

OF LIFE THAT RESISTS – ON MICHEL HENRY’S NOTION OF SELF-AFFECTION

ABSTRACT: For Michel Henry, the Cartesian notion of “*videre videor*” (“I seem to see”) provides the clearest schema of the type of self-affection in which life is experienced, and through which one can provide a properly phenomenological conception of life. It is above all in Henry’s exemplification of the ‘*videor*’ in terms of affective experience (in undergoing a passion, feeling pain) that one is able to pin down his two principle arguments concerning the nature of this self-affection. The one, regarding the *videor* as a form of self-awareness, ultimately fails to convince, whereas the same cannot be said for Henry’s analyses of those types of affective experience whose primary characteristic is precisely a form of resistance internal to life itself. This leads to a demonstration of how Henry’s phenomenology of the *videor* founds an understanding of life that presupposes a form of impotence and limitation, and even finitude, as the very implication of its appearance. OF LIFE THAT RESISTS – ON MICHEL HENRY’S NOTION OF SELF-AFFECTION

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As a goal of phenomenological research, identifying the distinctive features of the experience of life rather seems to have fallen by the wayside. In certain respects, this is a surprising development; a properly elaborated notion of life would certainly have a significant bearing on a number of current topics in philosophy, among them ethical issues in the bio-medical sciences and the notion of emergentism in consciousness studies. For all that, the study of life in

and of itself, irrespective of any practical or interdisciplinary applications, seems to be of only minor importance when compared to topics like what it means to have free will, or a body, or an item of practical knowledge. It is as if only those latter sorts of problems, and not ones associated with the distinctive experiential qualities of life, allowed us to take stock of ourselves, which is to say, allowed us to come to terms with the burden, not just of having life, but of having to live.

One exception is Michel Henry's pursuit of a phenomenological conception of life. There, one cannot but be struck by the quite particular sense of life that is at stake in a phenomenology that only appears to make room for efficient causes. Synonymous neither with transcendence and factual life à la Heidegger nor with the unceasing engagement and intentionality of conscious life à la Sartre, what Henry calls 'Radical Life' breaks with the idea that life is what enables human beings, rather than stones or clouds, to be involved in situations or be-in-the-world, and thereby to be caught up in and preoccupied with the world around us. To the contrary, the significance of life lies for Henry in a different direction; it is that which cleaves subjectivity from the world, thereby exposing one to the world's irreality and the staleness of its appearances, as well as to a realm of truth little susceptible to any form of mediation.

However, if this experience of life is indeed so isolated and excluded from any appearing of the world, then how is it given at all? Henry was rarely able to improve upon the skill with which he addresses this problem, above all in *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* and the later work *Incarnation*, via the Cartesian notion of the "*videre videor*" ("I seem to see"). For Henry, the *videor* holds the key to the type of self-affection in which this life is experienced, and thus shown as both suffering and enjoyment, as both burden and empowerment.

As I show, it is above all in Henry's exemplification of the *videor* in affective experience (in undergoing a passion, feeling pain) that one is finally able to pin down his two principle arguments concerning the nature of this self-affection. The one, regarding the *videor* as a form of self-awareness, ultimately fails to convince, for in the last analysis Henry does not do enough to

distinguish his version from similar such accounts offered by Sartre, Descartes, and even Heidegger. On the other hand, the same cannot be said for Henry's analyses of a type of affective experience whose primary characteristic is precisely a resistance internal to life itself. Not only does such an account of resistance allow a concrete understanding of what a self- or auto-affection could be about; it also opens up a perspective on why, for Henry, an original givenness of life cannot but be structured in this way.

By the end of this discussion, I hope to have shown how Henry's interpretation of the *videor* points the way toward what is ultimately a conception of life, as is especially, but not only, to be found in his late work, *Incarnation*, which ends up including (much to our surprise) a form of impotence and limitation, and thus finitude, as the very implication of its manifestation. Moreover, I aim to underline how Henry thereby opens up a profound perspective on what is so dissatisfying and frustrating about the experiences of limitation, namely their ambiguous and relative character.

An epoché within the crisis of truth

Given our aim to discuss Henry's phenomenological interpretation of the Cartesian *cogito* as "*videre videor*," it is indispensable that it first be situated with respect to his understanding of metaphysical doubt. If for nothing else, this will be in order to understand why Henry places "*videre videor*" at the apex of Descartes's *ordo cognoscendi* in the *Metaphysical Meditations*. That is, there are different readings of how and the extent to which Descartes, during the Second Meditation, succeeds in overcoming metaphysical doubt. Henry's own move is to show that the "*videre videor*" is the signal expression of the *cogito* because of the way it *resists* the fallaciousness that such doubt shunts into all appearing.

It should be noted, first off, that the distinctive aspect of Henry's approach to metaphysical doubt does not lie in its portrayal as a form of phenomenological *epochê*, but rather in the view that it reflects a crisis of truth in the nature of appearance itself. For Henry, such doubt is not in the first

place about some absolute freedom, reveling in its boundless exercise. Instead, it is about a disruption or “disqualification of the appearances of the world,”ⁱ which strikes at the evidence by which such appearances are qualified.

The reciprocal determination of evidence and world is thus crucial for this Henrian understanding of metaphysical doubt. This relationship holds true for Henry, notwithstanding the fact that “intelligible, rational, ‘eternal’ truths such as $2 + 3 = 5$ ”ⁱⁱ have a very different sort of evidence from that of the sensuous truths one would more readily identify with “an appearance of the world.” In the one case and the other, evidence suffers the same fate in Henry’s hands, insofar as it always depends solely on what is given. Hence, for Henry, evidence cannot but be drawn from something other than the appearance, in order to qualify the truth of an appearance one way or another. As such, regardless of whether it is empirical or non-empirical, evidence always comes down to a way of displaying how appearances belong to and depend on the world.

One will easily recognize this correlation of world and evidence as another version of the correspondence model of truth,ⁱⁱⁱ according to which evidence originates, not within the appearance itself, but in that to which the appearing relates or corresponds. One would have to be forgiven, on the other hand, for being less familiar with the somewhat abstract notion of “world” Henry is using here. The world connotes that realm or “horizon of visibility” from which something can appear,^{iv} yet is also to be characterized “as exterior, as other, as different” to what appears.^v What is to be made of this description?

Simplifying a great deal, Henry’s conception of world essentially comes down to his dispute with the following view: specifically, that all phenomenal achievement would be conditional upon a form of otherness irreducible to the phenomenon. Such otherness is the “pure” phenomenal “horizon,” which he calls “the being-posed-before as such,” that grants “that-which-is-thrown-before,” that is, one’s object.^{vi} The grounding role of this “pure horizon” as Henry conceives it functions analogously to Heidegger’s “understanding of being” (*Seinsverständnis*). Both notions

address how, for instance in the objectification of one's own body as a quasi-thing, as *Körper*, such a perception of the body is contingent upon on a basic experience of the world as that into which the body fits. Moreover, if we extrapolate to include other forms of representation, then both these conceptions connote that the conditions for seeing, for example, stem from a complex form of ever-prior contact with the horizon of the world.

Henry's sense of world is then quite different from the sense of world at stake in empirical or sensuous evidence, and whose evidence is to be distinguished from that experienced in one or other form of pure or ideal reflection. The implication in Henry's interpretation of metaphysical doubt is that there is a form of world that even subsists in Husserl's pure reflection. This is insofar as even the immanent givens of a pure reflection must in one fashion or another be other to and, as Henry sometimes puts it, be "posed" or "thrown before" consciousness "as such,"^{vii} and so must be drawn from a pool of ideal objects or objects of reflection.

Carried to its furthest implications, Henry's close association of the world with all forms of evidence would thus establish hegemony of the 'world' over both the truth and falsity of appearances. Herein lies perhaps the chief redeeming aspect of Henry's interpretation of metaphysical doubt. Instead of merely advocating a simplistic differentiation between some transcendent world (in a bad Husserlian or Heideggerian sense of transcendence) and the appearances which correspond to it, Henry questions whether the potential givenness of truth and falsity, that is, the very potential for manifesting reality, is solely exhausted by the phenomenological qualities that Henry identifies, for better or worse, as the appearance of the world.

For anyone still harboring reservations about this admittedly subtle distinction, it might be helpful to recall how much, at times, Schopenhauer seems to lurk behind Henry's thought. Schopenhauer did not, unlike Descartes, need to prove that representations of the moon, for instance, only partially contain or capture that transcendent object out there, the moon. Instead, he

only needed to show that representations, due to their formal character as objectifications,^{viii} are but a second-tier manifestation of that all-consuming metaphysical reality he called will.

In Henry's hands, the *epoché* of metaphysical doubt works in much the same fashion. Instead of wrangling with Heidegger and others on the finer points of the workings of transcendence, Henry's phenomenological analysis instead simply seeks to undermine the privileged truth value of all those sorts of appearances that involve any form of otherness, and thus that appear to rely on a "horizon" or world,^{ix} which he alternately terms the "*hors de soi*," "transcendence," or "ecstasis." The "metaphysical procedure [*démarche*]" of doubt accomplishes this through its hyperbolic or excessive postulates, which highlight the fact that a potential for fallaciousness can qualify an appearance in such a way as to make it wholly incommensurable with the qualities of any appearing of the world.

Insofar as such potential for fallaciousness even concerns ideal objects according to Henry, we might clarify that Husserl would call the possibility for an object to appear falsely in a consciousness an "ideal possibility," meaning that it constantly remains a possibility even while being wholly unprecedented in the previous course of one's experience. However, he would not accept that this ideal possibility lurks within all appearances in just the same way, if at all. With ideal objects, that is, Henry's "intelligible, rational truths," this possible falsity is a matter of pure phantasy or bare empty thought that one entertains and can never actually be realized. On the other hand, it essentially pertains to the evidence of real *sensuous* objects, given the nature of their givenness through *Abschattungen*. Husserl refers to this when describing the experience of actual empirical things in 'external perception':

Faktisch lässt der Fortgang der Erfahrungen immer wieder neue Eigenschaften hervortreten. Dass das aber immer möglich sein müsse, ist kein blosses Faktum, sondern eine im Wesen der Dingerfassung liegende, also apriorische Notwendigkeit.^x

Furthermore, he qualifies this possibility as being “die immer offene Möglichkeit des Andersseins und Nichtseins.”^{xi} Henry’s radical premise in his interpretation of metaphysical doubt emphasizes that this ideal possibility for fallaciousness universally covers any and all types of appearances, without making any further claims as to whether it could ever be universally realized.

According to Henry, herein lies the utter “simplicity” of the unnatural step taken by Descartes in the First Meditation,^{xii} when he moves from noting the occasional dubiousness of empirical objects to questioning their evidence, and all evidence, outright.

... doubt can only reach [*atteindre*] all these truths without sparing any of them because, from the outset, it reaches the appearing in which they are shown to me, the “seeing,” as it were, in which I see them, the evidence in which this “seeing” attains its perfection. Because seeing is considered deceptive [*trompeur*] in itself, everything which it gives to be seen is in turn struck down by the blow of doubt.^{xiii}

The extravagance of the two escalations of metaphysical doubt—the dream and the evil genius—serves to underline a distinctively ineradicable character of potential fallaciousness that inheres in appearances.^{xiv} Metaphysical doubt does not create this conditional fallaciousness in appearance, but only reveals its phenomenal character, which is namely that it seems to be a possibility originating within appearance itself, and thus seems unable to be assimilated to any evidence and any appearance of the world.^{xv} Since such evidence could only ever become manifest as objects given by the world (in Henry’s quite limited sense), it would be inadequate for addressing the self-generative potential fallaciousness in appearances,^{xvi} which metaphysical doubt itself presupposes.

In differentiating between two forms of falsity in appearances (the dubiousness of evidential objects versus the dubiousness of all worldly appearance), and by thus opening up the question whether there is a form of metaphysical truth incommensurable with evidence, metaphysical doubt nevertheless still seems to leave Descartes (or more precisely, Henry) with a serious problem. It

seems nothing can be done about the infectious possibility of fallaciousness within appearance. According to Henry, it is precisely at this point, when metaphysical doubt confronts us with the nature of appearing and its capacity to deceive, that the unearthing of the *cogito* becomes most ripe and poignant:

The *epochè* concerns Descartes himself insofar as he belongs to this world, insofar as he is a man. It concerns his body, his legs, and his eyes: none of that exists. What, then, is the meaning of seeing, hearing, being warm, for a being who has no eyes, no body, and perhaps does not even exist? “*At certe videre videor, audire, calescere*”: “Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, to be warmed”^{xvii}

The question is whether there is anything left over, anything which resists, in the effecting of metaphysical doubt, given the ostensibly ineradicable “possibility that a vision, and consequently every vision, and so vision itself would be fallacious” (*Incarnation*, 99). The significance of the *cogito* is to be explored on this account, and this exploration is made all the more necessary by the fact, as Henry highlights in the passage just cited, not simply that there seems to be a form of truth given in appearances, but rather that there seems to be an insuperable vivacity to our perceptual life. The clue to what resists and rebukes the fallaciousness within appearing therefore concerns what emerges from the consciousness in which metaphysical doubt itself is enrooted. What resists according to Henry is the “*videre videor*.” Henry takes this phrase from a passage in the *Meditations* where Descartes, in considering what most essentially belongs to oneself as a thinking thing, provides a notable description of thinking:

For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.^{xviii}

By focusing his analyses of the *cogito* on this “seeming to see” (“*videre videor*”), Henry not only offers an account of the sort of metaphysical truth that is irreducible to the evidence of the world. Moreover, he does not just offer an interpretation of why Descartes held the *cogito* to be “sensory perception” in a “restricted sense”—not a representation, not seeing, but a certain sensing of thinking itself. Above all, thanks to the “*videor*,” Henry furnishes us with a clear account of why, in contrast to many other empty or formal accounts of selfhood nowadays (like that associated with truck drivers passing through the night), he finds there to be a particularly exigent and rich experience of one’s own life that remains at stake throughout perception and action.

Videor as self-experience

Let us turn our attention to Henry’s principal arguments concerning the nature of the *videor* as experience of life within every form of representation. In essence, there are two related, if not always equally effective, prongs of Henry’s description of the *videor* as experience of original self-affection: firstly, that of the *videor* as an immediate form of self-awareness, and secondly, that of the *videor* as an affective experience of a resistance internal to life itself.

In the first place, the *videor* has to be understood in terms of the following question: insofar as “it seems to me that I see” (“*videre videor*”), how does “this appearing appear, what is its phenomenological material, and how does it occur that this appearing is precisely mine”?^{xix} In the *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, Henry couches the issue thusly:

Is the semblance that resides in *videor* and makes it possible as ... self-appearance ... identical to the semblance in which seeing attains its object and truly constitutes itself as seeing?^{xx}

Here, the question comes down to the following: is the awareness by which the act is given to itself also a kind of seeing, albeit ‘mental,’ akin to my seeing that chair on the other side of the room? Does such awareness constitute an objectifying, that is, representational, form of appearance?

Sartre, and even Husserl before him, had already shown that this could not be the case, for then one would fall into a paradoxical and counterfactual “infinite regress” of self-awareness.^{xxi} If every ‘consciousness of consciousness’ could only ever be consciousness of an object, then there would always need to be yet another consciousness for whom the last instance (of consciousness) would come to be an object. Otherwise, one would have to posit an ‘unconscious consciousness’ at some level of self-awareness, that is, an instance of consciousness which would be awareness of an object but not aware of itself. Henry works in much the same manner, but the problem of the infinite regress in the *videor* is given a slightly different spin. Such a postulate of an ‘unconscious consciousness’ is unacceptable for Henry because it would only end up reproducing the potential irreality of all transcendence that had been established through metaphysical doubt.^{xxii}

Be that as it may, this cautionary tale about infinite regress in self-awareness could seem like a rather formal argument, which is to say, one that merely involves conceptual play. However, both Sartre and Henry find strong phenomenological grounds for describing the most basic form of self-consciousness as a special non-objectifying form of self-appearance, specifically, by comparing such self-givenness to other forms of self-awareness. By way of example, let us take the famous Sartrean vignette of a voyeur peeping through the keyhole of a door. The voyeur is wholly fascinated by what is seen; she has what Sartre calls a “pure” consciousness. This pure consciousness is in no way occupied with what it means to be consciousness, but is solely concerned with that of which it is conscious.^{xxiii}

Nevertheless, in this pure consciousness, the voyeur remains aware of what she is doing. How so? Sartre writes: “The immediate consciousness which I have of perceiving does not permit me either to judge or to will or to be ashamed.”^{xxiv} That is, the immediate self-consciousness of the voyeur is to be contrasted with every kind of reflective awareness of one’s intentional acts. In order for the latter to take place, one has to turn the act of illicitly staring into the object of an explicitly reflective act by taking a distance from oneself. Most telling in all this is the ease with which the

reflective shift in attention is accomplished; it overwhelmingly testifies to how, as Henry puts it, such reflection must “presuppose” and originates in an immediate and non-positional self-awareness without which there would be no starting point, no frame of reference, to take any reflective distance at all.^{xxv}

On the basis of such a distinction between different forms of self-awareness, Sartre qualifies all consciousness as involving an “immediate, non-cognitive relation of self to self.”^{xxvi} Henry has just this immediate, non-objectifying self-awareness in mind when writing that “*videor* designates this sensing inherent to seeing and [that] makes it an actual seeing, a seeing that senses itself seeing,” or again that the *videor* as thinking is “the self-sensing itself that originally gives thought to itself and makes it what it is, the original appearing to self of appearing.”^{xxvii}

However, it is precisely this aspect of Henry’s interpretation of the *videor* that creates some problems for him. That is, its strength, its corroboration by Sartre’s analysis, also proves to be its weakness, insofar as there is nothing to make us think, along with Henry, that such an immediate form of self-awareness necessarily has an affective quality.^{xxviii} Despite what one otherwise sharp Sartre commentator writes, it is questionable whether Sartre would consent to his pre-reflective *cogito* being depicted as a kind of “sensing” or “self-sensing.”^{xxix} This is because, for Sartre, the excessive or superfluous character of consciousness introduces a minimal form of distance with even the most basic forms of affect, like suffering.^{xxx} Hence, while Henry may sharply criticize Sartre for attributing to consciousness a merely formal and empty character of selfhood,^{xxxi} it would nonetheless seem inappropriate to conflate Henry’s arguments concerning the immediacy of self-awareness with any reasons for believing it to have an intrinsically affective character, which would be disclosive of the life of the self.

Suffice it to say that to get away from what he sees as an empty conception of the *videor* as self-consciousness, in its proximity to accounts put forth by Sartre, Husserl, and even Heidegger, Henry needs much more than any formal account of the immediacy with which

selfhood is involved in awareness. Precisely in order to insist on the affective “material” of selfhood, interwoven with all representation, one can thus find Henry pursuing a different route, first in *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, and to a greater extent in *Incarnation*. He will turn more and more, namely, to a description of the ‘ipseity’ at stake in the *videor* as being a sort of power, impulse and even drive that cannot but be affectively turned back on itself, just as soon as it would ground and manifest any intentionality, any movement, any action. Henry would have us understand how life’s force of manifestation comes to the fore ‘pathetically’ in all awareness precisely because it intrinsically resists its own effort to surpass itself in the process of grounding intentional representations. These complex stakes of Henrian self-awareness are made apparent in the following passage, where Henry discusses how the force and power of life can be given to itself:

If there is only power that is given to itself in the pathetic self-givenness of Life, then all power is affective, not as a result of circumstances foreign to its own essence, but because this resides in that pathetic self-affection which, establishing this power within itself, gives to it the possibility of exercising itself – of being the power that it is.... Referring to the power of the Affectivity that places all bodily performance in itself, this is thus only possible when reposed upon this ground; all force is in itself pathetic, and this is what, at bottom, is naively expressed in the concept of drive.^{xxxii}

In contrast with a simplistic reading of Henry, the *videor* must not be seen as only evincing the transcendental basis for the power of representation or “bodily performance ... in the pathetic self-givenness of Life,” which “installs [this power] within itself.” Rather, since “there is only power that is given to itself,” the *videor* also manifest a fundamental inability, inherent to that power, to exhaust itself fully in any intentional relationship.^{xxxiii} As we shall next show, this is experienced as a form of resistance on the part of life to the very power to which it gives rise.

Videor as self-resistance

Let us recap the question we are after; namely, how does the *cogito*, interpreted by Henry via “*videre videor*,” constitute an affective disclosure of the life within myself? Such a notion of an affective disclosure of life was at stake in Henry’s description of an immediate reflex to reject Cartesian doubt. Most importantly, it was found that this form of truth in and of life is not seated in the things seen, but is rather located within the very awareness of seeing and doubting. On the other hand, Henry’s emphasis on the immediate character of this self-disclosure of life does not suffice to justify his insistence on its auto-affective quality, and so does not sufficiently clarify the phenomenological basis for such a notion of auto-affection. There is, however, another way in which Henry’s philosophy lays claim to a phenomenologically-grounded notion of auto-affection. This is borne out in certain passages where Henry seems to model such affectivity upon an experience of resistance, precisely in analogy with the way he uses the paradigm of resistance for understanding our corporeal existence. What then warrants seeing the *videor* as consisting in such a type of resistance, and from what must it be seen to stem?

In the first place, concerning the nature of this resistance, an important clue lies in the way Henry designates article 26 from Descartes’s *The Passions of the Soul* as a prime example of the *videor*. There, Descartes writes:

But we cannot be so misled in the same way regarding the passions, in that they are so close and internal to our soul that it cannot possibly feel them unless they are truly as it feels them to be. Thus often when we sleep, and sometimes even when we are awake, we imagine certain things so vividly that we think we see them before us, or feel them in our body, although they are not there at all. But even if we are asleep and dreaming, we cannot feel sad, or moved by any other passion, unless the soul truly has this passion within it.^{xxxiv}

The veracity of the passion is considered here not in terms of an appropriate object or situation, but rather in terms of its relationship to the awareness in which it would be given. What stands out is how passions like love or sadness are too interwoven with awareness to allow any distance to

be taken from them, and so debar any question as to their irreality, even when they are given in dreams. On Henry's view, despite the fact that one cannot but help feel that one "truly has this passion within" oneself, it is not entirely correct to say that there can be consciousness of it, because this would presuppose distance from it. In Henry's case, this entails that appearance and passion are one and the same.^{xxxv}

What is noteworthy here is that this permeation of awareness by the passion does not for Henry amount to an inwardly-turned form of experience, as if it were a kind of serene contemplation of one's own feelings. Not only would such a move be inconsistent with Henry's own claim that all phenomena can be given both in terms of the "appearing of the world" and in terms of "the appearing of life."^{xxxvi} More importantly, such a move would prevent Henry from taking into account one of the chief phenomenological traits of the passions, which is the dynamic and inclining character of their affectivity.^{xxxvii} That is, Henry cannot but recognize, per Descartes's definition of the effect of the passions,^{xxxviii} how the passion acts as a sort of disposition by which certain "goods" or ends come to be represented.^{xxxix} Thus, he cannot avoid the difficult task of describing how the 'horizonless,' passive and self-entangled character of the passion can still go together with some form of movement or dynamic.

What is striking is the way Henry attempts to get around this difficulty, namely by accounting for the interwovenness of the passion and self-awareness in terms of a form of resistance inherent to the passion. Specifically, this resistance comes down to the way that the passion appears to be in excess of any transcendent horizon or object to which it would be related. In a nutshell, in the very same movement by which the passion would glaze the world with love or sadness, thereby infusing everything with its affective quality and so disposing one towards either a good to be reached or an evil to be avoided,^{xl} [1] there is at the same time an experience of what Descartes described, in one of his letters to Princess Elizabeth, as an "excess" of the passion.^{xli} That is, the passion is shown to be irreducible vis-à-vis what it is related to – to paraphrase

Descartes, those ends never seem proportional to the force of the passion – and is thus shown to resist itself, namely by showing itself, its power, to be incommensurable with those very ends to which it nonetheless seems disposed.

Now, it is important to note that this experience of excess can be understood as a form of resistance internal to the passion only if one commits what Cartesians would consider an egregious error. Namely, that of ignoring the complex relationship of the passion - which for Descartes is a matter of passivity, of a bodily disposition - with the will, which is a question of volition, freedom, and a certain “action with respect to our soul.”^{xlii} For instance, according to Breeur’s account of the Cartesian passion, it is not the passion in itself, but rather the will impassioned by a bodily impulse or inclination that shows itself to be excessive in its movement toward certain ends.^{xliii} Henry’s conflation of the two, or rather, his reduction of the will to the passion,^{xliiv} only confirms once more his basic agenda, in his attempt to place what appears to be a sort of carnal drive,^{xliv} under the rubric of life, at the heart of both the *cogito* and the will. In so doing, he is able to claim that the passion excludes, from the beginning, being fulfilled and thus exhausted in any form of willing or effort that naturally ensues from it.

Leaving aside this difficult problem of the *locus naturalis* of the will – in a passion or drive or rather in freedom – it nonetheless does not seem overly difficult to find at least one example in support of Henry’s case concerning the passion’s excess, and thus resistance, to itself. Such an experience of internal resistance can be seen in how the passion seems to culminate in a sort of affective agitation of certain aspects of the body without, for all that, allowing itself to be localized or isolated as either the root or object of the passion.^{xlvi} To borrow an example from Husserl, the affective content of “anxiety (gripping) my throat” or “grief (gnawing) at my heart” cannot be reduced to a pain of the throat or heart.^{xlvii} How little sense it would make to be concerned with those objective aspects of my body, for instance, by taking a throat lozenge or an antacid tablet, in order to palliate this angst.^{xlviii} In this respect, such resistance of the passion to be objectified, and

thus to be fulfilled in its very own movement and push towards certain representations, is made apparent from the first instance of the presence of passion, in what Henry calls the passion's "radical immanence" and foreignness to all vision.^{xlix} In other words, I do not need to do cumulative research in order to realize the inadequacy of my avowals of love for someone as an expression of my passion, or to realize that anaesthetizing each and every area of my abdomen will never succeed in removing the butterflies in my stomach. The futility of the externalization of the passion, vis-à-vis its excess, is revealed *ab initio*, which would indicate that the passion resists its own movement from within.

In the *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, one can find clear parallels between the ramifications of such an analysis of the passion and the conclusions Henry draws regarding all perceptions, and indeed any and all appearances in which the phenomenon of life is at stake. In the later philosophical standpoint of *Incarnation*, moreover, one can find its import being drawn into closer proximity with the sort of resistance encountered in incarnate existence, in function of the much more prominent role Henry gives to his understanding of life as "movement."^l Here, however, is where a problem arises for Henry; it is one thing for Henry to frame the resistance experienced in the *videor* in terms of the passion or in terms of corporeal intentions. It would be something else entirely to claim that such resistance is inherent to all appearances, which is to say, at stake in any and every case in which life is experienced. That is, if this resistance is indeed so internal and essential to the push of life toward manifestation in the *videor*,^{li} then we have to question why this should hold true regardless of the experience involved. If the drive to manifestation is at the same time, according to Henry, the sole potentiality of the life subtending all appearance, in its "hyperpower [*hyperpuissance*]" to occur and make itself felt,^{lii} then why should this always go together with a form of (internal) resistance? Why should the drive of life, which is in the last analysis a drive to manifest itself through all our representations, turn out to have such internal resistance as an inexorable aspect of its manifestation, as in the *videor*? There can be no

mistaking Henry's response to these questions, namely that life's "hyperpower" constitutes its own undoing, that is, its own resistance and passivity to itself. An excellent illustration of this notion of resistance inherent to life, where power and self-limitation are bound together, is furnished in Henry's analyses of the feeling of pain.

In the first place, in an attempt to furnish a concrete account of pain, Henry recognizes that the feeling of pain is as much about a form of movement or drive as it is about a form of affectivity and passivity. Even from within his phenomenological reduction, when he would focus on the "pain in itself," he finds it necessary to concede that extreme pain, as in cases of torture, is not something inert. Despite his description of "pure suffering" as being "a suffering without horizon, without hope," Henry clearly indicates that such suffering retains its impressional character. This is insofar as the suffering still retains a sense of what "lies before it," what is denied in its movement, namely, "moving itself to the outside [*au dehors*] like someone undergoing torture who threw themselves out the window in order to escape their tormenters."^{liii} For Henry, the experience of suffering is once again, like the passion, about a movement struggling to throw one outside oneself, toward something, in search of the end of a release.^{liv}

Throughout his various attempts to get to the core of this "pure suffering," however, all of Henry's familiar descriptions quickly recur: it is an impression which never comes to objectivity;^{lv} it is impossible for it to escape itself; it is "overpowered by its own weight [*accablée sous son propre poids*],"^{lvi} "crushed under its own weight [*écrasée sous son propre poids*]," "driven back onto itself [*acculée à soi*]."^{lvii} All of these descriptions seem plausible enough as a characterization of the passivity involved in pain, yet the question remains, given their reinforcement of the notion of an internal resistance: why should this be?

In first coming across it, one cannot but be taken aback by Henry's answer; it is because, as he writes, "[t]his impossibility [for pain to escape itself] cannot be reduced to the circumstances, to the design of the sites, to the torturers; *it is ultimately due to the internal structure of the*

suffering.^{lviii} In other words, as Henry writes elsewhere, “[the suffering] is incapable of instituting vis-à-vis itself any sort of retreat, a dimension of flight in favor of which it would be possible to escape from itself and from what is oppressing about its being.”^{lix} The internal resistance, this force of life “driven back onto itself” which seems to condition the pure pain, is thus not about a “wall” or “skin” against which such life is pressed.^{lx} As Henry makes clear in the following passage, the resistance internal to this, and indeed every form of affectivity, is rather to be ascribed to a fundamental form of impotence or inadequacy stemming from within and extending through any “force” of appearance of life:

All the being of that which resists is then in the force that is resisted. The manner in which it resists is the manner in which the force experiences itself. The manner in which it is revealed is the manner in which that force is shown to itself as impeded [*entravée*], inhibited, unable freely to deploy itself according to its own will.^{lxi}

The resistance experienced in an affect like pain, in a passion like love, or in a bodily movement like breathing thus all seem to share a similar form of incapacity that is experienced as self-resistance; it is none other than a form of life tripping over itself, which condition follows from nothing other than its irresistible vivacity, that is, its self-engendering nature. If Henry can write that “the impotence of a feeling, its impotence of being clear of itself, is identical to its power,”^{lxii} then this must mean that, for Henry, the life behind such feelings and perceptions, as their origin and principle of manifestation, must simultaneously comprise its own limitation and its own passing, with respect to which anything like the limits in representational life can be encountered in the first place.

This notion of life resisting itself – or as he dares imply elsewhere, of “absolute life” constituting its own finitude, qua the “finitude” of our own “flesh”^{lxiii} - constitutes the most mature form of Henry’s project. In essence, Henry strove for a phenomenological account of a form of hyper-efficient cause that cannot but manifest its own existence precisely through resisting and

limiting itself, as a consequence of its own “hyperpower” being *de trop*. And insofar as it is correct to restrict ourselves to this field of inquiry vis-à-vis Henry’s philosophy, this is also a project that puts him in fruitful dialogue with great ‘thinkers of the drive’ like Leibniz, Schopenhauer, and Freud.

Lest there be any confusion, the intent here has not been to provide an apology either for Henry’s phenomenological analyses or his ontological conclusions. To the contrary, given our aim to elucidate just how Henry pursues a phenomenological conception of life, in and of itself, in the most mature formulations of his thought, we have been able to demonstrate that the charge of “hyper-transcendentalism,” advanced by Bernet and extended by Laoureux,^{lxiv} holds up even in writings where Henry seems to make room for a form of limitation and incapability, and hence finitude, within life as he understands it. There is but one caveat. If such “hyper-transcendentalism” is about an incessant turn inward on Henry’s part,^{lxv} away from the world, then this must not only be understood as a turn in search of the evidence of an infinite form of life, on whose transcendental foundations our individual lives ultimately rest. The last writings of Henry equally force us to consider his phenomenology of life as a turn toward the transcendental foundations of human limitation and finitude as well, which rejects the premise that the finite conditions of our worldly existence could ever suffice as a condition of finitude.

Apart from even this fairly provocative move, however, the interesting thing about Henry’s later elaborations of self-affection as resistance is not simply that they make room for an account of finitude within his own philosophy. What is more intriguing is how Henry immediately recognizes that such finitude is given in no certain terms. Significantly, he speaks of the “relative resistance” experienced in the self-affection of the flesh.^{lxvi} This “relative resistance,” internal to the drive of life, points to both an incapability within life and to the constant renewal of that life’s effort to manifest itself.^{lxvii} Thus does the internal resistance seem caught in a repetitive cycle of opposing itself and withdrawing, of ceding and imposing, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for one to

apprehend just where the inadequacy or the limitations imposed on one's life, and hence in one's self, precisely reside.

The significance of Henry's analysis in this regard is particularly profound for any account of human failure. In a word, Henry's description of this internal resistance, inspired by Maine de Biran, allows us to account for why there is a subjective feeling of dissatisfaction in failure (as opposed to the objective feeling of disappointment in failure). On the basis of Henry's account, we can propose an understanding of how such a feeling of dissatisfaction occurs not only because of some sort of shame at our inadequacy, but just as importantly because we are haunted by a feeling of failing to fail – of being unable, that is, to circumscribe precisely where our inadequacies have surfaced and where, on the other hand, we could have done more. In other words, Henry offers a striking account of why we feel that we might have done more in our moment of failure, not because of some self-reassuring cognitive bias, but rather because of the disturbing reminder that we can never precisely define our limitations, and thus can never know precisely where they lurk.^{lxviii}

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ⁱ Michel Henry, *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2000), 96. Henceforth *Incarnation*. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, if we think about photographs as forms of evidence, only the *photographed object itself* determines whether I truly have evidence, in this picture I have taken, of the real Mona Lisa hanging at the Louvre.

^{iv} Michel Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 18. Henceforth *Genealogy*.

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- ^v Henry, *Incarnation*, 59.
- ^{vi} Henry, *Genealogy*, 18.
- ^{vii} “Before being that of the thing or the essence” (ibid).
- ^{viii} “In his alternative conception of the relation between the will and its manifestations, the latter is the objectivity (*Objectivität*) in general or the specific objectivation of the will. The appearances (acts of will, voluntary bodily motions) are the thing in itself (will qua intelligible character) as *objectified*.” Günter Zöllner, “Schopenhauer on the Self,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 29.
- ^{ix} “It is in conformity to this eidetic structure of the horizon wherein there must take place, in every instance, the fulfillment of the intentionalities which have not yet produced their correlates corresponding to the original mode. The horizon prefigures the path which the intentionality of consciousness must follow if it wishes to be able to convert into an intuitive reality that which is still only aimed at by it in an empty way.” Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 17. Henceforth *Essence of Manifestation*.
- ^x Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen, Ergänzungsband: Husserliana XX/1*, ed. Ullrich Melle (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 195.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Henry, *Incarnation*, 96.
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} “Once posited, no vision is by itself capable of distancing itself from this apparent possibility.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 99.
- ^{xv} “this seeing annihilated [*laminé*] by doubt, by the possibility of being false, which inhabits its own vision.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 100.
- ^{xvi} “there, where ‘seeing’ no longer intervenes, where vision ... can no longer do anything” (ibid).
- ^{xvii} Henry, *Genealogy*, 17.
- ^{xviii} René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1988), 83.
- ^{xix} Henry, *Incarnation*, 94.
- ^{xx} Henry, *Genealogy*, 19.
- ^{xxi} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958), xxviii. Henceforth *Being and Nothingness*. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time, (1893-1917)*, trans. John Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 123 (“Appendix IX: Primal Consciousness and the Possibility of Reflection”).
- ^{xxii} See Henry, *Genealogy*, 20.
- ^{xxiii} “All that there is of intention in my actual consciousness is directed toward the outside, toward the world.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxix.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid.
- ^{xxv} Henry, *Genealogy*, 20.
- ^{xxvi} Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxix (trans. changed).
- ^{xxvii} Henry, *Genealogy*, 21, 22 (trans. changed).
- ^{xxviii} “[The affectivity of thought] is original sensing, the self-sensing of sensing, the *videor* in which the *videre* experiences itself and attains in this way the effectivity of its reality as experience of vision.” Henry, *Genealogy*, 30 (trans. changed).
- ^{xxix} This view is offered by Mouillie in his overview of Sartre’s philosophy: “Even though Sartre presents the pre-reflexive *cogito* as a condition of the Cartesian *cogito* ... this ‘auto-affectation’ does not seem far removed from the ‘original ‘sensing’ of the immanence to self, which M. Henry restores to even Descartes’s *cogito*.” Jean-Marc Mouillie, *Sartre: conscience, ego, psyché* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 29, note 1.
- ^{xxx} “The suffering which I experience ... is never adequate suffering, due to the fact that it annihilates itself as in itself by the very act by which it founds itself.... My real suffering ... can *be* suffering only as consciousness (of) *not being enough* suffering in the presence of that full and absent suffering.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 92.

^{xxx} See Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 211.

^{xxxii} Henry, *Incarnation*, 204.

^{xxxiii} “But this movement of surpassing [of an intentionality] remains in itself and moves itself in itself; it is the self-movement of the Life that is carried away with itself in the pathetic self-affection of its *inseverable* flesh.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 203-4 (my emphasis). See also: “The reality of a movement is not exhausted in its singular phenomenological effectuation: it resides in the power to accomplish it.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 205.

^{xxxiv} René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1988), 228. Henceforth *Passions*.

^{xxxv} “it is here, under the name ‘passion,’ ... the insurmountable passivity of appearing with regard to itself, ... the original appearing to self of appearing, ‘thought.’” Henry, *Genealogy*, 32 (trans. changed).

^{xxxvi} “Now, there are two fundamental modes according to which the manifestation of everything that is given to us is accomplished: the appearing to the world and the appearing of life.” Michel Henry, “Souffrance et vie,” in *De la phénoménologie, Tome I: Phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 144. Henceforth “Souffrance et vie.”

^{xxxvii} “*Original Affectivity* ... makes of this [phenomenological] material an impressional material, which is never an inert material, the dead identity of a thing.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 90.

^{xxxviii} “For it must be observed that the principal effect of all the passions in men is, they incite and dispose their souls to will the things for which they prepare their bodies so that the resentment of fear incites him to be willing to fly; that of boldness, to be willing to fight, and so of the rest.” *Passions of the Soul*, art. 40. Cf. also art. 138: “And besides, [the passions] most commonly make the evils and goods they represent to us, seem much greater and weightier than they are. So that they incite us to seek after the one and avoid the other with more vehemence and anxiety than is convenient.” See also René Descartes *Correspondance avec Élisabeth et autres lettres* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 127 (Letter from 1 septembre 1645, *FA III*, 603).

^{xxxix} Henry clearly displays his affinity for such a Cartesian view on affects and passions when raising the following objection to Condillac in *Incarnation* (200): “when the pleasure or displeasure of experienced sensations provokes spontaneous movements destined to produce the advent of the former and the rejection of the latter, where does the possibility to accomplish such movements reside?”

^{xl} “[A] passion is a perception that ‘disposes’ or ‘indisposes’ ‘the soul to will the things to which the body has been prepared.’” Roland Breeur, “Passion à volonté,” *Bulletin d’analyse phénoménologique*, II/3 (June 2006), 5.

^{xli} Descartes, *Correspondance avec Élisabeth*, 128. Henry describes this excess succinctly in terms of a “passion without body.” Henry, *Genealogy*, 31.

^{xlii} Descartes, *Passions*, 19; 1:335–6; *AT* 11:343, as cited in Lex Newman, “Descartes on the Will in Judgment,” in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 336. As Newman usefully points out, for Descartes both the will and the passions can be considered as “acts of the mind.” However, in contrast to the passion, only the will or “volition” can specifically denote “those thoughts that are actions of that mind,” which is to say mental acts considered from the point of view of “agency.” On this “double-aspect analysis of the passions” according to which the passions must be seen as both inclining and inclined perceptions ‘referred to the soul itself,’ see also Desmond Clarke, *Descartes’s Theory of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112-14.

^{xliii} “On the one hand, the passion is not a force that is opposed to or determines our will. On the other, *it wants nothing*, but makes us want.” Breeur, “Passion à volonté,” 6.

^{xliiv} As in his claim as to how the passion permits the will to be revealed to itself, “in the infinity of its power.” Henry, *Genealogy*, 43.

^{xli v} It should be added here that the characterization of Henry’s “Life” as a form of drive is no straightforward matter. In *Incarnation*, he clearly indicates the import of the concept of drive for his philosophy of Life, when writing that all human action is “that of our original corporeity and its powers; it is *the drive* moving itself in itself and ‘folding [*pliant*]’ the organs which cede to its power.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 215 (my emphasis). At another point, however, he shows aversion to any identification of Life with a drive under the form of a “blind force” (*Incarnation*, 259), as per a naïve psychoanalytic or biological understanding.

^{xli vi} Henry’s attention to this aspect of the passion exhibits an unexpected similarity with a note of Wittgenstein’s: “What is it that is so frightful about fear? The trembling, the quick breathing, the feeling in the

facial muscles? – When you say: ‘This fear, this uncertainty, is frightful!’ – might you go on ‘If only I didn’t have this fear in my stomach!’ ... The expression ‘This anxiety is frightful!’ is like a groan, a cry. Asked ‘Why do you cry out?’, however – we wouldn’t point to the stomach or the chest.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 132-33.

^{xlvii} Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Volume II*, trans. John Niemeyer Findlay (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 859.

^{xlviii} While having patently different reasons for doing so, Husserl puts forth a similar idea when writing, partially in reference to the phenomenal content of the passion, that “however we may decide the question of the existence or non-existence of phenomenal external things, we cannot doubt that the reality of each such perceived thing cannot be understood as the reality of the perceived complex of sensations in a perceiving consciousness.” Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Volume II*, 862.

^{xlix} “The ‘passion’ according to Descartes ... develops its being in a sphere of radical immanence; it is oblivious to seeing.” Henry, *Genealogy*, 29 (trans. changed).

^l This is for instance to be seen in the way Henry sets up the phenomenological discussion between Condillac and Maine de Biran concerning our “impressions that are not indifferent,” namely, by couching the latter as “movements by which one is given over to the enjoyable sensation and by which the hurtful is refused.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 199.

ⁱⁱ As Laoureux’s work on the later Henry’s account of corporeal experiences of resistance has already shown. See Sébastien Laoureux, “Immanence et intentionnalité. Les figures du ‘continu résistant’ biranien dans la phénoménologie matérielle,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, 103(1-2) (2005), 17, 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henry, *Genealogy*, 325.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Henry, *Incarnation*, 84.

^{lv} As can be seen in the following, Henry does not place this drive for flight solely at the beginning or at the end of ‘suffering’; it remains exigent in both of these moments of the suffering, in both its coming to be and in that to which the suffering gives rise: “In the impossibility to *surmount* this passivity, to subtract itself from the weight of its being – from the ‘burden of existence’ – there is born its suffering identical to the experience of this burden. In this suffering and in the structure of its suffering a will is born, that of escaping its suffering, of being rid of itself.” Henry, “Souffrance et vie,” 153 (my emphasis).

^{lv} “We can see representation has nothing to do with phenomenality’s original upwelling, because sensation—pain, for example—is entirely what it is in the immanence of its own affectivity without first being posed for itself, in front of itself: in order to be certain of itself, it has no need of that coming to ob-stance; its suffering is sufficient.” Henry, *Genealogy*, 76.

^{lvi} Michel Henry, “Incarnation,” *De la phénoménologie. Tome I: Phénoménologie de la vie*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 167.

^{lvii} Henry, *Incarnation*, 85

^{lviii} Henry, *Incarnation*, 84-5.

^{lix} Henry, “Incarnation,” 167.

^{lx} Henry, *Incarnation*, 85.

^{lxi} Henry, *Incarnation*, 212.

^{lxii} Henry, “Souffrance et vie,” 150.

^{lxiii} “In-carnation ... designates the coming into a flesh, the process by which this occurs, in which it resides, in such fashion that, in constantly experiencing itself in the extreme passivity and the passibility of its finitude as incapable of giving itself to itself, it refers necessarily to such a process, to the Archi-giveness of absolute Life in its Archi-passibility.” Henry, “Incarnation,” 175-6. See also *ibid.*, 173-4: “Our flesh in truth is nothing other than that, the passibility of a finite life drawing its possibility in the Archi-passibility of infinite Life.”

^{lxiv} Rudolf Bernet, “Christianity and Phenomenology,” trans. Gregory Sadler, *Continental Philosophy Review* 1999 (32), 338; Laoureux, “Immanence et intentionnalité,” 25, 38.

^{lxv} “the philosophy of Christianity proposed by M. Henry ... turns itself similarly toward the interior life.” Bernet, “Christianity and Phenomenology,” 338.

^{lxvi} Henry, *Incarnation*, 213.

^{lxvii} Henry, *Incarnation*, 214.

^{lxviii} I would like to thank Rudolf Bernet, Roland Breeur, and Niall Keane for their helpful comments and suggestions on previous versions of this text.