

PRELIMINARY NOTES

In a prefatory note to *L'essence de la manifestation*, Michel Henry writes: «That which is concrete is not empirical, but rather transcendental»¹. This note belonging to a long series of notes written in the 1950's is dedicated to post-Kantian philosophy and the ontological status of subjectivity. It is extremely significant, because it provides a summary of the fundamental reason of Henry's interest to *life*: the description of appearance considered as such and the determination of its ultimate condition of possibility. What Michel Henry defines «life» is the transcendental considered in a specific manner: not like a simple 'form' or an abstract 'structure', but *pure reality* – the concrete, experiential, and non-empirical foundation of the conscience and its factual existence.

Of course, one could object that Henry's demand is only the «Wiederholung» of an original tendency expressed, since Husserl, within contemporary phenomenology's aim to «return to the things themselves». This is indeed the historical merit of Husserl's phenomenology according to Heidegger, having provided contemporary philosophy with the conceptual means (his rigorous method) to concretely grasp the being of conscience. The replacement of a philosophy of conscience with a philosophy of *Dasein* also answers to the same request for «liberation», which is simultaneously a request to return directly to the very source of the transcendental life of the subject.

Henry's phenomenology also places itself in this development, although it radically criticizes the transcendence of *Dasein*. It can be appropriate to

¹ M. Henry, Ms. A 2711 (Fonds d'Archives M. Henry, Plateforme ALPhA, Université catholique de Louvain): «Ce qui est concret ce n'est pas ce qui est empirique, c'est ce qui est transcendantal».

say that Michel Henry's phenomenology literally constitutes a 'philosophy of the concrete', in the sense of an original successor of French philosophy in 1930's and 1940's, the years of the return 'towards the concrete': the years of the return of French philosophy to Kant, of the Hegel Renaissance, and of research on Kierkegaard as well as the young Marx. This is the same context where the decisive research of Jean Wahl, Alexandre Koyré, Martial Gueroult, Alexandre Kojève, and Jean Hyppolite was located; each of these had developed a completely new (and typically 'French') way of (re)reading classical German philosophy. Aside from the well-known French reception of German phenomenology, marked by the rise of existentialism after 1940, the unpublished writings made accessible by the *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry* (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) clearly show the relevance of the previous philosophical horizon. The language and categories adopted by the young Michel Henry for achieving his first formulation and structuration of what will become his own «problématique»² clearly mark this heritage. Thanks to the mediation of these exceptional representatives in this 'époque' of French culture (Jean Wahl, Martial Gueroult and Jean Hyppolite were the young Michel Henry's research directors at the CNRS in the period between 1948-1963), a unique convergence arose between phenomenology, transcendentalism and spiritualism in Henry's thought.

According to Henry, the transcendental is the concrete and pure life of phenomenality – the essence of manifestation seized in its effectiveness and reality. But, phenomenologically speaking, concrete life means nothing else than the self-experiencing of phenomenality, the immanent and immediate self-generation of appearing as such, radically distinct from the ek-static nature of intentionality and representation. It is not the opening to an other, but enclosed in itself, undergoing itself in self-experience (i.e., the «épreuve de soi» that Henry distinguishes from the self-awareness), which is for Henry the condition of possibility of any experience of an other or hetero-affection. 'Pure life' is therefore *not* the result of intentional activity; it is totally extraneous to the dialectic of representations, which its auto-revelation makes possible.

The notions of 'life' and 'concepts', recalled in the title of that special issue of «Azimuth. International Journal of Philosophy», would focus on this 'internal tension' of the phenomenological conscience. A conscience 'divided' between the immediacy of the self-experiencing of its original

² See M. Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (1963), Paris, PUF, 2003³.

essence as ‘pure *pathos*’ and the mediation of the intentional activity in world constitution. A division coming up every time that life becomes ‘conscience’, i.e., conscious, aware of itself. When awareness appears, life apparently ‘separates’ itself from itself: beside of its immediate self-experiencing, a new way of experiencing develops itself. It is the flux of representation, the dialectic through which life seeks to appropriate of itself, to know its own essence, to know itself. This is what Henry interprets as the phenomenality of ‘world’. But world *is not* life in its original sense; it is only a derivation, something unreal, opposite to the absolute reality of life in itself.

This division between ‘world’ (conceived as the horizon of the representation that life creates of itself, by the mediation of intentionality) and that which is only the condition thereof introduces a deep ambiguity in Henry’s phenomenological approach. The opposition of ‘life’ and ‘concept’ means the fundamental opposition in philosophy itself is involved, because of its internal division between its own demand to return ‘toward the concrete’ and the representation of the concrete that philosophy inevitably is. Indeed, a return ‘toward to concrete’ – toward to material life, as Henry’s phenomenology require – cannot be never totally separated to a critic of philosophy itself (a critic of its own history and of its conceptual instruments).

The combination of those two aspects are present in Henry’s thought, and that is the scholars’ challenge for investigating in order to discover those different meaningful levels of reading of Henry’s phenomenology (seized in its various declinations, as ‘critic of historical phenomenology’, ‘critic of modern metaphysics’, ‘critic of the history of occidental philosophy’, ‘critic of culture’ etc.) and highlighting its hermeneutical potentialities. This growing interest on the historical roots in Henry’s phenomenology is reflected in a number of the papers of this volume. This tendency demonstrates how searching in these roots can bring new and to some extent critical light on widespread assumptions.

The idea to collect papers offered by Italian specialist of Henry’s phenomenology comes from discussions happened during the International Symposium *Michel Henry en résonance. Réceptions italiennes et réactions actuelles*, held at the *Fonds d’archives Michel Henry* and at the Italian Cultural Institute of Bruxelles (Belgium – February 26-27, 2015), granted by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FSR-FNRS, Belgium). The Editors wish to thank the Louvain’s University Superior Institute of Philosophy (ISP) and the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute of Bruxelles, Dr. Paolo Grossi, for their hospitality and the Belgian FSR-FNRS for its support. The Symposium was part of the COFUND Marie-Curie

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