

Towards a Phenomenology of Life and the Invisible: Generativity and Sonship in the Thought of Michel Henry

Giovanna Costanzo

Abstract The philosophical reflection of the Twentieth century has drawn fruitful inspiration from Husserl's lesson on phenomenology, whose originality lies in the intentionality of consciousness. The possibility of observing the conscience reversed from inside out, aside itself, defined by objects of intent and not by our awareness of intentionalising them, has in fact worn-down the relationship between consciousness and self-awareness, paving the way towards a new philosophy of being and relating in the world. In particular, Michel Henry traces a pathway that leads from the superficial "outer" appearance, the exterior of the phenomenon to the discovery the invisible law of the life itself. The radical opposition between the phenomenality of the world and the phenomenality of life is thematized within the horizon of meaning offered by Christianity, where God manifests himself in giving life, in the Incarnation of the Word into flesh. Regaining our status as Sons allows us to achieve an ethical horizon in which the care and concern for others allows us to discover not foreigners but brothers, since we are sons of one Father in Christ. In this sense Generativity and Sonship become an indication to follow the path of sharing and joint participation, in pain and pleasure, in love and respect for that only Life, worthy to be honoured and defended in every respect.

1. The interest brought up by the experiments of young researchers at CERN on *the God particle* 'or *the Higgs Boson*, held responsible for the mass of all existing bodies, or the clamor over the possible knowledge of the entire sequence of the DNA code, indicate how the desire to grasp the unfathomable mystery of life, its hidden links and complex patterns have always not only interested scientists and researchers, but Man of all times, or simply thought. Of course, whenever the combination

G. Costanzo (✉)

Department of Ancient and Modern Civilisations, University of Studies
of Messina (Italy), Polo Annunziata, 98168 Messina, Italy
e-mail: costanzog@unime.it

of power-knowledge has led human capacity towards the intelligibility of nature or better towards the hidden patterns which make up its vital system, modern science has fatally interrupted, as Adorno and Horkheimer¹ would say, the vital and virtuous circularity between man and nature, living beings and the life cycle. Matter has been reduced to its quantitative and mathematical aspects and every natural element has been bent to justify the ends and goals dictated by a ruthless logic of domination and exploitation. For this reason many nineteenth century thinkers have vigorously and forcefully asked themselves how to return to question the deepest well-springs of life, not only in the light of a reborn thought with an ecological vocation, that is, a philosophy which makes responsibilities the sum of its actions in the cosmos; but in light of a thought which attempts to re-examine the role of man in creation since the crisis of the Cartesian image ego cogito, understood as the principle of all certainty and truth. In particular, philosophical reflection has drawn fruitful inspiration from Husserl's lesson on phenomenology, whose originality, according to many interpreters, lies in the intentionality of consciousness, and in its opportunity to offer a critique of the Cartesian consciousness. The possibility of observing the conscience reversed from inside out, aside itself, defined by objects of intent and not by our awareness of intentionalising them, has in fact worn-down the relationship between consciousness and self-awareness, paving the way towards a new philosophy of being and relating in the world, "which has become the need to go beyond the safe limits set by the essential consciousness and its reality",² in order to help retrace the logos which guides the development of the existence, as according to the Polish Anna-Teresa-Tymieniecka, whose work this conference pays homage to-; or in order to reveal the immanent principle which gives life to all beings, as according to the Frenchman Michel Henry's course of philosophical studies. Even if at different stages and in different ways, both thinkers, in fact, have dedicated "all of their research beyond the level of ideas, in search of the primordial propulsive energy of the phenomenological movement itself. They have thereby initiated a rethinking of critical consciousness, precisely of Husserl's method – re-elaborated on the constituent level in order to grasp that element of life, that creative and creating movement which is part of the life of every living thing".³ This need to reopen the innate consciousness to its vital dimension, this common interest in going beyond the given phenomenon towards vital energy or towards the immanent principle which makes any event possible, seems to be motivated not only by the need to get out of the doldrums of a thought limited to a logical and idealistic process, a thought which failed to grasp the profound connection between spiritual and material, between the world/nature and spiritual man, and the need to go beyond the limits with which science and biology claim to investigate existence. In fact, the image of a life

¹Max Horkheimer, Thodor. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment; Dialettica dell'Illuminismo*, Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino [Turin] 1966.

²Daniela Verducci, *The issue of development in perspective ontopoietica; La questione dello sviluppo in prospettiva ontopoietica*, «Etica ed Economia», Semestrale di Nemetria, 1 (2007), FrancoAngeli, Milano [Milan] 2007, p. 45.

³*Ivi*, p. 47.

analyzed through the lens of a microscope, often hides the conviction, in the words of Francois Jacob, “that biology does not consist in life but in algorithms”.⁴ Scientific interest tends to address the chemical and biochemical links rather than the fulfillment and amazement towards a Life which has been gifted by Others. Particularly interesting is Michel Henry’s phenomenological study in which he criticizes the dominant and widespread reduction of man to a ‘manifestation of the world’; scientific and technological thought has come to remove the interest in intuitive and original knowledge, the *knowledge of the bowels* as Maria Zambrano⁵ would say, while at the same time a widespread aesthetic culture has made us increasingly incapable of building authentic ethical bonds.

2. In order to achieve this, -and this seems to be the ethical inspiration which Henry’s entire phenomenological studies are based on, we need to trace an alternative route to those which Western philosophy offers, a pathway that leads from the superficial “outer” appearance, the exterior of the phenomenon, to the discovery of the invisible law of the universe and, therefore, of existence itself. If it is true, that life is phenomenized through a mass of cells, which is precisely what biologists study in the laboratory, we cannot have access to life through thought; we cannot explain life through the compelling logic of rational, reductionistic and deterministic thinking⁶:

Whether it concerns neurons, electric current, acid chains, cells, chemical properties or their end components – material particles, biology is characterized by the fact that it is foreign to phenomenology. Indeed, all of these physical, chemical or biological factors represent phenomena or refer to phenomena, because otherwise science would be powerless to discovery. Nevertheless, it is precisely these various phenomena that do not obtain their ability to reveal themselves to us, their phenomenality, from themselves. *The ability to reveal themselves and become objects of possible knowledge* is thanks to a power of revelation unknown to them, *they being blind in themselves*.⁷

To the philosopher from Montpellier, the “blindness” of such physical or chemical elements signifies that they do not possess the reasons behind their phenomenality in their appearance, but in something else which, however, is not visible. The idea, in fact, that the “truth of things must appear and be revealed” is a postulated product of Western thought, which from Plato to Kant and Husserl, has interpreted “truth as manifestation”, as that which appears on the mundane horizon of visibility. According to this classical conception, reflecting on the phenomenality of natural phenomenon means “that the world does not consist in the totality of things or bodies but in the horizon of light in which things appear as phenomena”⁸ and thus

⁴Michel Henry, *C’est moi la Vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme*, Seuil, Paris 1996; *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*; trans. *Io sono la verità. Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, Queriniana, Brescia [Brescia] 1997, p. 58.

⁵Cfr. Maria Zambrano, *Clear Forest; Chiari del bosco*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano [Milan] 2004.

⁶Cfr. Edgar Moren, *The Challenge of Complexity; La sfida della complessità*, a cura di A. Anselmo, G. Gembillo, Le Lettere, Firenze [Florence] 2011.

⁷Michel Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*; trans. *Io sono la verità. Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 54.

⁸*Ivi*, p. 33.

“the truth of the world is not only indifferent to what it appears to be but more importantly, focuses its attention to what it receives from its truth which is “true” only insofar as it reveals itself”.⁹ And this is what occurred in the

philosophies which place consciousness at the foundation of truth -defined as an active transcendence or the projection of the horizon in which the object becomes visible, beyond the object. Placing the entity in the condition of object or “frontally”, thus as phenomenon, is only made possible by producing a horizon of visibility, which is the world itself. The world therefore *is not*; it never ceases to occur, just as a horizon that continues to take shape, under the condition of a power that never ceases to plan it. In Kant, this power is called transcendental imagination – the placement into image of a world, which is nothing other than this placement into image. It is in this placement of image, in turn an imaginary place, where every entity appears to us as image, representation, object, placed frontally, phenomenon.¹⁰

If the “truth of the world is nothing but the self-production of the exterior as the horizon of visibility, in which and for which everything can become visible and therefore phenomenon for us”,¹¹ according to Henry what thought has obliterated and forgotten in its long journey of research, is the *why*, and not only the *how* phenomenon occurs; the “truth” of its manifestation, the truth of its existence is hidden *inside*, within the immanence of its existence, in the heart of its vital essence. In doing so, and only in this sense the “truth of the world”, projected towards the exteriority of phenomenality, (*phenomenality of the world*) is opposed to the “truth of life” (*phenomenality of life*). For this reason “truth” and “life” must become inseparable in a form of thought for which good and truth are not “ideas to be contemplated and searched for far and wide,” as Agnes Heller¹² would say, mimicking the platonic progress towards ideas. In fact, such “phenomenology of life” professes that life is not contemplated in theory, but is lived and suffered, because life is pathos and affection, and only through living and suffering can it become an object of thought: “it is always life to make its objectification possible in thought, that is to say, as a condition within it and its object”,¹³ and “whoever has access to life only in and through life, implies a crucial precondition: it is Life itself which comes to itself”.¹⁴

Life is thus understood as a process of self-generation in which it senses itself. For this reason its self-revealing form does not belong to the speculative or objectifying order. On the contrary, the way in which phenomenality is phenomenized is

⁹ Ivi, p. 35.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 35–36.

¹¹ Ivi p. 36.

¹² Agnes Heller, *Philosophie des linken radikalismus*, BSA-verlag, Amburgo, 1978; *Radical Philosophy*, Basil Blackwell, 1984, tr.it. e cura di L. Boella, *Filosofia radicale*, Il Saggiatore, Milano [Milan] 1979.

¹³ Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de della carne*, Seuil, Paris 2000; *Incarnation. A philosophy of the Flesh*; trans. *Incarnazione. Una filosofia della carne*, SEI, Torino [Turin] 2001, p. 110.

¹⁴ Michel Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*; trans. *Io sono la verità. Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 77.

the identity between sentient and sensed, the identity of who lives life and feels it in its pathic immanence.¹⁵

In this sense, the French philosopher attempts to make his thought a very “meditatio vitae”,¹⁶ or a reflection on life understood as absolute immanence and revelation. This apparent contradiction is, in fact, the question of issue which our philosopher seeks to unravel in his long career and in works as *The Essence of Revelation* (1963), *I am the truth. For a philosophy of Christianity* (1996), *Incarnation. A philosophy of the Flesh* (2000), through the instruments provided by historical phenomenology, particularly by Husserl, as well as in light of what has been Revealed. The radical opposition between the phenomenality of the world (the outer, transcendence) and the phenomenality of life (which is pathic immanence) is thematized within the horizon of meaning offered by Christianity. Life is revealed beginning from itself and in itself, outside the conditions of the world and regardless of any transcendental horizon, which would end up objectifying life itself. Christianity, in fact, unlike other wide-spread religions, tends to make its focal theme a truth of life which is distinctly opposed to the truth of the world (“*I’m not of this world*,” John 17, 14): the Christian God is something more and cannot be subject to the rules which govern the phenomenality of the world. And it is yet in the Christian God that appearance and what appears to be real are one: “God is pure revelation and reveals nothing but himself. God reveals himself”.¹⁷ To say that “God reveals himself” is to say that God reveals himself in life and as life: he reveals himself as the living God, (*1 Tim 3, 15*) as the living God who gives life, and is a manifestation of life through the generation of his Son (*Jn 14.6*). Thus this self-manifestation of God does not depend a priori on ontological or anthropological events, since God manifests himself in giving life, when He comes into the life of every believer, therefore life is the very essence of His manifestation: “*Life is nothing but that which reveals itself*, and not something that would also have the property of self-revelation; it is the very fact that it is able to reveal itself, self-revelation as such. There is Life wherever such a self revelation occurs”.¹⁸ Life is not only the place where the Father reveals himself, but also the place where the Son is revealed and it is the Son in the words of the apostle John to say: “I am the Truth, the Way, and the Life” (*Jn 14.6*).

Naturally, the topic of truth recalls the long philosophical tradition which considers it a matter of exclusive competence, in the sense that understanding reality and reducing it to a concept is a matter of thought, as Hegel argued; the truth Christianity speaks of, instead, does not belong to the speculative order, it is not

¹⁵ Carla Canullo, (a cura di), *Michel Henry: telling the pathos; Michel Henry: narrare il pathos* Eum, Macerata [Macerata] 2007.

¹⁶ Giuseppina De Simone, *The revelation of life. Christianity and philosophy in Michel Henry; La rivelazione della vita. Cristianesimo e filosofia in Michel Henry*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani [Trapani] 2007, p. 46.

¹⁷ Michel Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*; trans. *Io sono la verità Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit. p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 47.

the result of reasoning, but of a truth professed by the person of Christ in the truth of his existence.¹⁹ Of course the difficulty of this theoretical approach, which intertwines philosophy and theology together in search of a living truth as opposed to a worldly truth, lies in the fact that philosophy proceeds exactly through reasoning, while “Christianity is a religion and, as such, legitimizes itself through its very existence”²⁰; therefore the Revelation does not disclose Himself to thought; indeed, it is only when thought gives way to the gift of faith, that man is open to God’s self revelation.

What motivates Henry in his attempt to understanding Christianity on philosophical terms, is not the comparison to the theological tradition, but the strictly phenomenological investigation²¹, in the conviction of the fruitful weave which joins theology and philosophy:

Therefore how does God revealed himself to us? Here the theological question is connected to the fundamental phenomenological question and identifies with it, as theology is only possible as phenomenology. The question of phenomenology is the way things give themselves, manifest themselves, so the theme of phenomenology, is never what gives or manifests itself, but its way of giving.²²

Even if philosophy and theology are two different disciplines, they do not oppose each other. The two starting points differ; for theology it is what has been revealed in Scripture, while philosophy, a self-knowledge, does not possess a predetermined starting point identified as truth. Yet, despite this, the method is common to both disciplines and that is: “in a movement of thought which achieves results- progressive steps part of a continually evolving theory, through the development of a series of evidence and the interaction of their implications(they too evident)”.²³

The movement of thought conceived by Henry and not Husserl, is the method offered by phenomenology; the “material phenomenology”,²⁴ or the science which has as its objective the self-revelation of Life. In such thought the question of the mystery of life leads to the mystery of the eternal origins of the Son in the Father; (“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”); as a phenomenological reading of the Prologue of John’s Gospel invites

¹⁹ Giuliano Sansonetti, *The phenomenology of the invisible Michel Henry; La fenomenologia dell’invisibile di Michel Henry*, prefazione a M. Henry, *Io sono la verità Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 10.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 8.

²¹ Vittorio Peregò, *The French phenomenology between metaphysics and theology; La fenomenologia francese tra metafisica e teologia*, Vita&Pensiero, Milano [Milan] 2004, p. 150.

²² Michel Henry, *Transport to the question of God: proof of being or experiencing life; Acheminement vers la question de Dieu: preuve de l’être ou éprouve de la vie*, Archivio di Filosofia 58, 1990, p. 525.

²³ Michel Henry, *Incarnation. A philosophy of the Flesh*, trans *Incarnazione. Una filosofia della carne*, cit., p. 292.

²⁴ Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle*, PUF, Paris 1990; *A Material Phenomenology*; trans. *Fenomenologia materiale*, Guerini Associati, Milano [Milan] 2001.

us to do²⁵: “in its absolute self-generation, Life creates He whose birth is the self-fulfilment of Life, its self-fulfilment in the form of its self-generation”.²⁶ The first living being is the Arch-Son; whose birth originates through transcendental procreation, in the sense that his birth does not have an ontic empirical status, but belongs to the same process of self-generation of life. The birth of the first living being cannot be understood “as a coming into the world”; since what is manifest to the world is alien to life “birth is not coming into the world but coming into life”²⁷; in this sense, the first living thing is “generated and not created”, as stated in the Nicene-Constantine Creed. Therefore, Christianity perceives the revelation of life in a radically new way; that of self-revelation of the Arch-Son in life. Therefore, for every Christian, access to Christ is not through his worldly qualities, but through the essence of his divine origin. “This conception of Arch-Son has opened a new perspective to traditional Christology, intended as the conceptual understanding of the nature of Christ”.²⁸ In line with the word of John, we can better understand nature according to Christ, considering Him as self-generation of life when faced with the difficulty of thought regarding the dual divine-human nature of Christ through the idea of a pre-existing nature which is added to the divine. Understanding the nature of Christ is also fully understanding man, if it is true that man is the son of God²⁹; this too is expressed as an inner moment of self-generation of life. In fact, there is one invisible life that unites the Father, the Son and other living beings: “this means that the truth of Christianity is not to be sought on the historical or cultural level, but in that series of transcendental, acosmic, invisible relationships” which originated in Life and which constantly foster Life: “the relationship between absolute Life and the First-living being, between the Father and the Son, between God and Christ, between absolute life and all living things, between Fathers and Sons; the relationship between God and men, the child and children, Christ and the living; relationships of children, the living, or men amongst each other”.³⁰

In this sole invisible life, only a careful reading of the concept of self-affection, allows us to understand the specific and different relations between people, man and God, and man and the Son. If life defines and produces the content of its affection, the internal process of self-affection of life is consistent only in God. Even though man is capable of self-affection, of being affected by his impressions, he is unable to establish the condition of this self affection. In a certain sense, man is passive before himself: “I have given unto me without having such a gift, depend

²⁵ Giuliano Sansonetti, *Logos as on. The philosophical reading of John's Prologue; Logos come via. La lettura filosofica del Prologo di Giovanni*, «Filosofia e teologia», 1999, 1, pp. 112–123.

²⁶ Michel Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. *Io sono la verità Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 79.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 81.

²⁸ Vittorio Perego, *The French phenomenology between metaphysics and theology; La fenomenologia francese tra metafisica e teologia*, cit., p.153.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Michel Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. *Io sono la verità Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 83.

on me”.³¹ So “if the single Self is self-affected, it becomes the identity of who affects and is affected, but it was not he who created that identity. *The Self affects itself insofar as Absolute Life affects itself through him*”.³² Therefore a double passivity characterizes man: he is passive with respect to impressions; he is passive with regards to that self-generation of Life which generates and constitutes man in as such life. If the existence of every living being lies solely in the process of self-generation of life, “self-affection is nonetheless impossible without generating the essential selfhood, which is implicit in every attempt and what is assumed by it. But the phenomenological effectiveness of such ipseity is a Self, which is itself phenomenologically affective [...], that is, the transcendental Arch-son begotten in the phenomenological effectuation of absolute Life”.³³

This means that nothing can establish itself as a living being or as selfhood unless an absolute selfhood already exists; a transcendental selfhood, existing from all time and created in the process of self-generation of life. Man is thus the son of God through the Arch-Son; he is the Son in the Son. It is the Son of God, the Word made flesh as stated in the Prologue of the Gospel, the beginning of all selfhood in its birth to life. Thus, Christ is a mediating figure, the prime Ipseity, in the sense that what is generated in life, only through Him and in Him becomes Selfhood, individuality and self-awareness. For this reason mediation annuls the potential risk of falling into a blind and irrational vitalism in which all individuality disappears.³⁴ After all, Christianity compared to other forms of spirituality, is characterized by the fact that:

far from meaning or implying the dissolution of individuality in each of us, absolute unity between all living Selves is the basis of such individuality. It is through the phenomenological fulfilment of life in his Word that every living being is united with itself, self-generated as an absolutely single self, irreducible to anyone other.³⁵

3. Justly, Henry’s theoretical proposal, fully part of the <Tournant Théologique> or contemporary French phenomenology, in reality ends up being an attempt to reintroduce evident metaphysical traits, despite having origins in phenomenological issues.

It is the French scholar Janicaud who considers that this ascent to the origins coincides with the abandon of the empirical nature of experience; phenomenology is thus transformed into its opposite, namely into metaphysics and in particular in the metaphysical idealism of early Hegel³⁶: phenomenology becomes

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 133.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ivi*, pp. 136–137.

³⁴ Giuliano Sansonetti, *Introduction; Introduzione a M. Henry, Incarnazione. Per una filosofia della carne*, cit., pp. XXV–XXVI.

³⁵ Michel Henry, *Incarnation. A philosophy of the Flesh*, trans. *Incarnazione. Per una filosofia della carne*, cit., p. 354.

³⁶ Vittorio Peregò, *The French phenomenology between metaphysics and theology; La fenomenologia francese tra metafisica e teologia*, cit., p. 159.

“spokesperson for the absolute”.³⁷ In this conception, the essence of the event is the event itself. Life is invested with an absolute value which seems to place it on a par with God: life is limitless, and eternal. It is identified with the whole of reality in which the human and the divine proceed towards a single pathic unit: “With regards to this point, Henry finds the immanence of the absolute spirit in its phenomenal manifestations, despite the attempt to subject knowledge to affectivity-to life, which experiences itself”.³⁸

The material phenomenology of Henry proposes to reject the historical phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, since it is based on intentionality, which is nothing but the assumption that drives the Western logos and which identifies by showing the essence of phenomenality from inside out. However, in this quest for an alternative to the Greek *logos*, Henry, according to Janicaud, retraces Heideggerian gesture, without bringing up the full consequences of this action: the questioning of the essence of metaphysics and the abandonment of the phenomenological method. With regards to the essence of metaphysics, he does not follow the same thread as the German philosopher, so he is unable to understand that the eideticalization pursued by Husserl is not an error but an essential part of the very future of Western philosophy and its claim to the founding of the *episteme*. After all, the Frenchman’s dispute over Western *logos* is resolved by reclaiming a strong conceptual and metaphysical structure, “on Henry’s strange persistence in wanting to set up this research at the centre of that very philosophical discipline, where principles are formulated in rational, unifying terms, Western terms, which he intended to reject”.³⁹ “Michel Henry proceeds by sort of depriving phenomenology of its home and methodological instruments”,⁴⁰ when the founders of phenomenology never abandoned the reflection on the method the method of phenomenology has never been questioned,⁴¹ often in the name of a “theologization which becomes literal, because it is the vision of God in God”⁴²; “But one wonders if a phenomenology of the absolute is not a contradiction in terms?”⁴³ Neither Husserl nor Heidegger considered the phenomenological method suitable in describing the manifestation of the absolute. The immediate effect of Henry’s phenomenological reading of Christianity, which was no less criticized, was the renouncement of the world by concretely reabsorbing all phenomena into the structure of Divine Life. If Henry totally reinterprets the Gospel of John, in the words “My kingdom is not of this world” (*Jn 18:36*), he nonetheless, turns the entire ontic dimension of Jesus’

³⁷ Dominique Janicaud, *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology; Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, L’Éclat, Combas 1990, p. 60.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ivi* p. 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Dominique Janicaud, *The phenomenology exploded; La phénoménologie éclatée*, L’Éclat, Paris 1998, p. 15.

⁴³ Michel Haar, *French philosophy between phenomenology and metaphysics; La philosophie française entre phénoménologie et métaphysique*, PUF, Paris 1999, p. 114.

life into an abstraction, thusly an abstraction of his human existence: “is it therefore irrelevant that the Arch-Son was born a Jew, became flesh in Mary’s body and died on the cross at Golgotha?”.⁴⁴ What prevails in this construction, as Tilliette Xavier accurately observes, is the “taboric” dimension, the glorious manifestation of Christ, at the expense of the precisely “kenotic” or sacrificial.⁴⁵ By judging it impossible to find traces of the divine in the world dominated by science, Henry tends to give ground to a phenomenology which seeks to give voice to God through the intimacy of life:

It is therefore an aesthetic conception of Christianity, concerned above all with celebrating the glory of divine life. Such life is based on its manifestation in the intimacy of a human sensibility sublimed by the presence of God who lives it from its birth.⁴⁶

Of course, radically, Christianity cannot simply be seen as a negation of the world and history, as Henry proposes by also following the Gnostic thought, so “man’s relationship to God is not through the world”,⁴⁷ since it is the very Incarnation of Christ to refute that claim. Perhaps for this reason, and also to respond to the criticism of his phenomenological reading of Christianity, that he developed the idea of *Incarnation. A philosophy of the flesh*, a work in which he methodically sums up his thought and in which embodied subjectivity becomes the pivotal theme.

4. The starting point of his most accomplished work is the classic Husserlian distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, between mere material substance, natural -biological and the intentional dimension of our corporeity, and consequently the unsettled issues this well-known opposition leaves behind:

our flesh is in fact none other than what it feels, suffers, and bears of itself, and thus by experiencing joy in itself through constantly renewed impressions, it is at the same time capable of feeling the body which is exterior to it- of touching it, as well as being touched by it. This is precisely what the outer body, the inert body of the material universe, is in principle incapable of.⁴⁸

Classical phenomenology affirms that “for every body which is perceived there is another body which perceives”.⁴⁹ It is in contrast to and moves beyond the approach of the natural standpoint which coincides with a certain naive realism and

⁴⁴ Xavier Tilliette, *Crist the Philosopher; Le Crist du philosophe*, «Communio», 1996, 127, pp. 94–99.

⁴⁵ Xavier Tilliette, *Cristology philosophy in Michel Henry; La cristologie philosophique de Michel Henry* in «Gregorianum», 2, 1998; Cfr. G. Sansonetti, *Cristo verità della vita in Michel Henry*, in AA. VV. *Cristo nella filosofia contemporanea*, voll. II Da Heidegger a Levinas, a cura di S. Zucal, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2001.

⁴⁶ R. Bernet, *Cristianismo and phenomenology; Cristianisme et phenomenologie*, in AA.VV., *Michel Henry, L'épreuve de la vie* (sous la direction d'Alain David et Jean Greisch), Cerf, Paris 2001, pp. 181–201.

⁴⁷ Michel Henry, *The truth in the Gnosis; La Vérité de la Gnose*, in AA.VV. *La gnose, une question philosophique*, a cura di N. Depraz. J.F. Marquet, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2000, pp. 19–29.

⁴⁸ Michel Henry, *Incarnation. A philosophy of the Flesh*; trans *Incarnazione. Una filosofia della carne*, cit., p. 4.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 128.

gives credence to the existence of an independent and external reality- the world, which the body belongs to. It is, therefore, the dimension of the perceptive worldly body which takes us back to a transcendental body, that is to the condition of every experience and perception of the sensed worldly body, the *Leib*. Only phenomenological analysis has brought to light the transcendental body, the *Leib*, as a condition of being able to exercise the fundamental powers of our body, or namely to touch what is external to us, including our same objective bodies, *Körper*. Faced with this dual phenomenology, between transcendental and body-object, between the principle of experience and its object, Henry believes it is necessary to unravel the underlying ambiguity in the definition of perception; so a “sensitive body” at the same time indicates the body being touched and the body which touches it: “sensitive, simultaneously indicates the ability to sense and what it is lacking”.⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty takes this position to extremes in *The visible and the Invisible*,⁵¹ in which he speaks of the relationship between the right and left hand, as the relation of opposition between the transcendental body capable of feeling i.e. the body which constitutes, and what is felt through it, the constituted body: a continuously reversible relationship, depending on whether the right hand touches the left, or vice versa.

The French scholar then comes to extend the relationship between touching and being touched to the whole world, a gesture, which to Henry does not resolve the ambiguity underlying sensitivity. The transformation of the hand from transcendental principle to object, in fact leads to assimilating it in the natural world; however, through such a view “sensitivity” is always what we can see on the outside; the way in which the senses exert their action is intentionality, the ability to display on the ekstatic horizon of the world.

On the contrary, in material phenomenality the transcendental possibility of the sensitive world, of the body-object, *Körper*, does reside in the intentional transcendental body, *Leib*, but this in turn refers to the original transcendental possibility of the same intentioned body, which lies in the self-giving of life. It concerns understanding the body no longer beginning from the world, but from life in its immanent self-giving. However, the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* does not account for the pathic immanence of life, because the *Leib*, the body-subject is nothing less than an intentional body, “subject to the world in the sense that it opens us to it”.⁵² So both *Leib* and *Körper* share the external as the matrix of sensitivity, to the point that they can transform each other from principle to object of experience, from touching to touched, as Merleau-Ponty well explains. However, if the only phenomenality is external, the transcendental body, that which allows you to feel outside yourself, in turn, can only appear when it is exposed outside itself in order to be felt. Therefore, the only thing which exists is what is perceived, while the ability to perceive from one hand to another, is assumed elsewhere with respect to what appears. For Henry

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 132.

⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and invisible; Il visibile e l'invisibile*, Bompiani, Milano 1999.

⁵² Michel Henry, *Incarnation. A philosophy of the Flesh*; trans. *Incarnazione. Una filosofia della carne*, cit., p. 136.

the opposite is true: “When the touching hand is touched, the other hand becomes a touched hand, *keeping within itself its primordial condition of flesh*, self-impressionality is touched which can only be impressed.... It is touched where it is touching”.⁵³

If primordial flesh is self-impressionism-the condition of possibly reversing touching and touched, it follows that passivity and activity coincide, in the sense that “activity and passivity are two different and opposite phenomenological activities, but both conditions of the same flesh, as their phenomenological status is the same, or namely, that of the flesh”.⁵⁴ According to this approach we no longer have to do with only two elements (constituent body and constituted body), but with three and the third is the primordial flesh, which reveals itself in the immanence of life and which evades any intentional action, because it is its foundation.

The change of perspective lies in the fact that the gateway in understanding the body no longer belongs to the outside, but to the immanent self-gift of life. Seeking to be genuine principle of experience- primordial power of manifestation, our body can neither be worldly object among other objects, nor “the intentional transcendental body (*Lieb*) which perceives itself and everything outside itself, insofar as it is the perceived body which must be eliminated.”⁵⁵

Neither the Husserlian *Körper* and *Leib* structure, nor Merleau-Ponty’s touching-touched chiasm come to understand the body in its primordiality. It can be understood only “if life is incarnated in the revelation of the body, which has no oppositional structure, intentionality or ek-stasis of sorts; in short it possesses, nothing visible”.⁵⁶ The primordial body starting from the self-giving of life and not from the world, is necessarily invisible. Our flesh is pure pathos and reveals itself in an immanent pathos by experiencing itself in the immanence: “an affective impressional flesh, whose impressionality and affectivity comes from nothing else but the impressionality and affectivity of life itself”.⁵⁷

This flesh allows us to break from the primordial Greek logos and its dualistic vision of man- divided between body and soul, where a true incarnation is unthinkable; but also from Jewish thought, in which the idea of the body created with a brute and inert matter -slime of the earth (*Gen 2.7*), is dominant and where the idea of the incarnation of God is unthinkable. Only Christianity has elevated the flesh to this primordial dimension:

the flesh of the Word never comes from the mud of the earth, but from the Word itself. In the mud of the earth there are only bodies, not flesh. Something like flesh cannot come to be and does not but come from the Word.⁵⁸

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 186.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 140.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 27.

The flesh of Christ does not only appear to be human, but is human in the sense that it is capable of feeling and suffering. “Indeed, feeling and suffering render it flesh and not merely a body: since suffering is one of the fundamental emotional hues in which life touches bottom. The Incarnation thus understood, overcomes the typical Greek dualism of body and soul”.⁵⁹ The Genesis account can only be understood in light of the Incarnation. The spirit of life does not join a given matter from without, but transforms it from within, making it in each and every way, living matter- flesh in this sense: “every flesh comes from the Word, if it is true that through Him everything was made and without Him absolutely nothing was made”⁶⁰ and it is yet through him that man has reached salvation, condition which neither Hellenism nor Judaism share:

According to Ireneo’s intuition, Incarnation which opens the way to man’s salvation, then appears to be a *restoration*, a *restoration* of the primordial condition inasmuch as man was created *in his own image*; such a creation is none other than man’s generation in the self-generation of absolute Life in his Word, his transcendental birth.⁶¹

Only the loss of these origins has necessitated the Incarnation of the Word into flesh, which is a non-historical, non worldly process. However, it is immanent to the process of self-generation of life, thanks to which man has acknowledged his transcendental birth in divine Life: “incarnation reveals our generation in life, our transcendental birth. It reveals our condition as Sons”.⁶² For every living being, recognizing oneself in the Son, means recognizing ones’ very primordial condition as Son.⁶³ “Therefore sonship is based on a phenomenological intimacy between man and Life, or rather God himself through the mediation of the Arch-Son, generated in the generation of life itself”.⁶⁴ To be born as selfhood in the Son through the Father, means to be born not only as an individual, but to eternally recognize oneself within a vital link with the Father, a link which structures us as primordial passivity. On the contrary, the more man “worldifies” or the more his existence is expressed as a “being in the world”, as Heidegger intends, the more he disregards the fact that the invisibility of one’s interiority is inscribed not only in the origin of his existence, but in its belonging to a pre-existing Being who constitutes me in life.

The saving action of Christ consists, then, in rediscovering “Absolute Life in one’s own life, namely that which does not cease to generate life”.⁶⁵ Recognizing this invisible principle means forgetting how much narcissism and selfishness there is within each one of us, in order to open up to a broader horizon in its place, where

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 187.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 331.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 352.

⁶² *Ivi*, p. 297.

⁶³ Cfr. Paola Ricci Sindoni, *Gift and Sonship; Pratiche del dono e paradigma della filialità*, in AA.VV. *Oltre la società degli individui. Teorie ed etica del dono*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011, pp. 162–181.

⁶⁴ Michel Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*; trans. *Io sono la verità. Per una filosofia del cristianesimo*, cit. p. 83.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p.185.

the care of others, as taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we hope takes over the prevailing and excessive care of the self. Regaining our status as sons, allows us then to achieve an ethical horizon in which everything is not simplistically reduced to me, but in which the care and concern for others, allows us to discover in these others not foreigners or strangers, but brothers, since we are sons of one Father in Christ. In this sense, the way through which Christ proclaimed himself “the way, the truth, and the life” becomes an indication or warning to follow the path of sharing and joint participation, in pain and pleasure, in love and respect for that only Life, worthy to be honoured and defended in every respect.

The theoretical urgency to investigate within the invisible forces that lie in the visible, led the philosopher to challenge a pervasive and reductionistic science which had ended up denying the instances of pathos and affectivity within the broader and more complex understanding of human life. The philosopher was also inspired to formulate a thought not only with an “ecological vocation”, that is, aimed at the appreciation of the value of life in its expression in creation, as Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka underlines. However, his thought also firstly defends the ethical demands in building lasting bonds by recognizing that every being belongs to the community of the living,⁶⁶ but above all to the religious community,⁶⁷ in the sense of “religio” as in the “religio” of Ortega,⁶⁸ or as a intertwining of the link with the ‘Primordial’, in order to attempt to stem the pervasive and suffocating lack of values in the contemporary world. These are surely the most interesting legacies of a philosophy that never stops intriguing, in each reading, our ability to focus on the splendid origami that Life is able to produce.

⁶⁶ Michel Henry, *A Material Phenomenology; Fenomenologia materiale*, cit., p. 176.

⁶⁷ Cfr. Giuseppina De Simone, *The revelation of life. Christianity and philosophy in Michel Henry* *La rivelazione della vita. Cristianesimo e filosofia in Michel Henry*, cit.

⁶⁸ José Ortega y Gasset, *Think and Believe; Pensare e credere*, Alinea, Firenze 1995.

Phenomenology of Space and Time

The Forces of the Cosmos and the Ontopoietic Genesis

of Life: Book Two

Tymieniecka, A.-T. (Ed.)

2014, IX, 358 p. 26 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-02038-9