


Article

The Crush of Life's Passion: Interiority in Michel Henry as a Possibility for the Experience of God

Simon Cunningham 

Department of Philosophy, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK; relation@nightofflesh.com

Abstract: The question of whether God can be given in first-hand experience is debated in the secondary literature of Michel Henry. Articulating the history and structure of interiority more deeply provides a more precise conceptualization of his interiority to emerge and thus settle the question, namely that Henry's thought contains both a dualism and duality. Within his dualism, Henry's interior appearing is foundational, and has no capacity to reconcile with the world's appearing that asserts exteriority as a foundation of what is given. Yet an interior/exterior duality emerges within Henry's foundational interiority. Experiences of things like chairs are exteriorly given in life, while experiences of affectivity like gratitude are interiorly given in life. Since interior experiences are unified with our life and are our life, they lack any phenomenological distance that reduce God to finitude. Thus interiority, when both the foundation and the experience, establishes both a possibility for a first-hand experience of God and a glimpse into God's experience of Godself. The article closes by showing how Henry suggests a name for God when given in first-hand experience: the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: God; Michel Henry; interiority; Holy Spirit



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1. Introduction

Can anything be said about God as an experience? Does God possess any sort of intelligible phenomenology when given firsthand? As we spend most of our waking hours interacting with things around us (e.g., lifting this coffee, completing that load of laundry), the world seems a potential location for experiencing God as well. Yet phenomenology has historically rejected the possibility of God as something given within the conditions of the world.

This is famously outlined in Husserl's *Ideas I*, section fifty-eight, titled "The transcendence of God suspended". In this section, Husserl refers to God as a "transcendence" that exists as a "polar opposite" of "the world's transcendence" (Husserl 2014, p. 106). Why does Husserl see God as existing in opposition to the world? Because he understands God as something "extrawordly" that thus only "comes to be known instead in a very mediated manner" (Husserl 2014, pp. 106–7). Mediated knowledge does not arrive through what is immediately given, and thus it does not survive the reduction. Unmediated knowledge sought through Husserl's phenomenological method, at least in *Ideas I*, stands in direct contrast with mediated knowledge, so he understands the question of God as needing to be suspended.

Toward the possibility of God as mediated by the world, Christian tradition holds a similar refusal. John's Gospel begins its entire account by saying, "Nobody has ever seen God" (John 1:18a; also 1 John 4:12a (NIV)). In short, the light of the world cannot mediate God. John's Gospel, like Husserl, sees God as something extrawordly. Thus, if anything can be said of God, it must arrive another way. It must be inaugurated through a different givenness that is not synonymous with the light of the world.

Toward this dilemma, Michel Henry (1922–2002) presents a solution that originated in the thought of Maine de Biran. Long before Husserl had established a rigorous phenomenological methodology, Henry argued that Biran had shown givenness as having two distinct modes: subjective being and exterior being. Henry writes:

“The being of subjectivity [*L’être de la subjectivité*] was determined by Maine de Biran in rigorous fashion by its appearance. This appearance was in turn determined in no less rigorous fashion starting from its radical opposition to the being of ideas or “notions”, images or things, starting from its radical opposition to exterior being [*l’être extérieur*] in general whose appearance, i.e., being, resides in its very exteriority. Such was the result of the problematic which went back to the foundation of ‘a twofold observation,’ i.e., the bringing to evidence of two irreducible modes of manifestation”. (Henry 1975, p. 37)

When given in the mode of “exterior being”, Henry agreed with *Ideas I* and John’s Gospel that mediated knowledge of God should always be bracketed: “One who says ‘I am the Messiah’ is not the Son of God merely through the effect of his words” (Henry 2003a, p. 7). Where Henry is unique is in there being an alternative unmediated knowledge of God in subjective being, or in what Henry calls interiority.

For example, prior to any possibility of my body’s movement being something I witness in the world, my movement is already known within the absolute certainty of my internal experience. My movement is given firstly as unified with my life and as my life. I do not have movement; I am moving. Subsequently, what Henry discovers in interiority is the possibility of God in phenomenology. God is not first known through the mediation of the world but instead is revealed through interiority to be the foundation of our life and self: “Each transcendental Self’s givenness to itself [...] is the operation of the Word [*Verbe*]” (Henry 2015a, pp. 250–51).

Yet is Henry inaugurating the possibility of God in first-hand experience? On this question, there is debate in the secondary literature. On one side is Christina Gschwandtner saying that Henry believed “we can hear the voice of God, and it can be distinguished from merely human words” (Gschwandtner 2022, p. 148). Gschwandtner believes that Henry’s phenomenology holds the possibility of experiencing God firsthand: “God’s word, then, for Henry, cannot be heard with our ears or in any audible sense. Rather, it is heard in and by the heart, in our impressions, desires, and emotions” (Gschwandtner 2022, p. 151). For Gschwandtner, God in Henry can be given to us, but only within interiority. Self-experience, as distinct from the world, possesses the capacity for “infinite joy of the self” (Henry 2003a, p. 113)¹.

Contrasting this is Joseph Rivera, who holds Gschwandtner as making a category error. For Rivera, God in Henry is only transcendental. God is only givenness, the necessary conditions for experience, not something that can also be experienced. As a result, Rivera disagrees with Gschwandtner that it is possible to experience God:

“The word of God [...] is not, as Gschwandtner argues, an experience of interior feelings or inner sensations, like heart palpitations or the feeling of warmth. [...] Appearances that appear in the luminosity of the world can be deceiving. Perhaps it is an idol that one feels, [...] the subterfuge of Satan”. (Rivera 2015, p. 207)

God in Henry cannot be given because, according to Rivera, it results in God being cast into the finite mode of the world’s appearing, something that the Life of God cannot do. As Henry has rightly outlined, whatever manifests in the world’s appearing is:

“... fractured, broken, cleaved in two, stripped of its own reality-in such a way that, now deprived of that reality that was its own, emptied of its flesh, it is no longer outside itself, in the world’s Image, but just its own skin, a simple image, in effect, a transparent film, a surface without thickness, a piece of naked externality offered to a gaze that slides over it without being able to penetrate into it or reach anything but empty appearance”. (Henry 2003a, p. 18. My emphasis)

In short, Henry understood the world’s appearing as the milieu of thinness and finitude. In his opposition to this appearing, Rivera understands God as purely transcendental. Thus, he must recategorize Gschwandtner’s interior impressions, desires, and emotions as finite worldly sensations like heartbeats.

In short, the question is if Absolute Life in Henry can be both transcendental and experiential, both givenness and something given. Rivera understands Life as objectified by entering into experience, so he cannot allow the latter. Gschwandtner resonates with Rivera's concern, but more carefully understands Henry's interiority as establishing a possibility for knowing God in direct experience.

This article will address the debate of whether God can be given in firsthand experience in Michel Henry. It will attempt to solve this debate by highlighting Henry's phenomenology as possessing both a dualism and a duality, a distinction that Rivera has failed to identify. Toward interior versus exterior appearing, Henry understands there to be an unreconcilable dualism, an absolute chasm between these two possible foundations. All experience only happens within the invisible interiority of our life, and the world's appearing (exteriority as a foundation) is absolutely irreconcilable with life's appearing (interiority as a foundation). Yet this foundational interiority allows a relational duality between what is interiorly given (e.g., emotions) and exteriorly given (e.g., chairs) in the interior life, and this possibility for what is interiorly given inaugurates, in Henry, a potential for a firsthand experience of God.

2. The Inspiration of Interiority in Michel Henry

To establish Henry's foundational interiority (i.e., life), it is helpful to establish its origins, namely his time in the French Resistance during World War Two. Henry was based in the Jura mountains with the *Pericles*, a division of intellectuals who ran missions in nearby occupied Lyon. Reflecting on this period of his life, he cited it as the inspiration of his eventual phenomenological framework: "The essence of true life revealed itself to me, namely that it is invisible. In the worst moments, when the world became atrocious, I experienced it within me as a secret to be protected and which protected me"². What is important to note here is Henry's early commitment to something like invisible life, an unseen foundation that exists as an alternative to the world's appearing. This epiphany is what led him to his first great hero: Maine de Biran, whom Henry calls a "prince of thought", and who had identified two differing modes of appearing that confirm the invisible life that Henry realized during the war (Henry 1975, p. 8). He saw how Biran understood subjective being as life itself and the exterior world thus having tension with life. Here is Henry in his first book *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body: Essay on Biranian Ontology* in 1949:

"The consequence of the absolute immanence of the ego is that the latter is identified in its being with life itself [*la vie même*] rather than being an abstract and generic term, the beginning of a rubric under which one could rank a certain number of phenomena which psychology traditionally attributes to the ego in opposition to those which it attributes to the exterior world [*monde extérieur*]: 'The ego which exists or apperceives itself interiorly as one, simple, identical, is in no way some abstract of sensations as that which is common to them and general in them.'" (Henry 1975, p. 39)³

Identifying these two modes of appearing became Henry's permanent phenomenological starting block, and for good reason. Stark distinction exists between them. As the phenomenological method desires to suspend preconception and return to the fount of the real, his phenomenology, beginning with interiority, is methodologically opposed to what is abstract and anchored in what is immediate.

A distinction is important to outline here, namely in Henry's above opposition to the "exterior world". Henry is not antagonistic to the world per se. His opposition is toward exteriority as a foundation, exteriority as such. He is opposed to any conception of givenness that separates what is given or experienced from our very life and self. This is because anything given in experience cannot but be given within our life. When givenness *as such*, the possibility for things to be given at all, is understood as our interior hidden life, there arrives the possibility for all experience to occur without mediation. Anything given gains its full proper capacity for reality and truth.

Though all givenness is interior, certain specific experiences are also interiorly given, such as movement or emotion. Since these are interiorly given, they are given without representation, without any capacity for falsity. What is interiorly given is always true. Furthermore, what is interiorly given is effortless. Emotion arrives immediately. Contrast this with what is exteriorly given, for example, objects in the world like chairs. Henry insists that these are still given unified with our life, given within foundational interiority, but as exteriorly given, they possess distance and thus representation. Representation then introduces inefficiency and a capacity for falsity.

Thus, there is both a dualism and a duality in Michel Henry's phenomenology. His fundamental dualism understands two modes of appearing that have absolute separation and thus no capacity to reconcile: the world's appearing and life's appearing. For Henry, life is the only givenness. "What we intend to signify when we speak of ontological dualism [*dualisme*] is merely the necessity of the existence of this sphere of absolute subjectivity without which our experience of the world would not be possible" (Henry 1975, p. 117). Whether I experience an emotion or a chair, these are both only given in my life. This foundation is important, as it establishes a hyper-unity, an Arch-generation, in which all of life's diverse manifestations can arrive (Henry 2003a, p. 77).

Through this dualism, a relational duality in Henry is inaugurated between what is given to our foundational interiority interiorly versus exteriorly. There is a duality in what life experiences firsthand. What is interiorly given in life, like emotion and movement, simultaneously constitutes life. It is given in my life as my life, without any intermediary, and thus is an absolute experience. "Because affectivity is the essence of ipseity, every feeling is as such, as feeling of self, a feeling of the Self; it allows to be, it reveals, it constitutes the Being of the Self" (Henry 1973, p. 465). In contrast, what is exteriorly given to life, like objects and concepts, introduces distance and thus a capacity for error. "The one who says 'I have a ten-franc coin in my pocket' does not thereby possess it" (Henry 2003a, p. 7)⁴.

To demonstrate the above, let us say that while sleeping I descend into a torturous and horrifying nightmare. I startle awake from fear and find myself safe in the real world. As the room around me slowly takes shape, I am relieved to find that the dream (e.g., monsters or murder) was not real. The objects in the dream were given at a distance from myself, and the distanced representation resolved as false. Yet the fear that the situation catalyzed was true. This is because there is no such thing as fake fear (nor any false affection). Further, contrary to the world slowly appearing upon waking, the fear was known effortlessly and in an instant. Since it was given within my very life and as my life, the fear was effortless and true, and thus was absolutely known. Thus, there is a duality of experience between what has potential falsity (exteriority) and what does not (interiority), though both types are always only given in my foundational interiority, my life.

Henry was not satisfied with Biranian foundational interiority. He desired it would also have a foundation. He discovered such a foundation in the proto-phenomenology of Meister Eckhart. Henry, in his magnum opus *The Essence of Manifestation*, shows Eckhart as possessing something akin to Biran's two modes of appearing:

"The soul has two eyes, one looking inwards and the other outwards. It is the inner eye of the soul that looks into the essence and takes being directly from God. That is its true function. The soul's outward eye is directed toward creatures and perceives their external forms, but when a person turns inwards and knows God in terms of his own awareness of him, in the roots of his being, he is then freed from all creation and is secure in the castle of truth". (Henry 1973, p. 331)

Further, not only does Eckhart support two competing modes of appearing. He also gives life a foundation, namely in his assertion that human life and God exist in complete unity: "What is life? God's being is my life" (Henry 1973, p. 419)⁵. Henry would proceed to establish his entire project through this founded interiority, regularly giving tribute to Biran, but primarily establishing life in Eckhart: "God engenders himself in me. [...] God engenders me in himself" (Henry 2003a, pp. 104–5; Henry 2015a, p. 248)⁶. Indeed, a

month before he died in 2002, Henry confirmed that his lecture “Phenomenology of Life”, given in November of 2000 to the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, contained “the essence of his whole philosophical project” (Henry 2003c, p. 100n1). In this essay, he championed Eckhart’s foundational interiority:

“... as Meister Eckhart understood, life is without why. The flesh which carries in it the principle of its own revelation does not ask for any other authority to illuminate itself. When in its innocence each modality of our flesh experiences itself, when suffering says suffering and joy joy, it is Life that speaks in it, and nothing has power against its word”. (Henry 2003c, p. 108)⁷

When Henry echoes Eckhart in saying that “life is without why”, he means the invisible interiority of our self possesses a stark difference with the world’s appearing, specifically all words and thought. Our life, as it barrels up in God and establishes us, is thus like God: life is tremendous and uncompromising. Joy and suffering manifest truer than any fact. Any attempt to establish Life with a ‘why’ is simply vanity, for “nothing has power against its word”.

3. Transcendental Interiority vs. Interior Experience

Before attempting to resolve the debate between Gschwandtner and Rivera, the nature of Henry’s interiority needs further clarification. Specifically, there are two interiorities in Henry: transcendental interiority and interior experience. Transcendental interiority is the form or character of anything interiorly given in our life⁸. In contrast, interior experience is exactly what it sounds like: that which is interiorly experienced firsthand. Transcendental interiority is related to Henry’s dualism because it concerns the manner of all experiences. Interior experience is related to his duality, emphasizing one of the two types of experience⁹.

The Essence of Manifestation is where Henry first articulates interiority in both its transcendental and experienced forms. He writes: “Insofar as affectivity [*l’affectivité*] constitutes the foundation of affection [*l’affection*], it determines it” (Henry 1973, p. 488). What Henry here terms “affectivity” is a transcendental interiority, the form that establishes “affection” (e.g., emotion) in firsthand experience. The two interiorities are distinct. To demonstrate this distinction, I will first outline Henry’s transcendental interiority. After, I will show how everything interiorly given in our life possesses this transcendental character.

There are three characteristics of transcendental interiority in Henry: life, affectivity, and flesh. Though all three co-occur in a harmonious reality, the paramount of these is life. “The consequence of the absolute immanence of the ego is that the latter is identified in its being with life itself” (Henry 1975, p. 39). As our living self finds itself alive, this is because it is founded on God as Absolute Life, the “I AM” (Exodus 3:14 (NIV)). Our life is established from and unified with the same Existence that spoke to Moses from the light and flames.

Second to our life is our transcendental affectivity and flesh. Here is Henry in *Incarnation*:

“The revelation of life is a self-revelation, the originary and pure ‘experiencing undergoing itself’ in which what feels and what is felt are one and the same. But this is possible only because the phenomenological mode of revelation in which life consists is a pathos, an embrace without distance and without regard to a suffering and an enjoyment whose phenomenological material is indeed pure affectivity, a pure impressionality, the radically immanent self-affection that there is nothing other than our flesh”. (Henry 2015a, p. 120)

Like life, there is no experience that does not also occur in flesh and affectivity. They establish our transcendental interiority, the manner of all experience. Thus, Henry can say above that “there is nothing other than our flesh”. He would similarly assert that there is nothing other than our life and affectivity. All three comprise our transcendental interiority.

There is something important to note with the word ‘transcendental.’ This term has historically been used in an abstract or objective manner. But, because it is arrived at through reduction, Henry is insistent that transcendental interiority is not ideal but real.

For example, “Affectivity is not the abstract condition of affection; it is the event when everything which happens, happens and is gathered together; it is the happening as such, as original happening and its phenomenological effectiveness” (Henry 1973, p. 489).

Henry’s transcendental interiority can be contrasted with what is interiorly given in experience in life: our emotions, subjective body, habits, agency, and powers of movement. These phenomena are interiorly given in that they are experienced without distance, effortlessly, and without possibility for error. More to the point, all these interior experiences are given in transcendental interiority: as living, impressionable, and affective.

Consider an emotion like gratitude. Gratitude is not given beneath a microscope nor seen among the stars. Gratitude is only given in unity with our living self. There is no distance between us and our gratitude; we are grateful. Further, though commonly categorized as an emotion, gratitude is also experienced as a felt impression in our bodied subjectivity. Although gratitude may be catalyzed by something exterior to us (e.g., a lover’s embrace), the experience of this gratitude is always given within our affective flesh.

Niall Keane has discovered a further interior experience: conscience. “The voice of conscience [. . .] is most certainly not reducible to a distant exteriority or to what Henry terms, ‘a horizon of visibility’ or ‘the illumination of its ‘outside.’ The voice of conscience is, rather, a strange, ‘engendering’ and silent appeal which cannot be illuminated by the ‘outside of itself.’” (Keane 2009, p. 207).¹⁰ Keane’s identification of conscience as an instance of Henryian interiority is accurate; our conscience is given without phenomenological distance from our life. Nobody has ever seen their conscience. There is no representation, and thus no potential for falsity. A crisis of conscience is always real. Again, to the point, any experience of conscience is interiorly given in our transcendental interiority. It is always given as something alive, felt, and affective.

4. Henry’s Theophenomenology

Now that Henry’s transcendental interiority has been contrasted with what is interiorly given in experience, there is space to introduce Henry’s phenomenology of God. If phenomenology is a commitment to begin with what is given immediately, beginning with what Husserl called “pure consciousness”, then the discovery of God through phenomenology in Henry is not so much through attending to Husserlian “objects in their how” but in appearing as such, in what Henry calls the “other *unrecognized* How by which life embraces itself” (Husserl 2014, p. 107; Husserl 2011, p. 121; Henry 2019a, p. 16. My emphasis). Our living selves become the focus, and what is given coexistent with the self is Henry’s interior milieu, a mode of unmediated experience that possesses remarkable similarity with the God of Christianity. What phenomenologically emerges is something akin to a theophenomenology.

Here is how Henry finds God within phenomenology: attending to our self, what is first given is that we are alive, and that our real and undeniable selfhood is not something we “acquired” (Henry 1973, p. 139). Our living self emerges from elsewhere. “I who live did not bring myself into life myself [. . .], this living being, this Self, and this flesh do not arrive in themselves except in the proceeding of absolute Life” (Henry 2015a, pp. 170–71). Further, our life arrives as affective in the way that this life is always felt in feeling, and this feeling concurrently is known within flesh, as an immediate and palpable pathos. Our affective life also auto-references. It “feels itself, suffers itself, undergoes itself, and bears itself, and thus enjoys itself according to impressions that are always reborn” (Henry 2015a, p. 4). A unity is inaugurated across our life and our affective flesh. Thus, what manifests is a phenomenology of interiority, a particular experience common within this invisible foundation.

As shown earlier, interiority has hyper-efficiency. “In the feeling of effort, there is no effort” (Henry 1973, p. 476). Affective pathos are given in life faster than the speed of light, for unlike light, its experience has no distance to cross. Second, interiority possesses hyper-veracity. It cannot be deceptive; it is always true. “Into this reality no error, no illusion enters, there is no lie in affectivity, and feeling is what is least ambiguous” (Henry

1973, p. 567). Therefore, this interior milieu, possessing hyper-efficiency and hyper-veracity, occurs outside space and time.

In summary, when attending to appearing as such, one realizes (1) that our life is given from elsewhere, (2) that life is fundamentally affective and impressionable, (3) that life seems to auto-affect, to love itself, and (4) to manifest this auto-affectivity and auto-impressionality outside space and time. What sort of affectionate absolute Giver of life exists beyond space and time? An honest evaluation cannot but admit how Christian this sounds. Such is what preceded Henry's late-life surrender, his Christian turn. As stated in an interview in 2002: "I did not start from Christianity but phenomenology" (Henry 2005, p. 153). He did not force the issue. Instead, the genius of Henry is how he suspended his commitment to dependent knowledge and patiently attended to human life, discovering at its deepest layer something like a theophenomenology.

By bracketing preconception and attending to what gives itself immediately and undeniably, Henry was able to not only posit God as real, but to God's Life as establishing our life. Henry agreed with Husserl's methodological bracketing of mediated knowledge in *Ideas I*, namely mediated knowledge of God. Yet through interiority, Henry was able to sidestep this limitation and reintroduce knowledge of God into phenomenology that was unmediated.

What is less apparent is the possibility of reversing this analysis. It is one thing to utilize interiority toward understanding human life. It is an altogether different thing to utilize human interiority to say something about God's life. But attend to it, we can. By attending to what founds our interiority, what is given is a glimpse into the experience of the Absolute itself.

This is possible because, as the foundation of experience, Absolute Life must similarly be an Arch-experience. Creation's capacity to be given must be inherited. The great deception in modern reductionistic Galilean science is the supposed independence of what is given: "Thus man is part of the material universe and can be entirely explained on that basis" (Henry 2003a, p. 260). Following Henry, bracketing preconception, and attending to what gives itself seems to say that everything given (e.g., the sky) only has a capacity to be given through something beyond it (or, vis-à-vis Henry, within it). The Creation story in Genesis says that God "separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault 'sky.'" (Genesis 1:7 (NIV))¹¹. The capacity for something like the sky or an emotion to be given in experience was established by Absolute Life.

It is only when experience is poorly conceived as worldly and finite (a surrender to Galilean science) that the possibility of God as an experience is typically rejected. But by understanding our life as given from elsewhere, the qualities of life's gift are founded by a Giver. As our life is given in auto-affectivity, the Giver must be an Arch-given. Absolute Life must have a paradoxical capacity to be given as well, even within finite human limitations. True, because of our finitude, God is only fully given to Godself. Yet, Henry (and Gschwandtner) seems to believe in Absolute Life as a possible experience within the desires and impressions of the heart, which would mean we have a capacity to experience a *paradoxically finite view of God's infinity*. As Henry understands it, "In this absolute revelation of the absolute in affectivity, the absolute arises and historializes itself in its absoluteness".

Henry regularly attested to our impressionable affective flesh as emerging from an Arch-flesh and an Arch-affectivity. Early in his life Henry wrote: "It is [...] in the affectivity of the absolute, in it and through it, that everything reaches us, and that everything which reaches us becomes real to us" (Henry 1973, p. 489). Similarly, at the end of his life he wrote, "... every conceivable life is accomplished by the power of absolute Life, which brings itself about in itself, this original arrival in itself is accomplished in the original pathos of its pure enjoyment of itself—in the Arch-Pathos of an Arch-Flesh" (Henry 2015a, p. 121). For Henry, God possesses an affectivity and flesh that precedes human life.

For example, when we experience joy, Henry is right that the joy is its own reference. We do not have joy; we are joyful in our very life. Yet, if our life is unified with God's Life then they share the same transcendental character: life, affectivity, and flesh. Our individual

interior joy is not necessarily an experience of God, but the conditions of this joy (life, affectivity, and flesh) receive this condition through God's Arch-experience. Thus, when God is given to Godself, when the Absolute Life of the Father lives in perfect knowledge and loving relation with the Son as the First Living, this givenness is fundamentally one of given life, affectivity, and flesh (Henry 2003a, p. 51). The same way my life is given to itself is the way that God is given to Godself.

5. God as a Possible Experience in Henry

Returning to the debate, Joseph Rivera is correct that God in Henry is that which establishes the possibility of anything to be given. First and foremost, God is the Arch-experience. As the Arch-experience, God's remains undomesticated. Thus, Rivera's entire argument in the debate comes from a good place, "Henry's conception of the 'language of life' therefore avoids the danger of domesticating God within consciousness, a danger Gschwandtner mistakenly attributes to him" (Rivera 2015, p. 208). Yet, Rivera has not distinguished Henry's duality from his foundational dualism. Rivera has conflated what can be interiorly experienced in life (like emotions) with transcendental interiority (like affectivity). The result is an unnecessary antagonism toward God interiorly given in life.

Unlike Rivera, Gschwandtner never conflates Henry's antagonism to the world's appearing (vis-à-vis his dualism) with God as a potential interior experience (vis-à-vis his duality). Indeed, this unity of God across givenness and what can also be given is the entire thrust of Henry's final book, *Words of Christ*, something that Gschwandtner understands: "Henry draws on the biblical texts in order to establish his larger point in *Words of Christ* as a whole: that Christ's words function immediately so that no split intervenes between phenomenon and phenomenality" (Gschwandtner 2018, p. 286). This is why Henry can say that "The Word of God speaks otherwise than do human words;" it "says something else and is heard in another way" (Henry 2003a, p. 216). Henry is even more forceful toward this point in an essay entitled "The Word of the Scriptures" written in 2002, the year he died: "The possibility of hearing the Word of life is essential for every living Self intrinsically linked to its birth, to its condition as Son. I intend [*J'entends*] the sound of my birth" (Henry 2003b, p. 195). Absolute Life, for Henry, is both the foundation of hearing and something that can also be "heard" in the heart.

Jean Leclercq, director of the Henry Archives, agrees with Gschwandtner. He believes Henry saw Absolute life as something that can also be given, that "Henry wished to conceive of religious experience [...] as an affective experience, pure and immanent in nature" (Leclercq 2014, p. 18). Leclercq supports this point with a manuscript from the Henry Archives:

"How can we fail to be astounded when we find, written on a draft page for *I Am the Truth*, in a kind of Pascalian fervour—no doubt channeling the same brilliant Fire—this *ipsissimum verbum*: 'The Holy Spirit: an *experience*. Phenomenology allows us to overcome the object of incomprehensible dogma which we accept in blind faith. The mystery allows itself to show through [*entrevoir*].'" (Leclercq 2014, p. 18)¹²

Rivera says that Henry understands God as the foundation of givenness, not something that can also be given. Yet if this was true then Henry would never propose the Holy Spirit as a possible experience, not even in a draft.

The scriptures also support God as an interior experience, as seen in the story of The Road to Emmaus in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel. After Christ is crucified and dies, many of his followers fall into great despair. Two of these disciples are walking away from Jerusalem, toward the town of Emmaus, when they are joined by a stranger on the road. The stranger asks what they are talking about, and they proceed to tell him about their hope in the Messiah, but that their hope seems it was misplaced because Jesus is dead. The stranger listens patiently and then shows them how their entire perspective was wrong. They are so moved by his words that they invite him to join them for a meal. At the meal, the disciples and the stranger begin to take the Eucharist. The moment the bread is

broken, the stranger is revealed to be Jesus Christ himself. He then disappears. Trying to absorb the reality of what happened, the stunned disciples ask each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32 (NIV)). They rise with joy and return to Jerusalem to rejoin the rest of the disciples.

It is important to state that Luke’s Gospel is not outlining any sort of formal phenomenological framework. What it does possess, however, is a firsthand testimony replete with phenomenological implications. As the disciples recount what just happened, their wonder is not first toward exterior realization, such as the stranger having been Christ all along or Christ as alive and not dead as they assumed. Instead, their amazement is toward the experience of Christ *while he was still hidden*. The experience of his resurrected life was second to that of his Word. What transformed these disciples was God as an unmediated experience in their hearts, their interior affective flesh¹³. They asked, “Were not our hearts burning [καιομενη] within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Newberry and Berry 2004, Lk 24:32). The verb καιομενη means ‘to burn’ as when lamps are burning bright (Louw and Nida 1996, p. 177). When God’s voice was given to them, their deepest selves were lit like lights in the dark of night. Though Christ’s “material” unveiling was remarkable, his “nonmaterial” Word on the road was their source of transformation (Henry 2009, p. 37). For the reader of Henry, is it any real surprise to see interiority referenced so explicitly in the scripture’s first-hand experiences of God?

The debate is settled in favor of Gschwandtner. Henry saw interiority as the potential for our living selves to experience Absolute Life first-hand¹⁴. He sees God as not only transcendental givenness but also something potentially given firsthand.

6. The Holy Spirit as God in Firsthand Experience

The note referenced by Leclercq in the margins of a draft of *I Am the Truth* suggests a potential terminology for God when given firsthand, “The Holy Spirit: an experience”. Suspending ideal concepts of the Holy Spirit from Christian theology, it seems Henry saw the Holy Spirit as a potential phenomenology of Absolute Life when given in experience.

Of course, it is important to avoid being too hasty or assertive in this designation, as if the Holy Spirit was a major phenomenology of Henry. It was not. As Francesco Gaiffi notes, “We find very few references to the Holy Spirit in the pages of his philosophy” (Gaiffi 2006, p. 155). Yet references are not entirely absent and do suggest God as a potential experience. In *The Essence of Manifestation*, Henry writes:

“It is in this sense that affectivity reveals the absolute, insofar as it reveals it absolutely. In this absolute revelation of the absolute in affectivity, the absolute arises [*surgit*] and historicizes itself [*s’historialise*] in its absoluteness. This absolute revelation of the absolute, of the absolute in its absoluteness, is Spirit. This is why it is said ‘The Spirit breathes where he will’ [*l’Esprit souffle où il veut*]. [. . .] Words are lacking to speak of this plentitude of the spirit, this plentitude which is sweetness and joy”. (Henry 1973, pp. 683–84)¹⁵

In this early text, Henry understands the Spirit, not as the Absolute Life of the Father, but as the “revelation” of the Absolute in absoluteness. Yet, the language here is somewhat ambiguous. Does Henry understand the revelation of the Spirit as transcendental or experiential? Looking closer, he describes the Spirit here as something that “bursts forth” (*surgit*) and “historicizes itself” (*s’historialise*). His language seems to establish Absolute Life as something really given. The reason for his ambiguity is probably less from seeing the Spirit as *purely* transcendental and more from wanting to avoid establishing God as something arising in the world’s appearing, a concern shared with Husserl in *Ideas I*.

This is not the last time Henry will reference “*l’Esprit souffle où il veut*” from John’s Gospel. He repeats the same expression about the Holy Spirit thirty-three years later in a passage from *I Am the Truth*, and again suggests support for the Spirit as the experience of

Absolute Life. Yet, before this reference can be highlighted, it is important to provide some context, since the experience of God that Henry references seems to be his own.

When someone studies Henry's life, there are two distinct moments that establish his philosophy. The first was mentioned at the beginning, his epiphany during his time in the French Resistance: "The essence of true life revealed itself to me, namely that it is invisible. In the worst moments, when the world became atrocious, I experienced it within me as a secret to be protected and which protected me" (*Brève Biographie de Michel Henry* 2022). This revelation is what catalyzed his phenomenology of interior immanent life as the possibility of all experience.

Yet Henry spoke about a second revelation recounted in an interview that he gave a few months before his death in 2002. This is likely his account of his late-life Christian turn:

"It was quite late, while rereading the texts of the New Testament, that I discovered with a certain emotion [*avec une certaine émotion*] that the theses implied in these texts were those that had driven the internal development of my own philosophy—namely: (1) the definition of the absolute (God) as Life; (2) the affirmation that the process of life, as a coming into oneself and as an experience (*épreuve*) of oneself, necessarily generates in it an Ipseity in which it experiences itself and thus reveals itself to itself—which is its Word; in such a way that the latter does not arrive at the end of this process but belongs to it as constitutive of its accomplishment and is thus contemporaneous with it. "In the beginning was the Word;" (3) that which we call man, that is to say the transcendental living Self that each of us is, cannot be understood except according to this immanent process of life, never according to the world. For me, the 'theological turn' in contemporary phenomenology is not a 'deviation' or a denaturation of phenomenology, but its accomplishment". (*Leclercq* 2016, p. 80)¹⁶

A few things are important to note here. First is Henry's insistence that the event happened late at night. Second, that the event happened during his reading of the New Testament. It makes the scenario like the "lonely places" where Christ sought to pray, and which is more conducive to experiencing God (Luke 5:16). Finally, it is crucial to note that emotion coincided with the realization of his philosophy as fundamentally Christian. What Henry is recounting in this story is likely the "religious experience" mentioned earlier by Leclercq. Emotion, for Henry, is not a trivial institution. It is an experience of his deepest self, of his life and flesh.

We will never have the chance to know fully what Henry meant in this interview, but considering the context of night, the New Testament, and the emotion, the simplest reading is that this event was when Henry's Christian faith flamed to new life. It sounds like the Emmaus scripture, as if one night God was revealed to Henry and properly reframed all he already knew, but with a Word foremost heard in his heart. What we do know is that this event catalyzed a "conversion" in Henry, and in the years that followed this emotional event, he proceeded to write the three most explicitly Christian books of his life: *I Am the Truth* (1996), *Incarnation* (2000), and *Words of Christ* (2002)¹⁷.

Returning to Henry's possible phenomenology of the Holy Spirit, one passage seems to recount this conversion alongside the verse in John 3:8. It is found in the last paragraphs of Chapter 12 in *I Am the Truth*:

"The knowledge by which one day life knows what since the beginning it knew without knowing it is not of a different order than the knowledge of life itself: it is a *pathétik* [i.e., flesh] upheaval in which life feels its self-affection as absolute Life's self-affection. This possibility [. . .] is what makes it a Becoming. But then, when and why is this emotional upheaval produced, which opens a person to his own essence? Nobody knows. The emotional opening of the person to his own essence can only be born of the will of life itself, as this rebirth that lets him suddenly experience his eternal birth. The Spirit blows where it wills [*L'Esprit souffle où il veut*]. Yet Scripture remains as the always open possibility of the

Becoming, in which any conceivable regeneration consists. That the emotion [. . .] happens to someone who reads Scripture, and it says to him nothing other than his condition of Son, is by no means astonishing". (Henry 2003a, pp. 232–33)

Is the above passage connected to the emotional night that Henry describes in that interview? It is uncertain. Yet the reading of scripture, the affective flesh "upheaval", and the discovery of one's condition as a child of God sounds uncannily similar. Either way, Henry referencing John 3:8 when he says "The Spirit blows where it wills" seems to repeat both the previous passage from *The Essence of Manifestation* and the scrawled note in the draft: "The Holy Spirit: an experience"¹⁸. It again suggests that Henry understood the Holy Spirit as the potential for God as something given, that the Spirit can "blow" into real experience, always in unity with our transcendental affectivity and flesh, the hidden living selves that we always are.

7. Conclusions

Most readers of Henry understand his grounding of human life in the Life of God, and that God is thus the foundation for anything given. Yet the question of whether God in Henry can also be an experience is less clear. Gschwandtner believes that Henry establishes, in foundational interior life, the possibility for God to be a possible given experience. In contrast, Rivera believes that this forces Absolute Life to manifest in the finitude of the world's appearing, and thus disagrees that God can be given.

Taking a closer look at Henry's phenomenology, we see there exists both a dualism and a duality. To Rivera's credit, Henry's phenomenology is fundamentally a dualism. Nothing is given that is not given in Life. Any experience that occurs at a distance from our living selves cannot possess reality. Yet, once life is established as the foundation of all experience, Henry's phenomenology also gains a duality. Things can be given in our foundational interiority both interiorly and exteriorly. For example, emotions like joy are given interiorly in our life, while worldly objects like chairs are given exteriorly in our life.

God is a possible experience when given interiorly in our life, because God as Life can be given there without any worldly representational distance that might strip the experience of its reality. More specifically, Henry seems to believe that the Holy Spirit is the possibility for an experience of Absolute Life within the interiority of the human heart. Gschwandtner is right in holding God in Henry as not just the foundation for our living selves but also as an experience that our life can know firsthand. In the crush of Life's passion, God as givenness can touch God as given. In this way, Michel Henry echoes the Psalmist: "Deep calls to deep. In the roar of your waterfalls, all your waves and breakers have swept over me" (Psalm 42:7 (NIV)).

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Notes

¹ On the question of the infinite nature of interiority in Henry: "The unlimited emotion of the prodigal son in his rags, it is the abrupt revelation that he is alive only in Life, and this revelation is infinite Life's self-revelation revealing itself to him in his emotion. All finitude is woven of the infinite, blended with it, inseparable from it, and draws from it all that it is, has been, and will be". (Henry 2015a, p. 177).

² *Brève Biographie de Michel Henry* (2022). No longer online but archived 22 January 2022, Available online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220122170618/https://www.michelhenry.org/biographie/> (accessed on 25 September 2024). The biography can still be found at <http://amichelhenry.free.fr/> (accessed on 20 November 2024) where Henry's late wife Anne is noted as "Responsable du site". This second site was originally hosted at MichelHenry.com but is also no longer online. See 4 March 2007 archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070304195305/http://www.michelhenry.com/> (accessed on 25 September 2024). Biography is quoting interview with Roland Vaschalde: (Henry 2001, pp. 489–99).

- ³ Henry is here quoting from Maine de Biran's *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie et sur ses rapports avec l'étude de la nature* (1859), p. 186. Though first published in 1965, Henry's text was first completed in 1949, fourteen years before *The Essence of Manifestation* was published in 1963. See: ([Brève Biographie de Michel Henry 2022](#)). The book's subtitle "Essay on Biranian Ontology" is missing from Eitzkorn's English translation, but exists in the original French: ([Henry 2015b](#)).
- ⁴ The issue of exterior experiences are a real problem in Henry's philosophy. "[Henry's] analyses remain deficient, since they fail to adequately consider the interplay between self-manifestation and hetero-manifestation." ([Zahavi 2020](#), p. 118). Yet this article is concerned with enriching the experiential range of what is interiorly given. Henry's problematic monism is thus beyond the scope of this article.
- ⁵ Henry is referencing Eckhart's German sermon "*Iusti vivent in aeternum. . .*" ([Eckhart 1986](#), p. 106).
- ⁶ Henry is referencing Eckhart's German sermon "*Iusti vivent in aeternum. . .*" ([Eckhart 1986](#), p. 109).
- ⁷ Henry is likely again referring to Eckhart's German sermon "*Iusti vivent in aeternum. . .*" ([Eckhart 1986](#), p. 105). See O'C Walshe trans: "But why do you live? For the sake of living, and yet you don't know why you live. Life is so desirable in itself that we desire it for itself. Those who are in hell in eternal pain would not wish to lose their life, neither devils nor souls, because their life is so noble that it flows direct from God into the soul. And so, because it thus flows immediately from God, they want to live." ([Eckhart 2009](#), p. 330).
- ⁸ Transcendental interiority is truly transcendental in that it is also the conditions of all experience, including anything exteriorly given in life, such as objects in the world or theoretical concepts. A chair or idea is always first given in life as an affective impression. But the topic of exteriority in Henry is outside of the scope of this article.
- ⁹ This paper will understand experience as what is given. This is distinct from givenness, or the foundation of what is given/experienced. See Henry's essay "The Four Principles of Phenomenology" for a distinction between givenness and what is given: "Only a reduction that goes all the way to the end of its capacity of reducing, that suspends the ek-static Dimension of visibility in which every conceivable giving intuition and evidence itself flow, and that suspends all possible showing, can discover the original givenness, the givenness that by giving life to itself, gives to it to be life. And, at the same time, it gives everything in the world and every possible world, inasmuch as the givenness of such things never happens except in the self-givenness of life." ([Henry 2019a](#), p. 16).
- ¹⁰ Keane is quoting ([Henry 1996](#), p. 62/46). It is likely conscience as interior was avoided by Henry because of his commitment to interiority as an uninterrupted unity, and conscience can involve an experience of interior division and tension.
- ¹¹ Sky is the first possible experience in Creation, since the earth in v. 1 is created as a void, and the first "day" is devoted to light, or the possibility for givenness.
- ¹² Leclercq is referencing Folio 23882 in "Fonds d'archives Michel Henry" ([University of Louvain 2024](#)). My emphasis.
- ¹³ Contrast this priority for what is hidden with humanity eating the fruit and gaining sin in the Garden of Eden: "the eyes of both of them were opened." Sin as a phenomenological overemphasis on the world's mode of appearing is a central theme in Henry. See: ([Henry 2019b](#), pp. 227–37).
- ¹⁴ On the Life of God as both givenness and what can be given, Karl Hefty understands Henry as possessing "Two phenomenologies of life." See: ([Hefty 2024](#), pp. 217–37).
- ¹⁵ Henry is referencing John 3:8: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (NIV).
- ¹⁶ Leclercq is citing ([Henry 2005](#), p. 154).
- ¹⁷ ([Rogozinski 2024](#)). Three Christian texts are: [Henry \(2003a\)](#); [Henry \(2015a\)](#); [Henry \(2012\)](#).
- ¹⁸ "Fonds d'archives Michel Henry." ([University of Louvain 2024](#)) Folio 23882.

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