Review

Henry, Michel. *The Michel Henry Reader*. Edited by Scott Davidson and Frédéric Seyler. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019. 296 pages.

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The Michel Henry Reader provides English readers with a glimpse into Henry's radical "phenomenology of life." Editors Scott Davidson and Frédéric Seyler display Henry as a major figure in the "theological turn" of French phenomenology. Sixteen chapters in four parts introduce the dramatic implications that his outlook has upon "Phenomenology," "Subjectivity," "Politics, Art, and Language," and "Ethics and Religion." Previously published articles or lectures, each chapter is an unabridged piece of Henry's work. The book begins with a brief summary of his ideas and differentiates them from the broader phenomenological tradition. From there, the reader is left alone with Henry, who announces that the phenomenological tradition has not yet encountered *life itself*.

Henry argues that before intuition looks outward into the world of beings, beings and the intentional subject have already appeared. The phenomenon as such does not belong to being alone, but to the prior plane of appearing, the pure *phenomenalizing* of the phenomenon. Such appearing is the precondition of being. Neither Husserlian nor Heideggerian phenomenology apprehends this original manifesting of being, Henry claims. Both conflate pure appearing with all that intuition ek-statically looks upon in the outward

world. This renders even the self as an intentional object. But before intentionality looks to see the transcendent object “out there,” the subject already lives in the automatic reality of their own appearing.

For Henry, this automatic reality is a pathos-filled immanence, and it is only in the absolutely immediate *feeling* of the self that life reveals itself to itself. Henry calls this auto-affection. Auto-affection is the non-intentional way of knowing that is the condition of possibility for all intentional *ekstasis*. The self is not *seen* as another object “out there” in the world, at a distance from the absolute immanence of life. Auto-affection is the self-revealing of life, and life is the very affect of this self-revealing. Henry thus poses life as the sheer *ipseity* of the self that underlies and is the source and possibility of all ek-static intentionality.

This phenomenology of life is a radicalization of Husserl’s critique of scientism. Reducing phenomenology to what is revealed in *pathos*, Henry poses a *counter-reduction* to the scientific reduction of knowledge to objective measurability. For Henry, the foundation of everything that appears is the immanent affectivity of life. As such, the condition of possibility for science lies deeper than the objects that it measures. This deeper immanence of life demands a more radically reduced way of knowing. For this, Henry turns back to the originator of modern science and philosophy, Descartes. Like Husserl, Henry takes a phenomenological reading of the “Second Meditation,” to re-consider the relation between ‘I am’ and ‘I think.’ Henry’s unique reading of this classic text is to identify the *cogito* without the *cogitatum*. The ‘I think’ self-appears, seeing itself without sight, in automatic affect. “What is absolutely certain,” he writes, “is the appearing in which seeing is given to itself” (17). That is, before thought thinks any object, it first *seems* that one thinks, and this invisible seeming is the appearance of the self in its *ipseity*. To ask if there is any deeper foundation of

the self would be a meaningless question. The auto-affection of life is the absolute starting point and source from which phenomenology may proceed to any intentional way of knowing. Henry suggests that this phenomenology of life paves the way for a more authentic account of subjectivity, one that does not objectify the self in an ek-static distance.

The implications for this radical counter-reduction of scientism are wide-ranging. One of the most striking is the way that Henry brings ‘birth’ into the heart of the phenomenon. In “The Phenomenology of Birth,” Henry begins by noting that the being of the living self is given in a way that the being of a rock does not share. Rocks have their being in the objective “out there” of the world. But to be born is to have a transcendental origin by which the living self is an immediate and unified subjectivity. Through birth, the self automatically comes into itself in sheer immanence. This makes birth central to an account of the subject.

With regards to politics, being born grants intrinsic freedom and equality to human life. In “Difficult Democracy,” Henry critiques modern liberal democracies for being based too much upon the formalities of representation. Here, freedom and equality consist of the unrestricted will of each individual that the procedures of voting and representation are meant to secure. This leaves open the possibility for the majority to overturn the very foundations of democracy: freedom and equality. A surer foundation is the *life* that all people have in common. Birth, Henry argues, is the transcendental source of freedom and equality. Every living self shares equally in the fact of birth. Likewise, freedom is the concrete ‘I can’ that the power of life gives to itself in each individual. Thus, before democratic formalities, life has *already given* the basis for every individual’s claim to freedom and equality.

In “Ethics and Religion within a Phenomenology of Life,” Henry describes religion as the way in which living selves explore their bond to life. Christianity is the religion that has

carried out the dynamics of religion and ethics within life. This is because Christianity conceives of God as the very essence of things, as Life. Life reveals itself, and is the very revealing of life. Likewise, God reveals Godself, and is the very revealing of God: the Arch-revelation of Life. Religion therefore explores the bond of life to Life. Ethics, on the other hand, consists of the ways that we ought to live out our bond to Life. The heart of the matter is to live as “sons” of life rather than as sons of what Henry refers to as “the world.” This is the same world, spoken of before, that exists “out there” at a distance from the immanent self. Becoming a “son” of life involves another kind of birth, a coming into the self that is the *consummation* of birth. It constitutes a return to the pathos and auto-affection of life. One comes to live and relate to others on the basis of shared life in God, who is Life. One comes to know oneself, not in the light of intentional ek-stasis, but in the unknowing where the self precedes any objective status in the world of intentionality.

Henry defines and applies his concepts with a powerful consistency. He always covers his tracks, re-introducing his phenomenological outlook in a fitting way before showing how it impacts his thought on a specific topic. Furthermore, Henry is a careful scholar of the phenomenological tradition. He identifies his ideas in relation to Husserl, Heidegger, and many others, while tracing the lines of influence between each. In Chapter 1, Henry outlines his agreement with Jean-Luc Marion, and how Marion’s approach to phenomenology is crucial to Henry’s radicalization of Husserl. These scholarly moves allow him to then rightly announce the originality of his own ideas.

With respect to Henry’s “theological turn,” these essays do not indicate which modern theologians may have influenced him. Like Marion, Henry’s phenomenology is marked by

the influence of Hans Urs Von Balthasar. This Catholic theologian's engagement with Heidegger produces a rich inter-relationship between being and—among other things—birth.

The Michel Henry Reader is perfect for graduate students who have already been introduced to the field of phenomenology. The first chapter, "The Four Principles of Phenomenology," provides professors with an ideal touchstone for teaching undergrads the basic tenets and tensions of phenomenological method. For researchers seeking to understand Henry, this compilation of lectures and articles allows one to identify specific topics for further study, while understanding them within the whole of Henry's thought. With regards to translation, Davidson and Seyler have provided uniform terms for central concepts like appearance or auto-affection, despite the various translators. This ensures a unity and readability of the whole. Overall, the book is an achievement that provides English readers with fresh access to Michel Henry as a major figure in French phenomenology.