

## “Givenness from Above”: The I Can and its Limits

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### Abstract

This article compares the concept of the living body (or “flesh”) in Edmund Husserl’s *Ideas II* with that of the French phenomenologist Michel Henry. It locates in their descriptions of the I Can a basic difference in the way they understand the roles that impressibility, affectivity, and perception play in the phenomenological method. It then examines Henry’s concept of “auto-affectation” and argues that the “strong” and “weak” senses of auto-affectation must be understood in terms of what Henry, following Kierkegaard, calls the “dialectic of pathos.” Henry finally distinguishes three degrees of passivity—of sensibility with regard to the world, of flesh with regard to itself, and of flesh with regard to incarnation. In the shift from the second to the third, we see a shift from a concept of givenness to a concept of “givenness from above.” It is here that the article locates the presence of a “transcendence” in Henry’s work, which in turn helps to clarify how he understands the boundary between phenomenology and theology.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, transcendence, affectivity, body, flesh, givenness, Michel Henry, Edmund Husserl, incarnation, impressibility

### 1. The Flesh in Question

THE “LIVING BODY” OR “FLESH” provokes questions that philosophy since its inception has sought to confront, if not to conquer.<sup>1</sup> They are questions not only about how embodiment should be understood, or how the body is related to the mind, but about what being-moved means—whether by oneself, or by another, actively or passively, freely or by nature, etc.—so that how and why this movement takes place seems to determine everything. The historical motifs are familiar. The passions: Must one learn to overlook them in a manner of equanimity (*apatheia*), or is it instead a ques-

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<sup>1</sup> One may refer to the Plato of the *Republic*, but also Stoic thought, and even St. Paul in his discourse on the battle between “flesh” and “spirit” in Ga. 5:17.

tion of defeating them through self-denial and self-discipline (*askesis*)? Must the soul rule over them through reason, or is it rather a matter of moderation, of being moved (or moving oneself effortlessly) at just the right time, in just the right way, or again of ordering them all in light of an immutable good than which none greater, or better, can be thought? Affection: is it an undetermined object of an empirical intuition that gives the world, which it is then up to thought to determine? Or is it rather what no thought has ever determined nor ever can, the content of absolute life in its own embrace?

Each of these manners of defining and living what is given in flesh is historically specific, and significant in itself. In multiple ways, they shape the contours of philosophical schools and the sensibilities of cultures, including our own. In the early modern era, the question of flesh becomes more difficult to navigate, and is slow to become formalized as new concepts come onto the scene (the *cogito*, the body as *res extensa*, the passions of the soul).<sup>2</sup> As opposed as they may be, the idealist and materialist philosophies that eventually populate nineteenth-century thought tend to share the view that the body and sensibility in general is of a piece with inert matter, an idea with historical links to British empiricism and Newtonian science.<sup>3</sup> Uniting us to the world, the body is best understood as a worldly thing, whose movements and dynamism are one with the world, and can be described and understood much like the world can, as nature or mechanism. So, if the body must be confronted, is it not in order for the ego to re-assert its dominion, to assure itself and the world that it, or its reason, remains in charge?

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the mechanistic conception of nature begins to outgrow its use.<sup>4</sup> With the form of thought Edmund Husserl calls "phenomenology," which is as much a "science of 'phenomena'" as a "science of ideas," the materialist prejudice is abandoned.<sup>5</sup> The body is to be distinguished, described, and delimited only as it appears, as it gives itself and no further, and what shows itself in the body is anything but an inert object. The extension of flesh thus goes well beyond the *res extensa* thought thinks as the body's essence. Even when considered only as an object, flesh gives itself as an "animated" body. It appears as a body endowed with the property of self-movement, with the capacity or power to move itself. But *to be flesh* does not mean simply

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough treatment of the issues, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la pensée passive de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Here one can cite, in the French context, Denis Diderot, *Le rêve de d'Alembert* (Paris: Hermann, 1987), OC 17, and in the English, Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1996) §§1-10.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Henri Bergson's early criticisms of Delboeuf and Fechner and what he calls "psychophysics," "the more we perceive the extensive behind the intensive, quantity behind quality, the more also we tend to thrust the former into the latter." *Time and Free Will*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Although, in *Ideen II*, for example, "nature" as described even by Husserl can still seem to mean something like "mechanism," at least insofar as it is distinguished from "person."

to be a body inhabited by a “soul” from who knows where. The habits and history of flesh—its actions and reactions, its drives, its memory and forgetting—are intimately involved in the activity and passivity of thought, in every form of motivation, and in all constitution. The flesh is of an entirely different order than thought, but if it implicates the mind or spirit in these ways, if it implicates what thought *can* be, no philosophy can afford to ignore it.

The stakes and implications of the phenomenological approach to the question of the body reverberate through the twentieth century, from Husserl, Scheler<sup>6</sup> and Merleau-Ponty<sup>7</sup> to the work of Didier Franck,<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Marion,<sup>9</sup> Michel Henry,<sup>10</sup> and more recently Emmanuel Falque.<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I wish to investigate only one nexus of issues pertaining to the question of flesh as it arises in the work of Henry: the so-called “I can.” The “I can” denotes what an ego can do, the practical conditions (and limits) of experience, and not merely what is thinkable. To speak of the limits of the “I can,” then, is to speak of limits of the *power* (δύναμις) of the ego or the flesh. The “I can” thus proves to be a fulcrum where critical issues are decided—ipseity and alterity, transcendence and immanence, and also the boundary (alleged or real) between theology and philosophy.

Considering the “I can” in Michel Henry will allow us to approach these questions in a clearer and more definite way. It will also show us in what sense and in what way it is possible to speak of a “transcendence” that is in some way present in the ipseity of the ego and in the auto-impressionality of its flesh. It is not a transcendence of a “beyond,” or of a hinter-world, or of a realm of ideal archetypes, but rather of a “before” (of flesh) and an “above” (of givenness). It is the presence, finally, of an alterity that manifests itself in giving itself, whose gift of itself manifests itself at the limit of oneself in suffering and at the limit of despair. In the “I can,” beyond the impotence that defines it, Life’s Revelation reveals itself as strength.

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<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Bern: Francke, 1973) GW 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) begins to raise the issue, which is treated more directly later in *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> See, in particular, the now-classical interpretation offered in *Chair et corps: sur la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Editions du minuit, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, the analysis of flesh in *De surcroît*, ch. 4 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), and of the erotic relation in *Le phénomène érotique* (Paris: Grasset, 2003) §§22-28.

<sup>10</sup> In texts spanning his career, from *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965) / *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1975) to *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) / *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), Michel Henry alters the manner in which philosophy (and phenomenology) determines the concept of the body.

<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, *Dieu, la chair et l’autre: d’Irénée à Duns Scot* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

## 2. Before “I Can”

The “I can,” as a concept, has a history, but let us simply recall how it appears in Husserl’s *Ideen II*. The contrast with Husserl will make clearer what is new in Henry’s approach, and it first concerns the phenomenological method itself. If in early work, he agrees broadly with Husserl about the positive meaning of passivity, Henry will later part ways over the role Husserl assigns intentionality in the phenomenological method. Instead of the intentional analysis Husserl performs in the attitude of “transcendental reduction,” Henry proposes that the phenomena involving flesh—impressionality, corporeality, intersubjectivity, motivation, and practical life in general—are conceivable, and thus describable, only in terms of what Henry calls “transcendental affectivity.” But what does “transcendental affectivity” mean? What does the shift from Husserl’s perspective involve? And what is at stake?

Before answering those questions, let us see how Husserl approaches the issue of flesh. Husserl defines the “I can” as what makes up the unity of the ego as a system. “The Ego, as unity, is a system of the ‘I can’.”<sup>12</sup> This definition arises in the context of a series of studies devoted to a phenomenology of constitution. They are inscribed in a larger work focused on what Husserl calls “pure phenomenology.”<sup>13</sup> The more proximate context, however, is a study of motivation, “the fundamental law of the spiritual world.”<sup>14</sup> The question of the “I can” is question of what the subject *can do*—its *abilities*—and also of what determines it to act—its “effective motives.”<sup>15</sup> The “I can” makes the ego not only “what” it is as a species of the universal “humanity,” but also “who” it is as this “individual,” with his or her personal character and peculiarities. For Husserl, the “higher” motives of the “spiritual ego [*das geistige Ich*]” are those in play when the ego acts freely, autonomously, and rationally, not apart from or against its habits, but also in accordance with them.

The “I can” is also defined as the set of potentialities *proper to the ego*. “I can” does not signify merely a capacity or power, but the fact that such a power is conjoined to an ego, is proper to it, falls within its “limits.” Among the ego’s possibilities (faculties) is the ability to move its flesh—“the organ in which it is articulated”<sup>16</sup>—freely and spontaneously. Thanks to flesh, the ego can also perceive what is external to it. Through its flesh, by means of its

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie II, Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1952) / *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book, Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), Hua 4, §59, 253 / trans. 266.

<sup>13</sup> Hua 3, p. 1 ff. / trans. p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup> Hua 4, §§ 54-61.

<sup>15</sup> Hua 4, §59, 254.

<sup>16</sup> Hua 4, §38, 152.

flesh, the ego “can” perceive the world. The flesh is also involved or present in *all* other “conscious functions.”<sup>17</sup> But Husserl says flesh belongs to the ego “primarily and properly” as a field where its senses are “localized.” What it senses, in other words, are *its own* senses. The sensations localized on the hand that touches, for example, belong to the ego as its own. They are possible only in flesh, so that only through flesh do sensations (of the ego) acquire spatial and temporal coordinates.

The “I can” thus circumscribes as a comprehensive and dynamic system the possibilities of human action for the ego constituted in the stream of life. Such possibilities may be corporeal (involving motor action) or spiritual (involving “feeling, desire, and will”). They may be normal, or peculiar. They are not fixed once and for all, but may be acquired, impeded, or forgotten. What is possible at any one time is also a function of previous actions, so that habits are formed as a matter of continual development, and an action becomes easier or more difficult as a function of habit. Habits transform latent potentialities; they strengthen or weaken them. Free motivation and habit thus “intertwine [*sich verflischen*],” whether it is a matter of yielding to a “drive [*Trieb*]” or to a “value-motive [*Wertmotiv*].”<sup>18</sup> Every activity, for Husserl, thus involves a kind of retro-reference. Each activity, “as it is lived [*wie sie erlebnismäßig ist*],” “refers back [*zurückweist*]” to a subjective ability, whether primal or acquired.<sup>19</sup> What an ego can do (action), and what it can undergo (passion) are questions that must be referred to the “I can,” to “powers that give rules [*Kräfte die ihm Regeln geben*].”<sup>20</sup>

With this background in view, we can see what Henry maintains and what Henry changes from Husserl’s perspective. Let us first simply address the question of their general understanding of phenomenology. It is well known that, in broad terms, Husserl’s phenomenology works itself out in perception. The transcendental reduction opens a field of investigation in which essences may be seen, and seen in a reflexive manner. In regard to this approach, Henry aims to initiate what he calls a “reversal of phenomenology.”<sup>21</sup> For Husserl, with respect to the unceasing flux of impressions that make up flesh, it is a matter of *perceiving* the ego and its impressions together in their abiding unity in the undulating flow. Phenomenology picks up, so to speak, only where the impression leaves off, *after* it has made its presence felt. Only then, in an attitude of reduction, can I perceive, for example, that such an impression is my own.

Henry reverses the direction of inquiry. Phenomenology must ask instead what comes *before* the impression and makes *it* possible—not how can I perceive that an impression belongs to me as its ego, but how can an

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<sup>17</sup> Hua 4, §39.

<sup>18</sup> Hua 4, §59, 255 / trans. 267.

<sup>19</sup> Hua 4, §59, 255 / trans. 267.

<sup>20</sup> Hua 4, §59, 256 / trans. 268 (translation modified).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Michel Henry, *Incarnation*, Part I.

impression be *felt in itself* and is thus united to itself, prior to any perception or reflection through which I see it as mine, or of my hand, or of the table. Henry's phenomenology of transcendental affectivity thus describes what he calls "auto-impressionality." It defines flesh not as a formal site where impressions arise, fall, and flow immediately away, but as experiencing undergoing itself *before* any perception of what it undergoes may arise. Properly understood, Henry's approach changes the question posed about the flesh. It is not the series of impressions perceived in their unity that tells flesh is possible. Rather, flesh in its auto-impressionality comes before any impression and makes *it* possible—as an impression of flesh felt in flesh and making up its flesh.

But the approach of Henry does not stop there. He wants to investigate—again, in an entirely different perspective from that of Husserl—not only what comes before the impression and makes it possible (flesh), but also what comes before flesh and makes *it* possible (incarnation). In strict terms, the "phenomenology of incarnation" aims to treat this *before* of flesh, where for it the question of phenomenality is decided. It is a question, again, of what makes flesh possible, not as logical precondition, but phenomenologically, as living flesh in its living, carnal actuality. It is not an *a priori* of thought that is necessary for flesh to be intelligible. Rather, the precedence in question is the very phenomenological possibility for flesh to arrive at all—in *itself* and in the very process of coming into flesh. It is not a question of how flesh belongs to me as its ego, nor of how flesh plays a role in the constitution of its life, but rather a question of how life, in itself, comes in flesh. As subtle as the difference from Husserl may be, Henry is posing a completely different question. Once seen for what it is, it cannot be confused with Husserl's approach, or interpreted as a diminished version of it.

Henry and Husserl thus approach differently, and understand differently, the role flesh plays in conscious life, and how it plays this role. They also understand differently how the powers of the "I can" and its flesh acquire determination *phenomenologically*. For Husserl, the properties of flesh are determined phenomenologically through the transcendental reduction, holding in its view the constituting activity of the transcendental ego. For Henry, only transcendental affectivity explains how flesh is given to itself. Henry would agree with Husserl that what transpires in flesh has meaning [*Bedeutung*] for the constitution of "higher objectivities" (ethical, spiritual, etc.), which are real only in flesh.<sup>22</sup> But for Henry, it is a question of how the "I can" becomes effective or actual, this real and living I can, in its immediate potency, not a question of how such a potency can be seen in its *eidōs* in the transcendental reduction.

Henry thus places a priority on the practical, insofar as it is not a matter of an eidetic determination at all, but of a practical ability, an ability to be

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<sup>22</sup> Hua 4, §39.

able [*pouvoir pouvoir*]. For Husserl, too, what is in question is the practical power of the ego, what motivates it, and how this motivation may be perceived. As we have seen, the habits and history of flesh are caught up in all forms of constitution. Husserl would reject the criticism that his approach comes only from the “outside.” Henry thinks it does, because it does not explain, or render conceivable, how the power of flesh *in itself* arises, or can arise, but describes only how the one who has performed the reduction can perceive that it has. Husserl’s transcendental reduction does, in its own way, render intelligible what flesh means, but it says nothing about how flesh appears in itself, or about how this appearing is possible in itself. All of this is intelligible, Henry thinks, only in terms of transcendental affectivity. Difficult questions here arise about the phenomenological method, about the transcendental reduction, and about givenness. We will have to confront them.

We can already see, however, that Henry assigns a different meaning to the “possible.” For Husserl, it is a matter of describing how the possibility of the “I can” in each case is formed in perception. It is a question in each case of how the perception and thus consciousness arises, for example, that these sensations under my hand as it runs along the table are mine as ego. For Henry, as for Husserl, it is a matter of conceiving the unity of the ego together with the powers that define it. But for Henry, to conceive this unity adequately is not the work of perception, or of reflection or retention, which has no explanatory power, but is precisely the work of flesh, the only site where the ability to exert itself appears in itself. Before we can turn to Henry’s “I can,” then, let us consider what horizons open up with transcendental affectivity. A better understanding of the difficult questions concerning “auto-affection” that Henry will struggle against will allow us to see how they are resolved in the “I can,” and will shed light on his wider philosophical itinerary.

### 3. An Opening in Auto-Affection

It is well known that in Henry’s phenomenology of life the concept of auto-affection plays an important role. We also know the concept of “auto-affection” arises in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and is developed and interpreted by Heidegger in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.<sup>23</sup> It becomes important for phenomenology to the extent that “givenness” implies affectivity, since an appearance is given insofar as it *affects* the sensibility. The question of auto-affection, then, is initially a question concerning how objects are given in the inner sense. For Henry, however, it becomes a question about the meaning of subjectivity as such. For him, Kant’s way of

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<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1998); Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt, a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2010) GA 3.

analyzing it plays both sides of the fence, so that the self can seem to bring itself about, so to speak, merely by thinking itself.

In the case of auto-affection, as Henry means it, affectivity is defined not as being affected by the so-called "self," but as affection that is affected by itself, and thus undergoes experiencing itself (*s'éprouve soi-même*), before and without reference to anything else. Selfhood or ipseity, in fact, is nothing other than that. Many critics of the idea seem to miss that all this is within a reduced perspective. For example, one can experience joy at anything in the world, yet it is possible, in a reduced perspective, to consider joy simply in itself, the pure affective content of it, which is pure in the sense that it does not imply or refer to anything outside it, whether to the world, or any object, or apparently any other ego. A pure joy feels itself, in the sense that what it is, and what it feels, is joy. Considered in this way, before it is joy-at, it must be able to be joy in itself, to feel its own (purely joyful) content.

Such is broadly how the question of auto-affection appears in *The Essence of Manifestation*. As he approaches the question of Christianity explicitly, however, and before he gives it fuller treatment in *Incarnation*, Henry begins to develop and refine the concept of auto-affection by introducing further distinctions within it.<sup>24</sup> In *I Am the Truth*, Henry distinguishes within transcendental affectivity what he calls auto-affection in a "strong sense" and auto-affection in a "weak sense."<sup>25</sup> In its weak sense, auto-affection lacks the power to bring itself into the condition of appearing, while in its strong sense, it is endowed with this power. To bring itself into its own condition of appearing means both that it defines its own content and that it produces itself.<sup>26</sup> Auto-affection in the weak sense is also an affection of itself, but it is weak in the sense that it lacks the power to be what it is on its own. Auto-affection in the strong sense proves to be the foundation for auto-affection in the weak sense, which it determines so essentially, and so constantly, Henry says, that "our life becomes confused with this feeling of being lived."<sup>27</sup>

Without examining this provocative statement further, let us simply acknowledge that inserting such a distinction within auto-affection may appear problematic and unsatisfactory. Are these not two distinct concepts whose enormous difference is masked under the same word? Is it a question of a continuum from one to the other, as the concepts of weakness and

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<sup>24</sup> The question of Christianity, it is true, arises from his earliest writings, where it receives not an "ontological" meaning, which is the proper concern of phenomenology, but a practical one. Christianity is a praxis. In Henry's later work, however, this practical meaning turns out to be more important, to the point that it implicates the "I can" as such, and thus everything attributed to the transcendental ego, from its thoughts, to its actions, to its motives. See, in particular, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1965), 287 ff / trans. 207 ff.

<sup>25</sup> *C'est moi la vérité*, 6, 135 ff. / trans. 106 ff.

<sup>26</sup> *C'est moi la vérité*, 6, 135 / trans. 106

<sup>27</sup> *C'est moi la vérité*, 6, 137 / trans. 108.

strength imply? Or is it a matter of an abrupt disjunction, as the concept of power implies, since a power, as we know, is either in my possession or it is not? If it is in my possession, it would seem to be a categorically different kind of power than the ones I usually attribute to myself, since it goes infinitely beyond what auto-affection in the weak sense can do. So, let us pose a question: Is this the moment in which transcendence intervenes in Henry’s work, whether secretly, surreptitiously and illegitimately, or explicitly and with reason?

We will need to confront specific textual indications of the “transcendence” here in question, but it is worthwhile first to notice where Henry’s argument goes from here. In *Incarnation*, Henry magnifies the aforementioned distinction within auto-affection—the distinction between strength and weakness, power and impotence—bringing us right up to it within it, and showing what takes place there. Henry remains within a transcendental perspective, except that now it is not a question of the ego and its ipseity, but of its flesh, of its powers, and of how it comes into possession of them. What in *I Am the Truth* appeared as the transcendental illusion of the “I can”—the idea that the ego “possesses” its own powers—now receives further clarification in terms of flesh. A closer examination of the phenomenological structures of pathos will explain how and why, from within its own pathos, the idea it possesses its own powers becomes an illusion. The consideration of pathos will in turn shed light on the meaning and validity of the distinction in auto-affection that we have highlighted, which on the surface may seem an unjustified equivocation.

#### 4. The Dialectic of Pathos

The phenomenology of incarnation brings to its limits in flesh Henry’s fundamental thesis about auto-affection. It aims to explain in its transcendental possibility not only how life comes in flesh, but also the strength and weakness of flesh, and thus its power. Though Henry approaches the “I can” from a transcendental perspective, what is in question is not a set of practical attributes or faculties understood abstractly. It is a question, rather, of rendering intelligible the real powers of real flesh. What, in the case of ipseity, was resolved in terms of auto-affection, has become a question of the pathos of flesh in itself, and of its internal phenomenological structures.

Henry says that when life gives flesh its powers, it does not make it a pseudo-flesh with pseudo powers.<sup>28</sup> To have power is to possess it, to be able to exert it, so that it is I who wills or not, who moves this way or that, who thinks and judges. And yet within the powers of flesh, within the givenness of these powers, a distinction arises. On the one hand, in order for them to be real powers, they must be in my possession. On the other hand, I do not

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<sup>28</sup> *C’est moi la vérité*, 8, 178 / trans. 141; *Incarnation*, §35.

give them to myself. To the degree that it is a real power precisely of flesh, Henry says it is powerless—*with respect to itself*. What kind of relation is this, between a power and itself, such that with respect to itself it would have no power? In order to be a power, it must be in possession of itself. But here, Henry says that, if it is a power, then precisely in this respect (with respect to itself), it is not a power. Interpreting Kierkegaard on this point, Henry calls the dynamic in question a “dialectic of pathos [*dialectique pathetique*].”<sup>29</sup>

The phenomenology of incarnation, which aims to describe how life comes in flesh, approaches this dialectic of pathos from the inside. For a pathos, an impression, or any power of flesh to have no power with respect to itself means not only that it undergoes itself without any possibility of distance, separation, or reprieve, but also that it is free. For Henry, freedom is a power. “At the same time as its action, it [flesh] experiences this action as *being in its power*.”<sup>30</sup> The *limit* of such a power, however, is reached not on its far side, at the end of its exercise, and when it is exhausted, but rather within it—as feeling unable not to be felt, unable not to be what it is. This limit, which every power comes up against in itself, is the fundamental powerlessness of flesh, not when it has expended itself and has no strength left, but in the midst of its very exertion.

The dialectic of pathos is in no way a static system, however. It is “moving.” Henry’s analysis aims to explain what happens within it, at the moving limit of power and powerlessness, where the real dynamism of life coming into flesh takes place. For indeed, when flesh in its pathos runs up against its own limit in itself, such an encounter is not uneventful. *It elicits a response*. In fact, we might say that two kinds of response lay open to it: Either it bears its own weight, or it finds the weight of its pathos unbearable, and seeks to escape it—by taking action. Since it cannot escape it, any action that endeavors to do so, amounts to a kind of usurpation of a power it does not possess, and it is precisely at this point that the transcendental illusion *can* arise. Such is the dynamic of anxiety as it increases vertiginously. If my freedom is inescapably mine, and I am unable to bear it, I project the idea of escaping it into my anxiety, which in turn is exacerbated to the point that I seek to escape *this* condition, and take action (as if I have no choice, as if I am not responsible—all the while claiming responsibility for myself).

The “leap” that results from an action so conceived, according to Henry, produces a qualitative change that is irreducible to its prior condition. Henry’s description to this point remains strictly phenomenological, but

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<sup>29</sup> *Incarnation*, III, §38, 282 / trans. 197. Henry on this point follows and develops Kierkegaard, who argues “The concept of movement is itself a transcendence that has no place in logic.” See Søren Kierkegaard, *Begrebet Angest*, in *Søren Keiekegaards Skrifter*, Vol. 4, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørnm et al (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997), p. 285 / *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13. See also, Michel Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation*, §70.

<sup>30</sup> *Incarnation*, III, §35, 261 / trans. 183.

he will also consider the same phenomenon of a “leap” in terms of the apparently-theological language of sin, idolatry, and Apostasy. Such a leap, understood phenomenologically, turns the reality of the powers of the “I can” into illusion, precisely an illusion of flesh about itself and its powers. If salvation from such a condition is not within the power of flesh, this is because sin, Henry says, “has destroyed our nature, and being unceasingly reproduced in it, unceasingly destroys it.”<sup>31</sup> We cannot explore this point further here, but one may wonder why and how, in Henry’s terms, such a destruction can be called real. In any case, we must be content for the moment simply to recall that the powers of flesh are real powers. If flesh then seeks power with respect to itself and for itself, it cuts against its nature at a fundamental level, and takes its life into its own hands, so to speak. If a real quality of real flesh is thus destroyed, it is possible to ask whether and how it may be restored. If it is a matter of real action in real flesh, such a restoration is possible only as its *own* action, yet this is an action that it, by itself, cannot perform—an action that, indeed, was never in its power. For Henry, it is the Gospel of John (17:15-19) that understands and describes such a restoration of flesh in its internal possibility—as the incarnation of the Word (*logos*) of life in flesh, and as *its own* operation, *for itself* and also *for us*.<sup>32</sup>

The salvation in question is not merely what a thought that manages to render salvation intelligible requires. It is matter, in the words of Irenaeus, of “superabundant love... in complete gratuitousness.”<sup>33</sup> The possibilities of perdition or salvation are not possibilities of merely theoretical interest, nor destinies merely imagined for flesh. Nor are they merely, we might add, only of *theological* interest. Rather, it is a question of flesh itself and its fate. If for salvation in the flesh to be possible (which is to say, real), the Word of Life itself must take on flesh, Incarnation in the Christian sense is not, according to Henry, the same as the incarnate condition that defines all flesh as given to itself only in the self-giveness of absolute Life. There are two conditions of possibility that are in question: first, the general possibility of flesh, and second, the singular and real possibility of its salvation. It is thus not only a matter of the restoration of an original condition, the possibility that flesh can become again a site of life when it has given itself over to idolatry and death. If the very flesh that was the site of sin becomes again a site of salvation, then it is a question of how flesh *can* become a site in which the flesh of the Word *itself* takes flesh.

We shall consider this possibility, which is a question of alterity, in the next section. For the moment, we can now see that Henry finally distinguishes within pathos three degrees of passivity. These degrees are the

<sup>31</sup> *Incarnation*, III, §46, 332 / trans. 232.

<sup>32</sup> See, in particular, *Incarnation*, III, §46, 334 ff. / trans. 234 ff.

<sup>33</sup> *Incarnation*, III, §46, 333 / trans. 233.

steps backward the “reversal of phenomenology” follows. First the passivity of sensibility, its two-fold dependence with respect to the horizon of the world, and to the content given in its light. This is the passivity of sensibility with respect to what affects it. But Henry’s phenomenology of the impression shows the possibility of sensibility is not explicable by referring only to what is sensed by it. Rather, the passivity of sensibility, the very phenomenological possibility of it, refers to a second, more basic passivity of impressionality with respect to *itself* (its auto-impressionality, the pathos of flesh). But third, the phenomenology of incarnation then shows the passivity of flesh, in turn, refers back to a final and radical passivity, to a “before flesh,” such that the givenness of flesh is given to itself only in the self-givenness of absolute Life. The givenness of the former in the latter is what “givenness from above” means.

## 5. Signifying Transcendence

We are now in a position to raise directly the question of transcendence in Henry’s work, while remaining as precise as possible about it. In *Incarnation*, Henry says the powers of the “I can” are not, in reality, powers of flesh, but are a “manifestation, modification, or peripeteia of a reality that is *other than it*.”<sup>34</sup> How should we interpret this advent of “alterity” within the field of immanence? What does it mean for the “I can” to be or to involve a manifestation, modification, or sudden reversal of *another* reality? Should we say that the “I can” (any power of the flesh in the exertion of itself) *may* or *may not* reveal this “other than it” — either by manifesting it, in the former case, or by modifying it, in the latter? Or, if it is a case of a sudden reversal, is the plot line it reverses anything but the story of my life, or what I thought was my life — driven by or centered upon my own action — suddenly yielding way to another reality, a different storyline, at issue all along — the tragedy of a suffering fate, suddenly giving way to a happy one?

Let us clarify these questions by adding to our consideration another text from *I Am the Truth*. In the context, Henry is not developing the phenomenology of life *per se*, but considering the kind of suffering described in the Beatitudes, where those who undergo so many kinds of suffering (who mourn, are persecuted, etc.) are called “blessed.”<sup>35</sup> Henry claims that what suffering experiences in itself (in its suffering) is not itself alone but also “something other,” of “another order,” and finally a “phenomenological

<sup>34</sup> *Incarnation*, III, §35, 255 / trans. 178 (our emphasis). The concept of “peripeteia” comes from Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1452a) and refers to a “sudden reversal” in a plot line from one state of things to another. It may involve one party discovering the role or involvement of another party, or the sudden introduction of new information that changes the meaning of everything, where Oedipus, for example, is revealed the secret of his birth. It may be a change to an unhappy state or to a happy one, and may arouse pity or fear, love or hate.

<sup>35</sup> Mt. 5:3-12; Lk. 6:20-26, with latter including both blessings and woes.

substance absolutely other than it."<sup>36</sup> We know that, like hunger, thirst, or pleasure, suffering is a modality of life, a possible way life reveals itself—as hungry, or thirsty, or pleased, etc. The self-givenness of each modality of life reveals in itself the self-givenness of life—as *what gives* suffering to itself and makes it possible.

But how is the self-givenness of life now “absolutely other” than the modalities in which it reveals itself? The ground of Henry’s text now seems to shift under our feet, for Henry does not simply claim that suffering is “always more and other than itself.” He also goes further, and claims that “*such is the transcendence present in any immanent modality of life.*”<sup>37</sup> As if that were not enough, Henry also claims that we discover in suffering, and at the limit of our suffering, “*another life*” revealed, “more hidden and more contestable” than our own.<sup>38</sup>

How can we fail to notice two, if not three, unexpected affirmations here? First, we are struck by the notion that life *itself* transcends any one of its modalities (we were expecting only an immanent relation between life and living). Second, “another” life seems to come onto the scene here (we were expecting ipseity, not alterity). And this second surprise in fact yields a third, which seems more serious, since it is not only a question of an alterity *within* life, but also of “another *life*” altogether (we were expecting only one, and Henry everywhere affirms only one life). Must each of these surprises be resolved, since they seem to jeopardize the immanent enterprise in its entirety? Or, on the contrary, do we see here a thesis proper to the phenomenology of life, as a matter of its own development and deepening?

In the context of Henry’s own work, the lexical introduction of the concept of alterity here should give us pause. Henry knows, as the text of *Incarnation* shows, what suspicion such an affirmation casts upon the theory of immanence that a phenomenology of life wishes to advance. Does it not dash to pieces every pretention of the ego to its own autonomy that Descartes, Kant, and Husserl ostensibly wish to grant it as its highest motivating force—that alone which is proper to it—its freedom? In fact, the concept of auto-affection has already qualified the autonomy of the ego, and for phenomenological reasons. But the question of alterity is more difficult. It was ipseity and not alterity that the theory of auto-affection was supposed to establish. If the ego is dethroned, so is its flesh, precisely with respect

<sup>36</sup> *C'est moi la vérité*, 11, / trans. 204, 210.

<sup>37</sup> *C'est moi la vérité*, 11, 255 / trans. 204 (our emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> *C'est moi la vérité*, 11, 256 / trans. 204 (our emphasis). Indeed, as Henry later confirms: “*Transcendence denotes the immanence of Life in each living being.* Because this immanence concerns the self-revelation of each living being in so far as it is accomplished in the self-revelation of absolute life, the phenomenological possibility of it and thus the concrete effectuation of it lies in the Arch-passibility in which absolute Life reveals itself originally to itself. “*Transcendence*” is only a still-undetermined word for this essence.” *Incarnation*, III, §23, 176 / trans. 123.

to its “ability to be able,” its *pouvoir pouvoir*.<sup>39</sup> Is it only the “I can” dashed against its limit that finally allows alterity to manifest itself?

Further questions may also be raised. What alterity is affirmed? Is it the alterity of life with respect to flesh? Of infinite life with respect to finite life? Of power with respect to impotence? We cannot forget that the affirmation about alterity arises with respect to the “I can” at its proper limit. If it also arises in a text promising a treatment of intersubjectivity (*Incarnation*), should we conclude that it is upon the alterity of absolute life that Henry founds the theory of intersubjectivity?

In any case, we can now see that Henry’s treatment of the “I can” has altered the question of “immanence” and “transcendence.” It is not a matter of the relation of the mind or the body to the world, or a question of how the senses or consciousness can reach an object outside them. Rather, it is specifically a question of the powers of the “I can” and what makes them possible. The question of transcendence here refers to my own power and its limits, and thus to my nature and its limits. It is no longer a matter of an exteriority. The limit of each of the powers of the “I can” is not a limit on its far side, but within it, from the loftiest to the most humble and ordinary. The “I can” of itself has no ability to transcend itself. It is not a matter of inserting transcendence into immanence and attributing to the ego a power that is not its own. Rather, what goes “beyond” the powers of the “I can” goes beyond them as *their own limit*, as their actual possibility, always implied, presupposed, and perhaps even involved, in their very exercise.

## 6. Givenness, Revelation, and the “I Can”

It may seem a confusion, if not an absurdity, to propose a determination of givenness as “from above,” rendering null and void the very achievement that was supposed to set the phenomenological method apart from the history of metaphysics. To “locate” givenness in an “above” may also seem to cover over a philosophical determination with a theological one. Even in strictly hermeneutical terms, such a phenomenological interpretation of a scriptural category may seem illegitimate, reading into the words of Jesus uttered at his time of trial a set of issues from a vastly different historical, conceptual, and cultural horizon. Nor do the rigorous methods of biblical scholarship seem to permit it.

Except that Henry remains ruthlessly bound to the law of life’s appearing, that is, to life’s phenomenality as it manifests itself in itself. When Henry treats specifically Christian questions and phenomena, he remains within the cadre of phenomenology. If salvation can be offered only as a “superabun-

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<sup>39</sup> “Ego implies that it is due to itself that the ego does what it does, is what it is. This implication is so immediate that it is produced well before the ego dreams of formulating it, as soon as it experiences itself as the ‘I can’.” *C’est moi la vérité*, 8, 177 / trans. 140.

dant love... in complete gratuitousness,” and thus only on the initiative of the Word and not upon the inquiry of the phenomenologist, it is nevertheless possible to describe the manifestation of such a love in phenomenological terms. If Henry finally moves freely from phenomenological analysis to the interpretation of scripture and back again, is it the universal meaning of scripture and its infinite depth that make such a movement possible?

Henry does come to regard the “philosophy” of Christianity as a kind of phenomenology of life, one that is older and deeper than his own. The point is not that there can be more than one; nor that the one, arising from the exigencies of contemporary thought, determines (and thereby either limits, reinterprets, diminishes, or fulfills as its inner telos) the other that is more ancient. Rather, the consideration of the “I can” in light of a phenomenology of incarnation shows phenomenologically all that is implied, and meant, in the proposition “whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”<sup>40</sup> If we are now able to see how the biblical horizon can still fuse with our own, can still teach us something, perhaps it is because we have come to be reacquainted with the subject matter in question.<sup>41</sup> Augustine was astonished to discover his love had already found its mark before any consciousness of it.<sup>42</sup> The “surprises” of immanence are indeed surprising. To admit it would not need to be shameful. It could be cause for wonder.

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<sup>40</sup> Mt. 16:25.

<sup>41</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Das Probleme des historischen Bewußtseins* (Mohr Siebeck, 2001)

<sup>42</sup> “Et mirabar, quod iam te amabam...” St. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, xvii, 23.

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