late works on Christianity (1996-2002).¹

While concerning at first both phenomenology and the philosophy of religion, Henry's approach is also crucial from an ethical and political point of view, as is shown by his critique of "barbarism" in contemporary culture (1987).² "Barbarism" appears precisely as a consequence of the attempt to negate immanent subjectivity and to reduce it to the sphere of visibility, to objectify and to quantify it, as happens in the ideology of scientism and its technological organization of society.

If life is radically immanent, however, the living (*le vivant*) must relate to the world, to possible projects and decisions, in short: it must *exist*. But, since existence requires and includes intentional components, human reality – both living and existing – implies that immanence and intentionality are related to one another, even though they are simultaneously conceived as radically distinct modes of appearing in Henry's phenomenology of life. For the latter "existence" clearly refers to a life *in* the world. It therefore implies the fundamental relationship of immanence and transcendence, affectivity and intentionality.

Following this line of thought, we are faced with at least two questions: First, what reality does immanent appearing possess for us as existing and intentional beings? And second, from an ethical point of view, what does the opposition between "barbarism" and a life in God mean in terms of existence?

With regard to the first question, it is not sufficient to oppose intentionality and affectivity. Criticizing radical phenomenology on the ground that it is non-intentional does not explain the stance that is taken in favor of intentionality as a paradigm for the phenomenological method; from Henry's point of view, this stance simply begs the question.³ It is therefore essential to analyze the relationship of intentionality and affectivity *within* the framework of radical phenomenology, thereby testing the resources of this phenomenology and, perhaps, its need for further extension towards intentionality. This is especially the case – and this refers to the second question – in the context of ethics, when we ask what kind of life we should live, the question of a possible translation or expression of affective life into intentional existence appears as a core problem.⁴

Indeed, ethics is the domain where the relationship between affectivity and intentionality is brought to the level of a decisive problem involving the fundamental principles of the phenomenology of life. If, according to Henry, what is at stake in ethics is the rediscovery of life in its affective and absolute dimension, *how* does this rediscovery manifest itself in the concrete development of one's own existence? *How* are we to configure existence in accordance with life's affective self-revelation? However, as important as it may be to *recognize* the transcendental genesis of any field of social existence, the appeal to the recognition of a community of the living in absolute life, paired with a critique of those forms of social organization which do not allow for such a recognition, does not yet seem to be a sufficient guide for social change, for instance.⁵

In what follows, I argue from the perspective of two key elements of the ethics of affectivity⁶ – the critique of “barbarism” and the call for a “second birth” – that Henry's approach to the living manifests a certain tension between the two main propositions of his phenomenology of life: on the one hand, the difference- or “duality-thesis” according to which life as auto-affectation or affectivity is radically non-intentional, meaning that intentionality and affectivity are therefore two radically different modes of appearing,⁷ and on the other hand, the “foundation-thesis” which states that both intentionality and the world are ultimately grounded in affectivity.⁸ As a result, it appears and follows from the standpoint of radical phenomenology itself that immanent affectivity has reality *for us* only insofar as it finds its expression or translation in the realm of the intentionally visible and that, with regard to the second question, both “barbarism” and its overcoming in “second birth” are effective only insofar as they are translated or expressed through representations. Henry's critique of representation and intentionality (essentially, through the duality-thesis) needs to be revised therefore (in accordance with the foundation-thesis), especially in the field of practical philosophy, where the essential role played by intentionality has to be acknowledged by radical phenomenology.

Furthermore, as pointed out in the conclusion, there are strong reasons to doubt that the importance of intentionality can be limited to its being a translation or expression of absolute life. Thus, hearing the word of life (*parole de la Vie*) would still entail the recognition of absolute life; again, however, this recognition alone would not, in itself, entail a ready answer to the question “what should I do?”

The Ethics of Affectivity: The Primacy of Immanent and Absolute Life

Henry’s radical phenomenology or phenomenology of life has resolutely adopted the risky standpoint of an infra- or non-intentional phenomenology. This may be seen as early as 1963 in Henry’s first work, *The Essence of Manifestation*⁹ when he develops the concept of immanent auto-affectation or affectivity as the appearing that is the foundation and the condition of possibility of all appearing, hence the condition of all that appears as objectively given through intentionality on the horizon of the world.

Radical phenomenology is therefore dualistic. There is not one mode of appearing but two: intentionality and affectivity. The innovative power of Henry’s approach lies, it seems, in two aspects of his phenomenological dualism: first, in the radical separation operated between these two modes of appearing – affectivity is entirely different from intentionality; it does not reveal something other than itself but is, according to its very essence, a self-revelation –, second, in the discovery that this power of self-revelation does not only pertain to life, but is life.

What, then, is life? Life is what reveals itself to itself without distance, underneath the subject-object divide and remains untouched by the distance that separates the subject from its representations, in perception, imagination, memory, language, etc. Life is therefore tied to itself without any possibility of escaping itself, and this is why it can sometimes seem unbearable.

Furthermore, life is what gives life to perception, imagination, memory, and language. In other words, there is no intentionality that is not grounded in affectivity. For instance, we would never be able to perceive a glass of water, if the act of perceiving were not revealed to us without distance. Otherwise, we would forever be separated from it by an infinite regress of perceiver-perceived. Perception, like memory and other powers of intentional directedness, is always and necessarily affective. Perception thus is inseparable from its self-revelation to the living, perceiving self.¹⁰

However, this self-revelation, which is the very formula of selfhood or ipseity, is invisible, precisely because it can never as such become an object for a view from the outside. Therefore, every attempt to see life, to objectify it, must fail. We cannot see life; we can only live it.

It is not by chance that this very short presentation of Henry's phenomenology reflects both of the theses mentioned earlier: the thesis that states that there is a duality in the modes of appearing and the thesis according to which the intentional mode of appearing is grounded in the more fundamental appearing of affectivity as life's self-revelation. These two theses are indeed essential to radical phenomenology.

They are also at the heart of its ethical dimension as can be seen through Henry's critique of contemporary culture and scientism. By reducing life to the objectifiable and the quantifiable, the latter is in fact tantamount to a negation of life as invisible affectivity. Hence, the denunciation of contemporary figures of "barbarism" in the 1987 essay *La barbarie*, an essay that takes up and radicalizes the Husserlian critique of the Galilean paradigm already presented in the *Krisis* work.¹¹ In "barbarism" man attempts the impossible: to flee from life by negating the existence of affectivity and its primacy over the objectively given. This can be seen, for instance, in the contemporary endeavor to reduce emotions to neural processes or in the impoverishment of our subjective and aesthetic powers through mindless television programs.¹²

Ethically, this forgetting of life calls for life's rediscovery. But, since the living is not its own origin, since the living has not put itself into existence, it is also, and essentially, the religious call to rediscover absolute life, i.e., God, understood as the life that engenders itself and all living beings in a continuous process of auto-affectation. As Henry has argued in *I am the Truth: A Philosophy of Christianity* as well as in his two last books, *Incarnation* and *Words of Christ*, man's salvation is only possible on the ground of a "second birth" that amounts to the recognition of the transcendental birth of the self in absolute life.¹³

However, according to Henry, this recognition is affective. It is not a becoming aware or a conscious of; it is therefore also outside the power of human volition and cultural mediations. Although these mediations, including the phenomenology of life itself, can function as catalysts in the process of reversing "barbarism" and the "transcendental illusion of the ego" by which we take ourselves as being the source of our own powers, "second birth" rests essentially on life's immanent dynamics. "The Spirit blows where it wills," writes Henry quoting the gospel of John. Here it is taken to mean that the ethics of affectivity, along with man's salvation, which is synonymous with the rediscovery of (absolute) life, finally depends on absolute life itself.¹⁴ Hence it may now be seen very clearly that Henry's ethics, or his ethics of affectivity, is intrinsically religious and calls for a religious existence, at least in the etymological sense of "religion" as the bond between the living and absolute life.¹⁵

However, it is less clear what such an existence would be or would look like. For sure, Henry would consider such a question a misunderstanding

since immanent life and its dynamics cannot be brought into the light of the visible, and therefore there is no point in asking what kind of existence would follow from “second birth” or how we ought to describe that existence in the realm of intentionality.

What can be said, however, about such a religious praxis is that it would follow almost immediately from our anchoring in absolute life and manifest itself as action, as exemplified in the merciful action of the Good Samaritan¹⁶ or, more generally, in a cultural praxis that is adequate to subjective powers insofar as it lives up to and increases these powers instead of diminishing, alienating and impoverishing them. In short, according to this model, man’s existence in the world is to be the immediate translation, or configuration and acting out of life’s immanent and absolute dynamics. Human existence is here the expression of a life in and through God.

“Barbarism” and Intentionality

As attractive as this solution may appear, it seems to be problematic on several grounds and leads to a more complex assessment of the ethics of affectivity. First of all, it is worth noting that affectivity is not only the ultimate reality and mode of appearing but also the reality on which “barbarism” as the very negation of affectivity is grounded. In other words, “barbarism” itself is, according to Henry, affective, which means that it has its *raison d’être* in the immanent dynamics of life: it is for affective reasons that the human being attempts to flee from life, and the flight into objectivity is the privileged means for this attempt.¹⁷

This is perfectly consistent with Henry’s foundation-thesis, since it accounts for the fact that all intentionality is founded in affectivity, but is problematic with regard to his philosophy of religion. Indeed, if individual life is necessarily embedded in and living through *absolute* life, then it seems that the latter should be held ultimately responsible for the development of “barbarism,” that is, for life’s attempt to negate itself. But this is a consequence that Henry would clearly not defend. It would, for instance, amount to God being the agent of his own forgetting and negation.¹⁸

It is true that in his first book on a philosophy of Christianity in 1996, Henry does stress that the invisible essence of life’s auto-affection enables one not only to make use of one’s subjective and bodily powers through the “I can,” but also to consider oneself the source of these powers. Life’s discretion at least facilitates what Henry calls the “transcendental illusion of the ego” and it is through this illusion that one turns to the world and away from life.¹⁹ But this is done in vain, since what one wishes to appropriate on the horizon of the world will forever remain outside of one’s life.

On the other hand, the “transcendental illusion of the ego” and “barbarism” require intentionality as the ability to represent and objectify. This clearly follows from Henry’s analysis of “barbarism” as relying on the

Galilean paradigm and the technological colonization of everyday praxis. But this implies in turn that “barbarism” is a phenomenon that does not concern all living beings, but only human life. There can be, for instance, no “barbarism” in animal life. However, Henry’s constant reluctance to integrate a study of animals in his phenomenology of life – a reluctance based, it seems, on the argument that we cannot phenomenologically assess a life form which does not appear directly to us -, has led Henry implicitly to equate the term “the living” with “human life.”

These two remarks show that human intentionality – or more generally, thought (*la pensée*) – must play a major part in the explanation of “barbarism,” a phenomenon that cannot be attributed to both absolute and animal life. Though affectivity may be the *raison d’être* of Kierkegaardian despair and “barbarism,” it is not a sufficient reason for it. Moreover, intentionality and thought have to be taken into account for our understanding of what the *overcoming* of “barbarism” in a cultural revival would actually mean. A quick review of animal life from the standpoint of radical phenomenology might further illustrate this statement.

For the animal too, life may become unbearable at times, for instance, in the experience of pain and privation. If, on all levels, life suffers itself (*se-souffrir-soi-même*) and is in Henry’s words *pathos*, then suffering (*souffrance*) refers to a particular affective phase, in which life tries to escape itself without being able to do so. The difference between human and animal is not that the latter cannot escape life while the former can. Again, life is precisely a continuous process of auto-affection from which there is no escape, for either animals or humans. But the difference may be found in the fact that the human, who through intentionality is capable of thought and representation, will *try* to flee from life into objectivity, thus creating the illusion of “liberation,” while the animal remains forever deprived of this means. It is precisely because “barbarism” is grounded on a project impossible to realize that it unfolds such a destructive energy towards life, a self-negation where life wishes not to be alive anymore and which seems profoundly alien to the animal kingdom.

However, if “barbarism” is foreign to the animal, should we therefore conclude that animal life is blessed? Or that the human condition is less perfect than the animal’s and that, as a consequence, human salvation would amount to a regression into a state much closer to that of pure immanence? This is not an available option either, since such a regression is neither possible nor ethically viable. Undoubtedly, Henry never argues in favor of such a regression, and he considers intentionality to be an important part of human life. And that is the very meaning of the foundation-thesis in his phenomenology of life.

But the fact remains that Henry’s works bear the constant mark of criticism directed towards thought and representation. Even when, in

Incarnation, he investigates the very possibility of the phenomenology of life as a philosophy, that is to say as a theoretical discourse, thought always comes second after affectivity and it is only through the immanent certainty of life that the truth of phenomenology as an image-of-life (*image-de-la-vie*), that is, as its adequate *translation*, can be established.²⁰ The same applies to ethical theory, which, besides being no substitute for action, is unable to act directly upon affectivity. Affectivity, and affectivity only, is the key to the transformation of life. Thus, the recognition of life in “second birth” is the work of immanent life, not that of thought or philosophical enlightenment.²¹ We have seen that this consequence is problematic since it places not only “second birth” but also “barbarism” in the hands of absolute life.

It seems that there are only two ways out of this aporia. The first is to distinguish two forms of affectivity, one belonging exclusively to absolute life and the other to the living. In fact, Henry distinguishes in this sense two forms of auto-affection (*auto-affection forte et auto-affection faible*), but his distinction refers almost exclusively to the fact that auto-affection in the strong and absolute sense has the capacity to engender itself while auto-affection in the weak sense is deprived of that capacity. Before stating that there are two lives,²² Henry writes that there is only one life.²³ These apparently contradictory statements indicate that the phenomenology of life seems to lack a consistent argument to distinguish absolute from individual life, at least with regard to the problem of the origin of both “barbarism” and cultural rebirth. Moreover, both are tied to the specific human form of intentionality, and this implies that the ethical-religious ideal of “second birth” cannot be conceived of as a regression into pure affectivity.

The second way out of the aporia would be to reconsider intentionality and thought as an integral part of man as a *living* being. Beyond the necessary critique of representation and objectification as possible vehicles for “barbarism,” such an endeavor would lead to a renewed appraisal of their benefits for an ethics of affectivity.

Intentionality Reconsidered: Psychoanalysis, Action and “Second Birth” in Radical Phenomenology

That intentionality has to be considered the *necessary* translation of affectivity and that without such a translation affectivity would simply not exist *for us* can be shown through an analysis of at least three themes that play a significant part in the phenomenology of life: the critique of psychoanalysis, the immanent reality of action and the immanent “dynamics” towards “second birth.” All of these themes are also relevant to ethical issues and to the importance of intentionality in them: they all demonstrate the existence of a *living need for clarity and understanding* that is to be fulfilled through the use of representations.

Henry's critique of psychoanalysis, more specifically his critique of the psychoanalytical technique or therapy, is especially relevant here because it illustrates the struggle of the individual with his own existence on an affective level. Indeed, in the *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* as well as in *Material Phenomenology*, Henry has built up a convincing argument against a psychoanalytical method that would rely solely on the interpretation of chains of signifiers or on a purely hermeneutic approach to personal history. From the point of view of the phenomenology of life, such a method would attempt to get rid of affectivity instead of taking it into account.²⁴

But, while stressing that a genuinely affective relationship unfolds in psychoanalytical transfer, Henry seems to overlook the fact that this transfer alone cannot lead to any analytical progress without being verbalized, at least to some extent. Moreover, such a transfer would simply not exist had it not been prepared by a relationship developed through communication and representation. A purely immanent relationship might well exist at the *core* of all relationships, and that is why all community is intrinsically affective. It is one of the major achievements of the phenomenology of life to have pointed out the existence of the universal community of the living in, and through, absolute life. But to say that all relationships are affective in the sense of having an affective core is not the same as saying that intentionality should play no essential part in them. In other words, the example of the psychoanalytical praxis shows that distinctively human relationships are also *necessarily* intentional as well as mediated through language and representation. As for humans, we even have to recognize that there is a living, affective need for clarity, that is, for the *translation* of affectivity into representation. In the case of psychoanalysis such a need becomes particularly visible. In fact, the striving for clarity and understanding affectivity could be seen as defining the very task of psychoanalytical therapy.

Broadly speaking, this goes a little further than Henry's foundation-thesis, since it does not only assert that all intentionality is grounded in affectivity, but also that intentionality is an indispensable part of human *life* or, in other words, that human life is always the life *of* intentionality. A closer look at Henry's phenomenology of action suggests the same conclusion.

Henry's theory of action can be traced back to writings as early as *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* (1965)²⁵ and to his book on Marx (1976).²⁶ In the latter, Henry states explicitly that the reality of action lies in the immanence of affectivity, not in what can be objectified and seen on the horizon of the world.²⁷ This claim is both surprising and unsurprising: on the one hand, it is not surprising since it seems perfectly consistent with the main thesis of the onto-phenomenology of life, a thesis that situates fundamental reality in life's affective self-revelation. On the other hand, it seems to stand in blatant contradiction of our everyday experience of action,

where the world *in* which we act and the intentional components *of* our actions are considered to be an essential part of what we do. However, to characterize these components simply as “irreal” (*irréel*) does not suffice to build a convincing argument. At least in *Marx*, Henry’s example of the runner leads perhaps to the most complete analysis that he gives of action as immanent praxis:

Imaginons un coureur sur la cendrée du stade. En tant qu’objet de l’intuition, comme phénomène empirique, objectif, sensible, naturel, sa course est là pour tous et pour chacun. Mais les spectateurs regardent et ne font rien. Ce n’est donc pas l’intuition empirique de la course, son apparence objective qui peut la définir, constituer sa réalité, elle n’est justement que son apparence. La réalité de la course réside dans la subjectivité de celui qui court, dans l’expérience vécue qui n’est donnée qu’à lui et le constitue comme individu, comme cet individu en train de courir, comme un individu “déterminé” pour parler comme Marx. *C’est là ce que signifie l’affirmation décisive de la première thèse selon laquelle la pratique est subjective.*²⁸

If we imagine a runner on a track in a stadium, it is clear that we ascribe reality to this action only in as far as we see it, that is, through intuition. But it is also clear that we do so from the external point of view of a third person perspective. The subjective experience of this particular action of running is forever inaccessible to this perspective and what we see can only be the *index* of the subjective *Erlebnis* in the first person. And, since no index can overcome its essence as index, which is to point to what it is not, there will always remain an uncertainty with regard to the subjective reality of the action from the spectator’s point of view. Therefore, the first main characteristic of action is its *opacity*.²⁹ But, it needs to be added that, since the subjectivity Henry refers to is the *radical* subjectivity of immanent life, the action is also opaque from a first person perspective.

The runner can, in a way, *see* himself running, *feel* this or that part of his body, etc., but, in doing so, he introduces the distance that defines intuition and is already taking a point of view external to immanent auto-affection. Affectivity can therefore not be seen or intentionally grasped; it can only be lived through. Hence, on the one hand, it is perfectly consistent to stress that the real character of action is to be found in life and affectivity, whereas the absence of such affectivity implies an anonymous process like those found in nature, such as a waterfall or the movement of the leaves of a tree. On the other hand, however, it remains unclear on what grounds we could designate a *purely* immanent praxis as an action: does action not *also* and obviously imply intentional components, e.g. in the case of the runner (*seeing* the track unfolding in front of him, *feeling* his movements, *evaluating* the situation from a tactical point of view, etc.), and *necessarily* imply those

components? It is for this reason that the second characteristic ascribed by Henry to action, its *blindness* (*aveugle*), is intrinsically problematic as is his further claim that intuition itself does *not* constitute an action: “dans l’intuition nous n’agissons pas et [...] dans l’action nous n’intuitions pas.”³⁰ After all, intentionality is always - and is as such - *activity* and the ground for such activity must, again according to the foundation-thesis, lie in affectivity itself. From Henry’s standpoint there is therefore only one solution which can combine both the foundation of intuition in affectivity *and* the exclusion of object-relatedness as unreal. What is real (*réel*) in object-relatedness is itself entirely alien to object-relatedness; it is the ground on which intuition becomes possible, that is immanent auto-affectation.³¹

However consistent this solution may be within the phenomenology of life, it does not entirely resolve the problem. We still have to ask what status should be ascribed to the unreal components of action, since an action that does not involve any of these components related to intentionality would simply not be an action anymore. But if seeing, observing, evaluating, etc. are at least to some extent necessary components for any action, they cannot be discarded as unessential in defining the *reality* of action itself. Thus, the only satisfactory solution lies in considering both affectivity *and* intentionality as defining together the reality of action. It might well be that we cannot exclude a purely immanent form of praxis, but, again, such a “praxis” would have no reality *for us* unless it is expressed in the form of intentionality.

This is also confirmed if we look at one of the few passages where Henry analyzes the relationship between action and representation in the sphere of values:

Si l’on définit l’éthique comme un rapport de l’action à des fins, à des normes ou à des valeurs, on a déjà quitté le site où elle se tient, soit la vie elle-même en laquelle il n’y a ni buts ni fins, et cela parce que la relation à celles-ci en tant que relation intentionnelle n’existe justement pas dans ce qui ignore en soi toute ek-stase. [...] En vérité s’il y a des fins et des normes à prescrire à la vie [...], il ne peut s’agir que de fins, de normes ou de valeurs provenant de la vie elle-même et à l’aide desquelles elle tente de se représenter ce qu’elle veut. Encore une telle représentation n’est-elle qu’occasionnelle, marquant une pause ou une hésitation dans l’action, laquelle se déroule dans l’immédiateté de sa spontanéité essentielle [...] Loin par conséquent de déterminer l’action de la vie, fins, normes et valeurs sont au contraire déterminées par elles. Cette détermination consiste en ceci que, s’éprouvant soi-même constamment et se connaissant à tout instant, la vie sait aussi à tout instant ce qu’il faut faire et ce qui lui convient.

Un tel savoir n'est en aucune façon différent de l'action, il ne la précède ni ne la "détermine" à proprement parler, lui étant identique, en tant que ce savoir-faire originel qu'est la vie, en tant que corps vivant. L'action [...] n'est jamais que l'actualisation du pouvoir primitif de ce corps phénoménologique.³²

Indeed, if life *knows* at any time what is appropriate and convenient for it to do, then how are we to account for hesitation, which Henry mentions in the same passage? The only possible answer, it seems, is that *we* hesitate, because we, as living human beings, do not always possess the knowledge of life itself and that the recourse to *representation* is for us the means to clarify what life *already* knows. The knowledge of life (*savoir de la vie*) might well be immanent to us since we are *living* subjects, but it does not follow from this that we, as living *subjects*, do know what life knows. In the sphere of values and, in general, of the ethics of affectivity the recourse to representation is, at least to some extent, necessary. It fulfills the living *need* for clarity, a need that belongs to our human *existence*. It is therefore not certain that, as far as ethics and even action in general are concerned, such recourse remains as "exceptional" as Henry asserts. After all, we do more than occasionally ask ourselves what we should do as well as what we ought to do.³³

Now, looking back on what Henry writes about the recognition of absolute life in "second birth" we are confronted with the same difficulty. If "second birth" is necessarily dependent on the immanent "dynamics" of absolute life itself – a thesis implying the human's "soteriological impotence"³⁴ – it again appears that such recognition would have not existence for us unless it finds its intentional *translation*. In fact, Henry does stress that, through the forgetting of absolute life, it is "as if" the latter does not exist for those caught up in the "transcendental illusion of the ego":

En sa temporalité immanente la Vie absolue a beau joindre à soi celui qui, de venir après en elle, n'en est pas séparé pour autant – pas plus qu'il n'est séparé de lui-même [...] – le fils prodigue ne l'en a pas moins oubliée. La puissance, plus intérieure à l'homme que lui-même, peut continuer d'œuvrer en lui sans qu'il le sache : n'est-elle pas cependant pour lui comme si elle n'était pas ? [...] L'immanence de la Vie absolue dans la vie propre et singulière de l'ego, c'est ce qui rend théoriquement possible le salut de celle-ci. Mais, encore une fois, cette possibilité demeure théorique, n'est qu'une simple possibilité.³⁵

On the other hand, a purely immanent recognition or "second birth" would not be able to become an "emotional upheaval" (*bouleversement*

émotionnel) without any change in the sphere of representation. One can hardly imagine any emotional change without a change in the way we see ourselves and the world around us. It is perfectly conceivable that the experience of “second birth” might not be accompanied by a consciousness of its theoretical meaning in philosophy, theology and ethics. But it is inconceivable that a man who could leave the standpoint of the “transcendental illusion of the ego” or even, that of the refusal of life in “barbarism,” would not, at the same time, change the representations of himself and the world he is living in. Again, an absence of change in representations would amount to an absence of change *tout court*.

What then are the conclusions that can be drawn with regard to the ethics of affectivity in radical phenomenology? Stating that, for us, life is always the life *of* intentionality seems to be a tautology insofar as “for us” necessarily implies the reference to consciousness. However, it also seems that this is precisely a point that is challenged by radical phenomenology through the duality of appearing thesis. Indeed, the originality and innovative power of Henry’s phenomenology is to conceive of a non- or infra-intentional *appearing* as immanent auto-affectation or life. But what appears and to whom? According to Henry, it is life that appears to itself and through itself, thereby radically excluding any intentional mode of givenness (*donation*). From the ethical and religious perspective, however, the problem is that the “word of life” is unheard by *humans*. Hearing that word again would amount not only to the recognition of life as immanent affectivity, but also to the recognition of absolute life as the source of our own life. This recognition is central to Henryan ethics and philosophy of religion. In *Paroles du Christ*, the author clearly relies on a *tour de force* accomplished through the Scriptures, in which, according to Henry, absolute life reveals itself through the “word of the world” (*parole du monde*):

L’extraordinaire accord qui s’établit entre la parole que le Christ adresse aux hommes dans le langage qui est le leur et celle qui génère chacun en son cœur et lui dit sa propre naissance provoque chez ceux qui la reconnaissent une émotion intense.³⁶

This can be seen as a further illustration of the idea that immanent life is “as if” it were non-existent for us, unless it receives the form of representation.³⁷ Moreover, one has to come to this conclusion within the framework of radical phenomenology itself, as has been shown through Henry’s critique of psychoanalysis, his theory of action and, finally, through his concept of “second birth.” But it also suggests that the importance of intentionality and representation has been underestimated by radical phenomenology, especially with regard to the living need for clarity and representation inherent to *human* life. As a result, the tension between the duality- and the foundation-thesis seems to resolve itself through the

“absorption” of the former in the latter, since there is no intentional access to a *purely* immanent reality.

More fundamentally, and with regard to the ethical and religious recognition of absolute life, the possible limits of affective-intentional translation of absolute and immanent life, for example in the domains of political and individual existence, need to be investigated and questioned.

Concerning the existence of a *political* community, Henry has argued, for instance in his later articles “La Vie et la République” and “Difficile démocratie,”³⁸ that democracy and human rights can only be founded in absolute life; therefore, only a society that recognizes this foundation is capable of a long-term recognition of equal rights, freedom, etc. But even admitting that modern societies rest or should rest on shared basic beliefs³⁹ does not solve the many specific questions and problems that do arise in the exercise of public policy. Again, public deliberation is necessarily mediated through language, and it is difficult to see how the social recognition of immanent life would translate itself *univocally* when concrete public decisions must be made.

In addition to the need for a translation of affectivity into intentionality and language, we are now faced with a diversity of possible decisions that depend not only on affectivity but also on contingent historical and economic factors. This seems to argue in favor of a more complex model of human existence where intentionality, language – in one word: thought – possesses a *relative autonomy* while being nonetheless founded in affectivity. This is also suggested when we consider not political but individual existence. Here too, it is difficult to see how “second birth” or the recognition of absolute life as the foundation of our everyday existence would univocally translate itself into concrete decisions on this ground alone. Can the many questions arising out of the task of leading one’s personal existence really be answered solely by hearing the word of life in us (*la parole de la vie en nous*)?

Or is it not possible that even if we hear that word again, even if we acknowledge with Fichte, whom Henry read, that the blessed life is the one in which we constantly feel our bond with God as the secret motive of all our thoughts, feelings and emotions – “*als die verborgene Quelle und der geheime Bestimmungsgrund aller unserer Gedanken, Gefühle, Regungen und Bewegungen*”⁴⁰ – is it not true even then, that we have nonetheless to *think* our way through existence?

It would mean that, while hearing the word of life, we may become truly receptive to the appeal of personhood as well as to the appeal of the social and political justice to be realized in any given situation. The recognition of life’s absoluteness is clearly at stake in ethics and politics. But it seems that individual and social existence cannot develop on the ground of this recognition alone. Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life therefore

has to be extended, not revoked. This extension remains the task to be undertaken.

¹ Michel Henry, *C'est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), Engl. trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000); *Paroles du Christ* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012).

² Michel Henry, *La barbarie* (Paris: PUF, 2nd edition, 2004); Engl. trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Continuum, 2012).

³ Dan Zahavi, "Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible," *Continental Philosophy Review* 32: 223-240, 1999. And before that: Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combat: L'Eclat, 1990).

⁴ For a study of the concept of translation in Henryan ethics, see Frédéric Seyler, *Barbarie ou culture. L'éthique de l'affectivité dans la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* (Paris: Kimé, 2010), 121-140, 203-233 and 299-312.

⁵ For a recent contribution on the importance of transcendental genesis and its recognition in the social field, see Raphaël Gély, "Towards a Radical Phenomenology of Social Life: Reflections from the Work of Michel Henry" in *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, eds. J. Hanson & M.R. Kelly (New York/London: Continuum, 2012), 154-177. This article summarizes the main thesis of Raphaël Gély, *Rôles, action sociale et vie subjective: Recherches à partir de la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007). Gély's work gives a valuable account of Henry's concept of transcendental genesis applied to collective action. However, it does not solve the core-problem of articulating concretely and phenomenologically immanence with transcendence in the social life. If "subjective life in itself calls for experiencing and intensifying oneself through the sharing of particular forms of collective action" (Gély, 155) - a statement that is already made by Henry - the question that remains is: What are these particular forms and how do we have knowledge of them? The reference to recognition and attention directed towards singular and immanent life is a step in the right direction, but it is not as such sufficient to provide an answer to this question. We still need to ask how we can know which forms of collective action do recognize immanent singular experience

and which do not. A radical phenomenology of social life precisely needs to address these questions.

⁶ For a presentation and development of Henry's ethics, which is being the scope of this article even in a summarized form, see Frédéric Seyler, *Barbarie ou culture. L'éthique de l'affectivité dans la phénoménologie de Michel Henry*, 2010. For a theological perspective on human action in Henry's phenomenology, see Antoine Vidalin, *Acte du Christ et actes de l'homme. La théologie morale à l'épreuve de la phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2012).

⁷ As is well known, this thesis is absolutely central to Michel Henry's phenomenology and is repeated throughout his work. To quote only one example from *Incarnation*: "En opposant à l'apparaître ek-statique du monde, qui domine le développement de la pensée occidentale depuis la Grèce, un mode de manifestation plus originaire - l'auto-révélation immanente de la vie en son invisible pathos -, la phénoménologie de la vie propose à la recherche des tâches entièrement nouvelles. [...] L'un de ces problèmes notamment se pose avec urgence parce qu'il résulte immédiatement de la dualité de l'apparaître ou, comme nous le disons, de sa duplicité" (129).

⁸ For two examples, among many others, of this equally important thesis, see *Incarnation*: "L'Archi-intelligibilité ne vient donc pas seulement avant toute intelligibilité concevable: elle la fonde et la rend possible"(130). And Michel Henry, "Phénoménologie matérielle et langage (ou pathos et langage)," in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome III (Paris: PUF, 2004): "L'opposition radicale qui sépare langage de la vie et langage du monde n'exclut pas leur rapport, bien au contraire. Ce rapport consiste en ceci que le premier fonde le second, lequel ne serait pas possible sans lui. [...] toute intentionnalité langagière visant une signification transcendante ne peut se rapporter à celle-ci qu'à la condition d'être déjà entrée en possession de soi dans l'auto-donation du pathos qui fait d'elle une vie. C'est ainsi que, en même temps que le faire-voir qui lui est propre, elle présuppose cette révélation originaire en laquelle il n'y a ni intentionnalité ni voir - en laquelle rien n'est jamais vu" (340).

⁹ Michel Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF, 2nd edition, 1990), for instance: 577-578, Engl. trans. G.J. Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975)

¹⁰ See for instance the example of the biology student in *La barbarie*: "Le savoir qui a rendu possible le mouvement des mains et celui des yeux, l'acte de se lever, de gravir l'escalier, de boire et de manger, le repos lui-même, est le savoir de la vie. [...] Si le savoir inclus dans le mouvement de remuer les mains et le rendant possible avait un objet, en l'occurrence ces mains et leur déplacement potentiel, ce

mouvement des mains ne se produirait pas. Le savoir se tiendrait devant lui comme devant quelque chose d'objectif, dont le séparerait à chaque fois la distance de l'objectivité, qu'il serait dans l'incapacité de rejoindre jamais" (23).

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: Nijhoff, 2nd édition, 1962).

¹² Henry, *La barbarie*, 188-198.

¹³ Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 192-215, Engl. 152-170.

¹⁴ Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 290, Engl. 232.

¹⁵ As Henry clearly states: "L'éthique a son fondement dans la religion." ("Éthique et religion dans une phénoménologie de la vie" (1996) in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome IV (Paris: PUF, 2004), 54). Paul Audi, *Michel Henry* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2006), 232 argues, on the contrary, that Henryan ethics is not necessarily religious, even in the general sense indicated above. However, the non-religious development of ethics endeavored by Audi cannot be considered as reflecting Henry's position. It is in fact quite contrary to it. Moreover, one cannot see how such a non-religious development of ethics can succeed within the framework of the phenomenology of life, if life is to be considered an onto-phenomenological absolute. See also Frédéric Seyler, *Barbarie ou culture*, 65-83.

¹⁶ Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 210-213, Engl. 167-169.

¹⁷ Henry, *La barbarie*, 118-119.

¹⁸ Moreover, it raises the difficult question of freedom in radical phenomenology. As *Incarnation* states: "La liberté est le sentiment du Soi *de pouvoir mettre en oeuvre soi-même chacun des pouvoirs qui appartiennent à sa chair*" (262; italics in the text). However, this freedom of the self as "I can" is dependent on its givenness through absolute life, hence freedom unfolds always on the ground of an originary absence of freedom.

¹⁹ Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 168-191, Engl. 133-151.

²⁰ Michel Henry, *Incarnation*, 122-139 and, in particular: "Nous savons que ce n'est jamais dans un voir que nous parviendrons à la vie, mais seulement là où elle parvient en soi - là où, depuis toujours, nous sommes déjà parvenus en nous-mêmes: dans la Vie absolue, selon l'Archi-intelligibilité du process de son auto-génération en tant que son auto-révélation. Jamais plus nous n'en appellerons au voir, à une connaissance quelconque de notre condition de vivants" (131).

²¹ Michel Henry, "Parole et religion: la Parole de Dieu," in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome IV (Paris: PUF, 2004), 202: "Mais le bouleversement de la vie qui l'ouvre

émotionnellement à sa propre essence se passe aussi bien de toute condition au sens d'une rencontre, d'une circonstance ou d'une occasion, de toute forme de culture de quelque ordre qu'elle soit. Elle naît et peut naître de la vie elle-même comme cette re-naissance qui lui donne d'éprouver soudain sa naissance éternelle."

²² Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 208, Engl. 164.

²³ Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 128, Engl. 101. It is worth noting here that Henry's position can be qualified, despite its phenomenological dualism and contrary to its rejection of monism, as ontological monism.

²⁴ Michel Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse. Le commencement perdu* (Paris: PUF, 1985), Engl. trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 172-174, Engl. trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 128-131. See also: Michel Henry, "Ricoeur et Freud: entre psychanalyse et phenomenology" (1988), in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome II (Paris: PUF, 2003), 163-183.

²⁵ Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (Paris: PUF, 1965), Engl. trans. G.J. Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975).

²⁶ Michel Henry, *Marx*, tome 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), Engl. trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

²⁷ Henry, *Marx*, 348.

²⁸ Henry, *Marx*, 346 (italics in the text).

²⁹ Henry, *Marx*, 348.

³⁰ Michel Henry, "Le concept de l'être comme production" (1975), in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome III (Paris: PUF, 2004), 31.

³¹ Henry, "Le concept de l'être comme production," 32.

³² Henry, *La barbarie*, 167-168.

³³ The reference to habituality, which is also present in Henry's phenomenology, also suggests, on the contrary, that an action can be "blind" provided it relies on a learning process which is all but "blind."

³⁴ For another approach to this subject, see Hartmut Rosenau, *Allversöhnung: Ein transzendentaltheologischer Grundlegungsversuch* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1993), which gives a theological account on the question as well as its study with regard to the evolution of Fichtean ethics and philosophy of religion.

³⁵ Henry, *C'est moi la vérité*, 207-208, Engl. 164.

³⁶ Henry, *Paroles du Christ*, 149, Engl. 119.

³⁷ But if we only have access to affectivity through such a translation or expression, one might even question the existence of affectivity as *appearing* and ask how we

could know about an appearing that does not appear to us. But even in that case, one could still maintain affectivity and, thus, immanent life as the transcendental condition of intentionality, itself being non-intentional.

³⁸ Michel Henry, “La vie et la république” (1989); “Difficile démocratie” (2000) republished in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome III, 147-184.

³⁹ The fact that, for Henry, every human community is founded in immanence and absolute life does not alter the importance of shared beliefs. On the contrary, the recognition of the transcendental genesis of the social and political field is, in that sense, the one absolutely essential “belief” necessary to socio-political critique as well as to social change. This explains why, following Henry, Raphaël Gély refers to terms like “recognition,” “meaning,” “attention” (or, on the contrary, to that of “denial”) and applies them to the community of the living in absolute life. Furthermore, it must be clear that, for Henry, this community is real *regardless* of any recognition or attention given to it. Thus, the statement according to which “the experience that the individual has of his situation [...] becomes common if he shares in a truly living action with others at the same time” (Gély, art. cit., 167), has to be corrected. Since “experience” is the translation of the immanent *épreuve*, it cannot become but is always already communal. Thus, the difference is given by the presence or absence of recognition of this fundamental reality. But, again, such a recognition does not tell us what a “truly living action” is or how to achieve it in a given social interaction or situation. It comes as no surprise that this is the very problem we encountered throughout this discussion of affectivity and intentionality in Henryan ethics.

⁴⁰ J. G. Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch die Religionslehre* (1806) (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001), 4. Vorlesung, 60.