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Subjectivity and Immanence in Michel Henry

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Introduction

One of Michel Henry's persistent claims has been that phenomenology is quite unlike positive sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, history, and law. Rather than studying particular objects and phenomena phenomenology is a transcendental enterprise whose task is to disclose and analyse the structure of manifestation or appearance and its very condition of possibility.

How has phenomenology typically handled this task? According to Henry, one of the characteristic features of Husserl's and Heidegger's classical investigations has been their emphasis on the *self-transcending* nature of appearance; no appearance is independent and self-reliant. It always refers to something different from itself. On the one hand, every appearance is characterised by a *dyadic* structure; it is an appearance of something for someone. Every appearance has its genitive and its dative. On the other hand, every appearance is characterized by its *horizontality*, that is, by its reference to a plurality of other appearances.

If it is acknowledged that the manifestation of, say, seashells and locomotives, is characterized by such a dyadic and horizontal structure, what about the dative of manifestation, what about subjectivity itself? Phenomenology has traditionally taken transcendental subjectivity to be the condition of possibility for manifestation, but does this condition manifest itself? Can that which conditions all phenomena become a phenomenon itself? A traditional answer has been no. If the transcendental condition were to become a phenomenon itself, it would no longer be that which conditions, but something that were itself conditioned. But although this option might have been available to Kant, it is not available to the phenomenologists. To deny that transcendental subjectivity manifests itself is to deny the possibility of a *phenomenological* analysis of transcendental subjectivity. And to deny that is

to deny the possibility of transcendental phenomenology altogether. But if the answer is yes, does the manifestation of this transcendental condition also have a dyadic structure, i.e., is it also an appearance of something for somebody? The answer to the last question presumably must be negative. If the appearance of subjectivity were dyadic, it would involve us in an infinite regress, insofar as there would always be yet another dative of manifestation.

If phenomenology is to account convincingly for the conditioned appearance of objects, it must also account for the subject for whom the objects appear. Every object-appearance is necessarily an appearance of the object for a (self-manifesting) subject. But unless phenomenology can show that there is in fact a decisive and radical difference between the phenomenality of constituted objects and the phenomenality of constituting subjectivity, i.e., a radical difference between object-manifestation and self-manifestation, its entire project is endangered (Henry 1963, 47, 52). The clarification of self-manifestation is consequently not a mere side issue for phenomenology, rather it is a precondition for any true phenomenological investigation whatsoever. In fact, according to Henry, object-manifestation presupposes self-manifestation. It is only because we are already given to ourselves that we can be affected by the world (Henry 1963, 584, 598-599, 613), or as Henry writes, “*Self-manifestation is the essence of manifestation*” (Henry 1963, 173).

Obviously, self-manifestation or self-awareness has been analyzed in the course of time, and particularly within phenomenology one can find detailed analyses of a pre-reflective, non-objectifying self-awareness. But according to Henry all of the previous analyses have failed to conceive of self-manifestation in a sufficiently radical manner. If one goes to Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas and Derrida one will repeatedly encounter the claim that division, separation and opposition are structural elements in all kinds of manifestation, including self-manifestation, and that even self-manifestation therefore implies a form of *ekstasis*, a form of internal splitting, self-alienation or self-transcendence, or as it is also sometimes put: Self-manifestation presupposes a confrontation with radical otherness (Henry 1963, 86-87, 95-96, 138, 143, 262).

Sartre can serve as a good representative of such a view. So let me briefly outline some of the ideas we find in *L'Être et le néant*.

Sartre and nothingness

Sartre is strongly opposed to the idea that self-awareness can be identified with some kind of pure self-presence. On the contrary, he explicitly defends the view that self-awareness and self-transcendence are interdependent. In his view, subjectivity is characterized by a pre-reflective self-awareness of not being the object of which it at the same time is intentionally conscious.

Thus the For-itself's Presence to being implies that the For-itself is a witness of itself in the presence of being as not being that being; presence to being is the presence of the For-itself in so far as the For-itself is not (Sartre 1943, 161).

In short, the self-awareness of subjectivity depends on its relation to something different from itself (Sartre 1943, 28-29). But Sartre is not only claiming that pre-reflective self-awareness cannot be understood as a self-sufficient preoccupation with self. He also claims that the self-awareness of subjectivity is dependent on subjectivity being different from itself. According to Sartre, the notion of *presence* entails a duality and therefore at least a virtual separation (Sartre 1943, 115). This does not hold true only for our presence to transcendent objects, however, but even for our self-presence:

Presence to self [...] supposes that an impalpable fissure has slipped into being. If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself. Presence is an immediate deterioration of coincidence, for it supposes separation (Sartre 1943, 115-116).

That is, one will never find nonthetic consciousness as a mode of being which is not, at the same time, in some way, absence from itself, precisely because it is presence to itself. Now presence to itself presupposes a slight distance from self, a slight absence from self. It is precisely this perpetual play of absence and presence, which it may seem hard to think of as existing, but which we engage in perpetually, and which represents the mode of being of consciousness (Sartre 1948, 69).

Whereas the being of the object is characterized by solidity, positivity, self-sufficiency,

and self-identity (a stone is purely and simply a stone, neither more nor less, it knows no alterity and cannot relate to that which is other), this is not true for the being of subjectivity (Sartre 1943, 33). My experience does not merely exist. It exists *for-itself*, that is, it is self-aware. But to be aware of one's perception, even pre-reflectively, is no longer simply and merely to perceive, but to withdraw, wrench away from or transcend the perception. To be self-aware is to exist at a distance from oneself; it is to be engaged in an ontological self-interrogation. Self-awareness and self-identity are incompatible determinations, wherefore Sartre questions the validity of the law of identity when it comes to an understanding of subjectivity and writes that self-awareness presupposes a tiny fissure, separation, or even duality in the being of consciousness.

Already on the pre-reflective level we find what Sartre calls "a pattern of duality", "a game of reflections" or "a dyad" existing between *intentionality* and *self-awareness*. Both moments of consciousness are strictly interdependent and inseparable, but their functions are not identical and they do not coincide absolutely. Each of the two refers to the other, as that which it is not, but upon which it depends. They co-exist in a troubled unity, as a duality which is a unity, and the life of consciousness takes place in this perpetual cross-reference (Sartre 1943, 114, 117; 1948, 67).¹

When Sartre speaks of a fissure or separation in the being of consciousness, he is obviously not talking about consciousness being separated from itself by *some-thing*, since the introduction of any substantial opacity would split it in two, replacing its dyadic unity with the duality of two separated objects. No, for Sartre consciousness is separated from itself by *no-thing*, that is, the separation in question is properly speaking an internal differentiation or negation. But Sartre also claims that the nothing that separates consciousness from itself is at the root of time, and his description of the structure of consciousness gains credibility the moment we turn to *temporality*, that is, the moment we understand the perpetual self-differentiation and self-transcendence of subjectivity in temporal terms. Consciousness exists in the *diasporatic* form of temporality. Spread out in all three temporal dimensions, it always exists at a distance from itself; its self-presence is always permeated by absence, and this unique mode of being cannot be grasped through the category of self-identity. On the contrary, temporality is a perpetual movement of self-transcendence which from the very

¹ On the pre-reflective level, consciousness is characterized by the dyad *reflet-reflétant*, on the reflective level by the duality *réflexif-réfléchif*.

beginning prevents absolute self-coincidence (Sartre 1943, 116, 141, 144, 175-177, 182, 197, 245; 1948, 76).

Pure immanence

For Henry this entire approach is fundamentally mistaken. In his view, subjectivity is absolute in the sense of being irrelative, and completely self-sufficient in its radical interiority. It is immanent in the sense that it manifests itself without ever leaving itself, without producing or presupposing any kind of fracture or alterity. Thus, Henry insists that the original self-manifestation of subjectivity excludes all kinds of fracture, separation, alterity, difference, exteriority, and opposition (Henry 1990, 72; 1963, 279-280, 351, 352, 377). Nor does it entail any relation, for relationality has no place in radical immanence, an immanence so saturated with self-manifestation that it excludes the kind of lack which would necessarily accompany any kind of fracture or internal distance.

To claim that self-manifestation involves division, separation and opposition is according to Henry to fall victim to one basic misunderstanding. A misunderstanding that has dominated most of Western thought, and which Henry has dubbed the *ontological monism*. This is Henry's term for the assumption that there is only one type of manifestation, only one type of phenomenality. Thus it has been taken for granted, that to be given, to appear, was always to be given as an object. Needless to say, it is exactly this principle of ontological monism which has been behind the persisting attempts to interpret self-awareness in terms of reflection or introspection. The model of intentionality has been the paradigm; self-awareness has been understood as the result of an objectifying, intentional activity, and self-manifestation therefore as a special form of inner object-manifestation, characterized by horizontality, duality and transcendence (Henry 1963, 44, 279, 329, 352; 1966, 22-23).

I have already mentioned some of the reasons why Henry would claim that self-manifestation possesses a different structure than object-manifestation. However, his disclosure of absolute self-manifestation is by no means to be taken as a regressive deduction of a transcendental precondition, but as a phenomenological description of an actual and incontestable dimension in lived subjectivity. This is clear from what might be one of Henry's most central claims, namely that the self-manifestation of subjectivity is an *immediate, non-objectifying* and *passive* occurrence, and therefore best described as a *self-affection* (Henry

1963, 288-292, 301).

Self-affection is a given state, it is not something that one initiates or controls, but something that one cannot refuse, deny, or avoid. I am for myself, I am given to myself, but I am not the initiator of this donation. Self-affection is not a matter of self-spontaneity but of a fundamental and radical *passivity*. To phrase it differently, to be self-aware is to find oneself in a state that one cannot escape or surpass. It is to be *situated* (Henry 1963, 299-300, 422, 585; 1994, 305).

[T]he relationship to self of the ego in its original ontological passivity with regard to self, his unity with self as an absolute unity in a sphere of radical immanence, as unity with self of life, permits itself neither to be surmounted nor broken (Henry 1963, 854).

Henry conceives of this self-affection as a purely interior and self-sufficient occurrence involving no difference, distance or mediation between that which affects and that which is affected. It is immediate, both in the sense that the self-affection takes place without being mediated by the world, but also in the sense that it is neither temporally delayed nor retentionally mediated (Henry 1965, 139). It is, in short, an event which is strictly non-horizontal and non-ekstatic (Henry 1963, 576, 349). Insofar as the self-manifestation of subjectivity is distinguished by this unified self-adherence and self-coincidence, insofar as subjectivity reveals itself directly and immediately, without temporal delay, and without passing through the world, Henry characterizes it as an atemporal and acosmic immanence (Henry 1990, 166; 1966, 33; 1963, 858).

Affectivity reveals the absolute in its totality because it is nothing other than its perfect adherence to self, nothing other than its coincidence with self, because it is the auto-affection of Being in the absolute unity of its radical immanence. *In the absolute unity of its radical immanence, Being affects itself and experiences itself in such a way that there is nothing in it which does not affect it and which is not experienced by it, no content transcendent to the interior experience of self which constitutes this content* (Henry 1963, 858-859).

Henry is not the first to have accounted for self-manifestation in terms of self-affection. One finds related considerations in Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. In *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, for instance, Heidegger takes the essence of time to be pure self-affection (Heidegger 1991, 194). And as Heidegger then points out, this concept of self-affection does not merely designate a process in which something affects itself, but a process that involves a self. Not in the sense that self-affection is effectuated by an already existing self, but in the sense that it is the process in and through which selfhood and subjectivity is established (Heidegger 1991, 190). Thus, qua pure self-affection, time turns out to be the essence of subjectivity. But as Heidegger also says, “*Zeitlichkeit ist das ursprüngliche ‘Außer-sich’ an und für sich selbst*“ (Heidegger 1986a, 329). One can find a similar line of thought in Merleau-Ponty, who claims that it is the analysis of time which gives us access to the concrete structures of subjectivity, and which permits us to understand the nature of the subject’s self-affection (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 469). Consciousness is always affected by itself or given to itself and the word “consciousness” has no meaning independently of this self-affection (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 488), and ultimately, self-temporalization and self-affection are one and the same: “The explosion... of the present towards a future is the archetype of the *relationship of self to self*, and it traces out an interiority or ipseity” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 487).

Husserl, Derrida and Henry on retention

Henry strongly disagrees with this view. One way to bring out his disagreement is by contrasting his interpretation of Husserl’s analysis of inner time-consciousness with the interpretation offered by Derrida.

Husserl’s most profound investigation of self-manifestation can be found in his analysis of inner time-consciousness, in his analysis of the structure protention-primal impression-retention. But one of the questions that Husserl’s analysis has given rise to is the following: If the self-manifestation of consciousness presupposes the retention, if it takes place through a retentive modification, are we then only self-aware of that which has just passed? Is consciousness initially non-conscious and does it only gain self-awareness the moment it is retained? This line of thought has been defended quite explicitly by Derrida.

According to Derrida it would be impossible to understand the relation between

retention and primal impression, and to comprehend the perpetual retentional modification, if the primal impression were a simple and completely self-sufficient ground and source. The primal impression is always already furnished with a temporal density, and the retentional modification is not a subsequent addendum to, but an integrated part of the primal impression. Rather than being a simple, undivided unity, self-manifestation is consequently characterized by an original complexity, by a historical heritage. The present can only appear to itself as present due to the retentional modification. Presence is differentiation; it *is* only in its intertwining with absence (Derrida 1990, 120, 123, 127).

One then sees quickly that the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation (retention and protention). These nonperceptions are neither added to, nor do they *occasionally* accompany, the actually perceived now; they are essentially and indispensably involved in its possibility (Derrida 1967, 72).

To be more precise, due to the intimate relation between primal presentation and retention, self-presence must be conceived of as an originary *difference* or *interlacing* between now and not-now. Consciousness is never given in a full and instantaneous self-presence, but presents itself to itself across the difference between now and not-now. Experiential givenness is possible thanks to the retentional trace; it emerges on the background of a non-identity and is haunted by the irreducible *alterity* of the past (Derrida 1990, 127-128, 168, 240). For this reason it is necessary to ascribe a transcendental or constitutive significance to a non-presence in self-awareness (Derrida 1990, 166; 1967, 5).

As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception and nonperception, in the zone of primordially common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*; nonpresence and nonevidence are admitted into the *blink of the instant*. There is a duration to the blink, and it closes the eye. This alterity is in fact the condition for presence [...] (Derrida 1967, 73).

Dans l'identité absolue du sujet avec lui-même la dialectique temporelle constitue *a priori* l'altérité. Le sujet s'apparaît originairement comme tension du Même et de l'Autre. Le thème d'une intersubjectivité transcendente instaurant la transcendance au cœur de l'immanence absolue de l'ego est déjà appelé. Le dernier fondement de l'objectivité de la conscience intentionnelle n'est pas l'intimité du 'Je' à soi-même mais le Temps ou l'Autre, ces deux formes d'une existence irréductible à une essence, étrangère au sujet théorique, toujours constituées avant lui, mais en même temps seules conditions de possibilité d'une constitution de soi et d'une apparition de soi à soi (Derrida 1990, 126-127).

These reflections do not merely illustrate the complexity of the task of understanding the temporal articulation of self-awareness, they also have the rather disturbing implication that consciousness appears to itself, not as it is, but as it has just been. To put it differently, there appears to be a blind spot in the core of subjectivity, i.e., the field of presencing is centred on a fundamental absence: initially consciousness is non-conscious and it gains self-awareness *nachträglich* through retentional modification.

Whereas Derrida argues that Husserl failed to draw the full implications of his discovery of the retentional modification, we find the exact opposite criticism in Henry, namely, that Husserl assigned a far too great significance to the work of the retention.

Whereas post-Husserlian phenomenology has generally tried to rectify what was believed to be an imbalance in Husserl's account of the relation between immanence and transcendence, namely his disregard of *exteriority*, Henry accuses Husserl of never having managed to disclose the true *interiority* of subjectivity in a sufficiently radical and pure manner. Thus, according to Henry, the basic problem in Husserl's phenomenology is not that it somehow remained unable to free itself from immanence, but on the contrary, that it kept introducing transcendent elements into its analysis of this immanence. As Henry even puts it, it is downright absurd to accuse Husserl of having advocated a philosophy of pure presence, since Husserl never managed to conceive of a presence liberated from horizontality (Henry 1989, 50).

Henry takes consciousness to be through and through impressional, not in the sense that it is always affected by impressions, but in the sense that its very being is constituted by its impressionality, that is, by its pure and immediate self-affection (Henry 1990, 33-34). Husserl

advocated a similar position. He also operated with the notion of an *impressional* self-manifestation, and claimed that our experiences are impressions in the sense that we are conscious of them as impressed (Husserl 1966a, 89, 110-111, 119; 1966b, 337; 1973, 25). But although Husserl did realize that impressionality is the basic mode of self-manifestation, Henry accuses him of taking this impressionality to be a type of manifestation which is constituted in the temporal flow (Henry 1990, 32). That is, instead of conceiving of impressionality as a truly immanent, non-horizontal, and non-ekstatic self-manifestation, Husserl treated it as a givenness in inner time-consciousness, that is, as a givenness which is intrinsically caught up in the ekstatic-centered structure of primal impression-retention-protention. According to Henry, however, this conception is ruinous to a correct understanding of impressionality. It implies that the primary self-manifestation is retentionally mediated, and it consequently furnishes impressionality with a rupture and an exteriority which is completely foreign to its nature:

Dès ce moment, en effet, la donation extatique de l'impression dans la conscience interne du temps a remplacé son auto-donation dans l'impressionalité et la question de l'impression est perdue de vue (Henry 1990, 49-50).

Against this background it is hardly surprising that Henry also objects strongly to Derrida's interpretation of the relation between primal impression and retention. To claim that the self-manifestation of the first is due to the intervention of the latter, and that subjectivity only gains self-presence in temporal adumbrations is in Henry's eyes tantamount to a complete nihilation of subjectivity. Henry certainly acknowledges that the retentional modification is an ekstatic happening in inner time-consciousness, but in contrast to Husserl, he does not take inner time-consciousness to be the original self-manifestation of subjectivity; instead, he conceived of it as the primary self-objectification (Henry 1990, 107). In reality, the intentionality of the retention presupposes the impressional self-manifestation, and the principal question pertaining to the self-constitution of subjectivity consequently concerns this impressionality. Thus, Henry can reproach classical phenomenology for having been so pre-occupied with the analysis of the self-objectification of transcendental life that it overlooked the truly fundamental level of self-manifestation (Henry 1990, 130).

According to Henry, the dimension of primary self-manifestation is non-ekstatic, non-

temporal, and non-horizontal (Henry 1963, 349, 576). It is non-horizontal insofar as the manifestation does not presuppose or entail a reference to anything transcendent or absent. It is non-ekstatic in the sense that the living ego never appears to itself across a recollection or oblivion, and it is immediate in the strict sense of being neither mediated nor delayed. We are ultimately dealing with a *self-affection* characterized by its complete unified self-adherence and self-coincidence (Henry 1963, 858), and this unity is neither constituted (by anything else) nor is it extended in protentions and retentions (Henry 1965, 139). Thus, in pointed contrast to for instance Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Henry does not conceive of self-affection as a temporal self-positing, but as something taking place prior to the self-temporalization. In fact, absolute subjectivity is not a stream of ever changing impressions, and neither is it characterized by a self-manifestation which keeps disappearing and reappearing due to the fluid nature of the streaming. On the contrary, there is always one and the same Living Present without distance or difference:

Mais ce qui ne change jamais, ce qui ne se rompt jamais, c'est ce qui fait d'elle une impression, c'est en elle l'essence de la vie. Ainsi la vie est-elle variable, comme l'Euripe, de telle façon cependant qu'au travers de ses variations elle ne cesse d'être la Vie, et cela en un sens absolu: c'est la même Vie, la même épreuve de soi qui ne cesse de s'éprouver soi-même, d'être la même absolument, un seul et même Soi (Henry 1990, 54).

To complicate matters somewhat, in some of his last writings Henry deviated from his firm declaration that the self-manifestation of subjectivity is completely non-temporal. As he admits, the very notion of self-affection is not a static but a dynamic notion. Self-affection understood as the process of affecting and being affected is not the rigid self-identity of an object, but a subjective *movement* and this movement can best be described as the self-temporalization of subjectivity. But, as he then adds, we are still dealing with a unique form of temporalization, which is absolutely immanent, non-ekstatic and non-horizontal (Henry 1994, 303-304, 310; 1996, 201-202). We are dealing with an affective temporality, and even though it seems to involve a perpetual movement and change, nothing is changed. The living ego does not have a past, a future, or a present. It is always the same self affecting itself. Or, more precisely, the self is nothing but the unchanging movement of affective self-

manifestation (Henry 1994, 311).²

A phenomenology of the invisible

As we have seen, Henry takes subjectivity to be absolute in the sense of being completely self-sufficient in its radical interiority. It is immanent in the sense that it manifests itself to itself without ever leaving itself, without transcending itself, without producing or presupposing any kind of fracture or alterity. Thus, Henry insists that the originary self-manifestation of subjectivity excludes all kinds of fracture, separation, alterity, difference, exteriority, and opposition (Henry 1990, 72; 1963, 279-280, 351, 352, 377, 419), and as he adds

A la structure intérieure de cette manifestation originelle n'appartient aucun Dehors, aucun Ecart, aucune Ek-stase: sa substantialité phénoménologique n'est pas la visibilité, aucune des catégories dont use la philosophie, depuis la Grèce en tout cas, ne lui convient (Henry 1990, 7).

² Although both Derrida and Henry ended up criticizing Husserl's theory of inner time-consciousness, they both remained deeply influenced by his account. To a certain extent, both of them succeeded in articulating elements central to Husserl's position more clearly than Husserl himself. At the same time, however, both also seemed to end up defending too radical positions themselves. The question is whether Husserl's own account might not provide us with a sound position that avoids the opposing excesses of both Henry and Derrida. Derrida's argumentation contains a puzzling tension. On one hand, Derrida wants to stress the intimate connection and continuity between the primal presentation and the retention. It is a falsifying abstraction to speak of them in isolation and separation. On the other hand, however, he also wants to describe the retention as being different from and foreign to the primal presentation. Only this allows him to speak of impressional consciousness as being mediated and constituted by the *alterity* of the retention. When it comes to Henry, I do not think that the difference between his view and Husserl's is quite as marked as Henry himself seemed to believe. Husserl would certainly accept that the impressional self-manifestation is immediate in the sense of being neither mediated nor delayed (Husserl 1966a, 111). He would probably also accept Henry's description of the abiding and unchanging character of the absolute dimension of experiencing. The remaining and decisive question is then whether this living field of manifestation has an ekstastic articulation or not. Husserl claimed that it does, and he insisted – rightly I believe – that it would be impossible to account for the possibility of reflection and recollection if it did not. But after Henry acknowledged the dynamic and even temporal nature of self-affection, the disagreement has dwindled considerably. To repeat, for Husserl, the original self-manifestation of subjectivity has an internal differentiation and articulation. Husserl insisted that only this fact can explain the possibility of temporal self-awareness, of reflection and recollection, yet to speak of it as being mediated or delayed is to remain determined by a conception that sees primal presentation and retention as two different and separate elements. For Husserl, consciousness is the generation of a field of lived presence. The concrete and full structure of this field of presence is protention-primal presentation-retention. There is no possible consciousness which does not entail retentional and protentional horizons (Husserl 1966b, 317, 337-338, 378). Consciousness is “immediately” given as a unity of presencing (primal presentation) and absencing (retention-protention) and is not a gradual, delayed or mediated process of self-unfolding. This seems to be what is required if one is to avoid the Scylla of an instantaneous non-temporal self-awareness and the Charybdis of a completely fractured time-consciousness that makes the consciousness of the present and the unity of the stream unintelligible.

Ultimately, it must be realized that one cannot approach absolute subjectivity as if it were merely yet another object. For Henry, absolute subjectivity does not reveal itself in the world. It is impossible to grasp this unique form of immediate and non-ekstatic manifestation through any categories pertaining to worldly appearance, and it will consequently remain concealed for a type of thinking which adheres to the principle of ontological monism, and which only conceives of manifestation in terms of horizon, transcendence and ekstasis (Henry 1963, 477). The manifestation of subjectivity is not only utterly different from the visibility of worldly objects, it is also characterized by a certain elusiveness, not in the sense that it does not manifest itself, but in the sense that there will always remain something which eludes reflective thematization (Henry 1963, 480-482; 1990, 125, 164). Since absolute subjectivity cannot appear in the visibility of worldly exteriority, since it evades every gaze, it is called obscure and invisible, and Henry is consequently led to the radical conclusion that the unique manifestation of absolute subjectivity must be characterized as an *invisible revelation* (Henry 1963, 53, 480-482, 490, 549; 1990, 125, 164).

The foundation is not something obscure, neither is it light which becomes perceivable only when it shines upon the thing which bathes in its light, nor is it the thing itself as a “transcendent phenomenon”, but it is an *immanent* revelation which is a presence to itself, even though such a presence remains “invisible” (Henry 1963, 53).

One might perhaps criticize Henry for making use of an unnecessarily paradoxical terminology, but his point is quite clear. The fundamental invisibility of absolute subjectivity should not be interpreted as a mode of non-manifestation. It is invisible, it does not reveal itself in the light of the world, but it is not unconscious, nor the negation of all phenomenality, but rather the primary and most fundamental kind of manifestation (Henry 1963, 53, 57, 550, 555). Since Henry’s entire oeuvre is devoted to a study of exactly this kind of manifestation, it can best be described as an ambitious attempt to develop a *phenomenology of the invisible*.

Though Henry might have been more explicit about this than many of the other phenomenologists, he is, however, certainly not the first to make this move towards the invisible.

If we for instance look at *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger famously wrote that the specific

task of phenomenology is to disclose that which “zunächst und zumeist” remains hidden from view, namely Being. It is exactly because there are phenomena which do not reveal themselves immediately that we are in need of a phenomenology (Heidegger 1986a, 35). Much later, in a conference from 1973, Heidegger explicitly speaks of a “phenomenology of the inapparent (*Unscheinbaren*)” (Heidegger 1986b, 399). In *L’être et le néant* Sartre writes that the lived body is *invisibly* present in every action, exactly because it is lived and not known (Sartre 1943, 372); and I hardly need to mention the title of Merleau-Ponty’s last book: *Le visible et l’invisible*. If one finally takes a look at the two phenomenologists that in certain respects might be called Henry’s absolute antipodes, Derrida and Levinas, one can also find similar ideas. According to Derrida, the ultimate condition of manifestation is not intuitively graspable. It cannot become the object of a reflection, it does not offer itself to vision, but remains forever the nocturnal source of light itself (Derrida 1972, 297; 1989, 137). As for Lévinas, he famously argued that the Other cannot appear for me as a theme without losing its radical alterity. I cannot presentify it without compromising its Otherness. When I perceive objects, I am their condition of manifestation, and they consequently appear as my creations. In contrast, my encounter with the Other is not conditioned by anything in my power, but can only offer itself from without, as an epiphanic visitation: “*The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation*” (Lévinas 1961, 61). For Lévinas, to encounter the Other is to be affected in radical passivity by something “invisible” in the sense that it cannot be represented, objectified, thematized (Lévinas 1949, 194, 206, 214; 1961, 209; 1982, 183). Henry describes the absolute passivity of self-affection in very similar terms. And whereas Henry emphasizes the absolute difference between any worldly, horizontal object-manifestation, and the non-horizontal, immediate character of self-manifestation, Lévinas says the same of the Other; it offers itself immediately, i.e., independently of all systems, contexts, and horizons (Lévinas 1961, 72). Although the radical immanence of the self and the radical transcendence of the Other cannot be thematized, this does not testify to their insignificance, nor does it represent a deficiency that must be remedied. It is due to the fact that functioning subjectivity and radical alterity both belong to a totally different ontological dimension than the one dominated by vision (Lévinas 1974, 158). To phrase it differently (and here it is of course Henry who is speaking), it is not because the Other is an Other, but because it is a self that I cannot perceive it directly. It is because transcendental life is characterized by its absolute immanence that intentionality can never grasp it. And this

concerns my own ego as well as the ego of the Other (Henry 1990, 151-152).

Conclusion

The presentation so far could easily give the impression that Henry conceives of self-manifestation in a way that excludes every mediation, complexity and alterity. To a certain extent this is true, but it is nevertheless possible to unearth certain passages which challenges or perhaps rather modifies the previous interpretation.

First of all, Henry acknowledges that absolute subjectivity does transcend itself towards the world. To put it differently, Henry does acknowledge that an analysis of subjectivity confronts us with an ontological *dualism*: in every experience something is given to absolute subjectivity which is different from subjectivity itself. It is the Other, the non-ego, which appears: “Certainly, subjectivity is always a life in the presence of a transcendent being” (Henry 1965, 259).

When taking Henry’s occupation with pure immanence into account it might be natural to conclude that reflections concerning the bodily nature of subjectivity would be foreign to him. But this would be a mistake. In fact, Henry clearly belongs among the French thinkers of the body. However, Henry insists that a phenomenological clarification of the ontological status of the body must take its point of departure in our original non-objectifying body-consciousness (Henry 1965, 79). When I am conscious of my bodily movements and sensibility, then I am conscious of it by virtue of the body itself; more precisely, by virtue of the very self-affection of bodily life, and not because the body has become my intentional object. According to Henry the body is originally given immediately, non-horizontally, and non-ekstatically, and he consequently characterizes it as a *radical interiority* (Henry 1966, 29).

Finally, Henry is even prepared to ascribe a certain complexity and diversity to the life of the ego:

When we speak of the unity of the absolute life of the ego, we in no way wish to say that this life is monotonous; actually it is infinitely diverse, the ego is not a pure logical subject enclosed within its tautology; it is the very being of infinite life, which nevertheless remains one in this diversity [...] (Henry 1965, 127).

As we have already seen, Henry does not conceive of self-affection as an ekstastic temporal self-positing, but eventually he did concede that the very notion of self-affection is a dynamic and by no means a static notion. Self-affection is not the rigid self-identity of an object, but a subjective movement or process of affecting and being affected; a movement Henry even describes in terms of a self-*temporalization*.

Are these precisions – or perhaps rather modifications – sufficient? Henry is undoubtedly the phenomenological thinker who has been most attentive to the problem of self-manifestation. His demonstration of its phenomenological significance is distinguished by its conceptual clarity. Furthermore, Henry delivers a quite interesting counter-attack against the customary critics of subject-philosophy. Whereas it has often been claimed that subject-philosophy is merely the reverse side of an object-fixated philosophy, Henry would claim that it is the critics of subject-philosophy that have never escaped the ontological monism, and who have never realized that there is a genuine alternative to object-manifestation.

At the same time, it must also be admitted, however, that Henry's intense preoccupation with this topic makes him vulnerable to criticism. Henry operates with the notion of an absolutely self-sufficient, non-ekstastic, irrelational self-manifestation, but he never presents us with a convincing explanation of how a subjectivity essentially characterized by such a complete self-presence can simultaneously be in possession of an inner temporal articulation; how it can simultaneously be directed intentionally toward something different from itself; how it can be capable of recognizing other subjects (being acquainted with subjectivity as it is through a completely unique self-presence); how it can be in possession of a bodily exteriority; and finally how it can give rise to the self-division found in reflection. Self-presence (properly understood) is definitely an important feature of our subjectivity, but so is temporality, intentionality, reflexivity, corporeality and intersubjectivity, and an analysis of self-manifestation which does not leave room for these aspects is hardly satisfactory. To put it differently and very concisely (I have addressed the question in more detail elsewhere) I would argue that Henry's approach is problematic and insufficient because it conceives of self-manifestation *in abstracto*, rather than accounting for the self-manifestation of the *self-transcending* temporal, intentional, reflexive, corporeal and intersubjective experiences. This prevents Henry from clarifying the relation and

interdependency between the self-presence and the self-transcendence of subjectivity, and I believe this must be the task (Zahavi 1999). As Merleau-Ponty has once formulated it:

[T]he question is always [...] *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Entgegenwärtigung) and throws me outside myself* (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 417).

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