

# Michel Henry's Anthropology in Connection with the Question of God

God as the Everlasting Life of Mortal Persons

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In this article, I delve into the central role played by Anselm's famous ontological argument in developing Michel Henry's radical phenomenology of life as articulated in his late 'philosophy of Christianity.' I analyze how this proof occupies a fundamental position in Henry's intellectual journey, shedding light on his conception of the relationship between the human ego and God. In doing so, we will see how the question of God in Henry's philosophy is primarily anthropological. By focusing on the human being who accedes to God's essence, Henry is led to deconstruct the modern anthropology that portrays the subject as an all-powerful entity based on scientific knowledge, personal strengths, and desires. Within this context, we discuss how Henry's philosophy redefines the relationship between the human being and God, challenging conventional paradigms of modernity.

## 1. Introduction

Within the sphere of contemporary philosophy, Michel Henry emerges as a unique author. As noted by Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup>, philosophy is forever bound to the realm of our finite existence. To articulate the intricacies of pure immanence, or overwhelming finitude, is perhaps the most striking feature of contemporary postmodern philosophy.

Within this framework of post-Husserlian phenomenology, Michel Henry assumes a highly original role as a philosopher. On the one hand, one could say that he adheres to Husserl's belief in the possibility of phenomenological reduction to an absolute sphere, which constitutes the fundamental inception and essence of all manifestations. On the other hand, his radical *phenomenology of life* establishes a profound identification of this absolute beginning with the Christian God. Consequently, Henry's later works end up developing a philosophy of Christianity, raising suspicions of a 'theological turn.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article explains, more succinctly and in English, what I was able to show in detail in the work: *Dieu à l'épreuve. Lecture henryenne de la preuve anselmienne et ses répercussions phénoménologiques*, Les Plans-sur-Bex, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris 1945, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Dominique Janicaud*, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, Combas 1991.

Michel Henry's originality surpasses mere emphasis on the absolute, which encompasses the *parousia* of God within our inner lives. In addition, he eloquently describes this divine presence while expressing admiration for philosophers such as Marx and Nietzsche, simultaneously considering Anselm's proof as the genesis of modern atheism. In doing so, Henry embarks on a reinterpretation of Western philosophy and Christianity, appropriating the ideas of various authors whom he considers his intellectual allies, such as Eckhart, Kierkegaard, Maine de Biran, and Descartes. These authors constitute a group of predecessor philosophers within the realm of a radical phenomenology of life, forming an integral part of Henry's theoretical framework.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Henry expands upon the subjective experience of God in response to Anselm's proof, thereby formulating a *performative* phenomenology. Through this approach, Henry compels his readers to recognize that their human condition is not defined solely by rational faculties or social engagement within the world, but rather by the affective nature of their 'flesh' and their dependence on God, who grants them life. It is a matter of *dehellenizing* not only Christianity, but philosophy itself.

## 2. Henry's Critique of the Anselmian Argument

Criticism of the Anselmian argument, commonly known as the *ontological argument*, runs through the various periods of Henry's work. And for Henry, whether the argument is formulated by Anselm, Leibniz, or Hegel, it always has the same meaning: according to the French phenomenologist, this rational attempt to prove God's existence establishes a monism, i.e., a one-sided reading of phenomenality.

In the thesis that made him famous, *The Essence of Manifestation* (1963), Henry makes only two explicit references to the 'ontological argument,' without ever mentioning an author. He takes the line of the argument in general, implicitly encompassing all its possible formulations. In Section I, which is on "ontological monism," he does so from the very first paragraph of this inaugural segment of the book (§ 8) and in paragraph 10. In paragraph 8, as Henry seeks to elucidate what a phenomenon is, he shows how the philosophy of consciousness imposes that the thing or being itself only manifests itself to an intentional consciousness:

"The absolute meaning of phenomenology thus bases itself on the presence of the thing, that is, on its appearance. When we interpret phenomenology as a philosophy of consciousness, this absolute meaning translates itself into a dogmatism of intentionality which, because it attains to Being itself, is capable of furnishing a real foundation for the 'ontological argument.'"<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, the presence of Being in general, as well as of any being, consists in its act of manifesting itself. This manifestation is achieved by an intentional consciousness, i.e., a consciousness that orients itself towards the presence of a greater being that is external to

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, transl. by Girard Etzkorn, The Hague 1973, 51.

it. On the other hand, the presupposition of an intentional consciousness justifies the ontological argument, insofar as the subject is always aware of something – a being, a reality – that manifests itself. In other words, from the ‘dogma’ of intentionality, the idea of God can be justified only in terms of the human intellect’s orientation.

In this way, Henry shows that the ontological argument is hardly limited to the assertion of God’s existence. Interpreted within the sphere of the philosophy of consciousness, this proof imposes a “reading of the phenomenal condition of being.” This means that the rational argument for God’s existence – which, unlike cosmological arguments, is *a priori* in relation to the world – establishes an exclusive mode of manifestation, precisely the mode of manifestation in a world. Henry affirms in this respect:

“Being must exist; it exists necessarily. The ontological argument is not a proof in the ordinary sense of the word; it consists in reading the phenomenal condition of Being. This phenomenal condition is precisely the existence of Being, it is, as Being outside its Being, the very Being of Being.”<sup>5</sup>

In this part of paragraph 10, Henry shows what the ontological argument determines: not only the existence of God, but above all, a one-sided interpretation of phenomenal existence as being situated outside its own essence.

Within the framework of monism, a distance is established between the subject and the Being that manifests to him or her. So, this monism limits every possible manifestation to a single mode. The way in which beings are phenomenized is always the same: the existence of things, and even that of God, implies a ‘distance,’ a ‘dualism,’ between Being (what manifests itself) and manifestation (for the consciousness that conceives it).

Understanding the phenomenality of being as the process of its externalization into the light of a horizon of visibility for an intentional consciousness, one may reconcile two apparently incompatible assertions: (1) firstly, reason affirms the existence, or even more the necessary presence of God; (2) secondly, reason recognizes that God’s being is not made present either in a concept or in a phenomenon to which consciousness has access.

For Henry, the crux of the problems with the ontological argument lies in the imposition of a single mode of access to things, including access to God, by an intentional consciousness. This kind of consciousness never grasps Being itself, but only its manifestation as self-differentiation. Consequently, “the Being of God will be nothing more than the *Ungrund*, which is not only the most obscure but also the most abstract.”<sup>6</sup>

Taken in isolation from Anselm’s *Proslogion* as a whole, the three designations of God presented there – God’s names – reveal the understanding of phenomenality that Henry has just denounced.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Michel Corbin, Saint Anselme, Paris 2004.

The first denomination, in Chapter II, is: *id quo majus cogitari nequit*, or 'that of which greater cannot be thought.' From this denomination through negation, thought is able neither to reach a concept that fully grasps the divine entity, nor to think of its non-existence.

Further on, in chapter V, the second name emerges: *id quod summum omnium*, or 'that which is the highest of all beings.' This name, together with the superlative expression, will enable us to posit positive designations of God's essence, as *summum bonus*, i.e., the 'highest good.'

However, linked to the notion of *melius* – i.e., the 'better than' – this designation is only apparently a positive one. It simply asserts that God's essence cannot be reduced to a concept fully known by our consciousness. The designation of God as *summum bonus* or *melius* hardly constitutes a concept capable of exhausting God's essence. And so, the second name fully respects the first designation.

In the same sense, the redoubling of negation by transcendence with the third name in chapter XV corroborates the absence of God's being in the concept that Anselm grasps in his intellect: *quiddam majus quam cogitari possit*, or 'something greater than all that can be thought.' With this appellation, God is placed absolutely beyond thought, outside any possible representation for human consciousness. Indeed, while in the first two names Anselm does not yet assert the impossibility of conceiving the divine essence – but only the impossibility of conceiving a being superior to it –, this impossibility is made explicit in the third name. God is 'greater than the greatest that can be thought.'

What sums up Anselm's *cogitatio* concerning God's being is the neutral *quod majus* – 'the greatest'. In this way, by establishing the reality of God beyond all possible thought for the human consciousness, according to Henry, the affirmation of divine existence is not free from a certain ambiguity.

Indeed, the affirmation of God's existence through Anselm's argument refers to the existence of an essence taken in itself, not yet phenomenalized, and never to the existence of its manifestation. By asserting the existence of God based on the 'names,' the *cogitatio* contains the notion of the existence of a divine essence to which access is impossible. Thus, if we affirm the necessary existence of God's essence, we deny, at the same time, the possibility of its phenomenal existence. This is why the *Proslogion* only ends by always adding, to the various denominations of God, the prefix *in* as negation: *in*-finite, *in*-comprehensible, *in*-conceivable. For Henry, these are expressions of a *phenomenological atheism*: even if God exists, it is not possible to access a manifestation of that divinity.

In fact, by envisaging God as *ineffable*, *unspeakable*, absolutely *infinite*, one sees God as a reality outside the concreteness of human existence, beyond anything we can think or grasp. Moreover, by asserting, through reason, the existence of a God whose essence is *inaccessible*, we tend to exclude the possibility of accessing God through another phenomenality, i.e., through another mode of donation. This other mode of donation, of manifestation, is targeted by Henry in his critique of the ontological argument, a critique that was intensified when the French philosopher reconciled his phenomenology with Christianity more than two decades after the publication of *The Essence of Manifestation*.

As his interview with Olivier Salazar-Ferrer (1991) shows, Henry rejects the notion of God as divine superabundance implied in the *Proslogion*'s argument. For Henry, God is not the absolutely transcendent Being, which is the meaning of *greater*. As he told in this encounter:

"What transcends the self is not at all a kind of transcendent, in the sense of 'greater,' which would be hypothetical and would have to be demonstrated. On the contrary, what transcends the ego is that which comes before it and in which it comes, which is therefore deeper than it and from which it emerges at every moment [...]. I had to speak about God at a symposium where I was asked to talk about Saint Anselm's proof. I had to say that it was not good, and to oppose his proof with another approach [...] in which I explained that God had not been demonstrated by means of intelligence. This is all well and good, but it never convinces anyone. It's only at the level of trial, where a Life greater than my life gives meaning to myself, that this is possible."<sup>8</sup>

This passage shows that Henry 'risked the question of God,' especially from the 1990s onwards, not so much as a break with, but as an extension of, his fundamental intuitions, already present in his first thesis in the 1960s. The question of access to God becomes a central issue in Henry's later writings. However, instead of asserting the necessary existence of God, Henry describes the subjective experience of an *ego* that lives in God.

I find it very interesting to see how Henry pursues and deepens his critique of the proof of God's existence precisely at the moment when he makes his adherence to Christianity explicit. While Anselm is absent in *The Essence of Manifestation*, Henry does not hesitate to call the *Magnificent Doctor* explicitly by name, as he contemplates a reconciliation between his phenomenology and Christianity itself. What's more, Henry only mentions Anselm's name to vehemently criticize his famous proof.

In the inaugural work of his Christian trilogy, *C'est moi la vérité* (1996), Henry returns to the problem of proving the existence of God by contrasting the Christian God with the god of Saint Anselm:

"To the extent that God alone is the unique Life that generates all living things, Christianity appears as a monotheism. What separates it from other monotheisms [...], as well as from the rational or natural theologies in which these monotheisms have sought a form of expression liable to rally all reasonable people, is that this unique God thought by the mind is not a Being endowed with all the conceivable attributes conferred on an absolute power, or an infinite Being, 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived' and who for this reason necessarily exists. If the Christian God has nothing in common with the infinitely great Being of Saint Anselm, which will be taken up in all the classical proofs of the existence of God and will serve as their pillar, any more than it does with Aristotle's prime motor, or else with the author of the best of all possible worlds, or with the simple concept of a unique God with whom no other will later be able to compete – this is for the decisive reason that God is not something to which our thought can provide access."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Michel Henry, *Entretiens*, Arles 2007, 68 f. [our translation].

<sup>9</sup> Id., *I am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. by Susan Emanuel, Stanford 2003, 54.

This is the same perspective asserted in *The Essence of Manifestation*. Rational proofs for God's existence imply a reduction of phenomenality to the world's own visibility. Both 'things' and the 'ideas' of representations presuppose the 'ek-stasis of exteriority.' The demonstration of God takes place within this sphere of representation.

This is a crucial point in Henry's work as a whole. During the 1970s, when Henry devoted himself to the study of Marx before his Christian period, he returned to the question of the proofs for the existence of God, even where he was hardly expected, since this was a work devoted to social reality.

"Doesn't Feuerbach's 'thought' warn us, at least, against objectifying this essence of self-consciousness, against letting the inner being go outside? [...] This is precisely the error of religion: 'Religion immediately presents the inner essence of man as an objective and other essence,' so that 'the proofs of God's existence are intended to externalize the inner, to separate it from man.'<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, Henry shows the extent to which Marx, by relying on Feuerbach, distances himself from Hegel. Indeed, Marx's critique of religion is directed against both traditional religion and Hegelian philosophy. At issue is the problem of discovering the existence of God *in re* from a content of intelligence (*in intellectu*). This type of procedure involves a 'massive contradiction,' understood 'on the phenomenological level,' which consists in proving the existence of a being, by adopting the presuppositions of the horizon of visibility of intentional consciousness. And the subject, who affirms the necessary existence of God, also concludes that this same greatest Being cannot be seen.

For Henry, it was Anselm who first initiated this type of philosophical approach to God and the relationship between God and the human being, i.e., the thinking subject. Nevertheless, it should be noted that explicit reference to Anselm is found only in the Henry of the Christian period. In *C'est moi la vérité*, one can find this mention of the *Magnificent Doctor*:

"It is Saint Anselm of Canterbury who first performed what we may call the denaturation of the question of God, the transformation of an affective fusion with divine life into a mediated rational approach."<sup>11</sup>

In essence, Anselm opened the door to a turn in the history of philosophy: the turn to intentional consciousness that forgets and denies the primordial affectivity, the only place where access to God is possible.

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Henry, Marx I. Une philosophie de la réalité, Paris 1976, 102 [our translation].

<sup>11</sup> Id., I am the Truth (see fn. 9), 154.

### 3. Henry's Alternative to the Anselmian Argument

Having clarified the content of Henry's critique of the ontological argument, we now need to set out what, for the French phenomenologist, constitutes the satisfactory alternative to the famous *argumentum* concerning the question of access to the divine reality. The role played by the ontological argument in the unfolding of the radical phenomenology of life is essential, insofar as such a rational approach leads to the colossal self-contradiction within the ontological monism: for it consists in *simultaneously* affirming the existence of God, as the original cause of all reality, and confirming the elusiveness of the divine's essence which can never manifest itself to humankind.

As a decisive alternative to Anselm's argument, based on transitive rationality, the immediate subjective experience (*épreuve*) of feeling-itself-without-distance constitutes the only phenomenon in which a manifestation could be fully accomplished. According to the elementary principle of phenomenology, which holds: 'so much appearing, so much being,' the revelation of any reality would only be perfect in the case where the essence of what is manifested corresponds, without any deviation, to its manifestation. Now, insofar as such perfection can only be achieved in the internal manifestation of immanent life itself, any reality whatsoever, including the divine, can only reveal itself perfectly within that very same life.

As a concept whose essence is enclosed in a kind of metaphysical bubble, God's reality is, therefore, vehemently rejected. Henry's alternative to the ontological argument is to move from the affirmation of God's 'ek-sistence' to the phenomenological description of the divine presence within human life. In this way, instead of starting from an essence conceived on the level of pure representation, radical phenomenology starts from the concrete individual and her relationship to God understood as 'absolute Life.' Rather than a logical deduction of the ontic attributes of the most perfect entity which the human intellect can conceive, access to God becomes a question of translating the *unio mystica* experienced by Rhenish mystics, such as Eckhart, into a strictly phenomenological approach. Henry's alternative thus establishes an explicitly religious link between the essence of God and a new conception of *humanitas*. But instead of determining this *humanitas* on the basis of God as an absolute and transcendent cause, the essence of both God and humankind is simultaneously revealed in the most primordial manifestation of self-affection.

Insofar as God emerges in his imperishable link to the human person, one may be led to think that Henry's approach would be close to that of Heidegger, insofar as both avoid the 'ontotheology' of fixed concepts, conceived outside humans' concrete facticity. The difference between the two thinkers, however, is considerable. To understand it, one needs to consider the monism of the concept of 'ek-sistence', presupposed both by Heidegger's existential analysis and by the implicit notion of existence in the *unum argumentum*. Henry rejects these two forms of monism.

#### 3.1 Spinozist third kind of knowledge and the original subjective experience

To overcome Anselm's *aporia* concerning a God who exists but has no manifestation whatsoever, divine essence should be achieved through a kind of *affective knowledge* that the

immediate trial of life (*épreuve de la vie*) makes possible. Such knowledge corresponds to what Henry would call the ‘arch-gnosis’ of the ‘simple’ human person in his later works: It is a kind of (non-intentional) consciousness capable of grasping the immediate presence of God through affectivity.

As a result, neither the identification of transcendental Life (in capital letters) with God, nor the presence of the latter in the experience of oneself without distance, emerges in the writings of Henry’s later philosophy only. Before he worked on his allegedly more explicit ‘philosophy of Christianity,’ such intuitions were already present, especially in the studies of Spinoza. As Henry mentions in his early commentary on Spinoza’s notion of happiness:

“It obviously couldn’t be biological life [...]. Spinoza didn’t want that kind of life because he felt its weakness and knew, better than anyone else, the betrayal of the empirical. But he knew another life, Eternal Life, for the Being with whom he gradually identified, and to whom he entrusted his destiny, was that necessary Being which has eternal existence. It was substance, the essence that implies existence. And this implication is eternity itself: eternity is the very essence of God insofar as it envelops necessary existence. For the human person, union with God is eternity.”<sup>12</sup>

This text, written well before *The Essence of Manifestation*, illustrates just how much Spinoza would be one of Henry’s main sources. Indeed, the first academic work of the phenomenologist ends with establishing a close relationship between the third Spinozist genus of knowledge and the happiness attained by ‘simple’ human persons. As Henry affirms in his early master’s thesis:

“There is the virtue of thinkers. Other men, however, will feel that they belong to God, without feeling the need, and no doubt because this belonging is more perfect, to theorize about it. The mystics, the simple, will also experience Spinoza’s happiness.”<sup>13</sup>

This passage illustrates the abandonment of the realm of theory – proper to the ‘thinkers’ whose intelligence elaborates rational proofs for God’s existence – in favor of the joyful sentiment of union with God directly in the trial of life (*épreuve de la vie*).

### 3.2 *The core of the a-cosmic ego*

The more the phenomenological reduction identifies God’s presence in the *ego*, the more early Henry seems to describe self-affection as a univocal phenomenon. The similarity between the *ego* and the divine ipseity itself is one of the major problems of the radical phenomenology of life. Both are defined by a subjective, immanent reality, before the appearance of things in the world or in relation to it. Neither is reduced to the thought of an intentional consciousness, grasping the specific appearance of ‘ek-stasis.’ Both correspond to the fullness of appearance, i.e., to the most radical fulfillment of the first phenomenological principle, which holds: ‘so much appearing, so much being.’

<sup>12</sup> Michel Henry, *Le bonheur de Spinoza*, Paris 2004, 106 [transl. A.G.L.].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 146 [transl. A.G.L.].

This is why, in Henry's work, one may find a 'phenomenality of the Night,' in clear opposition to the light of the exteriority of the intra-worldly horizon. 'Night' is not used in a purely metaphorical sense but, correctly capitalized, designates the specific mode of appearance of immanent reality subsisting before the world. Inspired by Eckhart's German terminology, Henry's phenomenology of the Night describes 'divinity' (*Gottheit*) rather than a metaphysical concept of 'God' (*Gott*). Whereas the concept of 'God' refers to the external relationship between it and its creation outside it, deity implies only a relationship to a person in his or her interior affectivity.

This is why Henry's so-called atheism, in *The Essence of Manifestation*, is not merely 'methodological,' as it aims to deconstruct the concept of God, understood in its classical sense as an ontic entity located beyond the immanent life that the ego constantly experiences. Drawing on the *Rhenish Master's* famous distinction between Divinity and God, Henry's philosophical content of atheism is neither cognitive agnosticism nor phenomenological atheism. Quite the opposite: after destroying or deconstructing the classical concept of God, Henry's atheism becomes capable of knowing God, just as Spinoza becomes capable of knowing the divine essence itself. This knowledge of the essence of Divinity is not achieved on the level of representation, where the singularity of the *ego* is erased: it is a matter of accessing the divine essence itself. That such knowledge arises within the human ipseity, understood as 'a person who knows God,' appears within Henry's phenomenology as an element of the immediate trial of life which constitutes the essence, i.e., the origin of manifestation. The arch-phenomenon of self-affectation, that is, the subjective experience of immanent life that reveals itself in strict dependence on the affectivity and singularity of the *ego*, manifests both 'the soul' and 'God.' In other words: Life characterizes both the *ego's* reality and Divinity as its core, the 'core of my soul:' "Let the essence of the soul be the very essence of God."<sup>14</sup>

Given that the core manifests itself totally in the immediacy of the original appearing of the subject, whose phenomenality is irreducible to representation, Henry's approach boils down to the thematization of this same self-affectation. This genuine phenomenon does not require language or rationalization to manifest and know itself internally. As the thematization of the primordial self-affectation of the *ego* is realized, by affirming the presence of divinity as absolute Life, Henry pushes his phenomenology to a different notion of existence than that implied in the ontological argument.

The deepening of this thematization sheds light on the seamless transition from Henry's earlier writings, especially *The Essence of Manifestation*, and Henry's later works, i. e. his Christ-oriented trilogy. By taking the description of the immanent life, Henry ends up positing God as the most foundational element of immediate affective *parousia*.

It is a question of thematizing not only the inner life one subject is constantly experiencing, but also the generation of such a life. This is why, rather than specifying the conceptual attributes of God's essence, the Divinity appears as the background to this same experience of the *ego* experiencing herself immediately.

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<sup>14</sup> Id., *The Essence of Manifestation* (see fn. 4), 310.

### 3.3 The thematization of God's subjective experience (self-trial) in the Trilogy

An issue of the very well-known *Archivio di Filosofia*, published in 1990, and devoted to the question of the ontological argument, includes contributions from authors such as Paul Gilbert, Xavier Tilliette, Peter Henrici, Paul Ricœur, Jean-Luc Marion, among many others. In this very volume, Henry published the article "*Acheminement vers la question de Dieu : preuve de l'être ou épreuve de la vie*," in which Saint Anselm is explicitly referenced for the first time in his publications. In his commentary on the *Proslogion*, Henry is provocative in that he is the only one of the authors of this volume to criticize the *unum argumentum*. The criticism against Anselm in this article coincides entirely with his rejection of the ontological argument set out in *The Essence of Manifestation*. Such a rejection is connected to Anselm's allegedly one-sided reading of appearing.

However, in this article, for the first time, Henry goes even further concerning the question of God, or rather with respect to the problem of access to the divine essence itself. By placing the manifestation of God within immanent life in the affective mode that characterizes it, he makes the transition from *The Essence of Manifestation* to the further development of his philosophy of Christianity: the thematization of God's *parousia* within immanent life as experienced by the human subject. For this reason, it seems to us that Henry's critique of Anselm's argument is central to this passage, because it poses the question that demands and prefigures the completion of the radical phenomenology of life. The heart of Henry's critique of rational proofs for God's existence, as we have seen, is to show how such demonstrations overlook the *ego's* immediate union with God. As Henry argues:

"We have tried to show that access to God consists in his revelation, i.e., in his own life, and thus in ours, insofar as we are thrown into our life by the eternal coming of life itself. Access to God in life means access to him in the way that life accesses itself, outside the world, in its pathos."<sup>15</sup>

This passage illustrates the fact that Henry, in continuity with his fundamental intuitions, already present in his first thesis of 1963, 'risked the question of God,' especially from the 1990s onwards.

Whereas, in *The Essence of Manifestation*, the critique of the ontological argument is limited to denouncing the one-sidedness of the phenomenality of the representation involved, by criticizing the 'proof of being,' from the 1990s onwards, Henry seeks to show the possibility of access to God from 'the self-trial of life' (*l'épreuve de la vie*). Against this backdrop, we need to ask what precisely this 'other way,' which Henry discusses with Salazar-Ferrer, consists of. To do so, we need to grasp the phenomenologist's distinction between the 'proof' (*preuve*) and the 'trial of life' (*épreuve de la vie*), a distinction not yet made in his earlier texts. There is, apparently, a play on words in place that is only possible in French. This play on words enables us to move from the rational plane of the 'proof of being' – Henry's way of naming the ontological argument – to the phenomenological realm of the 'trial of life' – the affective and immediate experience of the *ego*.

<sup>15</sup> Id., *Phénoménologie de la vie*: Tome 4. Sur l'éthique et la religion, Paris 2004, 79 [transl. A.G.L.].

The unbroken difference between *The Essence of Manifestation* and the later trilogy lies, above all, in the progressive thematization of the trial of life through the theological language of the human birth into God.

Rather, it is an attempt to describe pure immanence phenomenologically. And indeed, it is through such a description that the radical phenomenology of life can come to an end. In this sense, the question of access to God within the trial of life becomes crucial, insofar as the positive determination of life, in terms of the divine *parousia*, will describe the whole phenomenon of a-cosmic self-affection identified as the *most original* essence.

In *C'est moi la vérité*, the first tome of Henry's later Trilogy, the human condition of being a "son of God" emerges as the biblical translation of what Henry had already judged in *The Essence of Manifestation* to be the radical "passivity" of the *ego*.<sup>16</sup> The concept of sonship (*filiation*) – borrowed to some extent from the Christian tradition – brings God into the philosophical discourse in strict connection with the human condition. From the filial condition of the *ego*, God appears within the radical phenomenology, always in deep connection with the internal experience of the original *cogito*. Instead of being imposed as an ontotheological concept from outside, God emerges as the positive determination of subjectivity itself. The alternative to the failure of Anselm's argument is to deepen the description of the engendering of passive self-experience. As Henry affirms:

"We must now return to the founding intuitions of Christianity. Access to the living God – access to Life – occurs only in Life, in the eternal process of its self-generation as self-revelation. Nor, truly, is the issue now the process of absolute Life considered itself, but rather the possibility for people to reach and to have access to God."<sup>17</sup>

Awareness of one's own filial condition is achieved effectively through the subjective experience of receiving passively life and one's own ipseity. As soon as it is phenomenologically experienced by the subject, radical passivity constitutes the keystone that enables Henry to make the transition from the phenomenon of the self-affected *ego*, by his or her own life – basically, the *ego* that I am – to the presence of God within myself or, more precisely, my self within God's Life. This passage marks the essence of the last period of Henry's work: the so-called 'philosophy of Christianity.'

This means that the most original phenomenon to which we have access, that of our own immanent life, is a *Self in the accusative*. As the *ego* becomes aware of his or her passive condition with regard not only to the feelings he or she experiences, but also to the fact of being 'posited by another,' the phenomenology of life, compelled to describe this process of the *ego*'s self-engendering, must make a distinction between two kinds of self-affection. On the one hand, we have the phenomenon of self-affection in the 'weak' sense. On the other hand, there is the self-affection in the 'strong' sense. This distinction appears for the first time in a 1992 article,<sup>18</sup> where Henry, without yet distinguishing between the predicates 'weak' and 'strong,' states that "there are thus two self-affectations, that of life which

<sup>16</sup> Id., *The Essence of Manifestation* (see fn. 4), 469.

<sup>17</sup> Id., *I am the Truth* (see fn. 9), 157.

<sup>18</sup> It is the article "Parole et religion: la Parole de Dieu"; cf. Antoine Vidalin, "Phénoménologie de la Vie et Théologie," in: Michel Henry, les Dossiers H, org. Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean Leclercq, Lausanne 2009, 514 f.

absolutely self-affects and thus self-engenders, and that of the self-affected Self and thus engendered as Self in Life.”<sup>19</sup>

Insofar as the self was neither self-begotten nor self-given, but only passively received his or her life and ipseity (the fact of being posited by another), his or her self-affection must be understood in its ‘weak sense.’ This is asserted in these explicit terms only in the first volume of the trilogy, precisely after the rejection of the Anselmian argument:

“As far as I am me, I affect myself: I am myself the affected and what affects it, myself the ‘subject’ of this affection and its content. I experience myself, and constantly, in that, the fact of experiencing myself constitutes my ‘Me.’ But I have not brought myself into this condition of experiencing myself. I am myself, but I myself have no part in this ‘being-myself.’ I experiencing myself without this givenness arising from me in any way [...]. This self-affection that defines my essence is not my doing. And thus I do not affect myself absolutely, but, precisely put, I am and I find myself self-affected. Here we find the weak sense of the concept of self-affection.”<sup>20</sup>

However, this ‘weak’ concept of self-affection is not self-explanatory. If the *ego* cannot generate its own life, we must presuppose a more primordial Ipseity who has such a faculty. Henry is leading us to the ‘First Living,’ the ‘Arch-self,’ to which the ‘strong’ meaning of the concept of self-affection is applicable. This Arch-self thus appears as the condition of possibility for the intelligibility of the accusative Self who I am.

The original phenomenon is that of a life that experiences itself, i.e., self-affection as distinct from any kind of hetero-affection, where the subject is affected by a reality that is external to him or her. However, for this life to be able to experience itself, it is necessary to suppose the presence of an ipseity, a singularity. One’s own self thus becomes the condition of possibility for life’s self-affection.

Moreover, in the process of engendering life, there must be a first ipseity capable of positing itself through the hyper-power of life. Consequently, the concepts of the self-engendering of ipseity, the ‘birth’ of the *ego*, and the self-giving of the contents of life are philosophically – more precisely, phenomenologically – legitimized. However, this ‘strong’ sense of self-affection does not apply to the *ego* to which I originally have access, the accusative *ego* that is my own. The *ego* that I am knows that he or she is not the first one: I am not the Arch-self that is self-engendered by herself in absolute Life. A link is thus established between the self, which each of us is, and God. This link is perceived in the phenomenon of the radical passivity in which our ipseities find themselves in relation to the Life they experience.

In this manner, Henry provides an alternative to the Anselmian proof. He establishes this alternative by moving us from the simple rational affirmation of *ens divinum*’s existence to the subjective experience of divine Life.

<sup>19</sup> Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*: Tome 4 (see fn. 15), 79 [transl. A.G.L.].

<sup>20</sup> Id., *I am the Truth* (see fn. 9), 106 f.

To further clarify this awareness of God's presence within the self-trial of life, Henry goes on to elaborate what he calls, in his later texts, an "archaeology of the flesh." Indeed, commenting on the Incarnation in Christianity, taken in the phenomenological sense, he states: "the phenomenology here sketched [is] in the form of archaeology of the flesh."<sup>21</sup>

The use of the word "archaeology" refers to a return to an origin more ancient than the self-experiencing *ego*. It is a matter of thematizing the 'absolute past' to which Henry refers in his later works. In doing so, he shows us how God plays the role of a condition of possibility of the self in the phenomenology of life.

The commentary on the Latin prefix *in* is interesting in this context. Instead of signifying the negativity of the *inaccessibility* or *incognoscibility* of Anselm's concept of God, this preposition now takes on the positive meaning concerning the Life and flesh that derive from it. A path towards God as origin thus respects the positive ontology of subjectivity, always sought by Henry.

According to Henry, Saint John sticks to the 'Before-Absolute' concerning the begetting of Christ, and of him alone. To this end, the phenomenologist privileges the Johannine description of intra-trinitarian relations. Henry's interpretation of the Johannine corpus is focused primarily on the figure of the *Incarnate Word* and his relationship with the Father: "On the one hand is the immense crowd of the living, and on the other an only Son, as John constantly refers to him."<sup>22</sup> This leads us to what Henry calls a "phenomenology of Christ." That God alone is his father, not Joseph, means that Christ presents himself as the transcendental "Arch-Son."<sup>23</sup> According to Henry, John recognizes the "Logos of Life" as the origin thematized by his phenomenology. John's insistence on what happens before the world, before creation, before the begetting of the human person, leads the phenomenologist beyond the self-affection of the *ego* that I am. What is needed, then, is an even more radical deepening of the origin that leads Henry to describe the "Before-absolute of life" based on the Johannine conceptual apparatus. In his view, John's Prologue describes the "Arch-Revelation of divine life," i.e., the pure self-affection in the strongest sense. Insofar as Christ declares, to the scandal of many, that "before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8:58),<sup>24</sup> the powerful concept of self-affection is affirmed. When the Pharisees ask him, "Where is your Father?," Christ affirms: "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father too" (Jn 8:14, 19).<sup>25</sup> There is therefore an immanent and reciprocal relationship between Christ and God, as John describes it: "Do you not know, Philip, that I am in the Father and the Father in me" (Jn 14:10).<sup>26</sup>

In this way, Henry's phenomenology of Christ – that is, the implications required by Christ's affirmations in the light of the principles of radical phenomenology – consists in a true extension (and not a mere repetition in another terminology) of the intuitions expressed in *The Essence of Manifestation*. Indeed, insofar as John describes the begetting of

<sup>21</sup> Id., *Phénoménologie de la vie*: Tome 4 (see fn. 15), 151 [transl. A.G.L.].

<sup>22</sup> Id., *I am the Truth* (see fn. 9), 114.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> This verse is often quoted by Michel Henry (cf. *Ibid.*, 76).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *id.*, *Words of Christ*, transl. by Christina M. Gschwandtner, Cambridge 2012, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Id., *Incarnation. A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. by Karl Hefty, Evanston 2015, 369.

the *First Living*, radical phenomenology, in appropriating the biblical text, places itself before the begetting of one's own *ego*.

The phenomenology of Christ, promoted by Henry in his later years, focuses, first and foremost, on the self-generation of absolute Life, even before the begetting of the finite *ego*, who I am, and his or her immediate self-affection. The intra-Trinitarian relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, highlighted in John, provide the phenomenologist with the conceptual tools to thematize this most absolute of origins. As Henry states in the last volume of his trilogy:

“The Father (Life all-powerful which self-engenders itself) remains in his Son (the Word [Verbe] in which this Life engenders itself in experiencing itself and in revealing itself in this way to itself, just as the Son (this Son in whom Life experiences itself in him in such a way that it experiences itself in it). Thus one is in the other in this way, the Father in his Son, the Son in his Father according to a reciprocal inwardness (each experiencing, living, loving one in the other), which is an interiority of love, which is their common Love, their Spirit.”<sup>27</sup>

The identity Christ experiences with the Father – “the Father and I are one” (Jn 10:30)<sup>28</sup> –, in conjunction with the fact of their distinction – “the Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28)<sup>29</sup> –, corroborates the true and only possible birth as the transcendental Arch-generation of the *First Living*. In this way, one can see how Henry reads Christ's words as an expression of the apodictic and affective certainty of being connected to absolute Life. The phenomenology of Christ thus confirms the description of the experience of the *First Living* ipseity. The ‘power before powers,’ that Christ claims to possess, is clearly the ‘hyper-power,’ the ‘Arch-power’ of Life. According to Henry's hermeneutics, the Fourth Gospel makes it even more explicit that this Arch-power of Christ is how finite *egos* are generated. According to Henry, the statement that “it is not you who have chosen me, but I who have chosen you” (Jn 15:16)<sup>30</sup> should be read in connection with Jn 14:6: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the famous parable of the sheep is illuminating in this respect (cf. Jn 10:1–18). On the one hand, it reverses the thematization of Life's self-engendering process, for Christ is no longer seen as the one who receives life, but rather as the one who gives it: “I have come that you may have life” (Jn 10:10)<sup>32</sup>; “I am the gate” (Jn 10:9).<sup>33</sup>

Henry's interpretation of this parable consists in the begetting of all finite *egos* by absolute Life in the Arch-flesh of the *First Living*. According to Henry, Christ is not primarily the medium between human persons and God, but between each *ego* and him- or herself. Insofar as each finite *ego* experiences him- or herself in the flesh of the Arch-Son, he or she experiences absolute Life itself, without merging with it.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. id., I am the Truth (see fn. 9), 113.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. ibid., 102.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. ibid., 163.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. ibid., 89.

<sup>32</sup> In an article published in 1995, a year before the publication of *C'est moi la vérité*, Henry develops the hermeneutic he will expound throughout the Trilogy, with regard to Jesus' parable of the shepherd and his sheep in Jn 10:1–18 (cf. id., *Phénoménologie de la Vie*: Tome IV [see fn. 15], 165–175).

<sup>33</sup> Id., I am the Truth (see fn. 9), 115.

#### 4. The Anthropology that Emerges from Henry's Phenomenology

In the phenomenology of life, the question of God is primarily anthropological. It is important to thematize phenomenologically the access to God insofar as it manifests the human person in his or her fleshly-affective nature and in his or her filial condition in relation to the Life that engenders him or her. This anthropology is intrinsically connected to the hermeneutics of the Johannine Prologue developed by Henry, especially in his later writings. In this context, the fundamental verse is undoubtedly Jn 1:14: the statement "the Word became flesh" designates the immanent appearance, outside and prior to any kind of manifestation in the world. Against the Greek principle, according to which manifestation requires the externalization of essence, John takes a stand: "came in the flesh" (1 Jn 4:1-2). The "Word of life" (1 Jn 1:1) is not confused with the prophets who appeared in the world in the course of a historical-temporal movement.<sup>34</sup>

In doing so, Henry's appropriation and reinterpretation of the notion of Incarnation leads him to refute a Church Father such as Tertullian. According to the latter, the taking on of flesh like ours by the Word meant appearing before our eyes in "a flesh that is made from the silt of the earth, from the matter of the world."<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, Henry's interpretation of John's Gospel does not refer to the objective or organic body, always visible in a world. What his phenomenology seeks to grasp is the radically immanent flesh. If Christ is the *archè* and the *telos*, the *alpha* and the *omega* (cf. Rev 1:1-8), we need to describe the movement involved in the Incarnation. This movement consists firstly in the process of begetting the *First Living* ipseity, and then the finite *egos*.

Moreover, Henry's philosophy of Christianity is not confined to the movement of transcendental birth. He goes on to extend his phenomenology towards a kind of eschatology. Although it may seem paradoxical, even contradictory, to speak of *eschatos* in an author like Henry, it seems to us that his search for a radical beginning leads him to glimpse the path to salvation. By deepening his philosophy of Christianity into an archaeology of the flesh, the *ego* is led back to the original life that had been forgotten. Henry's eschatology thus consists in this return to the origin.

In this way, his philosophy of Christianity cannot be reduced to an extension of material phenomenology through the thematization of the Before-Absolute of transcendental Life. In addition to the archaeology of the flesh, Henry's hermeneutic of the Pauline and Johannine corpus also reveals the eschatological movement of the Christian cogito towards salvation.

Christ's Incarnation (cf. Jn 1:14) is not just about the arch-engendering of the most primordial Ipseity, and then of other finite ipseities: it also constitutes a coming whose goal is the salvation of all the living. It is worth noting Henry's use of biblical formulations to illustrate 'sin' as estrangement from original Life, and the affective gnosis from which the *ego* is led back to it.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. id., *Auto-donation*. Entretiens et conférences, Paris 2004, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Id., *Incarnation* (see fn. 26), 45.

#### 4.1 Sin as an exclusion from absolute Life

In his trilogy, Henry first describes the engendering of the *First Living* ipseity: Christ. Subsequently, he illustrates the engendering of the finite *egos* in the life of this First selfhood: human ipseities. Next, he portrays the forgetfulness of these finite subjects in relation to their dependence on the absolute Life. And finally, he describes the eschatological movement that brings them back to their filial condition. Here, radical phenomenology develops from the situation triggered by 'evil.' The origin of evil lies within the human heart, insofar as

"There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile [...]. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come [...]. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."<sup>36</sup> (Mk 7:14-23)

According to Henry, 'evil' appears in John's Gospel to be defined by the inability to hear the 'Word of Life' – that is, the inability to see that Christ is of divine condition and, consequently, to see oneself as a living being begotten in God through Christ. This is the state of those Jesus mentions when healing the blind man from birth. Henry's hermeneutics of this passage focuses on the implicit distinction between two radically heterogeneous ways of seeing: there are those who, despite their biological blindness, see that Jesus is the Messiah; and there are those who see into the exteriority of the world, but are unable to recognize him in his divine condition.

The Pauline opposition between the Law and living grace is reflected in John's contrast between the "new principle" of the Pharisees and the "original principle" of immanent life. In other words, insofar as Jesus' opponents come from the "devil," their new or "*different father*," they are concerned only with the world and its affairs, to the detriment of the original trial of life (cf. Jn 6:45; 8:44, 47).<sup>37</sup> Enclosed in their 'radical egoism,' the Pharisees represent the gap between the gift of life, received passively, and the absolute quest for mastery of intra-worldly phenomena. John refers to such characters as 'liars' or 'hypocrites,' because they feel, in their hearts, that they are the origin of all reality. Only if the world's visibility reveals all truth can we be certain of the justice and actions of the Pharisees.

Nevertheless, Christ demands that almsgiving, fasting, and prayer be carried out 'in secret,' i.e., outside the spectacle of intra-worldly events. In the midst of the world, 'hypocrisy' is always possible, as there can be a discrepancy between the truth of the visible gesture in the invisible flesh and its appearance in the eyes of the earth (cf. Mt 6:1–18; Mt 23:27).

In overestimating his or her power, the ego begins by overestimating worldly objects, reversing the original 'hierarchy.' Thus, insofar as he or she attributes to ek-static phenomenality all the power of appearing, the *ego* obscures his or her filial condition with respect to absolute transcendental Life. To the question of why, a beautiful formulation by Plotinus responds: "sons no longer know that they are sons." In Henry's reading of John, the fourth Gospel adds a description of an *ego* that takes itself for the foundation of his or her own being. It is an *ego* that does not want to live in the passive condition of the one who receives

<sup>36</sup> Cf. id., *Words of Christ* (see fn. 25), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 121.

life, but rather one who exercises agency in creating reality and modifying the world by his or her own power and will. This is the movement of 'evil.' In doing so, the *ego* tends to despise, or even forget, life in its arch-affective revelation. This means that the *ego*, deluded into forgetting its own begetting, takes 'possession of its powers,' exercising them only within the horizon of 'ek-static' phenomenality. Those are the 'liars' of whom Jesus speaks in the parable of the sheep: "All who came before me are thieves and robbers" (cf. Jn 10:1.8).

The figure of the Anti-Christ, the one who "denies the Father and the Son" (1 Jn 2:22 f.; Rev 9:6.20; 13:14), makes this forgetfulness of Life clear. The opposition between Christ and his antonym corresponds to the heterogeneity between the egoism of those who are exclusively of the world (cf. Jn 17:14; 1 Jn 4:5 f.), taking possession of the things that are there and reducing all reality to those things, and the withdrawal of the one who gives his or her life completely.<sup>38</sup>

In this respect, it is interesting to remember the response addressed to Nietzsche in Henry's reading of John's Gospel. At the climax of his trilogy, the radical phenomenologist names the deluded *egos* with terminology that comes very close to that of the philosopher who considered himself to be dynamite. "Master of itself" and the "all-powerful Subject"<sup>39</sup> are expressions that can be ascribed to those who follow the ideal of overcoming human nature. This ideal undoubtedly coincides with Nietzsche's subject, as a creator. Although Henry finds in Nietzsche the intuition of a return to immanent life and the concern to nurture its growth,<sup>40</sup> we should not confine ourselves to the praiseworthy mentions of Nietzsche. Insofar as the 'denatured heart' is that of the subject who places him- or herself 'at the center of everything,' this is indeed a 'monadic *ego*' that Henry is deconstructing in his later philosophy of Christianity. In fact, insofar as the radical autonomy of this *ego* is held to be illusory, there is an important difference between Nietzsche's thinking and Henry's phenomenology.

The same applies to Marx. Although Henry praises him, he does not defend the 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach, according to which the world must be transformed by a subject that is at the origin of all power without the passive reception of life. Such a subject appears to be the 'monadic *ego*' that Henry criticizes. This Nietzschean or Marxian *ego* lacks the radical passivity in which he or she receives life without being its creator.

One can understand that, according to Henry, 'evil' becomes effective through *egos* that live as autonomous beings. Beginning with 'sin,' which consists in opposing the original passivity of the giving life, evil takes place. This is illustrated by Jesus' observation of the hatred of his adversaries: "They are full of hatred against me and against my Father" (cf. Jn 15:18 f., 23–25). This means that, with 'sin,' 'evil' no longer recognizes its wickedness in the light of God and divine Truth. Much more than that, evil becomes the total rejection of that Truth, no longer recognizing itself as evil. This rejection of the Truth consists in the total separation with respect to Life. In doing so, the *ego* absolutizes the world and its phenomenality.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Cf. id., *Phénoménologie de la Vie*: Tome IV (see fn. 15), 132.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. id., *Words of Christ* (see fn. 25), 97.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. id., *The Essence of Manifestation* (see fn. 4), §37, 370.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. id., *Words of Christ* (see fn. 25), 97–100.

Continuing to translate the biblical verses into the intuitions of material phenomenology, the autonomy of the *ego*, detaching herself from God, translates the attitude of focusing exclusively on 'ek-static' phenomenality. From there, the subject can nurture the illusion of autonomy, i.e., the illusion of being the master of all reality, as the Nietzschean super-human does. For Henry, the biblical figure of such a subject is Cain, who personifies the attitude that this sin constitutes. Although God seeks to speak to him from within the a-cosmic heart, the one who killed his brother goes off into the 'outer darkness,' increasingly severing his link with God, Truth, and Life.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.2 *Archi-gnosis or the eschatological return to Life*

The question that now arises is "how then, in spite of evil, beyond it, through it," is it still possible for the human person 'to hear' the Word of Life, the Johannine *Logos*. It is a question of understanding the movement towards the origin to which the *ego*, which had absolutized the 'ek-static' phenomenality of the world, returns. Such is Henry's eschatology, if there ever was one.

In his last writings, especially in his philosophy of Christianity, Henry ends up sliding towards the theme of ethics in general. To this extent, rather than a theological turn, his famous trilogy could be interpreted as a shift towards the assimilation of certain ethical aspects. Indeed, in Henry's later writings, a clear ethical-moral preoccupation emerges.

In this respect, Henry's hermeneutics preserves the omnipotence of the *Verbum Christi* and, above all, the purification of the disciple's heart.<sup>43</sup> To all those who want to follow him, Jesus demands that they abandon earthly goals and concerns, i.e. "the order of the world."<sup>44</sup> It is a question of re-establishing the primordial hierarchy between the two phenomenality-ties that the monadic *ego*, deluded by its powers, had distorted. In other words, Henry's hermeneutics of the Johannine corpus conceives of salvation as the re-establishment of the original order by re-attributing primacy to transcendental life.

In this sense, Henry reads the 'second birth,' which Nicodemus has difficulty understanding (cf. Jn 3:1–21), as a return to the living, inner affectivity that the *ego* had forgotten in its earthly affairs.<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that salvation, understood as a return to Life, is offered to those who have become almost exclusively focused on worldly affairs. This is why gospel-oriented sanctification consists in a return to the original order between the two phenomena, and not in the elimination of all 'ek-static' appearances in favor of immanent life. With this respect, Henry quotes the following passages of John's Gospel:

"I don't pray that you take them out of the world, but that you preserve them from the Evil One. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world [...]. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I sanctify myself, so that they themselves may be sanctified." (Jn 17:15–19)<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cf. id., *Phénoménologie de la Vie*: Tome V, Paris 2015, 129.

<sup>43</sup> Id., *Words of Christ* (see fn. 25), 110.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. id., *I am the Truth* (see fn. 9), 190–192.

<sup>46</sup> Id., *Incarnation* (see fn. 26), 335 f.

The difficulty, then, lies in understanding the return to a-cosmic life by a person who is now turned towards the world. Faced with this aporia, Henry adds one clarification to his definition of *humanitas* as a living flesh. The human person is indeed “double, visible and invisible at the same time.” The question that then arises concerns the possibility for this person with a ‘double nature’ to hear in a language that is her tongue a word that would speak in another language, which would be that of God. To do this, one must destroy his or her own “egoism” that constitutes the “leap into sin.” In order to abolish “the system of transcendental egoism,” Henry quotes the new commandment proclaimed in John’s Gospel (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-21): Love of God, understood as Life, is the first and indeed the only commandment of ethics.<sup>47</sup>

Through the works of love, the *ego* will be able to forget itself to leave behind the solipsism of egoism that had confined its life to the sphere of purely ‘ek-static’ phenomena. This is why, rather than aiming for the manifestation of the “face” of others, in the manner of Levinas, Henry sees the practice of love as a means of achieving, above all, “self-forgetfulness.”<sup>48</sup> In this sense, the way is to forget oneself to stop placing oneself at the origin, returning to the accusative mode of existence that is receiving life as a gift.

This self-forgetfulness serves to remind the *ego* of its intrinsic link to absolute Life. For the *ego* to become aware of the fact that it is not the origin of reality, the relentless trial of life is no longer enough. The *ego* must become affectively aware of the passivity that characterizes self-affection in the ‘weak sense.’

To this end, Henry creates the syntagm of ‘Arch-gnosis:’ knowledge gained through the affective trial of life. The fact of being a gnosis (a *knowledge*) introduces a nuance to the concept of Johannine ‘Arch-intelligibility.’ Insofar as knowledge involves the subject who is conscious of it, when the phenomenologist evokes ‘Arch-gnosis,’ he is referring both to ‘Arch-intelligibility’ and to the state of consciousness of the subject to whom life gives to him- or herself.

In order to achieve this awareness, when the *ego* has turned his or her attention to earthly matters, it is appropriate to thematize the immediate trial of life. Henry thus confronts the supreme paradox of his approach: the affective experience – that which needs no concepts or reasoning to reveal itself immediately in the immanent embrace of transcendental life – seems to call for philosophical thematization.

To understand this, it is important to distinguish between the trial of life itself (*épreuve de la vie*) without the need for thematization, and its subjective knowledge (for which thematization can be a first step in helping to achieve it). Just as Jesus speaks in parables, Henry thematizes the trial of life that precedes and dispenses with all philosophy. In other words, the thematization at issue here functions a little like Christ’s parables, when he speaks in human language about everyday experiences in the world in order to elicit the experience of another reality, invisible to earthly eyes.

The thematization of the trial of life, brought to us by Henry’s philosophy of Christianity, serves only to provide a definitive answer to the aporia of the ontological argument. This

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. id., *I am the Truth* (see fn. 9), 186.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 212 f.

means that, determined according to biblical conceptual tools, such a thematization constitutes the way not exactly to immediate access to God (always present within us), but above all to awareness of the tireless divine *parousia* within us. Within him- or herself, the ego becomes affectively aware of being not only posited by God, but deeply linked to absolute (or divine) Life.

In this way, we understand the extent to which Henry's phenomenology, if there is such a thing, is (or seeks to be) performative. By this term, I want to state that, especially in his later writings, Henry thematizes the trial of life in order to stimulate in his readers an affectively perceived awareness of our passive or filial condition in relation to God. In this context, 'phenomenology' no longer means starting from the incontrovertible apodicticity of a phenomenon whose inaugural manifestation is given to be described. Henry's appropriation of John's Gospel appears to us as thematizing the life that is given to us, so that this described experience is consciously felt by the *egos* we are, even if such a subjective experience is always realized a-thematically and constantly in transcendental forgetfulness.

The performativity of this philosophy enables us to overcome Nietzsche's revolt against religion, conceived as a reaction contrary to the vitality of immanent life. Just as in Nietzsche, Henry's notion of life has to do with the aim of realizing human needs and desires: notably "life's need to constantly increase itself, to increase its capacity to feel, the level of its action, the intensity of its love."<sup>49</sup> The 'Arch-gnosis' that emerges from radical phenomenology is also affective enjoyment. In fact, according to John, God is not only Life: God is love.<sup>50</sup> For Henry, salvation is realized by intensifying life, in its affective tones. However, this is only possible with the awareness of its dependence on God, the only one who can give life and stimulate it.

This approach responds to Nietzsche by refuting his genealogy of morality: it is not 'through resentment' that Christianity overturns 'the values of the world.' The *fuga mundi* is not achieved through jealous hatred of those who possess nothing in the world. The renunciation of a conquest in the world, the abandonment of the powers of earthly 'ek-stasis' in order to satisfy some will to power, is because true values lie in a-cosmic Life.

Indeed, even though she must renounce earthly affairs, the disciple remains fully alive. Even if she must die to the world, one is always dealing here with a 'second birth.' Whereas Nietzsche turns to the here-and-now of life in order to assert his power, Henry appeals to self-forgetfulness so that Life can be passively received. In so doing, instead of locking him- or herself into an absolute faith in the earth, the Henryan *ego* withdraws from the world, precisely to intensify the fundamental, affective modalities of his or her life.

In a rather ethical terminology, regeneration or purification of the heart is not, for Henry, reduced to the simple re-establishment of the true hierarchy between the affective appearance of primordial life and the secondary 'ek-stasis' in worldly phenomena. To achieve this, the *ego* must forget him- or herself as master of all reality, so that he or she can tirelessly feel his or her filial condition in his or her self-affection. This corresponds to Henry's ethics.

Nevertheless, the salvation sought by such an ethic is not limited to the subjective experience of this condition of living always from a first radical passivity. Feeling oneself as a

<sup>49</sup> Id., *Incarnation* (see fn. 26), §43, 312.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. id., *Auto-donation* (see fn. 34), 38.

son or daughter, i.e., as a self in the accusative, must in some way merge with the trial of absolute Life.<sup>51</sup>

In short, Henry's eschatology consists of two distinct, interconnected moments: (1) by renouncing mastery of reality in the 'ek-static' appearance, (2) the *ego* orients itself towards the origin where he or she is constantly begotten and where his or her own life can increase without limit.

In this sense, love-*agape* meets love-*eros*. It is from self-forgetfulness (*apape*), implied in the renunciation of the world and its specific phenomenality, that the ego returns to the affection, we might say *erotic*, of enjoying oneself in one's flesh. In other words, it is only by returning to the radical passivity of its self-affection in the 'weaker sense' that an ipseity can receive a life beyond its powers. The generativity revealed by material phenomenology is not limited to the engendering of the finite *ego* within absolute Life. It is also about the fullness of a life that is obtained by withdrawing from the world. The weakness of radical passivity thus constitutes the condition of possibility for the affective plenty in which the *ego* is fulfilled, i.e., in which he or she is saved.

That is why Henry's phenomenology is nothing more than a description of the experience sought, or attained, by mystics of all religious traditions in their ecstasies to an a-cosmic dimension, beyond this world.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how Michel Henry proposes an alternative to the ontological argument that consists in the phenomenological thematization of the affective experience of the immanent God. Interior to our flesh, God gives us life. And it is in the passivity of our filial condition that we experience God in us. This experience is confused with the experience of feeling oneself in the accusative. Therefore, the question of God, in radical phenomenology, is above all anthropological. To be aware of the interiority of God means to conceive one's *humanitas* as fleshly and filial, i.e., affective and dependent on a Living other who precedes us.

Indeed, to experience oneself as a living being posited not by one's own strength or will, but by a Life that in spite of everything surpasses us, inaugurates an entirely different anthropology. Insofar as I accept myself as a son or daughter – in the subjective experience of self-affection in the weaker sense of the term, i.e., as generated by a Life greater than myself – passivity, like fragility, is experienced in a positive way.

It is quite the opposite for the subject who affirms, through the power of reason, the necessary existence of God. As the summit of universal reason, held by a Faustian subject, the ontological argument arises. The subject who thinks it seems to impose the reason he or she masters on God itself. As a result, he or she ends up removing God from all possible experience, because such a subject wants to be him- or herself the all-powerful one, the one who controls everything.

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. *id.*, *I am the Truth* (see fn. 9), 291.

Rather than allowing us to think of God and his phenomenality differently, Henry's alternative to the ontological proof has the merit of leading us towards a new anthropological conception. This no longer conceives of the dependence of a finite or fragile person as a limitation, but rather as the condition of possibility for the affective experience that only divine love can engender.

In his last published novel, *Le fils du roi*, Henry introduces us to the character José. Weak as a mental patient, José narrates his encounters with the doctors and other patients at the hospice. In doing so, he leads us through the trial of his immanent life, with unshakeable certainty that he is 'the king's son.' Almost at the end of the plot, there is a clear allusion to the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, which takes place in the Gospel of John (cf. Jn 18:28-40):

"The director of these debates still had some:

- Let's see [...] The main obstacle, the only one, in fact, was this strange conviction you had of being the son of a king – a conviction without any objective foundation, as you now agree.

I remained silent [...].

- Answer me: Are you the king's son, yes or no?

- You said it, I am."<sup>52</sup>

Despite his royal lineage and the certainty that consoles him absolutely, José is in no way confused with the all-powerful creator who wants to master everything, whether through science or technology, or through the sheer force of the Life that animates him. He is neither Don Juan nor Faust. José recognizes that he receives himself in the almighty Life. He is the son, not the king himself. And so, instead of dominating or imposing a force, he loves by giving himself in return. Peace is experienced in this self-giving.

This inner and a-cosmic peace is attained only by those who, in a passive attitude, never cease to receive life, despite their weaknesses, their worldly pains, or the injustices to which they are subjected. It is only in this way that such consolation is possible. This is how José's story ends:

"They will seize my body [he says]. They will raise the threat of their whips against me so that I will lower my forehead, so that I will no longer read in my eye who I am and who they are. They will strike with all their might. They will burst my lips and the puffy flesh of my cheeks [...]. But what does it matter! Such tactics can't hurt me, because I'm also the king's son."<sup>53</sup>

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die zentrale Rolle, die Anselms Beweis bei der Entwicklung von Michel Henrys radikaler Phänomenologie des Lebens spielt, wie sie in seiner späten ‚Philosophie des Christentums‘ formuliert ist. Es wird analysiert, inwiefern dieser Beweis eine grundlegende Position in Henrys intellektuellem Weg einnimmt und Licht auf seine Konzeption der Beziehung zwischen dem menschlichen Ich und Gott wirft. Dabei werden wir sehen, wie die Frage nach Gott in Henrys Philosophie in erster Linie anthropologischer Natur ist. Indem er sich auf den Menschen konzentriert, der sich dem Wesen Gottes öffnet, wird Henry dazu gebracht, jene moderne Anthropologie zu

<sup>52</sup> Id., *Romans*, Paris 2009, 546 [our translation].

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 549 [our translation].

dekonstruieren, die das Subjekt als eine allmächtige Entität darstellt, die auf wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnissen, persönlichen Stärken und Wünschen beruht. In diesem Zusammenhang wird erörtert, wie Henrys Philosophie die Beziehung zwischen Mensch und Gott neu definiert und damit die konventionellen Paradigmen der Moderne herausfordert.