**Suffering and Ipseity in Michel Henry: The Problem of the Ego’s Transcendental Identity**

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**The Problem of Personal Identity in Husserl’s Phenomenology**

The double expansion that Husserl’s phenomenology imposed on subjective experience posed, among other difficulties, a new and particularly difficult problem for Husserl; that of the trans-temporal identity of the transcendental subject, the “ego.” This problem involves also, and still more fundamentally, the question of the ontological status of the ego. Beginning with his descriptive-psychological understanding of consciousness and its intentional acts in the 1901 *Logical Investigations*, Husserl had first identified the subjective ego with the empirical person, and considered it sufficient to determine the flow of acts experienced by consciousness as a “bundle” (*ein Bündel*) of subjective phenomena devoid of altogether devoid of any internal principle of unity, except a mere formal synthesis.

This solution, however, thereafter proved untenable. Indeed, the intersubjective character of the constitution of everyday empirical reality required the recognition of a structural reference, within all intentional acts and all pure lived phenomena, to the “ego ipse,” either as the agent of the act—as in the case of an intentional act, in the strong sense of an “active synthesis,” such as a categorical apprehension, a judgment, etc. or as an egological center of affection, as in the case of the processes of the “passive synthesis.” From this resulted, simultaneously, both a new radical problem and the possibility of new discoveries within pure phenomenological anthropology. Let us begin by specifying the nature of these discoveries.

On one hand, this opened the way towards a theory of transcendental constitution of the various elements that make up the human being as a concrete anthropological essence: soul, flesh (*Leib*), person, psychological personality, social person, “spiritual” person (i.e., the cultural and historical person, in the sense of the “Geisteswissenschaften,” or “human sciences” according to Dilthey’s understanding of this concept). All of these dimensions of the human individual could receive not only a fundamental clarification of their sense, and essence, in
the context of the appropriate eidetics, but could also, and especially, regain a legitimate ontological-metaphysical foundation that neither neglected nor set aside the immediate experience that makes every concrete, living ego singular and empirical, the experience in which and through which alone this ego is originarily given to itself, and, so to speak, revealed to itself for the very first time, in the originary and absolutely unsurpassable evidence designated in Husserl’s expression “pure ego.” Therefore, one no longer had to fear the affirmation that, before existing as the “soul” of a “body,” as a psycho-physical unit, I am, as myself, originarily present to myself before being present to anything in the world. Husserl’s reflexive analysis of the transcendental constitution of all objectivity and its possibility-conditions thus found, by another path, the originally Cartesian evidence of the essential non-worldliness of the ego.

The Self-constitution of the Ego

On the other hand, however, this new foundation that phenomenology could provide to philosophical anthropology would imply a new difficulty. The ego, although undeniably a necessary moment of the internal structure of any intentional act and passive originary experience, also finds itself caught in the originary flux of conscious living, that is to say, in the originary flow of pure temporality. If the pure ego, conceived as the immediate self-consciousness of the “I” that I am, were accepted phenomenologically as that which is implicated in the living present as a temporal modality of the originary impression, this same ego would also find itself, for this same reason, subject to the inexorable dynamic law of the flow of transcendental life. Consequently, it could not be identical to the I-subject of the totality of the flux of consciousness—unless it were possible to traverse the continuous series of successive impressions that become, in the continued progression of passive synthesis, retentional contents. However, this implied, for the pure ego, the demonstration of a new property, which is neither given nor givable within the limits of available evidence specific to the “living present” and whose phenomenological legitimacy therefore remained in first instance at least, problematic: the trans-temporal identity of the pure ego. What ontological status could such an identity enjoy, assuming that it could be demonstrated phenomenologically?

Husserl thus found himself compelled to form a new and paradoxical hypothesis, that of the self-constitution of the ego.

This process of self-constitution revealed itself gradually, and as implying two-levels. First, it was necessary to analyze the process of retentional acquisition of new noetic capacities and their correspondent noematic potential correlates: the famous “Urstiftung,” the originary establishment of an intentional habitus (Habitualitäten). Second, however, one had to distinguish from this constituted ego, which is potentially related to a world with its objects and its objective situations, the ego that acquires this habitus. This latter must necessarily be conceived of as the originary ego, continually co-present with its own constituent transcendental life, and with each new “originary impression.” In such a scheme,
the very idea of a constitution effected by temporal synthesis implies this latter ego, the genuine “I,” present to itself. The self-constitution of the ego therefore had to include also an appropriate constitutive process at this ultimate and radical level, and be described thus, as the self-constitution of the pure ego itself. For this reason, as Husserl wrote in the fourth of his Cartesian Meditations:

The ego is himself existent for himself in continuous evidence; thus, in himself, he is continuously constituting himself as existing. Heretofore we have touched on only one side of this self-constitution, we have looked at only the flowing cogito. The ego grasps himself not only as a flowing life but also as I, who live this and that subjective process, who live through this and that cogito, as the same I.¹

It is phenomenologically true that, in the experience of pure living, yielded by the transcendental reduction, the ego does not experience (éprouve) its presence, active or passive, in its successive experiences with all of their noetic-noematic moments, as a simple coming-to-be of a flowing life, but rather as a presence-to this life, and therefore in full distinction and phenomenal duality between the content of the originary impression and the ego to whom and for whom this content appears and is gradually transformed. I am involved in my pure transcendental life, but I am still always, for myself, essentially distinct from it. However, if from a descriptive point of view, the trans-temporal permanence of the identical ego is an undeniable given of transcendental experience, it is uncertain whether we can satisfactorily account for it in terms of self-constitution.

A Deficit of Presence

The very concept of constitution always implies, indeed, that the ego be determined as a result of the constitutive process. And this remains applicable even if we grant—following such authoritative interpreters as E. Fink or R. Bernet—that Husserlian transcendental idealism should not be understood as a productive idealism, as if transcendental subjectivity were the principle of a real genesis, but solely as an idealism of sense-giving (donation de sens) and the establishment of sense (institution du sens). If indeed the pure ego, pervading, insofar as permanent, through the continuous passive succession of pure temporality, must be understood as a pure unity of sense, and as established by a continuous passive synthesis of identification, it is, a fortiori, necessarily thought of as a result of the process of constitution. Thus, regardless of the ontological interpretation that may be proposed of the Husserlian process of constitution itself, it will remain true that, if identity occurs to the pure ego by means of a “constitution,” the ego thus experienced as one and enduring will always be dependent on an operation of identification. Whether this identification is “passive,” as Husserl adds, changes

nothing, and therefore owes its identity to an operation of identification, its identity can only have the meaning and scope of an intentional identity which is true only as posited and recognized. It is therefore in no way an originary ipseity: Husserl’s scheme of transcendental constitution, even in the attenuated form of a passive identifying genesis, thus inevitably leads to the rendering of the personal identity of the ego as a subtle form of transcendental illusion; a roundabout way to confess the inability of the theory of transcendental constitution to account positively for subjective evidence—namely, that of the self.

Moreover, the Husserlian theory of the constituted ego implies that the latter is always late to the advent of the originary impression and the “living present.” It is always an “I” that has already come-to-be, that is, so to say, past, that receives its existence from the actuality of a first retention—which, then, is not anyone’s act. In other words, there is no one to receive, now, in an actual, living modality, the originary affect of the impression. The intentional scheme of “constitution,” valid for objectivity, demonstrates therefore its theoretical insufficiency with regard to the problem of the originary identity of the living I. The formal reason for this failure lies in the fact that any constitution (whether “passive” or “active”) is a synthesis, and therefore occurs as a noetic process, which in turn implies a gap, a distance between the operation and its result, as between noesis and noema. Passive synthesis also reproduces, in its way, the structure of the division or the distention of the intentional act, and its process of objectification.

The Impossible Self-Foundation of Originary Noetic Life

To appeal to this structure would entail, directly, the problem of the phenomenological substrate of the being of noesis itself, the necessity of determining the mode of phenomenalization of the synthetic operation in which the originary passive synthesis of self-identification, which was supposed to perform the genesis of the ego, consists. If the I owes its being to a constitution, the constituting noesis—the originary passive self-identification—cannot be experienced by the ego, which, as constituted, is rather the result of that originary noesis. Thus, the trans-temporal permanence of the “I,” a fundamental characteristic of our experience, ends up having to be interpreted as an intentional illusion. The Husserlian theory of the ego’s self-constitution does not effectively succeed, therefore, in accounting for the eidetic and descriptive state of affairs that Husserl himself identifies in the passage of the Cartesian Meditations cited above.

This failure (échec) reflects a certain insufficiency with regard to the issue of subjectivity: the impossible self-foundation, within the paradigm of the objectifying constitution, of originary noetic life. Indeed, if noetic life, that is, the giving of meaning by intentional synthesis, were in fact the radical, ultimate form of the activity of consciousness, all noesis should, in order to be—that is, in order to appear in the pure transcendental temporality as a lived act of the ego—receive this phenomenal being from its intentional appearing in the constitution operated by another identifying noesis, of which it would be the correlate. There is a need,
therefore, for the *actual* noesis, effective in the mode of the living present, to *already have been preceded* by a founding noesis, of which it would be the correlate, which is absurd. Worse still, this requirement would have, in turn, to apply to this founding noesis itself. One cannot escape the *regressus in infinitum*. One in this way can conclude, clearly, that the *intentional* concept of synthesis is, by itself, unable to determine the originary phenomenality proper to transcendental subjectivity, and to the *I* living in this radical mode.

**Michel Henry: The Radicalization of Transcendental-Phenomenological Experience**

This impossibility of a phenomenological self-foundation of intentionality was first discovered, and explicitly thematised, by Michel Henry in *The Essence of Manifestation*. His critical diagnosis underscored the fundamental inadequacy of the scheme of the noesis-noema correlation, as raised to the rank of general ontological paradigm by Husserl, and as employed toward the comprehension of the *continuity* of the being of the *ego* in the immediacy of its relation to itself. This diagnosis led to the demonstration of another form of phenomenality, *another mode of appearing*, more originary and more fundamental than that of constituting consciousness; the radical phenomenality of *life*, as self-experiencing, as that ‘feeling-oneself-living’ which underlies all lived experience of something other.

However, by showing that all transcendental activity of constitution is based on the non-intentional and radically *immanent* event of this originary affectivity that is pure life itself, Henry radicalized the phenomenological experience of the *ego*. He simultaneously referred the entire ontologically fundamental sphere of absolute originary givenness to *transcendental affectivity*. He discovered, in this way, a more fundamental stratum of subjective experience; the result was a new expansion of phenomenological experience. In this way, the general “law” governing the development of phenomenological research since Husserl is verified: the expansion of the field of experience is necessarily accompanied by the identification of new laws of appearance. This involves at once the illustration of a new form of phenomenality, and thus the releasement of a new type of rationality.

**Ego and Ipseity: The Problem of the Ego’s Identity in Time**

If now, in adopting the attitude of this radicalized phenomenological reduction, which gives access to immanent pure life, we place ourselves in the scheme of this originary immanence of “absolute life,” in order to explore the structure of the new phenomenal laws that characterize it, we discover that originary life is characterized fundamentally by the non-distance, and the absence of any dimension of ek-stasis, of any openness to externality. Absolute immanent life is *self-affection*, the identity of the affecting and the affected. Henry writes, in the

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Introduction to Incarnation: “‘To live’ means to undergo experiencing oneself. The essence of life consists in the pure fact of undergoing experiencing oneself, and, on the contrary, everything pertaining to matter, or more generally to the ‘world,’ is devoid of this.” In I Am the Truth he also states:

Life does not cast outside itself what it reveals but holds it inside itself, retains it in so close an embrace that what it holds and reveals is itself. It is only because it holds what it reveals in this embrace, which nothing can pull apart, that it is and can be life. Solely on this condition can it experience itself, be itself what it experiences—and, consequently, be itself that which experiences and which is experienced.

This is why the self-affection of life is a radical form of phenomenality, absolutely originary, the essence and principle of all manifestation. It is self-revelation, the revelation of itself; it is thereby, and simultaneously, the condition for the revelation of everything other (in an intentional ek-stasy). As such, it is the revelation of anything that can appear, in general: “in the self-revelation of Life arises reality, all possible reality.” If the essence of subjective life is the originary event of affective self-experience which life forms of itself, it cannot fail to have an extremely close relation, the closest possible, with the self-identity of the ego, thus with its ipseity. And indeed, Michel Henry establishes a relation of substantial identity between the continuous outpouring of life as self-affection and ipseity itself, as a condition of the originary “Self”: “This identity between experiencing and what is experienced is the original essence of Ipseity…. Ipseity is not simply a condition of the process of life’s self-generation: it resides within it as the very way this process is achieved.”

If, therefore, being self for oneself; the immediate coincidence of the conscious subject with itself, or subjective identity, is the concrete form in which the process of transcendental life takes place, the problem concerning the lack of being that characterizes the Husserlian conception of ego may appear to be resolved. Yet, there remains a major difficulty; the absolute and originary process of self-affective life is defined by Henry as identical to the process of self-feeling of life as immanent to the flesh. He indeed posits the phenomenological axiom that: “the flesh is precisely the way in which life makes itself Life. No life without flesh, but no flesh without Life.” The sensitive flesh, flesh in the phenomenologically radical sense as understood by Michel Henry, is the concretely lived dimension in which the process of the “coming into itself” of life as self-affection is

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4 Emphasis by the author. The identity thus underlined is evidently the crucial point for our investigation here.
6 Ibid., 56 [75].
accomplished. And as a result, it is also the concrete mode of realization of the ipseity of “oneself.”

Thus emerges a difficulty concerning the *temporal* character of this “coming into itself” of life. In other terms, the necessarily temporal form of the process of self-affection is at the same time the *birth* of the transcendental “self,” in its ipseity, the generation of the Self in the generation of the flesh. Henry writes for instance in *Incarnation*: “Life reveals flesh by generating it, as what takes birth in it, being formed and edified in it, and drawing its substance (its pure phenomenological substance) from the very substance of life.” If, therefore, the *I* that I am can only *receive* its ipseity from the originary process of a carnal self-affection that unfolds through the duration of transcendental temporality, the being of the *ego* remains permanently dependent on a temporal event, which is just as contingent as was the emergence of the new “living present” in Husserl. And so, the identity of the *ego* does not seem any better secured through Henry’s self-affection than it was through Husserl’s “passive synthesis.”

* The Ego in the Face of Death as a Concrete Event

Michel Henry’s radicalization of phenomenality thus allows us to approach the problem of man’s identity in its most radical dimension. Let us leave aside the most evident aspects of human being, in order to focus on its problematic identity, as phenomenologically reduced to the eventual *core of being* which is the pure *ego*, as reflected in our relationship with the lapse of time, and our own death. One’s own personal death, as a concrete event, appears to the living *ego* in the form of a horizon of possibility. Such a horizon signals and signifies precisely this same radical dependence of the *ego* with respect to the originarily contingent gift of life. The ontological contingency of such a gift—that is, of the *effectual* event of self-affection—Henry interprets as “absolute passivity,” the radical passivity of the *ego* with respect to absolute Life that bears, and sustains, it from the inside. However, the same radical contingency of the emergence of immanent life manifests itself in the form of consciousness of time. The consciousness of time is already, in fact, the experience of the subject’s finitude. “*I am, I exist, that is certain*” exclaims, almost triumphantly, the Cartesian *ego*, which otherwise risks sinking into a bottomless abyss of metaphysical doubt. It must add almost immediately, however, now sober after the drunkenness of that first apodicticity: “*but for how long?*” To this Descartes replies, according to an irrefutable logic; “*so long as I think.*” What is most important for us here is the way in which this direct link between the temporal being of the *ego* and the continued exercise of the *cogitare* is made explicit: “*for it is possible that if I stopped thinking, I would cease at the same time to be or exist.*” If we put to good use the profound interpretation given by Michel

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7 Henry, *Incarnation*, 121 [174].
Henry of the Cartesian cogitatio as a self-affective phenomenon, we arrive directly at a clear formulation of our problem: I am- that is to say, I have the ontological constancy and identity with myself (ipseity) that the word “I” implies, as long as the originary affect of life’s self-affection is given to me in my flesh. Thus we arrive at the point where the essential query of man, of all men facing this finitude, can no longer be held back: Am I not therefore, myself, but a mere temporary phenomenal effect? In my actual existing, and in its simple phenomenality, am I dependent on an anonymous, contingent and unpredictable process, which can, at any time, let me fall back into nothingness?

A Peculiar Existential Experience: Suffering

To address that question regarding the being of the ego, it is necessary to conduct a precise phenomenological analysis of the originary reception of life—or, in Henry’s terms: of transcendental birth of the “Self” in life and from life—at the very moment that it is this reception. It is an absolutely passive reception, whose structure is the passio itself, the essence of “πάθος,” or rather “πάσχειν” in act, the radical submission by which I undergo, within myself, the new impetus (élan) of the new self-affection of each moment. The experience in which the radical passivity of the ego, with respect to life, manifests itself, should be analyzed phenomenologically. Michel Henry locates this experience in suffering. It is for this reason that he chooses, in Incarnation, the phenomenon of suffering as a phenomenological paradigm that enables us to determine the essence of originary impression. On this point, he writes:

The passion of suffering is its gushing forth in itself, its being-grasped-by-itself, the adherence of it to itself, the force in which it coheres with itself and in the invincible force of this coherence, of this absolute identity with itself in which it afflicts itself and is revealed to itself, its revelation—its Parousia…. We said that no impression brings itself about as such. This is the first meaning of the radical passivity we are talking about. The impression, the pain in its suffering, feels itself passive in the depth of itself in as much as it is not for nothing that it has come in itself, in the powerlessness that brands every impression, like a seal stamped on an envelope that receives, in a singular way, its content…. Of what does this coming in itself consist, which every conceivable impression in it precedes? It is life’s coming in itself. For life is nothing other than what undergoes experiencing itself without differing from itself, in such a way that this trial is a trial of itself and not of something else, a self-revelation in a radical sense…. Life undergoes experiencing itself in pathos; it is an originary and pure Affectivity, an Affectivity that we call transcendental…. Life’s self-revelation takes place in Affectivity and as Affectivity. Originary Affectivity is the phenomenological material of the self-revelation that constitutes life’s essence…. It is an impressional material undergoing experiencing
impressionally and doing so unceasingly, a living auto-impressionality. This living auto-impressionality is flesh.

Suffering and Self-Affection

From this both carnal and passive character, as marks the impressional birth within immanent life, we would be tempted to conclude, perhaps too quickly, the simply momentary and temporary character of the being of the ego. And in fact, Henry examines, immediately afterwards, the possibility of such an interpretation. He dismisses it on the ground that this coming-into-itself of life is an incessant process of continuous self-affection. On the page following the one quoted previously, indeed, he points out:

In support of Husserl’s thesis, we asked whether it was not true that every impression, as soon as it arrives, disappears… And yet do we not live in a perpetual present? Have we ever left it? How could we if we are living beings, invincibly joined to themselves in a Life that never ceases being joined to itself—undergoing experiencing itself in the enjoyment of its life, and in the untearable flesh of its originary Affectivity—inexorably weaving the flawless thread of its eternal present?

The Fundamental Theses of Material Phenomenology

From these texts, Henry’s essential theses with regard to the problem of the being of pure ego emerge clearly. First: the ego is not originary. I receive, in the absolute passivity that is the essence of transcendental affectivity, the life that gives me to myself, and that makes—that is to say, dynamically arouses—my being. The Cartesian “I am” means that “I live,” that I am a living being—and that I thus am living only insofar as I am born, at any present moment, out of the autonomous event of the self-emergence of absolute life. Second: Life springs forth, effects itself—in the words of Henry, “comes into itself,” occurs to itself and in itself—in a present, determined by Michel Henry as “perpetual,” a perpetuity meant to guard us definitively against the annihilation whose threat is inscribed, at every moment, in the Husserlian vanishing of the originary impression.

These two theses immediately imply two consequences of great significance for contemporary philosophical anthropology: 1. The most originary mode of being of the transcendental living ego that each of us is, is not what we denote by the use of the personal pronoun “I,” but is instead that which this pronoun designates in the accusative form, as an object, “Me.” The strictly originary form of the ego, its nascent form, is that which, since its invention by

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8 Emphasis added.
9 Henry, Incarnation, 61-2 [89-90].
10 Emphasis added.
11 Henry, Incarnation, 62-3 [91].
Pascal, our language calls “the self.”

Before being in a position to posit myself before myself, and especially before being able to posit myself before others—as before another, as a “Me,” a “Myself”—I must be engendered in and by primordial affection which arouses me from within Life—and therefore in the accusative form, as passively affected, as “me.” In contrast to its initial phenomenological status, Henry conceives the ego (that is to say, that which, within me and from itself, designates itself as “I”), then, as derived—in fact, as a tertiary phenomenon. It is only when it has gained possession of his powers of consciousness and action, through the experiencing-of-oneself of originary Affectivity, that the originary “self” can seize these powers, received affectively from life, as if they were its own, as if it had given them to itself. Only then can it come to say and think “I”—a term which always indicates “I can…”

The second consequence is even more decisive: it is the distinction between ipseity and egoity. Indeed, according to Henry, ipseity is nothing but the structure of the self-affection of life, its concrete form. This is why it precedes any “self,” or “ego,” which is only its derivative. It is the originary ipseity of Life that establishes the possibility of both. Henry gave to this ontological axiom, which defines his phenomenological ontology, a formally Christian expression: all finite human subjects, all of those “egos” generated in the originary embrace of Life’s self, are “sons in the Son,” since they receive their ipseity from the originary and primordial ipseity which is the Self of absolute life as such, as infinite life, the First Self or First Living Being, Christ as the only Son of Life—whom Henry identifies with the Father of the Christian Trinity. The originary movement of absolute immanent Life, which generates itself by coming into itself—which thus, according to Henry, justifies its identification with God—necessarily realizes itself in the concrete form—incarnate—of a fundamental and primary Ipseity—the First Living. It is in the flesh of the First Living that all finite flesh takes a form of ipseity, ourselves, as subjectively living individuals. With respect to the singular ego, this means that it cannot have any ontological consistency of its own, other than as a secondary ipseity, derived from that of the First Living Being, and from the absolute originary self-affection in which it is generated; the singular flesh of the finite ego that I am, this flesh in which “I” receive my originary status of generated transcendental “self” from Life, is therefore but a partial and particular phenominalization of the only originally egoic flesh, that of the First Living Being, which is the Ipse of absolute Life.

The Decisive Issue: The Problem of the Personal Ego’s Identity in the Flux of Originary Affective Life

To Henry’s spectacular deepening of Husserlian analyses of the phenomenality of transcendental immanent life, we can now ask the question that has been our concern since the beginning of this essay: is it the case that the identity of the pure

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ego that I am—and whose pure experience I cannot deny having, is actually established, and made intelligible, by setting forth this process of perpetual “gushing-forth” (jaillissement) of life as self-affection? It seems that, unfortunately, this is not the case. Several objections and difficulties, in fact, become apparent.

The first is that one can hardly support—from the phenomenological point of view—the thesis of the “eternal” character of the living present. Although it is true that we live always and only in the mode of the present, which is the actuality of being-affected, this is only a partial aspect of the full experience of pure temporality. The enigma of temporality consists precisely in that, under this indeed perpetually renewed mode of the actual present, identical and invariable modally, different temporal contents continue to emerge, and come to be, continuously. Thus, if one pays attention, as is ordinarily the case in the conduct of action in its existential context, to the content of what gives itself as to-be-lived, the event that affects me never remains, itself, perpetual, but loses subsequently all the living actuality that the present mode, for a moment, had lent it. It is characteristic of the structure of temporality that the very content that proposes itself now, presently, to me, with the power to affect that it receives now from my present—and presenting—life, passes, and passes away. And so does its actuality. The integral structure of temporality is not, as Henry’s assertion of a “perpetual present” presupposes, an alternative that could be formulated as: either the fixed immobility of an immutable present, or the spiralling flight of depthless moments, similar to mathematical temporal points that are destroyed as soon as they appear. The integral structure of temporality is, on the contrary—and this is precisely the puzzling point—the synthesis and connection in actuality of these two aspects, within their phenomenal opposition.

Moreover, Henry’s expression of life’s “eternal coming into itself” implies a contradiction: if life “comes” (vient), comes to be (advient), if it has the form of an event, it cannot be “eternal.” The phenomenon described by Michel Henry justifies the adjective “perpetual,” in the precise sense of being “continuously repeated.” But no repetition can ensure a priori its indefinitely renewed continuance in the future. On the contrary, the necessity of a permanent to maintain its being in the form of a repetition testifies to its incapacity to perdure in a continuous constancy, to endure by itself so to speak, and to its insurmountable need to begin again, anew, serially, in order to effectively exist across an extent of time. If life actually has the originary structure of a recurrent self-affection, in accordance with the Cartesian scheme of continuous creation, the continuity remains irreducibly temporal, an irrefutable proof of its essential expiration (caducité). Thus life, conceived and described as originary self-affection, has, insofar as it is an event, the structure of a perpetual “gushing-forth” (jaillissement). As such, it necessarily retains the character of a temporary event—that is to say, a priori and in essence, subject to an end. Nothing in the originary appearing of self-affection can ensure that the actual process of this self-affection repeats itself again beyond the particular present content. The identity of the living “self,” if it can
only live in that life, remains forever, for ontological and structural reasons, under the permanent threat of its disappearing (évanouissement).

However, and worse still, Henry’s absolute life does not come in me strictly speaking, but in itself, in the concrete form of an originary Ipseity that I am not. The “self” that “I” am can come to be, can be given to itself, only secondarily, as participant, indirectly receiving a partaking of this Life. Thus the self-identity of the ego that “I” am, as a singular human ego, is thus not grounded in its own being. It is only brought back to an extrinsic foundation. My identity, as thus derivative, is denied on principle any ontological autonomy, and is therefore thought of as only apparent, phenomenal.

However, even if Henry’s conception of the transcendental origin of the ego partly falsifies the basic phenomenological data, this partial falsification certainly does not annul the value of Henry’s fundamental intuition according to which our being is essentially affective, and grounded in life’s self-affection. So if we must preserve this fundamental basis of material phenomenology, another more faithful and rigorous description of the relationship between the singular ego and originary self-affection, as is experienced from within the former’s own life, should be proposed. We must therefore return to the analysis of suffering, as the eminent experience of the ego’s originary passivity with respect to self-affection. Let us, then, examine the phenomenological description of suffering proposed by Henry, as exemplary manifestation of the essential pathos of life:

Pure pain is pure suffering, it is this suffering’s immanence to itself—a suffering without horizon, without hope, entirely occupied with itself because it fills the entire place, so that there is no other place for it but the one it occupies. It is impossible for it to leave itself, or to escape itself…. As soon as suffering is there, it is entirely there indeed, as a sort of absolute. For the one who suffers, nothing infringes upon his suffering. Suffering has neither doors nor windows, and no space outside it or within it that would allow it to escape…. Between suffering and suffering, there is nothing. For the one who suffers, for as long as he suffers, time does not exist…. Suffering is driven back against itself…. Suffering is not affected by something else, but by itself; it is a self-affection in the radical sense that suffering is what is affected, but it is by suffering that it is so. It is at once affecting and affected, what makes it hurt and what hurts, without distinction. It is suffering that suffers…. Suffering feels nothing other than itself.13

In this remarkable descriptive analysis, Henry brings to light and accentuates that which is, according to him, the self-affective structure of suffering, by two characteristically paradoxical affirmations, in which are condensed the essence of his thesis: (1) “For the one who suffers, as long as he suffers, time does not exist,” and (2) “It is suffering that suffers.” By means of these formulae, Henry intends

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13 Henry, Incarnation, 58-9 [84-5].
primarily to emphasize the negative meaning of the prefix “self” in the expression “self-affection.” He intends to suggest that suffering is not experienced as bound to any external source, to the intervention of any given extrinsic power. It does not present itself as hetero-affection, but as an autonomous phenomenalization that arises from itself, and imposes itself by means of its own dynamics, as a result of its own spontaneity. Yet these two statements, if we understand them literally this time, are completely contradicted by phenomenological experience. (1) It is not true that for the one who suffers, “time no longer exists.” It is precisely the opposite: in the experience of suffering, minutes are interminable, and more exactly, there are no longer “minutes,” as elementary parts of a period that could be traversed, but rather an endless renewal of new punctual moments, indefinitely multiplied, of renewed pain. Suffering, then, imposes on consciousness the structure of a repetition, of time, with a dramatic intensity that no other human experience contains. Suffering is the pathetic scansion of time; it exemplifies and clarifies the latter’s structural law in a particularly powerful, implacable way. Suffering thus acts as the revelation (révélateur) of the immanence of the new present moment and accentuates it in proportion to its expectation of the future. (2) But above all, it is untrue that suffering itself suffers, and suffers (or affects) itself. On the contrary, when the pain settles in me, it is always “me” who suffers! (The accusative form of the pronoun according to French usage is particularly appropriate here.) For suffering is the most intense possible experience of the being of myself, not only as that which is affected by an “impression,” but more properly as aggressed by a hostile enemy, or an adverse and unbearable quality.

We must now further specify this analysis by highlighting two principal phenomenological aspects of the act of suffering. Suffering has the structure of an aggression, and involves an immanent conflict. Feeling aggressed in the flesh and as flesh, the ego reacts to maintain its affective identity, that is to say, the constancy of a positive affective relationship with itself. Even if the ego can do nothing but endure the pain, this endurance itself has neither the structure nor the phenomenality of a pure passivity: it always rather has those of an immanent effort, of an affective tension entirely directed towards the sensible and affective maintenance of a certain balance, of what is usually experienced as the autonomy of that which is sensed even within sensing: the sufferer is not invaded by suffering, he does not vanish in it. Far from disappearing in it, as Henry’s thesis would have it, the sufferer is opposed to it. In his powerlessness—and this opposition is constitutive of this experience of powerlessness—he opposes himself, in an internal and invisible way, to his suffering. This implies that he sustains (porte) it, even if he cannot “bear” (supporte) it.

Secondly, although suffering occupies the entire space of consciousness as a sensing power—as Henry rightly notes—it does not invade the ego that suffers. Indeed, if the suffering ego were to disappear (in the case of a loss of consciousness, for example, or a deep coma), there would no longer be any suffering either. The appearing of suffering thus implies the permanent presence of the suffering ego. But this permanence is not an indifferent “assisting,” either: since the ego is radically affected, and thus changed by the emergence of renewed
pain, the *ego* can *neither* be detached in relation to the painful affection, *nor* erased by it. It is *affected*, and it is at once essentially altered by it, and confirmed in his appearing as *distinct* from it. In suffering, self-affection has the structure of a self-*differentiation*. It is for this reason that suffering always presupposes, and in fact never fails to contain, an immanent space of *non-coincidence* between that which affects (pain) and the affected (*ego*). This space of negativity is at the same time the transcendental possibility of judgment and free choice. It is in this phenomenological and ontological *gap*, which preserves the conditions of inner freedom, minimum and all the more essential, that man must be able to *bear* suffering; that is to say, to adopt an *attitude* with regard to that which, imposed as it were in the conflict, gives itself to be lived. This attitude oscillates between two poles, of consent or refusal. The possibility of *offering* one’s own suffering is a possibility that is grounded transcendentally on this characteristic structure.

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**Conclusion; The Problem of Personal Identity in Henry’s Phenomenology**

The preceding observations treat all too cursorily the phenomenological structure and temporality particular to suffering. But despite this brevity, they clarify some eidetic characteristics of the immanent event of self-affection, and its relationship to the pure *ego’s* identity. These lead us already to propose—subject of course to further analyses—two conclusions. First, we can see that the trans-temporal persistence of the *ego*, its enigmatic ability to *traverse* a series of originary affective presents, and thus to experience its temporal condition as a limitation and a trait of *finitude*, is not the effect of an operation of memory, as common sense naively believes. For if that were the case, the identity of the *ego* would already be adequately assured by the passive identification synthesis, as Husserl’s theory of intentional self-constitution of the *ego* would have it. However, we saw that such an intentional self-constitution fails to capture, and leaves as a presupposition, that which is in question and requires grounding. Conversely, the investigation of the immanent temporality of self-affection, in the paradigmatic example of suffering as interpreted by Michel Henry, demonstrates that reducing the finite *ego* to a derived product of the absolute self-affection of Life faces a double contradiction: an internal contradiction on the one hand, and a contradiction with the phenomenological data on the other hand.

This first negative conclusion leads to a second, albeit positive conclusion. If the transcendental immanent existence of the *ego* is not a product of the originary event of self-affection, it is because the latter *cannot* be so. Indeed, as the structure of suffering demonstrates in exemplary fashion, affection—that is to say, any self-affection, since all affection contains in itself the structure of self-affection—always presupposes a center of receptivity susceptible of reacting to it, by opposing it. The existence of an *egoic center capable of being affected*, capable of receiving
the aggression of the affect (pain, pleasure or both) is a necessary condition of possibility for affection itself.

One will perhaps ask whence comes, then, this double theoretical inability, in both of the phenomenologies that we examined, both the constitutive transcendental phenomenology and the material phenomenology of transcendental affectivity. This remarkable failure with respect to the question of the condition of possibility of the ego’s identity may, in my view, be the result of the radical presuppositions regarding phenomenological method, as adopted by our two authors. At the stage of extreme radicalization, which the phenomenological problem of the being of subjectivity has reached today—in particular, and precisely, thanks to the work of Husserl and Henry—it is perhaps time to consider seriously the possibility that the I is, though given, irreducible to the conditions of phenomenal objectification recognized to date—that is to say, according to the final view of Michel Henry, to the conditions of self-affective experiencing of oneself. Is the evidence of sensing.oneself in fact the true measure of the being of the ego? Should we not question the supposed phenomenological convertibility of being and appearing? If, indeed, the pre-phenomenal being of an Egoic core of potential receptivity is a transcendental condition for the possibility of the originary impression, and for the formal affect that is the new living present, and if all pure temporality is grounded in the phenomenon—the source of this originary impression—how then is it a surprise that the I traverses time? The phenomenon of the trans-temporality of the ego—that seems enigmatic in the context of the reductive phenomenality customary in phenomenology—signifies simply the independence of its being with respect to temporality itself, due to a transcendental precedence that cannot be thought of without an aporia save through a prior dissociation of being and appearing. The ego thus reveals itself as an originary pre-immanent transcendence, which owes its being neither to the temporality of any phenomenal appearing, nor to the emergence of carnal life.

Translated by Elvira Vitouchanskaia and Garth W. Green