

The Ethics of Affectivity and the Problem of Personhood: An Overview

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Michel Henry's critique of barbarism,¹ understood as a flight from life, almost immediately raises the question of how life's tendency to negate itself is then to be overcome. Undoubtedly, such a question refers to ethics. Although Henry not only provides an analysis of civilization and its malaise, but also targets the level of the individual through the concept of despair inspired by Kierkegaard, there is no systematic treatment of ethics to be found in his phenomenology of life.^{2,3} In light of the diagnosis of barbarism, it is therefore necessary to investigate what ethics would be contained in, or follow from, Henry's phenomenology. And if the essence of life is to be found in immanent affectivity, the questions thus become: is there an "ethics of affectivity" and, if so, which are its main aspects? The purpose of this article is to give an overview of ethics from the standpoint of Henry's radical phenomenology and to discuss some of the main problems it implies. (1) The opposition of barbarism and culture is essential in order to understand Henry's distinction between *ethos* (or "first ethics") and normative ethics, but it is only intelligible if one refers to immanent affectivity as the key-concept of his phenomenology. (2) As we will see, it is the lack of *recognition* of immanent life as fundamental phenomenality that makes barbarism possible, a recognition that is therefore central to phenomenology of life as ethics and to the concept of "second birth." (3) However, since phenomenology is, as theory, tied to intentionality, how

¹ Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (London/New York: Continuum, 2012) [Henry, *La barbarie* (Paris: [Grasset & Fasquelle, 1987] PUF, 2004).

² The rare articles or book chapters referring explicitly to ethics are: "L'éthique et la crise de la culture contemporaine" (1986) and "Éthique et religion dans une phénoménologie de la vie" (both reprinted in Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV. *Sur l'éthique et la religion* [Paris: PUF, 2004], 31-9 and 53-64) and "L'éthique chrétienne" in Henry, *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 171-91 [Henry, *C'est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 210-40].

³ Michel Henry has used synonymously at least three different designations for his phenomenological approach: "phenomenology of life," "radical phenomenology" (both used in this contribution) and "material phenomenology."

can it become indicative of that which *escapes* intentionality, and how can it provide a truth-criterion for propositions that refer to affectivity as invisible? (4) As the access to the transcendental becomes both an ethical and a theoretical problem, it is necessary to investigate how a radicalised reduction can be performed with regard to three interrelated aspects that are central to human life and therefore to ethics: community, personhood, and action. The analysis of action in particular shows Henry's reductive move at work, while also facing the problem of articulating transcendence with immanence. His radicalised concept of personhood reveals the same features as those contained in his approach to action: they both combine affectivity and intentionality, but limit the reality of personhood and action to their affective core.

Barbarism vs. Culture: Ethics as Normative Critique, Ethics as *Ethos*

Let us begin with what could be called Henry's "normative critique" as is founded by the conceptual opposition of barbarism and culture. Remarkably, this opposition pervades almost all of Henry's oeuvre. Its explicit use is limited to his 1987 essay, but it can already be seen at work in his philosophy of economy as well as in the political philosophy contained in the two volumes on Marx. And, since there is a clear connection between the concept of barbarism and that of despair as "sickness unto death," which is mentioned as early as 1963 in *The Essence of Manifestation*,⁴ one can trace the normative aspects of barbarism vs. culture back to the beginning of Henry's phenomenology. At the other end of the spectrum, his philosophy of Christianity and his phenomenology of the flesh make a repeated use of this opposition.⁵ Far from having been abandoned, the denunciation of barbarism is an integral part of Henry's philosophy of Christianity.

A denunciation is, in this context, a radical critique that is intrinsically normative, since even for the phenomenologist it is impossible to remain neutral while facing, as a living being, what is described as the inversion of culture. This is even more true in the case of a phenomenology of life that analyses such a cultural inversion as a movement of life's attempted self-negation. Culture is, in Henry's sense, always to be understood as a culture of life, whereas barbarism consists in a reversal of this process toward a "culture" of what is other than life, that is, toward a culture of death.⁶ The opposition of barbarism and culture remains, therefore, unintelligible, as long as it is not referred to life as the key-concept of Henry's phenomenology. However, from the standpoint of life—which is the all-encompassing standpoint since, strictly speaking, there is no standpoint outside of life—the dichotomy separating values from mere facts no longer holds if every fact is being evaluated from life's standpoint. Even indifference, for instance, is still a tonality pertaining to life as affectivity. It is, as such, not neutral and certainly not definitive if we follow Henry's understanding of life as a constant process of

⁴ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) [Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF, [1963] 2003)].

⁵ See for instance: Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 259-75 [325-45].

⁶ *Ibid.*, 275 [345].

coming to itself (*parvenir en soi*), a process through which tonalities are subject to change and can even transform into their opposites.⁷

Henry's denunciation of barbarism can therefore be described as axiological, as long as one agrees, however, not to consider the axiological realm as independent, or even simply as different, from the realm of reality. As a result, there is, for Henry, no essential difference between phenomenology, on the one hand, and ethics on the other. Phenomenology is, as phenomenology of life, also ethics, since both approaches have one and the same object: the truth of life. Every form of normativity is, in this view, ultimately rooted in life, and so is every possible aspect of reality. The ethics of affectivity is thus phenomenological ethics and this is also why Michel Henry's entire oeuvre can be read as ethics.⁸

For similar reasons, barbarism is, in its "accomplishment," *impossible*. Life's project of fleeing and negating itself cannot be accomplished, because life remains itself, even through forms of flight and negation that Henry does not hesitate to characterise as madness.⁹ While trying to escape its own essence, life encounters the paradox of despair and faces an impossible task. This certainly does not prevent both barbarism and despair from being harmful: without being able to annihilate the experience (*épreuve*) that ties life to itself, it can nonetheless transform itself into a "sickness unto death." It is this very movement of fleeing that Michel Henry recognises as constituting the characteristic trait of modernity. While Kierkegaardian despair is a valuable analytical heuristic at the level of individual existence, barbarism in Henry's sense extends this paradigm to major tendencies at work in modern civilisation.

To begin with, let us consider the role of science in the constitution of modernity. The rise of the Galilean revolution coincides with the establishment of *modern* science, marking a paradigm of objectivity and the reign of exteriority." Such a paradigm not only crystallises the disjunction of knowledge (*savoir*) and culture, it also reduces phenomenality to ek-static appearing.¹⁰ As ideology, scientism therefore ratifies and promotes the forgetting of life (*oubli de la vie*) as subjective interiority, that is, as the realm of pathos as a distinct and fundamental type of phenomenality. However, since it is in pathos that the ultimate origin of transcendence is to be found, science is nothing but a figure of life and scientism an expression of reality that turns against itself, and aspires to negate its essence. Hence, the rise of a paradox that appears throughout any investigation into the ethics of affectivity: scientism, like every other negation of subjectivity, is the work of subjectivity itself; barbarism, in this sense, is the work of life and, as such, one that requires its own "cultivation." This leads to a first difficulty: it is impossible to separate life from its own attempted negation. Moreover, such an attempt belongs to life and is in principle one of its possibilities. Barbarism is therefore

⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 37 [68-9].

⁸ A detailed study of this thesis, as well as of the ethics of affectivity in general, can be found in: Frédéric Seyler, *Barbarie ou culture. L'éthique de l'affectivité dans la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* (Paris: Kimé, 2010).

⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 52 [95].

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42 [77].

neither an accident nor an element exterior to life that would attack it from the outside. It is in the realm of life itself, in its pathos, that the possibility of reversing the movement of self-growth (*auto-accroissement*) has to be located. Henry's analysis situates such a possibility in the history of affectivity (*historial de l'affectivité*). Affectivity, according to this analysis, necessarily undergoes a phase of suffering (*souffrance*) and it is in order to escape this suffering that the attempt to flee from life appears.¹¹ The movement of self-growth is thereby reversed, while the available energy is used for the purpose of escaping the experience that one is. It is in this context that a flight into the realm of exteriority appears as the most promising means. But since self-experience (*épreuve de soi*) is what defines life as auto-affection, the attempt turns into despair and, ultimately, transforms itself into the desire for its own negation. In this sense, barbarism is the ultimate expression of nihilism.¹² If, for Henry, science is not always as innocent as the disinterested quest for knowledge would suggest—if “the joy of knowing is not as pure as it seems”¹³ –, it is nonetheless a form of praxis and, as such, it remains a form of culture.¹⁴

The same applies to technology. The essence of *techne* is founded in life, and instrumental relations are part of bodily-ownness (*corpsappropriation*), i.e., that the “system” defined by the triad “subjective body/organic body/Earth” is an originary part of immanent auto-affection.¹⁵ However, the aforementioned paradox also applies here and, again, what essentially belongs to life—and is therefore a form of culture—can be reversed and put into the service of its negation. For radical phenomenology this is the case when, building upon the presupposition of scientism, modern technology materializes this presupposition. Whereas the instrument of the pre-modern age still functions as *mediation* for the actualization of subjective potentialities, the processes mastered by techno-science are anonymous and natural phenomena. The self-accomplishment of nature has replaced—or tends to replace—the self-accomplishment of subjectivity. And when “action” has become objective, the subjective powers belonging to the “I can” become atrophied, since these powers are progressively evicted from the processes of production.¹⁶ Finally, humanity itself becomes subjected to a technological approach in which the human is considered solely as a natural being instead of a living subjectivity. The ideology of scientism first prevails on its own level, namely that of the mind, but the development of technological frameworks based on the paradigm of exteriority leads to a colonisation of praxis that reaches deeply into everyday existence. Those frameworks and devices are therefore essential to ideology insofar as they constitute an indispensable mediation for the reversal of culture into barbarism. It is praxis itself that is pervaded by the project of self-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66-7 [118-9].

¹² Henry, *Incarnation. A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 221 [Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 316].

¹³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 72 [129].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62 [109].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45 [81-2].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51 [92].

escape and self-negation, a point that Henry develops through an analysis of television.¹⁷ Obviously, the practice of scientific inquiry is itself a highly elaborate form of praxis, even when it is put to the service of despair. Techno-scientific frameworks lead, on the contrary, to a decrease in opportunities given to the use and cultivation of immanent force.

From this, two points of consideration follow. First, Henry's analysis of techno-science clarifies what is at stake for an ethics of affectivity, namely a fundamental dichotomy between the liberation of force that emerges from life's movement of self-growth and the flight from the excess produced by such a movement.¹⁸ Such is the ethical substance of the opposition between culture and barbarism. Second, this analysis raises the question of social conditions and their impact on the exercise of subjective potentialities. A central aspect of this issue is the relation between both social and individual determinations and the role played by mediations for action.¹⁹ In this context, however, the thesis of technology's axiological neutrality can no longer be maintained,²⁰ as this would be inconsistent with the claim that there are no facts devoid of axiological meaning (as well as with the constant denunciation of techno-science throughout *Barbarism*). Furthermore, the issue of social organisation refers to two important fields of investigation: economy and politics.

In both cases, Henry's normative critique targets the forgetting, or even the occultation, of transcendental genesis in which political organisation and economy are rooted.²¹ It is therefore the transcendental as ante-political and ante-economic that is considered as the only source for the legitimacy of politics and economy as superstructures that are tied necessarily to representation and measurement.²² However, according to Henry it is precisely the opposite that is happening, namely that these structures seem to become autonomous and tend to impose their laws on immanent life. This is only possible insofar as the foundational character of immanent appearing in pathos remains forgotten. In techno-scientific capitalism, but also in totalitarianism, this tendency to treat superstructures as an autonomous reality becomes extreme.²³ Alienation can never be total, but it is nonetheless very real, precisely because it is able to affect individual praxis by substituting the laws of ideality for those of vital teleology.²⁴ It is therefore the lack

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-14 [187-99].

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 100 [174].

¹⁹ See also the debate with Paul Ricœur: "La rationalité selon Marx" (1979), in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III. *De l'art et du politique* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 100-4.

²⁰ Henry, *Barbarism*, 53 [96].

²¹ The following considerations on political philosophy and on the recognition of absolute life are based on my encyclopedia entry "Michel Henry" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online access: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/michel-henry/>).

²² Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 196 and 204-6 [Henry, *Marx*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), vol. II, 154 and 219-20].

²³ See Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism. Theory of a Catastrophe*, trans. Scott Davidson (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) [Henry, *Du communisme au capitalisme. Théorie d'une catastrophe* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1990)].

²⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, 134 [236].

of *recognition* of immanent life as fundamental phenomenality that makes the movement of substitution-reversal, which characterises barbarism, possible. If we follow Henry and distinguish between an originary ethics—*ethos* itself as a first ethics in which life accomplishes its essence²⁵—and ethics as normative and discursive,²⁶ it is to the latter that the philosophical task of reminding us of the transcendental genesis and, hence, of pathos itself as fundamental appearing is assigned. Thus, the ethics of affectivity also has a political dimension, insofar as it identifies and unmasks hypostases in economics and politics.²⁷ Being at first a critique, this aspect further enables radical phenomenology to thematise a possible cultural renaissance as a “reversal of the reversal” operating in barbarism, for instance as *attentiveness* to life.²⁸ As far as the political realm is concerned, however, such a renaissance is countered by the tension, the aporia even, existing between invisible life as ipseity and public affairs as general. This tension, which constitutes the political, can be clearly seen at work in the democratic project, that is, in the attempted self-foundation of communal life that is the heart of democracy.²⁹ From Henry’s point of view, democracy cannot be seen as a factor that leads necessarily to culture. Even if democracy offers a chance to reestablish “the true order of things, the foundation of the political in life, for which it can be nothing but a mediation,”³⁰ there is always a risk of considering the visibility necessary to public life as the only possible mode of phenomenalisation. It may thereby favor the occultation of the very foundation of its legitimacy, and become the objective ally of the Galilean principle.³¹ Moreover, the prospect of political self-foundation is, in its essence, at risk of reproducing on the communal level the transcendental illusion of the ego³² as ultimate constitutive power. On this level also, the bond with absolute Life, i.e., the religious bond, can fall into oblivion. In such a context it is the conquest of human rights that is eventually threatened by the reduction of the human to that which scientific exteriority will be able to enunciate. The ethics of affectivity and its implications for political philosophy oppose this tendency, insofar as it entails the principle according to which the political is only legitimate as mediation for what is ante-political, namely life, both individual and communal.

The Recognition of Absolute Life

Henry’s reading of Christian ethics definitively confirms that what is at stake for the ethics of affectivity is the recognition of the bond between individual and absolute life. For Henry, cultural renaissance is inherently religious and therefore

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97 [169].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 96 [168].

²⁷ Henry, “La vie et la république” (1989), in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III, 158.

²⁸ Marc Maeschalck, “L’attention à la vie comme forme d’une rationalité politique,” in *Michel Henry. La parole de la vie*, ed. Jad Hatem (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), 239-75.

²⁹ Henry, “Difficile démocratie” (2000), in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III, 171.

³⁰ Henry, “La vie et la république,” 162 (Translation original).

³¹ Henry, “Difficile démocratie,” 175.

³² Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 140 [177].

refers to the theme of “second birth.” Here again, the opposition of barbarism and culture is put to work. The negation of God in the world of techno-science is considered to be a negation of the human as a living ipseity,³³ which leads to the abolition of action, the only locus where the human is able to experience life as an absolute. The frenetic search for oneself in the world, which, according to Henry, characterises modernity, can only be short-circuited by abandoning oneself to Life, that is, by giving up the care for oneself in the world (*souci de soi dans le monde*).³⁴ The modern quest for personal identity is in reality a flight from oneself, since it substitutes a ghostly ego for ipseity, i.e., the real and living self born from life’s process of self-engendering.³⁵ Not to care anymore about oneself as ego means “to be only a living that is traversed by Life,”³⁶ to rediscover what has been forgotten, to live from the life that one is without having chosen to be and, therefore, to live from the infinite love that absolute life has for itself. As with the later Fichte, activity and abandonment to the absolute are united. Activity is not meant as the restless oscillation between the limited and the unlimited, nor as the endless sacrifice of one of these extreme positions in favor of the other, but as a peaceful and yet active immersion in Life. The blessed life of Fichte’s *Anweisung*³⁷ is one that has arrived at its destination in God after having exhausted all the resources of independence (*Selbständigkeit*). Its actions are a source of joy operating as *index sui* of a life in love. Since such a life wishes only that which is wished for by the divine Life in it, it wishes authentically and is rewarded with the highest joy.³⁸ In Fichte, as in Henry, *teleology* oriented toward the recognition of absolute life takes the form of a double negation, in which what negates the absolute has to be negated in return.³⁹ Furthermore, for both philosophers, this recognition can only be a practical one: it entails an inner revelation (*innere Offenbarung*)⁴⁰ that essentially resists its description and escapes representation.⁴¹

But how does such a life, one that is in conformity with its essence and embraces that which continuously carries it in Life, become actual? And how can the ethics of affectivity avoid a double-bind situation, where abandonment is commanded, where one cares not to care anymore about oneself, and where one

³³ *Ibid.*, 263 [330].

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 165 [208].

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 143-4 [181-2].

³⁶ Henry, “Difficile démocratie,” 169 (Translation original).

³⁷ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch die Religionslehre* (1806), in *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, vol. I/9, eds. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 1995).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴¹ Remarkably, the *Anweisung* has been the only work of Fichte commented by Michel Henry; see Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, §§ 10, 11 and 38. For further studies on Henry’s Fichte reading see: Rolf Kühn, *Anfang und Vergessen. Phänomenologische Lektüre des Deutschen Idealismus. Fichte. Schelling, Hegel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004); Frédéric Seyler, *Fichtes ‘Anweisung zum seligen Leben.’ Ein Kommentar zur Religionslehre von 1806* (Freiburg im Breisgau/München: Alber, 2014), 201-14; Frédéric Seyler, “Fichte in 1804: A Radical Phenomenology of Life?,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 28 (2014) 3: 295-304.

desperately tries to flee despair? If second birth is only possible through praxis and the work of mercy,⁴² it follows that such a mutation of praxis can only be an interior one, i.e., that it can never be commanded from a point of view exterior to immanent life. It is therefore through the action of immanent life itself that “the life of the ego is changed into the Life of the absolute,”⁴³ which means that it is not the result of the ego’s conscious caring for salvation. This is, however, a highly problematic point in the ethics of affectivity. Is such ethics still possible if what has been identified as its fundamental issue depends, not on decisions consciously put into action, but on the immanent dynamic of affectivity itself? Caught between the alternative of a necessary or, on the contrary, of a purely contingent and elective grace that would put affectivity into motion toward second birth, an ethical *project* would seem to be powerless and therefore in vain. Perhaps, however, this difficulty can be overcome. Perhaps the task for an ethics of affectivity is merely to be *indicative* of a word (*parole*) that, as such, can never be part of any ethical discourse. Perhaps its task is therefore reduced to that of pointing toward affectivity without ever pretending to have power over it. But, if this hypothesis is correct, what then is the status of the phenomenology of life as a theoretical, albeit phenomenological, discourse, i.e., how can it be indicative of what escapes intentionality since it is intentional in its nature as theory?

Making the Invisible Visible: The Paradox of Radical Phenomenology

In order to analyse this problem, we have to go back to the distinction made between immanence and transcendence in Henry’s work. Since life as transcendental affectivity escapes intentionality but is, at the same time, its foundation, the problem of having access to the transcendental becomes an ethical problem: how, in other words, is the appeal to a recognition of life that overcomes life’s forgetting and occultation compatible with the acknowledgment that such a recognition essentially cannot be achieved through a reflective process involving consciousness or even philosophy itself? We stated that the phenomenology of life as a whole amounts to ethics, but how can it fulfill that purpose, even only in part, if second birth is completely independent of any theoretical preparation?⁴⁴ If this is the case, what can the ethical function of a phenomenology of life be? To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand how Henry’s discourse ensures the truth-value of its own assertions, that is, how it legitimizes its own radicality as a “reversed phenomenology” (*phénoménologie renversée*), since such a reversal implies at least some sort of *access* to the transcendental.

The path of evidence, which Henry identifies as a self-referential foundation in Husserl’s phenomenology,⁴⁵ is unavailable to a radical phenomenology that situates fundamental appearing in the invisible, and thus beyond evidence. As a further consequence, this radical move must oppose any

⁴² Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 170 [214].

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 165 [208].

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 165 [208].

⁴⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, 71-2 [104].

attempt to make perception the first principle of givenness. However, this begs the question concerning radical phenomenology's access to fundamental appearing in pathos: if the latter is the foundation of ek-static appearing, from which it nonetheless differs radically, how is a discourse on pathos possible and how can phenomenological propositions be known to be true, since evidence has been discarded as a possible criterion? Thus, the problem of an access to life as transcendental refers to that of the conditions of possibility of radical phenomenology itself, i.e., to the possibility of a translation of immanent life into representation and language. From the standpoint of radical phenomenology, there can be no access to life from outside of life. But, again, how do we know that and, above all, how can we *accurately think* about life, since thought is necessarily tied to representation and therefore bound to transform affectivity as soon as it thinks about it? First, it has to be remembered that, for Henry, *every* thought is rooted in affectivity and would not exist without it.⁴⁶ This also means that every thought carries within itself the certainty proper to the knowledge of life (*savoir de la vie*). Consequently, through every thought, immanent life *translates* itself and does so *necessarily*. However, all of this applies to thoughts regardless of their particular truth-value: thoughts that refer to propositions that are false are just as founded in life as are true ones, which means that this foundation cannot be as such a criterion allowing us to distinguish between truth and falsehood. It seems that life translates itself in all forms of discourse, but that only *some* of them stand for a translation that is *accurate*. This means that, even if the certainty inherent to life is shared by all living (*vivants*), it is only for some of them that this certainty is discursively recognized. What is problematic here is not so much the underlying idea that such recognition would be the result of an elective grace—which could very well be operating in many discoveries –, but the task of providing an inter-subjectively shared criterion for propositions that are claimed to be true. In Husserl's Göttingen Lectures, this criterion is met by evidence. In Henry's radical phenomenology of life, it is met by certainty. But this is only possible insofar as it is admitted that there is a *shared* certainty, just as there is, at least potentially, shared evidence. For Henry this possibility can be found in the counter-reductive model given by the Cogito.⁴⁷ And that is why he substitutes self-referential certainty for self-referential evidence as a truth-criterion. If, therefore, the discourse of radical phenomenology—as a reversed phenomenology that recognizes the primacy of life over thought—is true, it can only claim such a value by appealing to a certainty shared by all.⁴⁸ It is clear, however, that the primacy given to certainty cannot be evaluated through a recourse to evidence, since the self-referential character of both implies an epistemic circle.

This circularity is also relevant with regard to ethics, since the discursive and the practical recognition of absolute life have a similar structure. As a philosophy, the ethics of affectivity necessarily possesses a discursive form that

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 90 [130].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-5 [148-52].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 184 [265] (footnote).

has to go further than the theoretical reference to ethos. Its meaning as normative and as a secondary ethics implies that it also has to be *practical*. One practical aspect of radical phenomenology can be seen in its use of the Cartesian counter-reduction. By identifying the latter through its reading of the Cogito, it operates the fundamental substitution of certainty for evidence, where “life knows at once what it always knew,”⁴⁹ inaugurating a transcendental perspective of attentiveness to life.⁵⁰ Such attentiveness is not limited to a theoretical view of life, but is tied to a praxis of textual reception that should lead from the word of the world (*parole du monde*) to the word of life (*parole de la vie*).⁵¹ This is why, as is the case with the reception of Scripture, Henry’s counter-reductive text has to be “heard” twice—first as a philosophical language and secondly as the word of life in immanent affectivity. The issue of the translation of affectivity into representation suggests that if life has the capability to translate itself into the language of philosophy, then the reverse should also be *possible*, such that unknown knowledge becomes known, and an already-given pathos emerges from oblivion when counter-reduction leads from the text to the original that inspired it. But this also implies that discourse alone—including that of radical phenomenology—is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the rediscovery of affectivity, since such a rediscovery is first and foremost the work of pathos itself and its history. This essential limitation does not make ethical discourse useless, but restricts its efficiency to that of being only a *possible mediation* for an immanent dynamic that lies beyond its control. Such could be the role of the ethics of affectivity; to support the living effort to overcome the forgetting that affects life, but which is successful only when it can be heard twice, and is therefore dependent on a favorable moment that would be the equivalent of *kairos* for radical phenomenology.

A discursive recognition, however, has to be practical in the sense that it cannot be dissociated from the certainty that pertains to affectivity. Such a recognition, therefore, can never be a pure abstraction but is necessarily tied to some form of praxis, even if intellectual. The primacy of immanence over transcendence therefore goes hand in hand with the primacy of praxis over *theoria* and it is this twofold primacy that has to prevail in a radical phenomenology of action, community and personhood—three interrelated aspects central to human life, for which the ethics of affectivity should be able to account.

Community, Action, Personhood: The Reduction to Immanence

The line of thought given by the opposition of barbarism to culture can further be applied to our understanding of alienation and liberation. A life that appears to itself as being caught in an alien destiny⁵² escapes alienation only insofar as it is

⁴⁹ Henry, “Parole et religion. La parole de Dieu” (1992), in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 201 (Translation original).

⁵⁰ Maeschalck, “L’attention à la vie,” 254.

⁵¹ Henry, “Parole et religion,” 200-3.

⁵² Henry, *Barbarism*, 54 [98].

able to liberate the force engendered in the continuous process of self-growth pertaining to life. Liberation, therefore, amounts to the accomplishment of life's essence, an accomplishment, however, that is never static or final, but that has to be renewed continuously. Such is the meaning of ethos in Henry—i.e., of the original ethics of affectivity—as it is identical to the movement through which affectivity seeks to accomplish itself. Here also, this understanding of praxis refers to the line separating barbarism from culture, just as it refers to the recognition of an originary passivity on which praxis depends, a primary powerlessness that is the condition for every possible power—which means that it refers to the recognition of absolute life.⁵³

The Community of the Living

But there can be no liberation for an isolated human being. Inside the community of the living it is, according to Henry's reading of Christianity, the same force of life that is given and shared.⁵⁴ To reduce the other to that which is visible or to a social function is to forget life both as an original ipseity and as a bond that connects each living being with all others.⁵⁵ In order to support this thesis, radical phenomenology needs to rethink intersubjectivity on a deeper level than that of intentionality, while avoiding the trap of solipsism in which the immanent self would be condemned to radical solitude. It is Henry's critique both of Husserlian pairing (*Paarung*)⁵⁶ and of the Heideggerian *Dasein-Mitsein* relation as circular⁵⁷ that leads to an understanding of the relation to the other within the immediacy of pathos, i.e., as an invisible being-together.⁵⁸ An exclusively egological perspective is thus avoided through the idea of such being-together in one absolute life. From this standpoint, the forgetting of absolute life goes hand in hand with a disruption of our relation to others, so that being born again in life is being born again to others. The thesis asserting the duplicity of appearing also applies here: "every visible appearance is doubled by an invisible reality."⁵⁹ Furthermore, this means that even in the most ordinary everyday encounters, affectivity is at stake in such a manner that the perception of others is always accompanied by a deeper relationship, where the other is not thematised as such.⁶⁰ And again, it is the recognition of this immanent community that is central to ethics and politics as conceived in radical phenomenology.

⁵³ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 137 [173].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 265 [333].

⁵⁵ See also: Raphaël Gély, *Rôles, action sociale et vie subjective. Recherches à partir de la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* (Bruxelles: PIE Peter Lang, 2007) and Gély, "Towards a Radical Phenomenology of Social Life," in *Michel Henry: The Affect of Thought*, ed. Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly (London/New York: Continuum, 2012), 154-77.

⁵⁶ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101-8 [Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 137-59].

⁵⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, 240 [343].

⁵⁸ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 118-34 [160-79].

⁵⁹ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 258 [323].

⁶⁰ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 127 [170].

With regard to the communal aspects of existence, it is equally necessary to investigate to what extent radical phenomenology is able to go beyond its critical role and to propose an alternative, reversing what could be termed the “politics of barbarism.” It is certainly reasonable to assume that its normative critique also carries a positive aspect, insofar as it reinforces vigilance and opposition towards certain social and political phenomena while advocating a reorientation toward a renewed concept of the political. Such advocacy could be rooted in the fundamental rule according to which political organization is legitimate only as a mediation of the ante-political needs inherent to life. Beyond the fact of its social recognition, however, it remains uncertain if this fundamental rule is able to generate and legitimize a particular set of legal norms or if it is too indeterminate to be used for such a purpose.

Immanent Personhood

Interestingly, a similar problem arises with regard to the concept of personhood and its meaning for a radical phenomenology of life. Here also it is the connection between the immanent and the transcendent that appears to be problematic. Radical phenomenology is, first and foremost, a critique of representation as belonging to the realm of transcendence. It is therefore entirely consistent in its critique of representational elements with regard to the question of the self (*soi*) and the “me” (*moi*). Such elements cannot determine essentially what the self or the “me” is, since they introduce, as transcendent, a distance or separation that makes it impossible for the self to seize itself as *real*, while representation is, in essence, bound to *ideality*. The reality of personhood thus could not be constituted by a fundamentally irreal (*irréel*) dimension, namely representations and, in particular, representations of oneself. The attempt to grasp the reality of the self through memory and discourse, through a hermeneutics of narrativity, can only produce a fictitious self or, if the fictitious character of a static description is acknowledged, an infinite hermeneutic process. Perhaps the best example of Henry’s critique directed at a concept of personhood based on representation is to be found in his approach to psychoanalysis. For Henry, the merit of psychoanalysis lies in its recognition of the central character of affectivity; its fundamental flaw is the substitution of representations and their interpretation for affect. By making representations the center of psychoanalytical praxis, the analytical approach eventually veils its affective foundation and tends to become an endless hermeneutic task. Psychoanalysis thereby shifts from the force of affect to the void of representation.⁶¹ The potentially endless character of psychoanalytical interpretation supports the idea that neither representations nor the history of their repression can account for the essence of personhood. But how does radical phenomenology account for personhood? The term “person” is not conceptualized as such in Henry’s writings, but is instead replaced by “self” and “me.” The self is

⁶¹ Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 316 [Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, 1985), 385].

considered to be identical to ipseity as characterises immanent auto-affection, that is, to life as adhering to itself and incapable of escaping itself. “Me” refers to an original passivity that is in turn the condition for the “I can” as a potentiality to exercise and develop subjective powers.⁶² In their essence, however, the self and the “me” are fundamentally affective and therefore immanent.

The essence of personhood is thus reduced to the movement of affectivity in living ipseity, and such a radical reduction must exclude what can be seen as secondary and derived; namely, representation and intentionality. Henceforth, “personhood” could only have two meanings from the standpoint of radical phenomenology: either it designates radical and immanent subjectivity itself, and, by way of this reduction, (radical) phenomenology of personhood becomes identical to what Henry enunciates about subjectivity; or, on the contrary, personhood is seen as comporting a necessary reference to intentionality and time (understood as ek-static temporality). In the latter case, however, the concept of personhood has to *articulate* pathos and ek-stasis in a way that does not simply dismiss such articulation as unreal.

The absence of this second perspective, in the corpus constituting the phenomenology of life, proves that Henry would allow only the first meaning to count as a description of personhood in a real sense. It is certainly correct to say that Henry’s radical phenomenology nonetheless has given an account of the worldly or transcendent aspects that characterise human existence. But it is equally true that this account is almost indistinguishable from the critique of these aspects, where the empirical is systematically reduced to the transcendental, the transcendent to the immanent, and which therefore functions as a normative critique in ethics and political philosophy. This is clearly apparent in Henry’s approach to aesthetics, intersubjectivity, economy and politics. The critique of representation as an illusory substitute for living reality is a constant and central theme in these analyses. For each particular field, radical phenomenology essentially attempts to “reverse the reversal,” i.e., to serve as a reminder of the transcendental genesis in which representation originates, thereby stressing the secondary character of what appears to intentional consciousness. This reversal is also the most important tool that enables the critique of scientism and technology and, thus, Henry’s concept of culture as opposed to barbarism. From the standpoint of ethics and political philosophy in Henry, this critique is essential. But is it also sufficient to provide an account of human existence as life *in the world* and, as far as ethics is concerned, to provide an orientation in the face of the necessity for action in the world? Henry’s analysis of action is highly significant in this context and casts further light on problematic aspects of personhood in radical phenomenology.

⁶² Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 135 [171].

Immanent Action

Following Henry, it is in immanent affectivity, and not in its movement of self-objectification, that the reality of action must be situated. With Marx, but against Hegel and Feuerbach, Henry stresses the opacity pertaining to action from an objectifying point of view, e.g., the action of running that, as *real* action, remains *invisible*.⁶³ As to the reality of our relation to the world, it does not lie in the object-relation, but “is entirely given by the inner experience that [subjectivity] makes of itself.”⁶⁴ Action is only real insofar as it is radically subjective, i.e., immanent to, and independent of, sensible intuition. Thus action might be said to be both opaque and blind, a claim that seems problematic, since even the simplest actions depend on intentionality, in the form of sensible intuition directed toward the world. To say that “in intuition there is no action and [...] and in action no intuition”⁶⁵ is even more problematic, since it seems to conflict with Henry’s own concept of praxis. According to the latter, praxis is all-encompassing for the living, which means that intuition is also founded in praxis and represents a particular form of it. For the same reason, *theoria* cannot be seen as radically independent from praxis—a point that Henry acknowledges in the same article.⁶⁶

⁶³ Henry, *Marx*, vol. I, 348. The pages 341-60 have not been translated for the English edition. Overall, only one third of the 989 pages constituting the two volumes of the French original have been translated into English. Furthermore, and as T. Rockmore explains in his preface, some passages have been rewritten.

⁶⁴ Henry, “Le concept de l’être comme production” (1975) in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III, 33 (Translation original). Henry’s example of the runner is a perfect illustration of this idea: “Imaginons un coureur sur la cendrée du stade. En tant qu’objet de l’intuition, comme phénomène empirique, objectif, sensible, naturel, sa course est là pour tous et pour chacun. Mais les spectateurs regardent et ne font rien. Ce n’est donc pas l’intuition empirique de la course, son apparence objective qui peut la définir, constituer sa réalité, elle n’est justement que son apparence. La réalité de la course réside dans la subjectivité de celui qui court, dans l’expérience vécue qui n’est donnée qu’à lui et le constitue comme individu, comme cet individu en train de courir, comme un individu ‘déterminé’ pour parler comme Marx. *C’est là ce que signifie l’affirmation décisive de la première thèse selon laquelle la pratique est subjective*” (Henry, *Marx*, vol. I, 353. The pages 341-60 are missing in the English translation).

⁶⁵ Henry, “Le concept de l’être comme production,” 31 (Translation original).

⁶⁶ “Des objections alors ne se pressent-elles pas devant nous? La praxis, dira-t-on, s’accomplit dans le monde, elle lui emprunte ses matériaux, ses instruments, ses lois, les formes qu’elle crée et par conséquent ses fins. Seulement le discours qui énonce ces objections est justement le discours de la théorie, celui qui trouve sa formulation dans la théorie des quatre causes d’Aristote, celui qui prétend réduire la praxis à la *theoria* et à un mode d’accomplissement de celle-ci. Accomplissons au contraire le renversement qui s’annonce dans les thèses sur Feuerbach: il ne s’agit plus alors de tenir la praxis dans la vue de la théorie mais de fonder la théorie dans la praxis. Fonder la théorie dans la praxis, c’est reconnaître d’abord que la théorie elle-même, le voir, n’est pas autonome et que les modalités selon lesquelles il s’accomplit, ses catégories, lui sont prescrites par la praxis...c’est affirmer, en second lieu, que pas plus que ses formes, le contenu du voir, l’objet de la théorie, ne s’explique par elle. La réalité sensible ne s’explique point par l’intuition. Je cite Marx: ‘Même quand la réalité sensible est réduite à un bâton, au strict minimum, elle implique l’activité qui produit le bâton’.... Dira-t-on: n’est-ce pas l’intuition précisément qui nous livre cette activité et l’ensemble des phénomènes sociaux? Nous devons ici réaffirmer notre thèse: l’intuition est incapable de nous donner l’être réel de l’action, elle peut seulement le représenter, le reproduire au sens où une photo représente un événement réel” (Henry, “Le concept de l’être comme production,” 34-5).

Moreover, if praxis is the foundation of *theoria* and intuition, how can they be opposed, and their essences be considered as “mutually exclusive”?⁶⁷ The essential difference, and even incompatibility, between action as subjective on the one hand, and *theoria* (and intuition) on the other hand, is the absence of any object-relation in the former. Such an object-relation is the defining characteristic of the latter. Combined with the proposition that *theoria* is founded in praxis, there is only one possible conclusion; namely, that the *reality* of object-relation has to be situated in immanent auto-affection, and that it is therefore alien to the object to which it is related. The action of seeing, for instance, is real in the sense of radical phenomenology only insofar as it actualizes subjective potentialities and is experienced in immanent affectivity. The object-relation, however, as intentional directedness towards *what* we face or choose to look at, would remain, on such an account, exterior to immanent subjective reality. This suggests at least two questions: 1) What is the *meaning* of action if its reality has to be thought of as independent of object-relations and, more generally, from one’s being-in-the-world? 2) How are these unreal elements of action to be accounted for?

As to the first question, the exclusion of object-relations outside of the reality of action implies that real *causes* and real *ends* of action have also to be situated in the only realm of reality recognised by radical phenomenology, that is, in immanent affectivity.⁶⁸ Most importantly, it leads to a re-evaluation of the normative power of ethics, whose norms and ends are precisely powerless if they do not emanate from life itself:

If one defines ethics as a relation of action to ends, norms or values, one has already abandoned the site in which it stands, that is, life itself. In life, there are neither goals nor ends, because the relation to them as an intentional relation does not exist in what does not have in itself any ekstasis [...] In truth, if ends and norms can be prescribed to life [...], these ends, norms and values can only come from life itself. Through their help, life seeks to represent what it wants. But such a representation is only a chance occurrence, marking a pause or hesitation in action.⁶⁹

Ethical norms are therefore to be seen as byproducts of subjective life, as life’s self-objectification and self-affirmation in axiological discourse. As self-

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 31; see also Henry, *Marx. A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 143 [vol. I, 324].

⁶⁸ As Henry writes in “Le concept de l’être comme production,” 36-7: “*Les chemins que nous suivons sont tracés en nous, ce sont les chemins de notre corps et ces chemins ne nous égarent pas*. Ils tracent le cercle de nos possibles et assignent à notre vie son destin. Toute l’activité sociale qui nous semble s’accomplir hors de nous trouve en réalité en nous et dans notre subjectivité à la fois son enracinement, sa réalité, sa prédétermination et ses lois” (Emphasis added).

⁶⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 96 [167-8]. Followed by: “So, instead of determining the action of life, ends, norms and values are determined by it. This determination consists in the fact that life, which experiences itself constantly and knows itself at every moment, also knows at each instant what must be done and what is suited to it. This knowledge is no different from action. It does not precede it or ‘determine’ it, properly speaking. It is identical to it, as the original know-how that is life, as praxis, as living body.”

objectifications they are always secondary compared to the sphere of immanence, in which there are no ends, no values and no norms as intentional objects. But if “life also knows in each moment what must be done and what is suited to it,”⁷⁰ how can we explain a phenomenon such as hesitation, and the need for norms and values in the form of normative ethics?

With regard to our second question, it seems difficult to admit that intuition should be excluded from the reality of action. For the action of running, for example, it would mean that actions such as looking around, observing other competitors, evaluating the situation from a tactical point of view, etc., would possess reality only insofar as these actions take place in immanent subjectivity, i.e., *regardless* of their intentional objects. Such a move is indeed radical since it leads one to dissociate subjectivity from objectivity, and intentional *activity* (as unfolding in immanence) from the *objects* constituted or apprehended by it (as transcendent). This move is also counter-intuitive in the sense of being contrary to our experience of action, where objects and situations outside of us seem to determine a large part of what we do and, thus, are given as being very real. This objection, because it is itself based on intuition, is hardly decisive from the standpoint of radical phenomenology. But it becomes more critical, and the exclusion of object-relations becomes more problematic, in light of Henry’s foundation thesis.

A foundation of transcendence in immanence should make it very difficult to separate radically, or even to oppose, transcendent objects (as irreal) and immanent activity (as real). On the contrary, if one thinks of action as a non-dissociable unity of intentionality and affectivity,⁷¹ this could very well lead to the conclusion that affectivity cannot solely account for the entire reality of such a unity. Henry’s position could here be summarized as follows: on the one hand, it acknowledges that action is constituted by a certain unity of two poles (affectivity and intentionality), while considering, on the other hand, that only one of them, namely affectivity, accounts for the *reality* of action. This structure is also the only one that can account for personhood from the perspective of radical phenomenology: temporality, being-in-the-world and affectivity form a unity, an arch-fact, but only the immanent core of this compound is real.

Conclusion: “What Should I Do?”

Within a normative context, Henry’s phenomenology is able to reduce the production of idealities to their transcendental genesis, thereby relativizing the importance of representation and putting affectivity in the foreground. On the plane

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96 [168].

⁷¹ Henry, *Incarnation*, 152 [217] seems to suggest such a possibility: “Our action thus does not take place first in us in order to then arise suddenly out of us. Because it is living, it has always belonged to life and never leaves it. It has also always been objective.... Living corporeity and objective worldly bodies are *a priori*. They are two *a priori* of the experience of our body that are themselves only the expression of the duplicity of appearing, which is an Arch-fact, and which nothing explains but is to be understood on its own basis, according to the rule imposed by the phenomenology of life.”

of ethics, it opposes barbarism and serves as a possible advocate or even mediation for the affective recognition of absolute life. But does it allow an analysis of the human condition beyond this reductive move? In other words: after having performed a radical transcendental reduction of the human to the living, and of the world to life, what can the ethics of radical phenomenology say about the human as the irreducible *unity* of life and intentionality, i.e., as the life *of* intentionality and as living-*in-the-world*? As the analysis of action in the phenomenology of life shows, action comprises a relation to the world and an orientation within it. It is only in this context that the question: “What should I do?” makes sense. This is the question of morality *par excellence*, a question pertaining to the good life and to an authentic personal life led by choice and action. While a considerable portion of our actions is habitual and therefore necessitates neither hesitation nor choice, this is no longer true of situations outside the ordinary, where, to quote Bergson, “the action which has been performed does not then express some superficial idea, almost external to ourselves, distinct and easy to account for: it agrees with the whole of our most intimate feelings, thoughts and aspirations, with that particular conception of life which is the equivalent of all our past experience, in a word, with our personal idea of happiness and honor.”⁷² Even without altogether accepting Bergson’s philosophy, one must certainly acknowledge that this kind of situation is essentially human and belongs, at some point, to the life of every human being. From the perspective of radical phenomenology, however, the problem is that its reduction of personhood to ipseity, and hence, to immanent affectivity, leaves room for only one option: it has to account for the problem of personal choice and personal action by referring them to immanent life. This is not to say that immanent life would be the origin of a transcendental genesis of personhood, since, for radical phenomenology, immanent life *is* personhood. But, as suggested by Henry in his essay on barbarism, it would be the origin of norms, values, and ends that would guide the living individual through existence and through the task of making choices that would be “authentic,” insofar as they are choices appropriate to the cultivation of subjective potentialities and to the essence of life as self-growth.

It is thus a radicalized concept of personhood that is proposed by Henry’s phenomenology of life—radical in the sense that representation, consciousness, and even temporality itself become inessential, as derived from the primacy of pathos. Their “reality” is never original, but always produced by affectivity. In this sense, life always finds its way—in individual and collective history, in culture as well as in second birth and, desperately, even in barbarism. From a normative and ethical point of view, one has therefore to conclude: while manifesting a pause or hesitation along the path that goes from life to reflection, the question “What should I do?” finds no answer except the one that is given by the movement of life itself, sometimes even against all reflection.

⁷² Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. Franck L. Pogson (London/New York: MacMillan, 1913), 170 [Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), in *Œuvres*, ed. André Robinet, intro. Henri Gouhier (Paris: PUF 1959), 112].