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**In the Mirror of Hegelianism.
Michel Henry's "Religious" Phenomenology**

English Translation by Katharine Kanter

PREPRINT
Open access version

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This paper was prepared under a grant (USIAS Grant 2019/20) from the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Studies, supported by EURIAS Fellowship Programme and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (7th Framework Programme, European Commission: FP7-PEOPLE), and coordinated by the RFIEA Foundation (Network of French Institutes for Advanced Study). Grant agreement n. 609400.

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In the Mirror of Hegelianism.

Michel Henry's "Religious" Phenomenology

Roberto Formisano

1. Introduction

The present study should be read within the framework of a research hypothesis that considers contemporary French phenomenology's debt to German idealism. It concerns more especially the early stages of Michel Henry's phenomenology, in the years prior to his publishing *L'essence de la manifestation* (1963) that deals with 20th Century Hegelianism.¹

Rather than purporting to effect a superficial, or perhaps artificial, rapprochement between the two philosophical systems, we shall point to a deeper connection between Michel Henry's phenomenology and contemporary French Hegelianism. Thus, in the first section, our study will sketch out the genesis of Henry's thought within its hermeneutic context. Interpreters have indeed tended to pay but scant attention to the context, rooted as it was in a moment decisive to the history of French philosophy. In fact, since 1930-1940, the rediscovery of German idealistic philosophy—notably Hegel and his so-called "early theological writings" (Hegel 1907)—fed into and accompanied the initial French reception of Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology (see Wahl 1946; Descombes 1979; Jarkzyk & Labarrière 1996). Given its primary exigency—namely, to shake off the abstractions of 19th Century academic and metaphysical tradition—, by merging as it were the horizons of debate (the *Hegel-Renaissance*,² contemporary phenomenology, philosophies of existence, discovery of Marx' early writings, neo-Kantianism, etc.), French philosophy found a path to the conceptual means that would underpin its programme of "reverting to the concreteness"³ of experience.⁴

It was in response to such theoretical demands and promptings that Michel Henry's philosophy emerged; discovery of Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology occurred in the wake of Hegelianism, phenomenology, and the existentialism of that day, *depending* upon the way these had framed and formulated the major questions pertaining to the phenomenon of Being and its

¹ This project was first launched in 2013. A post-doctoral Marie-Curie grant (European Commission) then enabled me to consult the *Michel Henry* Archives at Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium. I should like to express my thanks to the Archives' director, Professor Jean Leclercq (Université catholique de Louvain), for having introduced me to the study of Henry's manuscripts. Analysis of that unpublished work opened up a field of research, later consolidated in view of collaborations at McGill University (Montreal) and University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study (USIAS). This afforded an extraordinarily stimulating environment for in-depth study, whilst benefiting from the cordial expertise of Professors Garth W. Green (McGill University) and Jacob Rogozinski (Université de Strasbourg). To them I dedicate this study in respect and gratitude.

² See Salvadori 1974; Baugh 1993; Mudimbe & Bohm 1994.

³ "*Vers le concret*" is the programmatic title of a text by Jean Wahl, published in France in the early 1930s: see Wahl 1932.

⁴ In this regard, cf. also the judgements of Merleau-Ponty 1948, p. 158, 164 and Hyppolite 1971, vol. I, p. 233.

relation to “the Experience of Consciousness” (“*die Erfahrung des Bewußtseins*,” as Hegel describes it in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*).

Our own interpretation purports to shew that in reacting to the Hegelianism/existentialism/contemporary phenomenology hybridisation, the young Michel Henry both took on and in his own way, inherited, the categories and overall framework of his philosophy’s founding issues (*problématique*) in *L’essence de la manifestation*. Our intention is not to downplay the crucial, indeed decisive role of mediation played by Maine de Biran’s philosophy⁵ when Henry came to elaborate his phenomenology of subjectivity. It is, rather, to underline the fact that Michel Henry overturned Hegelianism will lay a basis for pointing to the knots or rather tensions, that crop up as Henry conceptualises phenomenology and its “religious” character. That analysis will—at the very least—serve to *open up* a question critical to *our* research, one that has to do with determining the meaning proper to phenomenological knowledge and its status.

2. The Background

As the 1946-1947 academic term opened, young Michel Henry filed with the Paris CNRS the initial version of a research project. Though a mere sketch at the time,⁶ its final version—seventeen years later, and further to much review and redrafting along with changes both to titles and structure—would form the kernel of his *thèse d’État*. First published in two volumes in 1963, defended in 1964, that work is the cornerstone of his “phenomenology of life:” *L’essence de la manifestation* (Henry 1963).

His main dissertation, intitled *Éléments pour une esthétique religieuse* (Elements for a religious Aesthetics), was directed by Jean Wahl (*Dossier CNRS*, p. 303), amongst the most eminent of Kierkegaard’s French interpreters. For Henry to select Jean Wahl as Research Director suggests a significant connection between the problem of “religious aesthetics,” i.e., experience peculiar to religious consciousness (which in essence, is made up of transcendence, rupture, and paradox), and the manner in which Kierkegaard’s philosophy was received in the general framework of his *reaction against Hegel’s system*. And indeed, a significant body of manuscript notes from that period (see Henry Archive, Ms. A 2033-6434) confirms that Henry’s *critique of Hegelianism* was central to the way he would define and construct his project and seek his own identity.

For Jean Wahl, that connection constituted a major pole of his labour in reinterpreting Hegel’s phenomenology. Wahl’s volume on the figure of “unhappy consciousness” in Hegel’s philosophy (Wahl 1929) points to tensions and perplexities in the young Hegel, which can be said to anticipate Kierkegaard’s critique of the philosopher of *Wissenschaft der Logik* or the *Enzyklopädie*, i.e., the mature Hegel (see also Wahl 1938). Jean Wahl sees Hegel,⁷ not as the

⁵ Henry devotes his study *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (Henry 1965 [1975]) to Maine de Biran. In the notice to the second edition (1987, V), he states: “At the time, I was intent upon establishing the concrete nature of subjectivity, opposing it to idealism.”

⁶ This was a research file, which Michel Henry began to write up by hand in 1946. At Paris on a CNRS Grant, he was preparing his *Doctorat-ès-Lettres*. Transcribed, the file was published in Leclercq & Perrin 2017, pp. 299–356 (now: *Dossier CNRS*).

⁷ Drawing on Hegel’s texts from the Bern and Frankfurt periods (Hegel 1907).

atheist who broke a path to Feuerbach and Marx, but rather as one who had “translated” Christianity’s main subjects into the language of modern philosophy. The young Hegel’s “Death of God” does not lead to identifying Spirit with the sphere of human *praxis*, but rather expresses, through the Resurrection, “Christianisation of the world”, i.e., appropriation of the latter in the light of the tension which, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, religious consciousness incarnates vis à vis of a transcendent being. That conscience be “unhappy”, i.e., through experiencing “appropriation” of its mortal condition, is from Wahl’s standpoint key not only to reinterpreting phenomenology and “vivifying” Hegel’s thought by bringing it forward into our own time, but to deploying it as a basis for understanding other philosophical programmes which call for a “return to concreteness.” From the 1930s onwards the decisive reference would be the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger.

All these issues would seem to be raised in Michel Henry’s bibliography attached to his grant application for 1947; it sums up the constellation of theoretical references surrounding this initial research stage (see *Dossier CNRS*, pp. 309–10). Besides Wahl, one finds amongst Michel Henry’s supervisors, importantly, Martial Guérault and (from 1949/50) Jean Hyppolite along with their “opposite numbers” as it were, namely Alexandre Kojève and Jean-Paul Sartre for whom Hegelianism was *atheistic*.

In contradicting Wahl’s interpretation, Kojève deems religion in Hegel’s thought, to be but a “moment” if a necessary one, in the process of achieving Hegel’s philosophy of Spirit, the definitive form of which very specifically entails *radically negating all religious forms*. Like Wahl, Kojève is bold enough to view Hegel as an “existentialist” *ante-litteram*—despite Kojève having first taken that from his perusal of Heidegger, rather than of Kierkegaard. The “unhappiness” of consciousness, the anxiety permeating existence, is but a “moment,” whose original meaning will be found in the work of *negativity*.

Now, one must acknowledge that Kojève’s reading of Hegel—a creative rather than a philological one—would markedly influence later French philosophy (see Canguilhem 1948, pp. 282–97), to the degree that “at least in France, one could no longer get at Hegel without first making the detour round Kojève” (Vouillero 2017, p. 91). One finds the imprint of that very mediation in the initial reception of Heidegger’s phenomenology. A significant illustration thereof is Sartre’s *L’Être et le Néant* (Sartre 1943) which Michel Henry acknowledges having studied in 1947. Sartre’s thought returns to the Hegelian theme of the “In-and-For-Itself” (*an-sich-und-für-sich* [*en-soi-et-pour-soi*]), to be elaborated afresh in Kojève’s concept of “Nothingness which nihilates (*Néant qui néantit*)” (Kojève 1947, p. 574).

That being said, for Kojève, and insofar as the “human reality” is concerned— i.e., *Dasein*, to follow the first French translation of a notion critical to Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology—negativity in essence is, and is achieved, in and by *work*: Man is but negating Act; his acting, exercised at the outset on the immediate data of consciousness, will transform and thus preserve it while lending it fresh form. In that sense, negation is a creative act. Its true meaning is that of dialectics, which Kojève declines to apply to nature, restricting it solely to the *free* life of the *Geist*.

That connection between negativity and freedom⁸ is discovered through the Unhappy Consciousness, which thinks Man onwards from the day of creation. In Judeo-Christian tradition, expressed in the figure of Unhappy Consciousness, Man was created in a state of perfection. After the Fall and in a state of sin, that lost perfection may be recovered, *though in another form*. Man must become *other*. Accordingly, he is *free*—in order that he *may* transform himself, improve his very essence, live for striving towards an ideal. But for Man, to be free means to be *mortal*. Unlike the beasts, whose life simply ends, the death of a Man is a dialectical sublation. *Knowing* he must die, Man can thus transcend his own death, think on it and rise above it, by means of thought: through *knowledge*, wherein the rising above one's own death will be completed. The truth that follows on—negating the finiteness that makes of Man what he is, negating his mortality—is the mirror in and through which the Absolute *acquires a vision* of itself, a self-awareness: it represents itself, makes of itself the subject of a representation, and thereby *acquires knowledge of itself*, albeit in a form that cannot be otherwise but objectified. In reflecting upon itself and thus becoming *other*, in human knowledge, the Absolute denies itself whilst remaining identical to itself. Phenomenology—as a description of the modes of human existence (see Kojève 1947, p. 39 ff.)—is thus a Discourse on Being, on its *concrete* modes of manifestation that refer to how Man understands the Real.

In his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Kojève writes:

Taken singly, Subject and Object are abstractions lacking both “objective-reality” (*Wirklichkeit*), and “empirical-existence” (*Dasein*). What exists in reality—once the issue is the Reality-of-which-we-speak; and since we do in fact speak of reality, for us the only question is that Reality-of-which-we-speak; what, I must insist, does exist in reality, is the Subject-knowing-the-Object, or, which is the same thing, the-Object-known-by-the-Subject (Kojève 1947, p. 451).

As Kojève saw it, there is nothing in phenomenological discourse foreign to the truth of the “real,” nothing separate from its formation and unfolding through history. Discourse *belongs* to the reality of the truly real (i.e., the phenomenon): *only to the extent that it can be described*, is there reality. *It is through and via the mediation of* description that Reality, as a phenomenon, *actually attains* its truth, the horizon being Time and History. Discourse negates the substance's immediate identity; its negating action drives the phenomenon's becoming, where the Being's entire unity finds its way back to itself (i.e., the Being as a totality taken *in the Discourse*, as its discursive subject); reconstituting that unity is *that in which the being proves to be revealed to itself, mediated by Discourse*. From this, it flows that Discourse belongs to the appearing of Being; it is *by the mediation of the Discourse* that the Being must be enabled to achieve its manifestation, by making itself *other than itself* on a world horizon limited in time, via *anthropogenesis* that acts upon History *and by appropriating its* “historical forms” within a dialectical process in respect of which philosophy—unveiled as the self-awareness of the Being's self-consciousness—represents the ultimate moment.

⁸ In 1950, Henry stated that he would devote “the sixth and final section” of his thesis (*Dossier CNRS*, p. 330) to the issue of freedom, not dealt with in *L'essence de la manifestation*, despite a reference to it, late in the *introduction*: Henry writes in a footnote that “the analyses to which allusion has just been made [...] could not be included in this work; they will be the object of subsequent endeavors” (Henry 1963, p. 58 [p. 47]). To date, that research has never been published.

3. Michel Henry's anti-Hegelianism

As his first year of research drew to a close, Henry altered the title of his main project to “Negativity and Transcendence.” Accordingly, religion, which he had at first intended to place at the heart of his thesis, would be subsumed within a vaster issue pertaining to “the experience of consciousness,” i.e., its movement of “dialectical sublation” (*Aufhebung*). In a memorandum preparatory to *L'essence de la manifestation*, which deals with Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s dialectics (see Kojève 1947, 527–8), Michel Henry writes,

Ko[jève] 527. *Truth* = “revelation” (= *description*) (→ probl[em:] ph[ilosophy] and revelation) of the Being and the Real through Discourse.

528 [illegible word] *True* = Being-revealed-by-the-discourse-of-its-Reality

→ Philosophy asserts that it describes not only the being, but the revealed Being, and that it explains the fact of Being’s revelation by Discourse.

Philosophy—the totality of that which is: $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Being} = \text{Substance} \text{ — Philosophy of Nature} \\ + \\ \text{Discourse} = \text{Subject} \text{ — Anthropology} \end{array} \right.$

The philosopher asserts that he speaks not only of the given-Being, but of himself speaking of the Being, as well → discover of the category of negativity and the dialectic.

*Discourse is integrated into the totality of the Being, i.e., a monism.*⁹

These few lines draw our attention to the fact that Michel Henry has not made use of Kojève’s “atheist” Hegelianism because he approves of it. It is rather *on account of his radical, conscious opposition* to the notion of a constitutive unity between the phenomenality of the Being and the Discourse (accompanied by a concern for “atheist” development of philosophy) that Michel Henry reads Kojève’s texts: the reason behind his gaining acquaintance with this theory and these discursive categories is that he seeks to master their foundations “*the better to destroy them.*”¹⁰ Michel Henry’s research path thus entails forming a concept of the founding principle

⁹ Henry Archive, Ms. A 2048 (emphasis in original): “Ko[jève] 527. *Vérité* = “révélation” (= *description*) (→ probl[ème:] ph[ilosophie] et révélation) correcte et complète de l’Être et du Réel par le Discours.

528 [mot illisible] *Vrai* = Être-révéle-par-le-discours-de-sa-réalité. → Philosophie dit décrire non seulement l’être mais encore l’Être révélé, et rendre compte du fait de la révélation de l’Être par le Discours.

Philosophie – totalité de ce qui est $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Être} = \text{Substance} \text{ — Philosophie de la nature} \\ + \\ \text{Discours} = \text{Sujet} \text{ — Anthropologie} \end{array} \right.$

Le philosophe ne dit pas seulement parler de l’Être-donné mais de lui-même qui parle de l’être → découverte de la catégorie de négativité et de la dialectique.

Le Discours est intégré à la totalité de l’Être, i.e. un monisme.”

¹⁰ “Destroying” Kojève’s discourse means neither simply its “refutation” nor its “annihilation.” Henry thinks of “destruction” rather along the lines of *Destruktion* as announced by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger 1927, § 6): “The task of Destroying the history of ontology (*Die Aufgabe einer Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie*).” Referring neither to criticism of an error, nor to mere exclusion that negates an earlier philosophical interpretation, the word “destruction,” taken in its rigorously phenomenological sense, here means de-structuring or “the shake-up (*ébranlement*) needed to reveal the structures, strata, system of the deposits” (Derrida 2013, 34) covering the essence. While for Heidegger, destruction refers to a form of negativity, safeguarding and defending through conflict the life, the truth of the essence by the tension of its

upon which rest the ultimate condition of possibility of Hegelianism, existentialism, and more generally contemporary phenomenology.

In Kojève's writings, Michel Henry comes across that same principle in the *integration* that an existentialist interpretation of the dialectic assumes to exist, between the phenomenality of the Being and its revelation by phenomenological discourse. Such integration, which involves inserting the transcendental link acknowledged by phenomenology between the appearing of Being and the structuring of the existence of "human reality" (*Dasein*), characterises the fundamental, preliminary assumption underpinning the "conversion" of the *Nichtigkeit* of finite consciousness and its experience—as essential determination of human existence—into a mode that constitutes the phenomenalisation of the Being as such. Integrating the modes of ontological understandings peculiar to existence within the truth of the Being is what Michel Henry refers to in his notes as "monism": the reduction of the two different modes of givenness to a single and identical mode of phenomenalisation understood in the light of the work of negativity; as a mode of structuring the "horizontal transcendence" which makes up the experience of consciousness through and within which the appearing of Being takes place. Subsumed within the original process of phenomenalisation of the Being, the transcendence of consciousness thereby manifests its ontological constitution: it does so by *discursive appropriation of its own structure*. The phenomenological *discourse* through which enabling consciousness to liberate its own essence thus becomes the locus for further freedom—that of the Being revealed to itself *in and by Philosophy*.

A feature essential to contemporary Hegelianism and existentialism is of course dismissing the illusion of Hegelian absolute knowledge (see Hyppolite 1946, p. 197 ff., and Hyppolite 1968, p. 51 ff.): the coming realisation of ultimate "dialectical sublation" or the revelation of the being to itself culminates as a function of the revelation to the self of negativity (human self-consciousness), achieved through Discourse in philosophical knowledge, where human Word becomes the Word of the Being and where both identify themselves, by negating their pre-existing difference. That said, the idea of a *structural link* between the Being and human reality (*Dasein*) is what Hegel's philosophical heirs have retained of his phenomenology: for the Being to appear, it must differentiate itself from itself, manifest itself outwith the self; it must come out of itself (*an sich*) and become *other* than itself (*für sich*), make of itself an object as it were, on the transcendental horizon of all "vision"—*i.e.*, *understanding*—of the self. The horizon is that of existence, the *Dasein* which too is open to understanding its own being, in accordance with the modes peculiar to the *In-der-Welt-sein*. Hence the notion of *Zusammengehörigkeit* will be maintained, whereby the *Dasein*'s jointly belonging is critical within the truth of Being.

In detailed and systematic fashion, the first section of *L'essence de la manifestation* reconstructs that "monist" (Kojève 1947, pp. 485–6) notion of the Being; its typical thesis considers the phenomenality of the Being *homogeneous* with existence's *ontological* structure. In a "monist" perspective, the "homogeneity of Being" (Henry 1963, p. 45 [p. 36]) establishes the *insertion*

workings (in the sense that the truth of essence resides in such conflicting interpretations), with Henry destruction takes on another, a further meaning. It is the discovery of an essence that, while constituting the ultimate foundation of all thought of the Being and from which it cannot be severed, lives "beyond" and independently of that opening. Henry's destruction (attained in the first part of *L'essence de la manifestation*) is the discovery of the "autonomy" of essence. See *infra*, § 4.

of the ontological structure of Dasein (and of its modes of existence and understanding) within the appearing of Being: ontological knowledge, despite its being stubbornly different in respect of absolute knowledge, is nevertheless constitutively integrated into the original process in and through which the Being appears as itself, in other words, as knowing-itself-to-be-itself, of which phenomenological Discourse is in some way its achievement.

4. Sources of the “religious” attitude of the phenomenology of life

To Henry, the subject of “liberation” is not human reality, but the essence. *Opposing* the monist notion of integrating the Being and existence, Michel Henry’s phenomenology asserts the *Selbständigkeit* of the original essence, i.e., the “autonomy” of the absolute: its *heterogeneity* relative to the finite manifestation of the *Dasein*, as well as its *independence* relative to its modes of appropriation and understanding that are peculiar to consciousness in general, which means the independence of absolute knowledge vis à vis phenomenological Discourse¹¹ and its Concept (cf. Henry 1963, § 75 and § 77).

Used by Michel Henry in a telling, provocative way, *Selbständigkeit* is a notion taken from Sartre’s *L’Être et le Néant* (Sartre 1943). For the latter, *Selbständigkeit* refers to the character of “autonomy” assigned by natural consciousness to reality, conceived as “being in itself,” substance, reality that can exist *independently* of the human being contemplating it. That said, a similar notion of *Selbständigkeit* appears in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, in the figure of Unhappy Consciousness, i.e., religious understanding of the essence, which not only considers the latter as “autonomous,” but assigns to it an ipseity, thereby acknowledging and projecting, in the image of its transcendent God, all the properties of perfection, eternity, infinity, etc. that human reality denies to itself on account of its mortal being.

In appearance only, though, do Henry’s phenomenology and Hegel’s “Unhappy Consciousness” converge: the former explicitly opposes the presuppositions governing the “unhappiness” of Hegelian religious consciousness. In the problematic context of *L’essence de la manifestation*, the discovery of the essence’s autonomy is presented explicitly, for purposes of determining the essence *which is not and cannot be* the outcome of a *Sinngebung*, the effect of a thetic act of consciousness. The assertion of *Selbständigkeit* rests rather on the phenomenological demonstration of *impossibility that constitutes* the essence, interpreted in the sense of transcendence (as the farthest horizon of all phenomenal donation) to ensure by itself the ultimate condition of its own appearing (cf. Henry 1963, § 27). That constitutive limit upon transcendence—a limit that analysis “cannot surmount” (cf. Henry 1963, p. 368 ff. [p. 295 ff.])—is associated with the need for radicalising the phenomenological method which, presented as the “*epoché* of the world,” consists in shutting down intentionality as such (see Serban 2010). Autonomy is thus shown to be an *immanent* determination relative to essence, establishing itself of itself, through its ability to ensure *by itself its own receptivity, quite independently of whether consciousness operates—actively or passively—upon it.*

There is nothing problematic in Henry’s grasp of the inessentiality of ontological consciousness, unaccompanied as it is by a “painful” sense of being severed from essence

¹¹ Here one glimpses, if but as a sketch, the general groundwork to the distinction drawn by Henry between the “Word of Life” and the “*logos* of the World,” later elaborated in his “Christological trilogy” (1996-2002); see more especially Henry 2002 [2012], chap. VII.

because no such separation ever occurs: although inessential, insofar as whatever consciousness may contribute to the original movement of self-revelation of the essence, consciousness proves to be *founded* in it, and in such a manner that neither an understanding nor failure to understand consciousness can alter or “break” the tie that essence in and by itself creates, *independently of consciousness and of its modes of understanding the self and essence*: “Nevertheless, the essence—stresses Henry—is *immanent to existence as constituting its very essence*.” (Henry 1963, p. 187 [p. 154]. Emphasis in original).

Here, the keyword is immanence; indeed, in *L’essence de la manifestation* Henry tirelessly reiterates that “immanence” is “the essence of transcendence”; it is “the original mode according to which is accomplished the revelation of transcendence and hence the original essence of revelation” (Henry 1963, 280–1 [227]). Immanence is *selbständige* because to achieve its own appearing, it *has no need of understanding*, and requires neither mediation by consciousness nor its ontological structure. As immanence, essence is *bound to no* “experience of consciousness,” where its ultimate possibility of donation is concerned.

In asserting the “autonomy” of purely passive, affective experience in the “being aware of itself” peculiar to the essence of manifestation, what Henry contemplates is an *essential disjunction*¹² between the original mode of appearing, which constitutes the affective self-revelation of the essence reduced to bare life as such, and the *derived* mode of appearing (deemed in Hegelianism to be co-original with the essence’s appearing) that constitutes consciousness and its being-in-the-world (i.e., its finitude and historicity: cf. Henry 1963, p. 203 [pp. 166–7]). A disarticulation that does not signify a “radical separation” between the original affective self-appearing of phenomenality, that Michel Henry calls *life*, and existence’s ontological structure. In objecting to Hegelianism and existentialism, Michel Henry’s phenomenology asserts the *inessential* character of all interventions that phenomenological consciousness can effect through *Verstehen*, insofar as that concerns the original process within which self-revelation of life is attained (Henry 1963, p. 179 [p. 148]). That existence be “inessential” in respect of this original process nonetheless means that the latter’s *accomplishment “within itself” is what constitutes the ultimate condition of possibility for opening the transcendental horizon of Being that makes up the structure of existence, the opening up of its being-in-the-world*. Otherwise put, it is because the self-affection of life has already been given to itself, in the pathetic immediation of its immanent testing of the self, that the latter *gives and allows itself to be found as that irreducible, purely “material” datum which presents itself as a reality “already present,”* as one already given or pre-given, and can thus be latched onto by phenomenological consciousness.¹³ As Henry would reiterate, *immanence is the essence of transcendence*.

It follows then, that from Henry’s standpoint, the aim of asserting the essence’s “autonomy” is not to *deny* the founding link that within life itself binds thought to the essence it seeks to

¹² It is that idea of “disjunction” or “disarticulation”, referring to the essence and its manifestation, that Michel Henry finds in the Fichtean doctrine of religion. See Hyppolite 1971, vol. 1, pp. 32–52 on the meaning of this “disconnection” in Fichte and see Rametta 2016, 173–88; Formisano 2018, 147–64 on the way Henry made the Fichtean notion his own.

¹³ On this point turns the critical difference vis à vis Husserl’s “hyletic phenomenology”: see (Henry 1990 [2008]).

understand. Negation is unnecessary here, because between “autonomy” of the essence and absence of “autonomy” for the finite consciousness, no conflict is possible. Nothing need be dialectically “eliminated.” Since transcendence is *founded* upon immanence, no work (*vs.* Kojève), no spiritual maturation of existence (*vs.* Wahl) is called for. By self-interpreting as *already founded in life, by the work it accomplishes in the origin of its immediate, immanent self-revelation*, to be itself phenomenological consciousness need not, in Henry’s view, deny its “religious” attitude towards essence (cf. Henry 1963, p. 898 [p. 728]). It is rather *owing to* that distinction, that from the founding link (the “*religare*” immanent to life and its phenomenological powers),¹⁴ Henry’s phenomenology strives to clothe it with fresh meaning, one other than that reasserted by the Hegelian line of phenomenology that has been carried forward by contemporary French philosophy’s main currents.

5. The issue “internal” to philosophy

That redefining of the relations between absolute life and human existence is attended by a re-examination of the relations between life, and how philosophy thinks life, i.e., between the essence and its “first phenomenology,” since life, being *index sui*, in its original movement of appearing has no need of being revealed through mediation of consciousness in general, and, in particular, by that determined mode of *In-der-Welt-sein* which is philosophical understanding. In a note preparatory to *L’essence de la manifestation* Henry writes: “One should not believe that our life is empirical and that there must be an exceptional operation which the philosopher alone can accomplish, for it [*i.e.*, life] to become a pure life” (Henry Archive, Ms. A 5878). However, to the extent that philosophy discovers the *inessential* character of its mediation, in the sense that its descriptions and discourse in no way constitute an “active” contribution to achieving the original process in which they do nonetheless allow access to phenomenological consciousness, the question *for philosophy* is inevitably to seek the meaning corresponding to its inner demands and efforts to adhere to the *Sache selbst*, to that essence considered in its movement that constitutes immanent self-revelation.

Once one accepts the impossibility of that phenomenological discourse being deemed a “moment” that constitutes the original appearing, Henry states that “if philosophy is secondary in relationship to life, nevertheless there must exist a mode of philosophizing which does not in any way prejudice the essence.” (Henry 1963, p. 56 [p. 43]). Accordingly, in reflecting upon philosophy’s mission in respect of life Henry writes: “As a matter of fact, the aim of this work is to show that there exists *absolute knowledge* and that the latter is not dependent upon some isolated bit of progress. Actually, such knowledge is not bound to a determined mode of existence, it is not the privilege of the moment” (Henry 1963, p. 55 [p. 43]). *Nevertheless*, such knowledge *is not* that of philosophy: “It is rather the very milieu of existence, the very essence of life” (Henry 1963, p. 55 [p. 43]). That absolute knowledge, heterogeneous to phenomenality of all *Verstehen* generally, is that of affectivity and its self-affectation admitting of no outside mediation, of no intervention by thought in general. But what then of philosophy? What then of phenomenological knowledge that insists upon rigorously describing that “invisible” appearing which is that “experiencing the self” (*s’éprouver soi-même*) peculiar to life? What

¹⁴ Cf. Henry 2004, p. 108, p. 159. In this regard, see Canullo 2019.

meaning can be assigned to such work, such as would distinguish it from all other forms of knowledge, and how may it be clothed in legitimacy?

Henry does not, of course, neglect the issue (see Henry 1963, § 17). In his introduction to *L'essence de la manifestation*, he asserts that “the ultimate meaning of phenomenology in the last analysis hangs upon the fact of the discovery of a ‘phenomenon’ which is itself the foundation (*fondement*)” (Henry 1963, p. 54 [p. 42]). As to the meaning that should be vested in this discovery and in phenomenological work of elucidation designed to capture as it were, essence in a “rigorous” and “loyal” manner, that question is not even raised. It is as though the mere *will to adhere to essence*, which constitutes the phenomenological method, calls for no further justification; leaving thought outwith the original process where the self-affection of absolute life occurs is presented as a clue to the solution, rather than as an obstacle: at the end of the day, it is *because* philosophy comes second to life (being is *shut out* from its original mode of donation), that accomplishing the latter *lays the groundwork for its description*, thereby supplying the criterion for uncovering “which mode of phenomenological treatment should be submitted to the foundation (*fondement*)” (Henry 1963, p. 55 [p. 43]); see also Henry 2000). Indeed, it is from the essence alone, in accomplishing that phenomenalisation attained in itself, that phenomenology can assert access to absolute life legitimising its descriptions, i.e., at least phenomenological knowledge’s certainty that it is aimed at “flesh and blood” reality and can thus define the distinctive trait of philosophy, as opposed to other paths to understanding.

Here, there does creep in a subtle ambiguity: *philosophy’s descriptive labours take on legitimacy not because they adhere to the donation of life, but only because of the autonomy which in principio the phenomenalisation of life secures to itself* (cf. Henry 1963, p. 180 [pp. 148–9]). Philosophical or natural knowledge: these are modes of being of existence in the world, to which life, in its immanent pathetic movement, proves to be “*indifferent*”¹⁵ because it has always been “present to itself at the heart of an internal transcendental experience which strictly speaking can neither be ‘obtained’ nor ‘lost’” (Henry 1963, p. 54 [p. 42]). Philosophical knowledge is legitimate to the degree that *it is up to life to lay the foundations for its being possible*, without philosophy contributing in any way to those foundations – just as is the case for any other type of knowledge.¹⁶

More generally, what distinguishes philosophy from all other modes of being, is that not only does it exercise its understanding vis à vis the essence, but it *knows*, grasps, and expresses through its language, the reason on which the legitimacy of its word rests: in it, there is

¹⁵ Henry 1963, p. 540 and p. 563 ff. [p. 431, p. 449 ff.]. Indeed, that “indifference” is what constitutes “the essence of Christianity” (Henry 1963, p. 564 [p. 450]).

¹⁶ Cf. Henry 1963, p. 173 [p. 143]: “Being is the pure manifestation. The manifestation of Being is the self-manifestation of pure manifestation. The self-manifestation of the pure essence of manifestation is in no way the result of reversal, rather it belongs to the pure essence of manifestation itself. That Being be able to manifest itself does not mean that the self-manifestation of Being can or must be joined to the essence of Being in the course of or at the end of a process which would permit this essence to realize itself; it means that the essence of Being is self-manifestation. *Self-manifestation is the essence of manifestation*. Again, we should understand how this self-manifestation of manifestation occurs: it is original. Original means that it is not the fact of philosophical knowledge but that of the essence itself. The self-manifestation of the essence is so little dependent on the fact of philosophical knowledge that the latter constantly presupposes it as the very condition of its accomplishment.”

accomplished the self-awareness of existence striving for “loyalty” to the essence. The *critical work* that philosophy, as a “critique of all revelation” (Henry 1963, p. 55 [p. 43]), directs at itself and history is realised in and through that self-awareness.¹⁷ Since such self-awareness will prove to be *heterogeneous*,¹⁸ and thus *external* vis à vis life, the inevitable question is again, *in what should consist the meaning of that appropriation which philosophy can secure to the foundation that life—and certainly not its self-awareness—accomplishes in its originary phenomenalisation?* Since for Henry, the issue is not to supersede the irreducible, even religious, heteronomy of life, one must seek to know *whether awareness of that heteronomy, although unable to contribute more to life, might bring to philosophy the determination it needs—not for life, but for itself, justifying its labour of elucidation.* Is the mere *eidos* of life—the only *eidos* to which one may legitimately appeal to in Henry’s phenomenology—able to secure to philosophy every condition for responding to the question?

As we see it, the question remains entirely open in *L’essence de la manifestation*, where Michel Henry’s line of argument, focusing as it does on the need to avoid “causing harm to the essence,” leaves in the background the issue “internal” to philosophy, which “comes second to life;” that means foreign to the order of questions peculiar to a “first phenomenology.” Perhaps the answer may be found in works written after *L’essence de la manifestation*, where Michel Henry deals with works of art, cultural criticism, the issue of history, and notably the possibility of a philosophy of Christianity. It would for example be worthwhile to check whether the “phenomenology of Christianity” that Henry developed from *C’est moi la vérité* (1996) onwards, surrounded as he was by the debate over the “theological turn in French phenomenology” (Janicaud 1991), might suggest solutions to these theoretical difficulties: was there really a radical “turn” in 1996, or was it simply the outcome of assumptions dating from the period in which *L’essence de la manifestation* was drafted? Does the “turn” of the 1990s involve reverting to the original project to work out a form of “religious aesthetics,” or does it rather represent a further development, if not to supersede it?

Within this study’s framework, which has principally to do with the early period of Michel Henry’s philosophical training, we have shown that the idea of a “religious philosophy” is actually found at the source of Henry’s work. In 1946 it was the explicit aim,¹⁹ and even later,

¹⁷ Here one finds revealed in its ultimate effect what *phänomenologische Destruktion* means for Henry: a labour *essential* (in terms of thought-method at least) to philosophical knowledge, *but inessential from the standpoint of essence*, i.e., relative to its autonomous, immediate, and immanent self-revelation.

¹⁸ All the more so that it interprets his method—and thus self-interprets—as “the self-justification of the transcendental life of absolute subjectivity in its self-objectivation (*in the form of its self-objectivation*)” (Henry 1990, p. 129 [p. 95]).

¹⁹ In the light of analysis of the *Dossiers CNRS* and the results set out here, as we see it, that idea of a “theological turn”—the interpretative paradigm initiated by Dominique Janicaud (cf. Janicaud 1991) which prevails insofar as our current understanding of French phenomenological philosophy in the second half of the 20th Century is concerned—should be subjected to serious and wide-ranging critical reexamination. Is the attention paid by contemporary French phenomenology to the phenomenon of religion (i.e., to religion as a phenomenon) truly the subject of arbitrary decision by certain philosophers? Might it not rather be a philosophical demand typical of a specific era in the history of French contemporary philosophy? Indeed, the relation of French philosophy to Hegelianism has enabled us to shew that the discovery of religion as a philosophical problem—around which gravitate fundamental philosophical issues casting doubt upon the

once religion no longer appears as the main subject and his research tends more towards working out a “first phenomenology” thanks to the opportunities provided by the discovery of the “subjective body,” Henry’s philosophy in no way alters the “attitude” governing his grasp of the phenomenological method, running parallel to his critique of “ontological monism.” Affirming the *Selbständigkeit* of absolute life and its self-affection is nevertheless not immune from certain aporias that Hegelianism recognises as typical of “religious” thought concerning the essence. Placing Henry’s phenomenology alongside Hegelianism—without attempting to suggest that there might be a reversion to the latter—has helped us shew that with Henry, “tension” persists between life and *the thinking* of life. A tension that Henry’s phenomenology declines to acknowledge within life itself,²⁰ and that it restricts to the *philosophical representation of life* alone. As it happens, it is precisely that representation which *is* Henry’s phenomenology as such: a knowledge the concept of which demands, down to our own day, that its meaning be elucidated *not for life, but for itself*.

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meaning, method, and concept as such of phenomenological research—makes up the decisive *humus* for the way in which phenomenology was first received in France. One can be allowed to speak of a “turn” only if one leaves out or even bury, a decisive moment in the history of contemporary French thought. We see this otherwise however: it is premised upon a philosophical understanding of religion and thus on the horizon of characteristic continuity that one locates the two trends—the two “souls”—of French philosophy, i.e., on the one side the “soul” which aims at secularising phenomenality (where there arise the “atheistic” or shall we say, “lay” interpretations of phenomenology); on the other hand, the “religious” trend (found with Henry) which by radicalising phenomenology, seeks to return to the immanent essence of life, to life as immanence and self-affection.

²⁰ Owing to the notion that, unlike philosophy, *religion is neither a determined mode of existence nor one of Verstehen*. Understood in the “original” sense of *religare*, and accordingly free of “positivity,” religion to Henry is assimilated to life, to its immanent movement of self-revelation, the same and the only process by which life institutes the founding tie to each individual, to each fleshly ego that makes up the community of the living (human) beings. It is that founding life which preserves the foundation’s unity, and upon which no external mediation—in other words *philosophy*—*can act* (see Henry 1963, § 49).

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