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Affective Political Community:

Michel Henry and the Ontological Subject

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Political Science

by

Althea Rani Sircar

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Affective Political Community:

Michel Henry and the Ontological Subject

by

Althea Rani Sircar

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Joshua F. Dienstag, Chair

This dissertation addresses the obstacle that fundamental differences present to the formation of liberatory and meaningful forms of political community. Developing a political theoretic account of Michel Henry's phenomenology of life, the project argues for conceptualizing radical differences in how individuals relate in ontological rather than epistemological terms. The project traces Henry's relevance for conceptions of subjectivity and community, arguing that his theorizations of auto-affection, immanence, transcendence, suffering, and praxis can provide crucial links in post-Cartesian formulations of the political subject that help political theorists better understand the problem of representing individuality within communities of difference. Situated in conversation with new materialist political theory, affect theory, and the phenomenological tradition, the chapters in turn draw on a subset of Henry's political and philosophical writings, which call for philosophical accounts of ontology as multiple and heterogeneous and for political communities that allow individuals to live in freedom.

The dissertation of Althea Rani Sircar is approved.

John A. McCumber

Davide Panagia

Giulia Sissa

Joshua F. Dienstag, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

Dedicated to my parents, Anna Dale and Dhrubo Sircar

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still life has some possibility left.

-Mary Oliver, *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems*

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"Politics of Life: Individual suffering and collective survival." American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, September 4, 2015.

"The Power of Eros in Political Community: Love's Ontological Place under Conditions of Plurality." Association for Political Theory, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, October 12, 2013.

INTRODUCTION

INTER-SUBJECTIVE DIFFERENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNITY

What happens when the good of the individual and the good of the community conflict? How do

we reconcile ourselves to others' positions when we find them anathema to our own ethics? Can

we form communities of mutual support with some individuals while excluding others? Can the

common be celebrated without the oppression of the different?

What do unrepresentable and irreconcilable differences look like? They may look like a

financial analyst working in the Indian business district of Gurgaon stalled in traffic yet another

evening; his mother, her voice flattened impersonally over the mobile phone speaker, is cross

with him for having skipped his pre-wedding *puja*[1] in his home village so he could respond to

fluctuations on the Nikkei. His breath constricts without him realizing it. It is partly from the

billowing smog but also from the anxiety that attends his attempt to please his widowed mother,

the extended family in his hometown, and his economist bride. In that moment he feels an almost

physical sense of being torn into multiple people, existing within convergent relational

communities. In that moment, he feels bound together by only a headache sharpened by the hazy

air swirling around his car and the stinging disappointment in his mother's voice. The global

flows of capital that allow him to support his widowed mother and her daily devotional

practices—the money and work that support his home world altogether—each make inexorable

claims on his time and commitments. To survive as the person he is means depending upon

multiple worlds and furthermore, in some sense, upon serving them all. His decisions shape not

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[1] *Puja* refers to a devotional act or ritual.

1

only his everyday orientation toward religious practice, but also the inter-familial dynamics that in turn mediate his relationship to religion. Will he respond to the guilt his mother's piety evokes by supporting a Hindu nationalist candidate, will he embrace secularization, will his solidarity with those back home who lack his education diminish? Yet beyond these important questions there is a deeper one: how does this person make sense of his life, his identities, and his relationship to these multiple worlds? How might this individual begin to connect on politically to someone with a different set of assumptions about what it means to exist? What understanding of reality must individuals share in order to build political solidarity?

A political decision—"which candidate do I support in the upcoming election?"—may be shaped by publicly stated and clearly perceptible individual and group commitments. Yet it is also the case that one's public and private actions may also not have much to do with one's sense of self. Sometimes we react without reflection and at other times the internal conflicts we feel paralyze us, or cause us to make decisions that keep us awake at night. This project asks us to consider whether and how one's political actions reflect internal conflicts over which worlds or commitments one inhabits—professional, familial, communal, religious, conscious or otherwise?

For my second figure, picture a septuagenarian American nun standing in a voting booth as she casts her ballot for an outspokenly pro-choice candidate, her hesitation outwardly imperceptible. Her religious order recently debated an anti-birth control papal encyclical over dark tea and apricot-bran muffins but, even in that trusted space of lively discussion, she could not quite articulate the depth of her internal upheaval. How each time she thinks of abortion bans, she remembers with startling clarity frantically trying to help a pregnant high school classmate who was doubled over in pain after trying to self-terminate. That experience of helplessness in the face of pain was formative in her decision to become a doctor, to take an oath

that sometimes flows from and sometimes conflicts with her monastic vows and spiritual beliefs. Her understanding of divine love is that it would not force her to adhere to a fixed hierarchy of values at the expense of caring for God's creation, yet to knowingly act directly against the Church's teaching, to be forced to *confess* this principled stance as sin, makes her angry and ashamed, and angry at the shame. Her rage reflects her sense that she does not personally find her commitments irreconcilable, although the various medical and religious communities she inhabits see them as contradictory. Her commitments exist within and because of her; she embodies them. They are profoundly subjective. Yet she is frustrated precisely because speaking and voting alike force her to simplify her views at the behest of rigid institutional frameworks, and her alternatives are silence and inaction.

Both the financier and the nun grapple with conflicting imperatives.[2] In daily life, they encounter many external claims about the *Weltanschauung* one ought to have, while negotiating plural ways of being in the world that are driven by a melee of internal and external motivations. Those who have themselves traversed multiple communities and life-worlds might recognize this feeling. It is so common for a person moving between multiple modalities of being to feel conflicted when pausing to make a decision; it is almost banal to express self-doubt. While political acts such as voting may invite one to stop to think, as the nun does, the nun's cognitive reflection captures one dimension only of her feeling of in-betweenness. Also crucial is her emotional memory of adolescent terror, of the sheer panic of a time when thought provided no guide to action and where inability to help and another person's overwhelming need met in a

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[2] I think of these examples as a form of the "speculative fabulation" that Donna Haraway evokes in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). I invite the reader to play with these examples, as Haraway suggests one does with string figures: "String figures require holding still in order to receive and pass on. String figures can be played by many, on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained. Scholarship and politics are like that too—passing on in twists and skeins that require passion and action, holding still and moving, anchoring and launching" (*Staying with the Trouble*: *Making Kin in the Cthulucene,* 10).

moment of crisis. The nun's emotional memory may even manifest as a visceral hesitation, as though the past experience of a strong emotion were a kind of bodily knowing. The lived moment of voting on a complex issue draws together both recent and distant past, and in doing so threads these lived experiences through nun's entire self—her brain, the hand holding the voting stylus, her awareness of the teetering cardboard of the voting booth, the impatient line of voters behind her, the warm embrace of incense during her religious community's daily prayers, and the scent-memory of her childhood friend's bloody discharge.

Embodied political hesitation and a visceral sense of incommensurability cannot be overcome with rationality alone. This project thus turns to the paradoxical ways in which the river of politics continually flows over a bed of political lack: lack of reflection, lack of intentionality, lack of deliberation. Everyday life entails negotiating conflicting values that cement our subjective commitments and feed into our political and social perspectives, yet aside from the rare moments when people stop to think and decide—as at the ballot box—there seem to be few chances to capture the attention and deliberative faculties of political subjects. Given this, how do political communities navigate spaces that discourage ethical reflection? What can political communities do when their institutions discourage subjects from reflecting on how people are shaped by their temporal, material, or neurological experiences? How can irreconcilable differences be overcome if individuals do not understand themselves as constituting difference? How can we bridge differences that are continually reinforced by unconscious and under-examined aspects of life? Even more challenging than those questions is this one: what can political communities do about differences between individuals that are so important to who they *are* that rational or ethical persuasion are useless? What kinds of politics

are possible if we take seriously that individuals have and will continue to have profoundly diverse epistemological and ontological standpoints?

This project responds to these questions by taking life and individuals' orientations toward their own lives as integral to political subjectivity. Rooted in the philosophy of life articulated by French phenomenologist and theologian Michel Henry (1922-2002), I argue that understanding subjectivity as necessarily affective and living supports an approach to difference that takes into account how diverse forms of being-in-the world may occupy incommensurable spaces and hold diverse worldviews. This entails a re-articulation of the place of life as the philosophical and practical basis for politics. What is meant here is neither the notion of "life" that has been claimed by the American Christian "pro-life" political movement nor a humanist discourse centered on specifically *human* life and its capacities, rights, duties, and obligations.[3] Instead Henry's phenomenology of life helps situate political commitments within the confounding and irreconcilable individual differences emerge from profound and intimate senses of the self.[4] This project builds on Henry's theory to suggest a politics that does not present a unitary notion of life but rather modes of relating to subjects' attunement to their own and others' lived lives.

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[3] This has been called for elsewhere, as in Howard Nelson Tuttle's *Human Life is Radical Reality: An Idea Developed from the Conceptions of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Ortega Y Gasset* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), which exemplifies the strange way Henry's extensive œuvre is overlooked in Anglophone continental philosophy, even that on the concept of life itself. Henry himself goes to great lengths to situate his work within a genealogy of subjectivity that includes Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger, among others. Indeed, while nearly everything Henry is concerned with "life" in some way, he develops this directed analysis out of a genealogy of the concept of subjectivity. He often articulates his work, for instance, as the logical result of philosophical antecedents such as Husserl's materialist concept of the life-world.

[4] Thus, my project takes up longstanding concerns related to those of Charles Taylor (especially in *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) about the grounding of subjectivity and perspectivism in modernity, but I also propose alternatives to the concept of immanent framing developed later in his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Likewise, the problems of belonging between diverse forms of life that concern me here echo questions taken up by Judith Butler (particularly in *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), and partly also in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

This dissertation is, at its core, about how people find meaning in existence, and how they do so in ways that are related to, without being dependent upon, their intimate senses of themselves. It is indeed the impossibility of total self-knowledge that prevents the objective gaze (whether one's own or another's) from probing the depths of individuals' deepest affective orientation. Coming to terms with the latter, I argue, is central to any kind of political project, but most urgently needed in situations where differences seem irreconcilable.[5]

This dissertation thus proposes an alternative to extant ways of "solving" the problem of difference, by viewing difference as neither something that is necessarily solved by negotiation or agonism in the political realm nor as something that can be addressed through toleration or a call to peaceful co-existence. I use Henry to tease out the affective roots of difference within existence, and to identify how the most difficult of political crises of difference already exist already within the individual. In the section that follows, I give an outline how and where this project diverges from some of the dominant approaches to the problem of difference, as represented by communitarians, liberal particularists, multiculturalists, and Deleuzians. Succeeding sections situate Henry and this project within the literature on affect and emotion; consider what political theory can learn from engaging Henry, instead of or alongside other phenomenologists; and, in the final section, place this project in conversation with a larger set of feminist, queer, and decolonial projects on the (im)possibility of forming meaningful community. The introduction concludes with summaries of the dissertation chapters.

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[5] The question of whether a human subject can exist in a state where it perceives neither subjectivity nor objectivity is far more thoroughly addressed in other philosophical traditions. See, in particular, Bina Gupta's *The Disinterested Witness: A Fragment of Advaita Vedānta Phenomenology* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998). As Gupta convincingly demonstrates, the Vedic notion of *Brahmon* deals with this very problem. While this project does not directly address a comparison between Henry and the Vedas, the comparison remains a fruitful area of discussion for future research. This gesture is but one way that the question of whether subjects can traverse radical (epistemological or metaphysical) difference can be posed in analogous ways in many intellectual genealogies.

I. The Challenge of Difference in Political Theory

Political theory has long tackled irreconcilable subjective differences by conceptualizing political difference and plurality through communitarianism, liberal, or multicultural frameworks. As developed by theorists like Michael Walzer, the liberal accounts of pluralism recognize that diverse worldviews or conceptions of the good life exist, but rely on plural individuals' recognition of their shared commitments and mutuality to create cohesive political communities.[6] What this approach is unable to propose is a vision of community between those who do not share commitments, or one that can persist despite the ways that one individual's interiority remains incommensurable to the inner life and world of another person.

Rather than attributing the impossibility of community amongst plural beings to either differences in truth claims or the insurmountable status of difference, I argue that understanding difference as existentially rooted in radical individuality is crucial to understanding when and where community can emerge despite differences. Furthermore, I suggest that radical individuality plays a key role in rooting and strengthening community with differences.[7] I am claiming neither that community is inevitable nor that it is always peaceful, but my intention is rather to bring forward the conditions of possibility for political community.

This project is an explicit call to nurture community in the face of its tendency to regress to states of oppression. To examine the political resonances of profound subjective difference requires at once engaging with the individual within the community as well as the plural within the individual. My interest in the possibility overcoming extreme difference and furthering political community rests on a recognition of the impossibility of this task. Thus, the final pages

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[6] Walzer, Michael. *Spheres of Justice: A defense of pluralism and equality*. (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

[7] This project neither aims to erase difference nor to negotiate it distributively, but rather to present a theory of subjectivity wherein difference is immanent and inalienable.

of the dissertation endeavor to reflect more widely on the co-constitution of the conditions of possibility for mutual relationality in community and the conditions of impossibility that inhere in the human condition. The majority of what follows, nonetheless, is a far narrower textual examination of the problems of identity, difference, and representation within a phenomenology of subjectivity. I draw out elements of Henry's thought which are then placed alongside contemporary examples of extremely difficult political difference or conflict—those challenges that seem insurmountable. The examples that begin this introduction are imagined, but the problems they highlight are all too real.

The answers I find for political implications of Michel Henry's work arise from his political writings but should be traced to his critique of the ontological subject, which reshapes fundamental ontology. Henry deems the philosophical project that seeks to formulate a singular ontological framework "ontological monism," setting himself the task of formulating a critique of this so-called monism through the development of a more heterogeneous account of existence. This dissertation examines how the ways that contemporary political theories of difference and identify can build on the particular ways Henry questions the ontological subject, i.e. the subject of Western philosophy and politics that descends from Descartes. Henry is at a post- or non-Cartesian theorist of subjectivity who represents a middle way between rejecting finite subjectivity *per se* and relying on a radically indefinable or layered subject. Henry's reading of Descartes seeks to locate a neglected or overlooked affect in the Cartesian analysis, an affect that is the unspoken driver of doubt. This leads, secondly, to the project's discussion of what Henry proposes as an alternative to monistic ontology. Henry proposes the radical phenomenology of life, that *the self is a radically differentiating sense of being alive*. Third, Henry's own work includes meditations on specific problems of politics: political economy and inequality, cultural

expression, and democracy. The project considers the applications and limits of Henry's political works, and proposes drawing Henryian politics not only from these but also the philosophical writings.[8] In the remainder of this introduction, I will draw out how the project's aims speak to various existing conversations in political theory and philosophy.

The discourses about community outlined above move between two problems. On one side is the fact that something called "community" may be achievable but, at best, it will fail to foster real mutuality or belonging while, at worst, it will actively oppress and exclude. The other problem is that community may never be possible at all. Henry presents a third possibility: the affective conditions for community are present in all life at all times, but they remain fundamentally inaccessible. One must thus hold two things together in tension: the conditions of possibility for community are always already immanent while it is also impossible to ever achieve community. An Henryian politics of difference helps elucidate this paradox because it locates the impossibility of being-with-others in the impossibility of being-with-oneself. Henryian political community locates the impossibility of overcoming difference in the conflict intrinsic to human life itself, where the suffering that cannot be overcome is that of individual lack. Returning repeatedly to the realities of individual lack, of suffering, of pain and want, can be the means to locating difference within a transformed understanding of what is possible in one's own life and in others' lives.

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[8] Throughout, I have chosen to use "Henryian" as the adjectival referent to Henry's work and ideas. In French, the form henryen(ne) is by far the most frequently used, changing according to the gender of the word being modified, but there is no firm consensus in the literature on how this should be translated into English. (Appearances in the Anglophone literature, including that published in Henry's lifetime, include multiple examples of Henryian, Henrian and, a few times, Henryan.) My preference for Henryian lies mainly in its similarity to the dominant French version which, by maintaining Henry's name in full within the word, scans more clearly in the written form.

One way to describe fundamental differences in what people take as truth might be to call them epistemological differences.[9] But these differences are not mere disagreements over what *is* true, in an analytic sense, or conflicts between *epistemes*, understood in Foucault's sense of complex discursive apparatuses that operate via forms of power that historically, socially, and culturally shape the horizons of possibility within which subjects understand the world. Whether Foucauldian or otherwise, understanding fundamental differences as being about systems of truth-claims or *concepts of the true* does not fully capture how these disagreements can rest on aspects of one's identity that cannot be characterized or represented (for instance, by language) particularly when these differences may relate to cultural or personal experiences that appear fundamentally unintelligible to others.[10] Likewise, some epistemological differences may be malleable, as when scientific education leads to a new understanding of cause and effect, but others are so fundamental to a person's selfhood that they cannot be easily altered or removed, as with a Wiccan's belief in a spirit-world or a Christian's in an immortal soul.[11] As I discuss above, this project intervenes in the discussion of political difference by considering the space where epistemological and ontological concerns can be neither distinguished nor represented. This space is an interior one, which can be described as the experience of existence—of one's aliveness—that both animates and drives the existence of political motivations and actions although this interiority cannot be translated clearly from the realm of the self to the realm of the

[9] Examples of this include the differential authority of scientific research accorded by the anti-vaccine movement in comparison to the medical community in the United States. Cross-disciplinary discussions of epistemological violence discuss questions of epistemological difference in terms of how various ways of evaluating truth and authority map onto or reinforce social hierarchies or power structures.

[10] Linda Martín Alcoff discusses how the uninterrogated coloniality of Foucault's thought limits his usefulness for considerations of epistemological difference in "Mignolo's Epistemology of Coloniality" *CR: The New Centennial Review* Vol. 7, No. 3, Singularities of Latin American Philosophy (winter 2007), pp. 79-101

[11] Foucault recognizes this, of course, as when he notes in the introduction to the English version of *The Order of Things* that, "It has been said that this work denies the very possibility of change. And yet my main concern has been with changes" (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

political. In other words, this project examines questions of rights or obligations as questions of the meaning of life, suggesting that that any polity must confront the question of who belongs through the question of what life is for the members of that polity despite the fact that they may not be able to clearly define that meaning in traditional political terms. Beyond the question of political belonging is the question of political subjectivity, the meaning this holds and the agency it allows for.

Certainly, political theorists have not been indifferent to these issues. For instance, new materialists have suggested that in order to address the imperatives about ecological crises, non-human material life and not only human subjects should have political status. Yet political theory—and political science as a whole—must pay even closer attention to the ways that potentially irreconcilable ethical tensions between individual and collective commitments make it difficult for polities to face of crises that threaten the existence of entire communities, threats like environmental or economic devastation.[12] In other words, the divergent ways that individuals understand life make large-scale problems particularly difficult to unknot.[13]

Interpreting difference in this light recasts the challenges faced by contemporary polities as issues that require political actors to engage critically with how they define their own self-hood and personhood generally. For example, volatile environmental circumstances mean that globally we must increasingly consider not just how to value a single life—a very old question—but how to weigh the lives of individuals against the continued existence of humans and other species. Bias based on race or gender is less easily addressed by representational policy solutions

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[12] Conceptualized and written before the Covid-19 pandemic, this project does not deal directly with that aspect of our present lives, but it does speak to many of the challenges it has posed.

[13] There are other challenges: another way of attacking the problem is via psychology while there are also very real technical and scientific obstacles to addressing the problem. I am suggesting here that both of these approaches can be understood in terms of the tensions between how we understand and value our lives and the imperatives of politics.

that favor a majority on the basis of sheer numbers over minority rights, particularly in an increasingly intersectional world experiencing stunning inequalities of income, education, and class.

II. Returning to Affect and Materiality

Since the 1990s, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have been engaged in what has come to be known as "the affective turn."[14] Many fields have seen extensive scholarly work on the role of affect and, more specifically, emotions.[15] Within anglophone political theory, the affective turn encompasses projects that focus on the implications of affective and emotional states for social and political life, as well as anti-foundational scholarship that seeks to rethink the methods and questions of the field by taking seriously the underlying or background somatic, sensible, and material conditions against which politics exists. Henry's project aligns more with the latter set of concerns, especially given his understanding of affectivity as the condition of possibility for all life, individual and intersubjective.

Accordingly, this project will largely refrain from characterizing particular emotions and passions; instead, it is organized toward understanding the individual as affective. As we will see later in this work, affect is for Henry the material context for what can come to be emotion, but not only emotion. Any action or outworking of *a* life is due to its being living and affective.

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[14] This dating follows that of Patricia Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)., and Paul Hoggett and Simon, *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies* (New York: Continuum, 2012). Note, however, that the latter rightly place political theoretic engagement with affect and emotion within a genealogy that goes back at least to Friedrich Nietzsche and that is highly influenced by psychoanalysis from the early twentieth century onward.

[15] I distinguish affect and emotion in what follows by considering affect to be embodied forms of sensation or feeling, while emotions are a subset of these, namely those that have taken on cultural or historical signification in particular contexts.

Likewise, for Henry auto-affectivity is what founds subjectivity. This project, inasmuch as it examines the work of Michel Henry, is best understood as situated between these approaches.[16]

Political theoretic work on affects has turned to the somatic aspects of political life, how it is mediated through, by, and within bodies and material things. Affect seems in some lights as though it is an important aspect of political life—engaging political subjects through their emotional or passionate ties to the political community. Some attachments that drive political action—such as patriotism or nationalism—are thus seen as affective attachments. Depending on the perspective, these may affects may seem positive—or harmful. Love of a nation may engender passionate efforts for the common good without regard for personal gain or it may foster the hatred of aliens within or other states without. Whether praising or critiquing affect, political theorists mainly focus on the political role of affect and the results that various affects may lead to. There is also a tension in materialist approaches between attending to the material reality of the individual as a body and ideas of diversity, multiplicity, and assembly that always already surround and contain bodies. Butlerian and other feminist political theories in conversation with psychoanalytic approaches have been important for theorists seeking to articulate democratic theories that take account of the material conditions of the bodies of members of a community. By turning attention to material and psychic bodies rather than a philosophical concept of the will, theorists are able to provide rejoinders to the kind of power relations that might lead the wills of some to overrule others' within a group. On this account, materialist approaches are vital for a liberatory theory that sees potential in the resistant bodies of the subjects of power. Rosi Braidotti's engagements with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler exemplify this materialist

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[16] I do not mean to imply that these approaches are either mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed. Rather their grounding assumptions and questions push in different directions and tend to imply divergent political implications.

ethos, presenting a vibrant theory rooted in materialism that is attentive to the claims of psychoanalysis.[17] Yet despite their reliance on both theories of individual bodies and theories of difference, it is often difficult to identify the precise relationship what unites individuals.

Materialists theorizing in this vein often take Deleuze and Guattari as the starting point for materialist conceptions of being together, using their approaches to re-envision the relationship between difference and individualism in the context of political challenges such as identity politics, nationalism, and interspecies relations. But where for Deleuze "a life" is always to come or becoming, Henry retains a notion of individual lives as situated and specific, even if they cannot be fully represented in philosophical or political discourse.[18] This project thus shares an interest in questioning the idea of a unitary individual or group, but does not go as far as Deleuze in turning to difference over and above identity. In the project, I argue that maintaining some conception of the individual subject is vital for politics; politics needs richer formulations of this subject's intention, will, action, thought, and relational possibilities.

Within Anglo-American political theory, the new materialists have gained a great deal of traction in thinking about the facticity of matter as a starting point for politics as we live it within a world that is inherently material. For Jane Bennett, Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, and William Connolly, among others, the matter of the world constitutes our being as a part of the world, turning our attention away from the primacy of the temporal character of being as emphasized by Heidegger, for instance, and toward the totality of the material world, which also encompasses the dynamic relations of energy and matter via force, etc.[19] As such, the irruptive potentialities of

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[17] See, in particular, Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Toward a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

[18] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (Cambridge, MA: Zone/MIT Press, 2001).

[19] See, in particular, Bennett's account of the challenges so-called inanimate matter poses to not just the Cartesian subject, but the subject overall (*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press,

the material world disrupt, according to Coole and Frost, the key ontological and epistemological

assumptions of twentieth-century (and earlier) "existential phenomenology."[20] Their particular

rethinking of the Cartesian subject is thus not so much a rethinking but a rejection that sees

materialism as fundamentally antithetical to any kind of intentional or will-ing subject.[21]

Part of what this project argues, however, is that this turn to what might be termed the

radical immanence of matter leads us into a too-hasty rejection of a middle ground between the

immanence of all materiality and an intending, thinking, acting, will-ing subject. Bringing

phenomenological methods back into the conversation about how materiality and immanence

shape the subjects who form political community. The language of the subject remains useful, as

it helps us to locate the ways subjects become manifest out of immanence, a process of

immanent affective self-feeling.

The affect of the individual living subject is ontologically linked to the affective character

of the other lives. Central to Henry's philosophy is a way of defining and deploying affect

wherein, ultimately, all community is understood as founded on an affective "pathos" or

suffering-feeling, which for him is always "with" other beings. Henry's theory of auto-affectivity

takes affect as both intrinsically material and fundamentally unseen and unknowable. His

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2010). Connolly's career-long engagement with the problem of plurality and multiplicity (a selected overview is helpfully provided in *William E. Connolly: Democracy, Pluralism, and Political Theory*, ed. Terrell Carver and Samuel A. Chambers, Routledge Innovators in Political Theory (London: Routledge, 2008). leads to his development of an account of becoming as an ethical orientation within proliferating political differences, for which see especially *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Coole and Frost provide an important field-defining overview of new materialism, with particularly close attention paid to how these new materialist challenges emerge from or are in conversation with feminist, queer, or radical philosophy and phenomenology (*New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[20] *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, 13

[21] A point underscored by this form of materialism's reliance on Deleuze and Guattari; see especially the essays by Bennett, Rey Chow, and William Connolly in Coole and Frost's edited volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

understanding of "feeling" rigorously articulates the importance of the unsayable and unthinkable for grounding human existence. In this way, his account provides an alternative post-Cartesian and post-Kantian rethinking of the place of rationality in subjectivity to those that follow the lead of Derrida or Ludwig Wittgenstein, to name just a few who have radically shifted how we think and speak about "the subject."[22] I propose that bringing Henry's language into our theorization of political community provides us with a way of approaching the difficulties that arise when trying to make community between richly diverse individuals possible. Recovering the a-temporal and non-objective counterpart to the ontological subject opens up a way to theorize subjective meaning alongside historical/political analysis. Shedding light on the ways the ontological subject is intertwined with the living subject, provides a way to understand how affective political community can be, not a contradiction, but a possibility.

III. Phenomenological Turns

In a well-known 1991 essay, the philosopher Dominique Janicaud critiques what he called the "theological turn" in phenomenology, categorizing Henry alongside Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricœur as having turned phenomenology away from its original intentions as articulated by Hegel and Husserl.[23] In Janicaud's view, the turn to the unseen, as in Henry, is an unacceptable radicalization of a method meant to study phenomena as they appear, a method that furthermore ought not attend to the questions of phenomenality as such.[24] This theological phenomenology, per Janicaud, is distinctive for its "rupture with

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[22] An excellent overview of this problem is in Chantal Bax, *Subjectivity after Wittgenstein: The Post-Cartesian Subject and the "Death of Man"* (London: Continuum, 2013).

[23] Translated and published in English as Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

[24] *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn,* 33-34

immanent phenomenality," and by its "opening [*ouverture*] to the invisible, to the Other [*Autre*], to a pure givenness [*donation*], or to an archi-revelation."[25] For Janicaud and likeminded critics, the phenomenology of phenomenality is simply another method of bringing the divine into the quotidian, of putting what cannot be known in conversation with a scientific method of analysis that is designed for precisely what can be observed.[26] In other words, for these critics, Henry's thought should not properly be called "phenomenology," since it effectively transforms phenomenology—a method of grounded observation—into metaphysics. While analytic metaphysics might balk at this characterization, it raises nonetheless the question of why a philosopher like Henry might hold on to the notion of phenomenology and its eponymous method. Even more pressingly: why ought readers of Henry take seriously its insistence on phenomenology?

Paul Ricœur points us toward an answer in his 1967 description of twentieth century phenomenology as the sum of Husserl's work and the heresies emerging from it.[27] Appropriately enough, since Henry studied with Ricœur, this field-defining observation does more than Janicaud's to capture the particular situation of Henry's work. This "heretical" phenomenology emerges from a method, the phenomenological method, which itself has tended to become a dogmatism. It is also important not to forget that the intellectual antecedents of phenomenology are a philosophical method rooted in Judeo-Christian theology and hermeneutics, even if Husserl himself expounded a secular standpoint on the world and the subjects who perceive it.

Although Henry's philosophy develops through readings of Husserl, Henry's focus is

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[25] Ibid., 17

[26] See, for instance, ibid., 85

[27] Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, ed. David Carr and Anthony Steinbock, trans. Edward E. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007)., 4

distinct. Where Husserl is concerned with how perception happens in a lifeworld that is shared among subjects, Henry looks instead within the subject. Yet he seeks to do so without abandoning the importance of subjects' shared material, affective reality. In this way, Henry occupies himself with the boundary between phenomenology and speculative philosophy or even theology. By focusing on the unknowable and unsharable aspects of subjective experience, one may even suggest that Henry is not doing phenomenological analysis *per se*.[28] Yet Henry is fundamentally engaged in asking how to understand a phenomenon—life—that encompasses experiences that can be shared with others, surely, but also those experiences about which it cannot be known whether or not they are shared. Rather than assuming that such experiences are strongly "mine own" or fully private, Henry opens up the possibility that these experiences are differentiating within as well as between subjects.

Henry's concepts of auto-affection and "life" bring to political theory a radically post-Heideggerian account of what the being of human beings might look like. In contrast to Heidegger's emphasis on the conceptualization of being as Being, Henry's work argues that there can be no single conceptualization. In other respects, Henry's interest in life as the fundamental concept for phenomenology picks up concerns that are similar to Hannah Arendt's interest in natality and to the concerns of the new materialisms. In contrast to the Arendtian notion that humanity can always begin anew, Henry suggests that life's immanent, cyclical quality is something that no life can escape, whether or not its conscious thought engages with this fact. Likewise, where new materialism blurs the line between human and non-human, Henry takes human lives as constantly differentiating, not only vis-à-vis other human lives but also vis-à-vis life in the world.

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[28] On traditional phenomenology's insistence on the subjective experience of the shared lifeworld, see Dan Zahavi. *Phenomenology: The Basics*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 53).

Henry's phenomenology is frequently characterized as part of a theological turn in post-structuralist continental philosophy, critiqued as relying on an "ontology of presence" that finds the meaning and essence of the world revealing itself to observing subjects through a sense of the presence of its being. To be sure, Henry's late career Christological theology of incarnation shares a concern with the question of how a transcendent divine might be revealed in the world. Yet Henry states the reverse in much of his work: he is asking not about ontological coherence in terms of a Platonic or monotheistic sort of metaphysics, but instead is concerned about the "beings of beings" in their lived realities in material worlds. In this sense, at least, his work has more in common with Derrida's questioning of self-revealing presence than with later phenomenological attempts to discover how Being might "give" itself to subjects through its presence in the world.[29]

Indeed, as John Protevi points out, Henry's project has strong similarities to Derrida's in that both take issue with prior philosophers' equation of phenomenology as method with a unitary or singular ontological perspective, termed ontological monism by Henry. Both Derrida's and Henry's critiques focus on the ways that identifying the "Being of all beings" with the human subject can mask other forms of existence or life. Henry's apparent disinclination to engage directly with deconstruction in his major philosophical works in fact masks the connections between his and Derrida's work, of which the most important for this project are the political implications of Heideggerian ontology and the status of the body. Both Derrida and Henry struggle to relate the body itself to an experience of the body. Likewise, each finds Heidegger's project unsatisfying, but in ways that exemplify their convergent views on language and the nature of knowledge itself. We can contrast, too, the internal immediacy of Henry's

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[29] I am thinking here of the work of Jean-Luc Marion, whose work explicitly draws on Henry's, but comes down firmly on the side of arguing that Being's givenness is an essential structure of existence in the world.

account versus the external reflexivity of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's. Henry wants to recapture

how the intellection of self-understanding (self-touching) in Descartes discloses the material

character of our inner life. Inna Viriasova, one of the few political theorists who has written in

English on Henry, reads Henry largely from a theological perspective, but also argues that

Henry's political experiences of "clandestine" work during the war shape his philosophical

approach to the phenomenology of subjectivity.

The primary course of Henry's departure from Husserl regards the latter's emphasis on the

scientific basis of perception and on the phenomenological method as a means of perceiving

reality as it appears to us.[30] What this entails is a turn to a phenomenology of the subject. Henry's

conception of the subject provides the grounds for thinking about immanence in relation to some

of its most vocal proponents and detractors among continental philosophy and its political

theoretic interlocutors.

While some texts within the phenomenological literature have been widely read lately by

political theorists, particularly the work of Merleau-Ponty, Ricouer and Levinas', Henry is rarely

considered. On environmental questions and theories of embodiment, some theorists turn to the

phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, one notable example is Martín Plot.[31] Levinas has been read

and written about widely on the ethics of difference within political theory and across the

disciplines, following his characterization of ethics as "first philosophy," notably by Alphonso

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[30] See, in particular, Husserl's *Ideen III,* where it is clear that at some points, the distance between Husserl and Henry is slight, given the former understands his own emphasis on material perception as but a part of what the subject *may* perceive, or apprehend, in the world. As he puts it, "The designation of the perception of something material as material perception is fully justified as that of the perception of something external as external perception—which, of course, is not anything external either—and in general it is as justified as any similar and completely unavoidable naming by means of transference. Material perception is a special case of the perception of something *extensive*, to which also, of course, the *perceptions of phantoms belong*" (Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences, Third Book: Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), 2).

[31] *The Aesthetico-Political: The Question of Democracy in Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Lingis.[32] Husserl is perhaps less written about contemporaneously, but in part because his

influence has already been felt and translated through the work of political theorists like Fred

Dallmayr.[33] The roots and some of the common concerns of French phenomenology can be felt

through the influence of Gadamerian hermeneutics (via a number of interpreters), and notably in

the work of Ricœur, one of Henry's teachers.[34] Stanley Cavell engages the phenomenological

tradition as it borders ordinary language philosophy and skepticism in *The Claim of Reason.*[35]

Other existential phenomenologists outside of the French and German language authors are less

widely read, but political theorists and philosophers have engaged, in particular, E.M. Cioran and

Jan Patočka, notably Joshua Foa Dienstag's discussions of the work of E.M. Cioran in

Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit and Emilie Tardivel's work on Patočka's concept of

freedom.[36]

      Hannah Arendt's debts to and critiques of phenomenology have been discussed in

numerous contexts, particularly Seyla Benhabib's writing on Arendtian work in relation to

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[32] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [Totality et infini: essay sur l'extériorité], trans. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academia, 1991)., see especially 46-47, 304.

[33] An entry point to Dallmayr's phenomenological thought can be found in Dallmayr, Fred Critical Phenomenology, Cross-Cultural Theory, ed. Terrell Carver and Samuel A. Chambers (London: Routledge, 2017).

[34] For more on the common heritage of phenomenological and hermeneutics, including the influence of Dilthey on Heidegger, and of both on Ricœur see Richard Kearney, Modern Movements in European Philosophy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)., especially pp. 98-100 but also see Heidegger's directly, albeit early, discussion of Dilthey in Martin Heidegger, Becoming Heidegger: On the Train of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927, ed. David Levin and John McCumber, trans. Theodore Kisiel, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007)., pp. 238ff.

[35] Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[36] Dienstag, Joshua Foa. Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.) Patočka's work was more widely read in the 80s and 90s during the revolutions that dismantled the former Soviet bloc but is re-emerging in recent scholarship e.g. Emilie Tardivel, La Liberté Au Principe: Essai Sur La Philosophie De Patočka, Bibliothèque D'histoire De La Philosophie (Paris: Vrin, 2011)

Heidegger's notion of work.[37] Also relevant here are Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman's discussion of Arendt's relationship to [Karl] Jaspers, among other writings on Arendt, Jaspers, and Heiedegger.[38] In contrast to reading Arendt's thought as historically linked to German phenomenologists like Jaspers and Heidegger, more recent works like that of Serena Parekh on Arendt exemplify a strand of political theory interested in excavating phenomenological methods from within texts usually not read as phenomenology.[39] This project is more in line with the latter, inasmuch as it talks about the role of phenomenology within political theory moving forward.

Finally, this project contributes to a fuller picture of how phenomenology can be used as political theory. Across the social and physical sciences and the humanities "doing a phenomenological analysis of *x*" is frequently asserted but rarely theorized. Often, saying that one understands something "phenomenologically" is simply shorthand for "looking at the whole picture" of a particular phenomenon from one or several situated perspectives.[40] The classic examples are, of course, the tree or the table—solid, material objects in the world that one could, literally, walk around, that one's (presumably *seeing*) eyes could examine) and that one can encounter through senses like touch, taste, or hearing. These varied disciplinary approaches exhibit one central aspect of classical phenomenology, namely in valuing careful attention to

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[37] See especially chapter five of Seyla Benhabib, The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).,

[38] Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, "Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers," in Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[39] (Serena Parekh, Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights (New York: Routledge, 2008).)

[40] For instance, Sara Heinämaa, "'An Equivocal Couple Overwhelmed by Life': A Phenomenological Analysis of Pregnancy," *philoSOPHIA* 4, no. 1 (2014).; M. Corr et al., "Living with 'Melanoma'…for a Day: A Phenomenological Analysis of Medical Students' Simulated Experiences.," *British Journal of Dermatology* 177 (2017).

phenomena as they appear in the world. Yet what is often elided is a theory of the forms of perception and knowledge themselves. By denuding the notion of phenomenological analysis of a self-reflection on the perceiving subject, phenomenology as mere tool fails to draw all it can conceptually and methodologically from the phenomenological tradition.[41]

This reading emphasizes his account of the impossibility of objectivity, an analysis of which is integral when "doing phenomenological analysis" in a political context. This is essentially what it means to be a political actor, and so my application of Henry's radical phenomenology is a way of outlining what and how a political actor can do to make sense of their experiences of difference. Henry helps us to understand that this impossibility is actually constitutive of knowledge-production, meaning that entirely possible to produce knowledge and entirely necessary to understand its limits. At the limits of objectivity is the emergence of individuality and the production of community. Community, as it emerges around or despite the limitations of objective work, exists not only despite but because of the fundamental paradoxes and fissures present in intersubjective life.

In what follows, I consider how life as such as is central to this conversation, yet we have lost sight of how to talk about life without assuming there are certain ethical agreements we share. To this end, my project is situated alongside others—such as Judith Butler's critical account of subjectivity in *The Psychic Life of Power*—that contend this striking disjuncture between the aims and the effects of community is reproduced in politics through the state and other expressions of power.[42] Using this critique as a starting point for understanding the self-

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[41] This is not to say that *methodologists* who developed practices rooted in phenomenological philosophy have not adequately looked at their foundations, but rather than the application of these methods often glosses over the assumptions about subjectivity and knowledge production that phenomenology itself was designed to make visible. For an example of methodological theory that admirably and critically roots its practice in the phenomenological literature, see Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 1994)..

[42] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press).

reinforcing problems of political subjectivity, I place myself among those seeking alternatives for negotiating the movement between individual and communal.

Specifically, I ask: how can we account for differences between individuals that seem to preclude community altogether, such as conflicting religious orientations? What can we do about differences that occasion constraint, erasure, or alteration of individual desires or needs in the name of "the common good," such as in questions about genetic engineering or the preservation of a more "essential" species over another? Finding grounds for a political theory of community that does not destroy individuals in the name of community means we must weigh the concerns of individuals, groups, minorities, or majorities, the prerogatives of difference and similarity, individuality or particularity,

Understanding political subjectivity this way widens the ground for discussing conflicts between individual commitments, statuses, and political problems, and for navigating between the values of some lives and others. I argue that Henry's accounts of subjectivity, community, and politics provide us with the means to theorize how political communities may address conditions of suffering, threat, lack, and crisis.

IV. The Limits and Rewards of Political Community

This project is titled "Affective Political Community." But community, as much as it may sound nice in everyday language, is the target of extensive questioning by theorists and practitioners alike. After all, valorizing "safe communities" can lead to violent policing, while the notion of there being something all people hold "in common" can flatten, rather than support, differences between individuals and groups. Yet despite deep philosophical and practical skepticism about the notion of community, critics continue striving to understand why, as Miranda Joseph puts it, "Community is one of the most motivating discourses and practices

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circulating in contemporary society."[43] Joseph, one more recent voice among many influential

critical theorists who have plumbed the darker sides of community, points out that "community is

almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of

human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging."[44] Arguing that this positive view of

community is problematic and incorrect, Joseph nonetheless emphasizes that the well-

documented harms caused by idealizing community are present alongside "the fact that

community generates not an attitude of 'whatever' but rather the strongest of passions."[45] For

Joseph, community is not just something that can be dismissed, since there are definite and

meaningful affective commitments to the idea of "community" which keep it alive and

flourishing. Joseph "suggests that community both supports and displaces capitalism," and

"argue[s] that the work of community is to generate and legitimate necessary particularities and

social hierarchies (of gender, race, nation, sexuality) implicitly required, but disavowed, by

capitalism, a discourse of abstraction and equivalence."[46] From this perspective, neoliberal

processes of capitalist production help to account for the formations, connections, and

relationships that intersect with discourses about "community" and belonging. Joseph

nonetheless locates how diverse forms of community many foster possibilities for displacing or

disrupting capitalism through alliances, actions, and the rearticulation and transformation of

communal relationality.

The critique of "community" that Joseph engages with largely focuses on how framing

community as "an unequivocal good" makes it possible to suborn the complex interests and

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[43] Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)., xxx

[44] *Against the Romance of Community,* vii

[45] Ibid., xxx

[46] Ibid., xxxii

wellbeing of all members of the collective to the "common good." When the latter is defined by those with the most power or the most bullying pulpit, even genocide can be framed as justifiable means for achieving the community's aims.

Yet even in situations where "communities" have not violently harmed their members and those around them, the ideal of community is functionally inadequate in practice. At best, human actors fail to live up to the ideal expressed by communities (including the family, the state, religion and so forth.) In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, community can be understood as a phenomenon that is always *désouvrée*, unworking or unmaking itself from within; understood ultimately as the English translation of *La communautée désouvrée* has it, as inoperable.[47] For Maurice Blanchot, responding to Nancy, community is *inavouable* or unavowable, characterized by its own impossibility, most horrifyingly unspeakable in the moments in which it is avowed, in contexts where the will of the community demands unquestioned fealty.[48] Blanchot views adherence to the community as a paradoxical transgression that is internal to it; one cannot deny the community, one can only rearticulate it. This discourse, which includes not only that of Nancy and Blanchot but also Derrida and Francois Lyotard, relates the political events of the twentieth century to the incompatibility of absolutist political language and plurality, diversity, or difference. The totalitarian ideals that flourished under twentieth-century fascism exemplified for these thinkers how the idea of "community" could be leveraged to support authoritarian nationalism. Furthermore, valorization of community is especially problematic since it purports to engender liberatory mutual belonging. These thinkers, including Joseph, doubt that the

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[47] Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté Désoeuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1999). Translated as *The Inoperative Community* [La communauté désœuvrée], eds. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, trans. Peter Connor, et al., vol. 76, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

[48] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 2006).

oppressive tendency of community can be kept from regenerating itself.[49] In other words, once

the measure of acceptability is what is best for "the community," the risk grows that the

community will decide that sacrificing the freedom of the individual is an acceptable cost for the

benefit of the group.

Yet while critical theorists have rightly placed the ideal of community within an

intellectual and political genealogy that sacrifices the few for the many, Sarah Hammerschlag

makes the important point that the unifying role of communal language has been used

historically by the few. Instances where members are drawn together into a sort of "social fusion"

in their sameness, she argues, are best understood as a myth that has been used both to deepen

ties internal to minority groups (in her example, in Judaism) as well as to exclude from the

political community those who fail to adhere to its supposedly universal principles.[50]

Hammerschlag also draws out how the thinkers above and others like Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe,

and Giorgio Agamben articulate

> visions of community that refuse both the universalizing and the particularizing options.
>
> What all these figures have inherited from Blanchot is a resistance to and suspicion of
>
> communal fusion, a suspicion, that is, of the modes of identification that bind people to
>
> a group, whether through territory, language, culture, or ethnicity. In reaction to previous
>
> models of identification, they develop a vision of the "unavowable community"
>
> (Blanchot), "the inoperative community" (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe), "the democracy
>
> to come" (Derrida), or "the coming community" (Agamben). Despite the differences

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[49] This is directly mentioned by Nancy in his response to Blanchot in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Disavowed Community* ([La Communauté désavouée], ed. Timothy C. Campbell, Commonalities (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016)., pp. ix-xi), although this work is more a development of Nancy's subsequent writings than a response to *The Unavowable Community*.

[50] Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*, ed. Thomas A. Carlson, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010)., 263

among these visions, in each the principle of identification with the larger polis is

replaced by an ideal of disappropriation, a rejection of the ideal of belonging as such.[51]

This "rejection of the ideal of belonging" necessitates reconceptualizing the "common" of

community as instead what is "uncommon." Notable in this direction are the efforts of Lingis and

Roberto Esposito to each argue that community, if it is to evade hegemonic universalities, must

be based on recognizing that what is held in common, by the members of the community, is the

fact that they hold nothing in common.[52] For Esposito this can be characterized as *nothing,* that is

to say, *no-thing*. Yet the lack of a concrete *thing* can still indicate an organizing principle or a

shared experience. Esposito reminds us of the ways that Hobbes' political community was

constituted to provide for individuals' most existential lack, security, while Rousseau's general

will operates through the creation of a mythic origin for community that risks dissolution as soon

as it is created.[53] These communities proceed through reference to a lack, but they fill it with

something that is meaningful even if it is immaterial. By contrast, Lingis takes the concept of a

lack even further, taking "nothing in common" to denote not "no-thing" but rather the lack of

something around which communities usually organize: reasons, productions, actions, or

kinships.[54] Both Lingis and Esposito identify the crux of the problem as that Western political

thought defines the community as that which the individual is not. In his most telling example,

Lingis implies that the phenomenon of community reveals itself most clearly at its limits, telling

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[51] *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*, 263

[52] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* [Communitas: origine e destino della comunità], ed. Cultural Memory in the Present, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010).; Alphonso Lingis, *Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

[53] See especially Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*., 16-17 and Lingis, *Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, 12

[54] Esposito traces his own use of this term to Heidegger discussion *Das Ding* and its further development by Nancy. See especially Esposito, *Communitas*, pp. 135-139.

of a cross-cultural encounter between two individuals where one (he himself) is at the brink of death. At the moment in a community of two people where one is about to cease existing and the other's life will continue, the individuals are forced to confront their fundamental difference (one has a future, the other does not) while also sharing an experience of this awareness of what they do not and cannot share: the fundamentally individual moment of death.

Each of these theoretical approaches challenges the notion that human subjects share a common ontology of community, that is to say, a common understanding of what community *is* and, in particular, what its foundation is. Where Lingis, for example, identifies a kind of "bare" community at the limits of understanding and life itself, we might also ask whether particular cultural forms require some shared sense of their own foundations even if a common notion of intersubjectivity is impossible? In other words, does a sense of community occur in groups even when this *sensus communis* itself can take on different forms? This might be the approach perspective of a social anthropologist who studies "group behavior" among various cultures. The idea that community might be observable, and that non-oppressive relations among people are possible is the obverse of the claim that all community filtered through Western political theology cannot escape being mediated by its concepts.

At the other extreme is a notion of community that radicalizes the inevitable mediation of experienced by subjects and groups and turns even farther from the idea of a common, unmediated subjective existence. Marxist thought understands the subject as a political entity as being shaped by a range of forces – formed by its relation to its own labor and the structures of society. Étienne Balibar provides one of the most dynamic and complex readings of the contextually shaped subject, emphasizing its fundamentally dynamic and situated status, wherein the *philosophical* subject is succeeded by a political subject such as the citizen, the bourgeois, or

the nation.[55] Balibar's emphasize on importance of deconstructive theories of community, reflects a larger concern among Marxist thinkers about taking community to be an immanent object. It is paradoxical that theorists of communism would be wary of engaging with notions of community, but many are rightly suspicious of attempts to speak for or as a community, aware of how speaking of or for a community can go awry. Thus, the focus in Marxist theory tends instead to be on the structural conditions in which various communities always exist. From this perspective, the community is something created after the work of communist revolution is accomplished; in order to create a common, one must first overturn or destroy the structural conditions that impede constrain people and nascent communities alike.

It is not only communists who are suspicious of community. One of the most significant risks of the project of affirming community is explained succinctly by Iris Marion Young. Young cautions that the myth of community recurs in problematic ways even when its proponents are arguing that community is immanently produced in subjects' affective relationships to one another. Young argues that proponents of community who value these relationships of co-presence as "immediate" rather than "mediated" are ignoring the mediation that is present in any inter-subjective encounter, and she rightly characterizes such a notion of immediacy as "a metaphysical illusion.[56]

Without detracting from these concerns, why is it important to understand community's possibilities? What can we achieve by understanding how subjects access a community's conditions of possibility? The danger of community being used for ill should not keep us from

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[55] On this question, see especially chapter fourteen in Etienne Balibar, "Citizen Subject [*Citoyen Sujet*]," in *Who Comes after the Subject? [Après Le Sujet Qui Vient?]*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge)., 275ff. Note that for Balibar, it may be an individual human being or a political entity that is constituted *or not* as a subject.

[56] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 233

understanding its possibilities. It is necessary to theorize the conditions of possibility for political community by developing an account of how subjects do and do not have access to those conditions of possibility in their own selves and in relationship with others. My goal is for this project to take seriously that mediated experience is inevitable in human life while also weighing heavily the real possibility of immediacy.

The problem of how individuals constitute communities crystallizes many significant oppositions. The theoretical literature with which I am concerned differs in its conclusions, but it expresses the problematic through philosophical oppositions, including: mediated and immediate experience, immanent and transcendent realities, thought and feeling, or reality and representation. These terms are central to Henry's project, indicating the rich potential of using his work to interrogate problems of difference within community.

V. Chapter Outlines

Chapter One, "Conceptual Framework for Henry's Philosophy of Life" discusses how Henry's concept of "life" grounds a theory of "living subjectivity." This theory of subjectivity emphasizes the subject's being alive and understands the experience of life, which is immanent to being alive, as *the* fundamental experience of reality. Life, which can be either individual or collective, is immanent and self-feeling. Henry argues, furthermore, that Heidegger's distinction between ontic and ontological experiences of living is a secondary separation between states that must be first understood as simply experiences of life. Life, for Henry, connects every living subject to itself while creating the conditions for affectively experiencing other living beings *as* subjects rather than merely perceiving then as objects. Relating as a living subject, then, means relating subjectively on several registers: understanding one's own subjectivity as fundamental as

well as unknowable by the other, and understanding the other as a subject in their own right, but one that is likewise unknowable and impenetrable.

While the concept of life is at the center of most of Henry's philosophical work, this chapter gives an overview of his emphasis shifts throughout his oeuvre. The vulnerability of ordinary life is most evident in his writings on politics and democracy, where Henry conceives of life as essentially characterized by suffering and the struggle to survive. These themes and a related concern with the necessary struggles of life subtend his more philosophical writings as well. Where his later work emphasizes the community of lives and the political implications of life as such, his early work's concern with the interiority of radical life remains fundamental even for these later questions. The urgency of these questions was articulated by Henry but explored relatively little in his late work or the secondary literature. While he largely focuses on threats to democracy and belonging from technology, capitalism, and state violence, the scale of planetary climate crisis and the rapidity with which lives are disregarded and discarded seems beyond his purview. Engaging with the concept of life is politically urgent at a time when the human species' very existence or possibility of life is under threat from climate change, when a global pandemic claims lives daily in nearly every part of the planet, and when the political world rings with debates over what constitutes life's beginning and who can adjudicate those definitions.

Chapter Two, "Interior Life and the Possibility of Intersubjectivity" looks more closely at Henry's early-to-mid career writings on the relationship of the self to its affective interiority. This chapter subsequently considers the political implications of taking the life of the subject as essential, asking how the posited interiority functions in relationship to its overall situatedness in a political world. In other words: to what extent should we consider how the inner life of a subject shapes its ability to interact with some sort of exterior? For Henry, the problem with most

philosophical attempts to understand subjective interiority is that they want to define the subject primarily through how it relates to objects or other persons in the world. But if we take seriously the idea that subjects are fundamentally non-objective, then we must radically decenter our understanding of the formative and meaningful aspects of inter-subjectivity. The chapter proceeds by first considering how Henry's idea of interiority is revealed by the breakdown of the phenomenological method in Descartes, which relies on the subject being perceptive, able to apperceive something that is outside of itself. But it can only do this through sensation, which ultimately happens because of a fundamental, prior sensation that the subject has of itself. There is a paradox at the heart of the radical immanence of the Henryian subject: at the deepest level, its interiority cannot be accessed, only posited, yet this posited existence is the only stable basis for thinking and understanding how a subject can and does find meaning in the world.

Chapter Three, "To Live is to Suffer," turns to one set of extreme conditions of life: its experiences of suffering, pain, torture. This chapter provides an overview of Henry's concept of suffering, taking it as a particular instance of the challenge of representation in politics. Following the discussion of representation, the chapter focuses on the problem of violence, especially of torture. Next, the chapter turns to the question of publicity which first emerged in the previous chapter, taking up Judith Butler's discussion of mournable life and what it can tell us about the theoretical usefulness of Henryian Life more broadly. The chapter concludes by discussing how Henry's concern with affective suffering requires the ongoing elaboration of lived experience, using the example of French torture in Algeria.

Finally, *Chapter Four, Political Life Beyond Abstraction: Michel Henry's Critique of the Political* looks at the way Henry identifies an affective dimension to praxis in Marx. For Henry, this provides the basis for a critique of economic and social activity that requires

attentiveness to the affective situations and, in particular, the physical needs, of the members of a polity. The materialism Henry proposes requires an expansion of the very notion of being-with, one that must include other forms of life—as well as the means for providing life—along with human subjects. Chapter Four turns to the construction of meaningful inter-subjective social relationships in a discussion of Henry's reading of Marx as a theorist of the human and human praxis. The chapter looks first at Henry's reading of Marx on thought and praxis, and then turns to the tension between the fundamental physical needs of the living and the abstractions of politics. Only once politics has turned from abstractions, such as capital, to specific concerns, can it hold life and other practically universal concepts in tension with political imperatives like justice and equality.

Henry proposes understanding political differences and plurality, such as those I described in the first paragraphs of this introduction, as being always already rooted in shared sense of life that is experienced. Rather than attributing the impossibility of community amongst plural beings to either differences in truth claims or the insurmountable status of difference, I argue in what follows that understanding difference as existentially rooted in radical individuality is crucial to understanding when and where community can emerge despite differences. Furthermore, I suggest that where community may be rooted and strengthened by differences, radical individuality plays a key role. Thus, the conclusion, "***Political Regeneration: the subject, the species, and enlivened thought,***" discusses whether and how principles of political practice and political philosophy that foster the regeneration of life as such and individual particular life can be inflected in Henryian directions. The future of life of this project entails a turn to the politics of existence as they relate to the need for regeneration of how seriously political communities take the existence of political subjects.

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR HENRY'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

In 1943, Michel Henry had been studying Spinoza when he paused his schooling and followed his older brother in joining the French Resistance. As the story goes, Henry was given the code name "Kant" because he always carried an edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in his rucksack.[57] His unusual choice of resistance fighter's reading material reflects his commitment to the study of philosophy, a pursuit nurtured by his family. The child of a French naval officer and a concert pianist, Henry was born in 1922 in French-occupied Vietnam but spent the majority of his childhood back in the colonial metropole, where he was raised outside Paris as part of an extended family of intellectuals and musicians. His secondary education was at the well-known Lycée Henry IV, site of the formation of many other philosophers-to-be.[58] He then pursued studies in philosophy under Jean Grenier, writing a thesis on Spinoza, whose thought was to influence his interests greatly.[59] Whether or not the twenty-one year-old Henry thought having a volume of German idealist philosophy at hand would make it easier to outwit Nazis, in his later career he became deeply concerned with the philosophical implications of authoritarianism. Indeed, his intense intellectual engagement with the meaning of life is marked by his attention across his œuvre to the threats politics poses to the lives and survival of ordinary people.

After completing doctoral studies in Paris under the supervision of Jean Hyppolite, Jean

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[57] Paul Audi, *Michel Henry : Une Trajectoire Philosophique*, Figures Du Savoir (Paris: Belles lettres, 2006)., 9 ; See also Jean Leclercq's biographical interview with Anne Henry in Jean Leclercq and Jean-Marie Brohm, eds., *Michel Henry*, Les Dossiers H (Lausanne, Suisse: L'Age d'Homme, 2009)., 9-50

[58] Including Simone Weil, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Maritain, Claude Lefort, Michel Foucault, Alain Finkielkraut, Gilles Deleuze, and Georges Canguilhem.

[59] Posthumously published as Michel Henry, *Le Bonheur De Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 2004).

Wahl, and Ricœur, Henry spent a long career based at the University of Montpellier, where he wrote in a variety of genres—from multitudinous systematic contributions to post-Husserlian phenomenology to award-winning fiction to political philosophy and, in his later years, theology. Starting with his post-war thesis, *Essence of Manifestation*[60], every major work Henry crafts centers on questions regarding "life". This presents a challenge for interpreters seeking to trace the subtle changes in how he discusses life, particularly because he believes life is radically self-propelling and generative of difference. Furthermore, despite his works' avowed commitment to theorizing ontological diversity and the power of infinitely proliferating lived experiences, Henry is largely read in ahistorical ways in relationship to a specific genealogy of phenomenological philosophy, that of Descartes, Maine de Biran, Husserl, and Heidegger, for example. Henry's writings themselves do not push outside of a largely Continental genealogy, which may be one reason why his work has not been taken up by scholars concerned with similar questions about radical difference, affect, and immanent power.

My objective here is to understand what Henry means by "life", to give a picture of the subject that lives life, and to lay the groundwork for an Henryian version of political subjectivity. I explore why and how Henry thinks that we need to focus on sensory and affective aspects of life, in order to analyze via Henry how crucial non-objective experiences of subjective life are for the existential questions individuals have. Subsequent chapters will draw out the critique of politics that is at the core of Henry's account of subjectivity and discuss what kinds of politics take seriously these sorts of critique.

Because "life" is the thing that is being studied, making it the object of a phenomenological analysis—as Henry does—is a contradictory position. If life is what makes

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[60] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

analysis possible, and is also the thing that is being analyzed, the classical phenomenological method of the *epochê*, or bracketing of existence, cannot be used. This is because life exists prior to any kind of effort that an individual subject might make to view its own life (or even another's life) objectively. Thus, the chapter provides an overview of the Henryian subject, which in this project serves as the basis for a political subjectivity that I am terming "living subjectivity." The characteristics of this form of subjectivity are considered in turn: its materiality, its affectivity, its constitution via auto-affection, its radically immanent essence, and the diversifying and multiplying qualities of its singularity. Henry's theory of the subject is of its being affective, with its existence dependent on its being alive in a substantive body, but where the thing that makes it meaningful is a quality of being alive that cannot be studied or examined, which Henry calls "life." Life can, however, be identified as a *feeling* or affect that is experienced by the subject. That experience of the self, what Henry calls self-feeling or auto-affection, is his way of understanding the basis for an ontological account of subjectivity. Life is what gives matter meaning, because meaning requires both some lived experience and some living subject to generate meaning through its relation to matter.

In the discussion below, this chapter examines Henry's account of subjective life, providing an overview of the concept of life and other core ideas that ground Henry's phenomenology of life and his critical engagement with the problem of subjectivity. This serves as a basis for the subsequent chapters' discussion of his critique of politics as something that endangers life.

In what follows, I first discuss the ways Henry sets out in his earliest major texts to contrast his project with that of Heidegger, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, with his own approach, which he defines as an investigation of phenomenality. The chapter then turns to

Henry's recuperation of the materiality of the *res cogitans*, and how this emphasis on materiality leads Henry to privilege the immanent qualities of existence. I next consider his framework for the relationship between thought, the body, and subjectivity itself, from which he draws his core understanding of the living subject. This living subject experiences its own subjectivity fully, an experience Henry sees as distinctive and prior to the version of subjectivity that has an ego (cogito) relating to an objective world. The following section looks at the character of the subject as affective—and specifically as auto-affective—characterized by its experiences of pathos, most notably suffering. Finally I turn to Henry's version of subjective agency that displaces intentionality in favor of impulse. This serves as a preface to Chapter Two's consideration of interiority and the living subject's hidden essence.

I. Henry's Scholarly Agenda

Into the twenty-first century, Henry's influence was perhaps greatest in the field he came to late in his career: theology and philosophy of religion. His importance to this field to his deep influence on the work of his pupil Jean-Luc Marion. In Marion is felt the influence of not only Henry but their mutual teacher Ricœur, but where Marion posits that phenomenology allows the subject to encounter the divine, Henry's work leads rather to the conclusion that such an exposure is impossible.[61] There is less tension and more a divergence of scholarly aim between Henry and Ricœur; Henry's phenomenology presents a complement to Ricœur's scholarship, in that where Ricœur is concerned with the work of language in subjective encounters, Henry's phenomenology is almost exclusively concerned with pre-linguistic or pre-conscious existence.

Henry's phenomenology is most closely aligned with that of Merleau-Ponty, sharing a focus on the roles of perception and apperception in the phenomenological reduction. Like

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[61] Although there is not sufficient space here to cover Marion's debts to Henry, extensive common ground can be found in their readings of Husserl, for instance.

Heidegger, Henry is concerned with the appearance of beings, but Henry's argument is that it is Life rather than Being that grounds the manifestation of that which exists. Notably, for Henry this emerges from a phenomenology of the body, rather than a phenomenology of thought. The distinction may seem slight, but he argues that to focus on Being rather than Life is to posit what he calls a monistic ontology, which is perhaps best understood as a static one, dependent the observation of a philosophically fixed subject-position.

Henry's critique of ontological monism, discussed below, emphasizes that in any particular history representation of a singular experience tends to rely on the objectivizing and representational work of language, as through text or conversation. Thus, my hypothetical nun may try to share with another member of her order why she voted how she did, by evoking the story of her childhood friend as well as her interpretations of Biblical texts. But Henry's work urges philosophy to consider the nun's explanation as a version of self-objectivation that is not just incomplete (as any memory or representation is) but also essentially unable to capture what it means to feel deeply her position and commitments within her own body. Whether or not the nun realizes this, Henry's analysis suggests that this missing relationship to of the subject to its own reality is the basis of all phenomenological difference. Yet Henry's critique of the subject returns again and again to another fundamental feature of life: the self and the self's experience of itself occur at once and in the same place, in a body (or whatever this mass of matter I inhabit is called.)

The vulnerability of ordinary life is most evident in his writings on politics and democracy, where Henry conceives of life as essentially characterized by suffering and the struggle to survive. These themes and a related concern with the necessary struggles of life subtend his more philosophical writings as well.

II. Henry's Phenomenology: *epochê* and forgetfulness

Not only does Henry propose his own account of a post-Cartesian subjectivity, he also rejects the idea that phenomenological method can produce any *positive* philosophical insights. As he puts it, "contemporary ontology pushes to the absolute the presuppositions and the limits of the philosophy of consciousness since Descartes and even of all Western philosophy since the Greeks," thereby clarifying his stance on the procedures of phenomenological analysis, which Henry believes posit a conscious, rational subject.[62] This claim is the basis of Henry's first major published work, *The Essence of Manifestation*. Here, Henry questions the definitional phenomenological method of the *epochê*, or the bracketing of the world to focus on the phenomena at issue and begin the process of reduction.[63]

"This book was born of a refusal," begins that work's preface.[64] His project, he continues, is to refuse "the very thought that made it possible."[65] This refusal describes the paradoxical attitude that drives all his subsequent academic work: a thoroughly thought-out and written up philosophical perspective on the importance of what escapes thought and text. Henry positions himself within philosophy but his work claims that philosophy can only hint at—and never describe—subjective reality.

In those opening lines of the *Essence of Manifestation*, "thought" refers most immediately to the "fundamental investigations of Husserl and Heidegger," philosophers whose

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[62] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, The Hague: MartinusNijhoff, 1973, xi

[63] Henry's discussion of the epochê is in direct conversation with Husserl and takes the Husserlian reduction as a prototypical method for phenomenology as such.

[64] *The Essence of Manifestation*., xi

[65] Ibid., xi

work Henry interprets in order to uncover what he calls the "most intimate essence" of Being.[66]

His approach is to construct a new "phenomenological ontology" by showing how prior

phenomenologies failed to achieve an account of the conditions of possibility for phenomenality

itself. As he puts it,

> [R]egardless of the degree of adequacy in its theoretical formulation—whether it is a
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> question of intuition or consciousness, of Husserlian intentionality or Hegelian alienation,
>
> of Heideggerian transcendence or Schelerian affective perception—the ecstatic
>
> becoming-present of Being allows its most intimate essence, i.e. that which makes it life
>
> and each of us living beings, to escape it.[67]

This passage brings forward a number of Henry's key claims. He foregrounds the argument he

wishes to make about the impossible task philosophers such as Heidegger or Max Scheler (and

likewise he himself as a philosopher) have set themselves, dismissing the possibility that any

"theoretical formulation" can capture the essence of Being.[68] He suggests instead that "the

ecstatic becoming-present of Being" might release Being's "most intimate essence."[69] Henry then

describes the essence of Being as, not the being of beings, but rather as "that which makes it life

and each of us living beings."[70] Henry grounds his phenomenology of the conditions for

existence, for the manifestation of being, defining the essence of Being as that which makes it

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[66] Ibid., xi; In referring to Being as a singular subject, Henry engages Heidegger's formula. As becomes clear later in *EP*, Henry's does not reject Heidegger's approach outright, but rather faults its turn from affect to transcendence. (*Essence of Manifestation*, 584-8) More on this below.

[67] Ibid., xi

[68] Ibid., xi

[69] Ibid., xi

[70] Ibid., xi

life. However, the connection between Being and life is qualified by what in this phrase does set Henry on a very different path from his predecessors: "[T]he ecstatic becoming-present of Being allows...that which makes it...to escape it."[71] The condition of possibility for Being, the "that which makes it," is given a way to be manifested by Being itself. Yet Henry's assertion that this revelation happens through "the ecstatic becoming-present of Being" raises further questions. Is not ek-stasis, or a phenomenon's overflowing to its outside, in tension with "becoming-present, or coming into existence by coming into presence? In these words, Henry prefigures how he will be arguing that two seemingly different things, namely transcendence and immanence, happen in one and the same movement, and at once and the same moment: in manifestation, life is made present in the subject as it escapes it. This simultaneous manifestation of life's immanence and its transcendence, of the conditions of possibility of its selfhood as with the conditions of possibility for its relationality; in manifestation, there is no inside or outside to the subject that can be related to as such, although manifestation is the grounds for both ipseity and relationality.

Rather than starting from a phenomenological position that relies on the joint work of perception and cognition (as, for instance, in Husserl), he emphasizes the materiality of the living subject, focusing on the subject's affectivity, which he defines as its quality of being sensible.[72] He argues that affect is central because the subject is always feeling itself (its own existence) in a material sense through the experience of auto-affection, which is prior to any conscious experience of making sense of the world. Affect is, he thinks, is at the center of all experience, since it exists prior to any awareness the subject might have of its effort.

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[71] Ibid., xi

[72] *Cartesian Meditations, Ideen I, II; Essence of Manifestation; Material Phenomenology;* Secondary literature on relationship of Henry to Husserl. Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences, Third Book: Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980)., Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.*, *Material Phenomenology*, 1st ed., Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

III. Affect and the Body

As discussed above, the body is understood by Henry as the foundation of life in two ways. First, having a body is necessary for experiencing being alive. Second the body serves as the material substance in and through which one experiences life (or in Henry's terminology that draws attention to life's ontological centrality: Life, capitalized.) In other words, I interpret Henry as saying that the body is at once the condition of possibility for life and (while alive) an individual experiences the reality of living through their body. There is a subtle link between these two ways of relating to the body. The body's status as condition of possibility for life does not depend on the individual's awareness of this reality; the body supports and holds aliveness all the same. There is an unspoken and pre-linguistic experience of life that is essential for any thought or spoken understanding of life, but that is prior to and can exist without that understand.

In other words, the body is the precondition for its own meaningfulness. The body is the means by which one can understand the body, but this understanding happens through subjectivity rather than through thought. O'Sullivan describes this as follows: "Henry posits the 'subjective body' as a means of experience through which it again becomes possible to conceive of affectivity and appearance as self-reliant entities." Two ways that we can rephrase term "auto-affection" are "self-feeling" or the "self-as-affective." In Henry, there are many times that this phrase applies to a situation where the "self" is being experienced even if the subject experiencing a sense of themselves could not describe or understand its experience in terms of "subjectivity" or as a so-called self. Some kind of a "subject" or self exists and it is that individual being that is felt or feeling. As Henry writes in the *The Essence of Manifestation,*

> In so far as the original essence of receptivity is defined in its internal structure by
> immanence, it becomes apparent that it itself constitutes the pure content which it

receives. What the original essence of receptivity receives is itself…Self-affection is the constitutive structure of the original essence of receptivity.[73]

Instead of cogito understood as thinking, Henry emphasizes the fact that there is something that is felt within oneself—one's sensation of thinking.

Henry's dissection of the Cartesian subject argues that the idea of the "cogito" is less about producing a "transcendental theory of knowledge" than it is about the process of coming to know through sensing the object of knowledge.[74] Or about, as he puts it at one point, of coming to know through the "pathetic grasp of appearing in its original appearing to itself." For the Cartesian subject, the knowledge that the subject has of itself is necessary for opening up a relationship to the world:

> Subjectivity is the pathetic immediation of appearing as auto appearing, such that, without this pathetic grasp of appearing in its original appearing to itself, no appearing—notably the aesthetic appearing of the world—would ever appear. Thus for example I can only see (whatever it might be) in that I represent it to myself on the basis of the ek-stasis of the World. But this ecstatic opening itself would not appear if it did not auto-affect itself in the very movement of its ecstasy.[75]

"All the same there is something vaguely uneasy in this transcendental theory of knowledge that will rule of modern thought: how can the cogito, which results from the radical critique of all use

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[73] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, 233; 287-88.

[74] Michel Henry, "The Critique of the Subject." in *Who Comes after the Subject?* Trans. Peter T. Connor. Eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, 157-66. London: Routledge, 1991, 165

[75] Ibid., 166

of evidence, be an evident fact itself, and, moreover, 'certain,' in such a way that everything rests upon it? It remains only to consider the cogito as a text, to submit it to a logical or historical analysis destined to uncover its faults or unconscious presuppositions, and to assess its difficulties."[76]

IV. Defining Autoaffection

Henry understands auto-affection broadly as including everything up-until the moment of sensation or feeling. There are numerous examples of this kind of situation in life: what makes us run our hands over our cold arms; what happens before we realize consciously or unconsciously that we are hungry and so go look for something to eat; when we sense that another person is upset and our stomach knots, but we cannot yet articulate why. In the political realm, auto-affection might be described as the kind of self-feeling that precedes self-knowledge of oneself as a political actor or political subject, but that equally grounds action, even when one does not realize that action is political. These affective currents differ among individuals, but we can understand these as the "psychic" or "subjective" backdrop for what we feel in any moment. That, in a very abbreviated sense, is what auto-affection looks like at one end of the movement toward a conscious self.

What happens at the start of auto-affection is even more important to Henry. Auto-affection's grounding and beginning is also what makes Henry's understanding of affectivity and subjectivity so distinctive. From his early discussions of auto-affection in The Essence of Manifestation to his very late works, this term is absolutely central to his understanding of existence. Recall that Henry says that auto-affection is the thing that does not feel but is prior to or below the feeling self. One way to describe auto-affection is as the unconscious ground of the

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[76] Michel Henry, "The Critique of the Subject." in *Who Comes after the Subject?* Trans. Peter T. Connor. Eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, 157-66. London: Routledge, 1991, 165-66

unconscious, since whatever we feel without realizing we are feeling it is still a feeling; auto-affection can't be that thing, but it is what makes that thing possible. But auto-affection is what makes that unconscious feeling possible—and thus accessible as affect—without being itself accessible. In other words, auto-affection is the condition of possibility for affection, just as life is the condition of possibility for subjective life.

It is important to remember that, phenomenologically, "auto-affection" and "hetero-affection" contrast. For someone like Hegel, Heidegger (or Marion and Merleau-Ponty, even) auto-affection may be a part of how the ego relates to itself in an ongoing way such that its consciousness is constituted. Distinguishing between the "I" and the "not-I", the self and what isn't the self is a process that auto-affection as "self-feeling" help with.[77] Instead, auto-affection is the feeling of being alive that is necessary for the subject to have any kind of desire to keep on feeling, or thinking, or doing. Henry thought that this was something Descartes missed: "when Descartes is confronted with the blinding intuition that affectivity constitutes appearances first coming into itself (the original self-affection wherein appearance appears to itself and wells up in its own phenomenality's appearance), his gaze falters."[78]

This is important, because Henry is figuring out how to situate affectivity which appears at two moments of existence. First, affectivity is the condition of possibility for any—indeed every—experience and every affection. This is already recognizant of the importance of materiality—affectivity is rooted in and indistinguishable from materiality. Affective materiality is the form that existence takes. Affective is also the content of experience—affectivity reenters and can be taken in by thought or unconscious in this moment. Affectivity is thus the condition

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[77] See e.g. Rebidoux, Michelle. *The Philosophy of Michel Henry (1922-2002) : A French Christian Phenomenology of Life.* Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012, 79.

[78] Michel Henry, *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 44, cited in *The Philosophy of Michel Henry,* 20.

of possibility, what makes the totality of existence possible, and then what constitutes the particularity of any individual experience of affection.

Auto-affection is present even if it has limited or no legibility to the feeling subject. If auto-affection is the condition of possibility of affect, I can have a sense that I am able to feel and that I might be liable to feeling something before I even register anything as anger, or before I sense the involvement of my body in the production of my feeling.

Take the example of anger: here, auto-affection must be understood not through the stomach which is knotted or the neck or forehead which are tensed, but rather through the material potential and proximate catalyst for the body's eventual involvement in the experience of anger. It is crucial that this is not particular to any of those parts, but rather it is the fact that being alive means that one can feel something, even if this has not particular legibility to the subject in every moment or to those outside or beyond or beside the subject.

In general, affection can be experienced as if it comes either from within or outside the subject.[79] What distinguished auto-affection is that it is only something that the subject experiences as only from within itself. Thus, the meaningfulness of auto-affection is fundamentally evident only to that which is auto-affecting. Auto-affection has, in this sense, no "outside," or fundamental graspability by another being.

Yet auto-affection also constitutes the relationship between a singular life and the flow of Life as such, as experienced through the living of myriad lives. Each life, in its own auto-affection, constitutes a singular experiencing being. Henry describes it this way in an important passage:

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[79] As Rébidoux puts it: "Now the essence auto-affects itself, and in so doing affects the ego as well. However, in forgetfulness, the ego imagines itself to be the source of its own powers and orientation. As such, it experiences this affection as though it came from something other than itself—other than itself and yet paradoxically within itself. To that extent, it is hetero-affected by the essence in a similar fashion to the way in which it is hetero-affected by things in the world." (*The Philosophy of Michel Henry,* 142)

Auto-affection has a two-fold meaning. First of all, it designates self-affection. Insofar as it designates self-affection, the auto-affection of time means that it is time itself which affects itself. This means, at first, that time is not affected by something other than itself, namely, essentially speaking it is not affected by a being. This is why we can say of time that is 'affected in the absence of experience,' understanding by experience the determination of the subject, viz. of time itself, by an ontic element.[80]

That time is auto-affection absent experience suggests for Henry that the fundamental relationship between beings and temporality is, in fact, that time is not immanent to being in the world but is rather "the transcendental horizon of Being."[81] That time can be "affected in the absence of experience" indicates there is a power that time contains, namely the power to posit outside of or beyond experience: the power of the imagination. For Henry, the key question regarding auto-affection is where and how it differs from "self-affection" or "affection by self."[82] As in the passage above, he does understand these as often overlapping, but there is a key instance when they do not: when there is not a material being engaged in the auto-affection. This happens in the case of temporality itself. Only in time as such posited as a horizon for Being is there no material being to feel itself, but simply the auto-affection of time. It is this example that points to the way that affection by a self is rooted in auto-affection. (In other words, auto-affection is more primary than the self's affection of itself.) For living beings, the ones that he is concerned with—beings "manifest" in the world—the immanent auto-affection that grounds affection by self is the most fundamental and generative for determining the essence of existence.

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[80] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, 187

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., 189.

It is here that Henry differentiates between the immanent character of affectivity and the ways that it can posit transcendent notions like Being or Time. The philosopher John Mullarkey describes auto-affection in one passage as Henry "reconciles [the finite and the infinite] metaphysically with the idea of auto-affection (the infinite Life affecting itself as finite living)."[83] Auto-affection contrasts with Heidegger's positing of Being as this condition of possibility and is based on an understanding of the self as material without being biological. This is not to say that Henry is opposed to the organic, but rather that the epistemological stance the self has to its own materiality does not have the character of scientific knowledge, since science is predicated on an outside, objectifying stance to its object of inquiry.

Attempting to bridge discussions of the individual and the communal, of the self and others, uses a grammar that already relies on dyads and oppositions. Against this grain, Henry's account joins other versions of what François-Davide Sebbah has called "phenomenology at the limit"[84] in pushing phenomenological concepts—like being, existence, essence, intuition, and reception—to the edges of what they can mean. For Henry, this includes questioning the assumption that these terms reflect some "truth" about the things themselves. Michelle Rébidoux rightly draws attention to the ways that Henry's understanding of auto-affection is "posited through analogy," pointing out that, for Henry, the experience of auto-affection relies on something common to all subjects, namely "the pathetik 'stuff', the affective flesh constituting

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[83] John Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline.* Transversals: New Directions in Philosophy. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2006, 33.

[84] François-David Sebbah, *L'épreuve De La Limite : Derrida, Henry, Levinas Et La Phénoménologie.* La Bibliothèque Du Collège International De Philosophie. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2001, 21.

the internal structure of the auto-affection in which the self is given to itself and grasps itself as a self in and as ipseity."[85]

The power of Henry's idea of auto-affective life is that he shows how any meaningful way of understanding subjectivity as living, rather than thinking or being, entails relying on the "possible" rather than the concrete. Henryian "life" links the natural, affective inclinations of subjects with the possibility that these can be linked to both their un-intentional and intentional actions. A primary example of this is his discussion of the basis of community, namely "pathos-with," or the affective state of feeling alongside or with other forms of life. Because pathos-with implies the presence of the other, for Henry, an encounter with any community is an occasion for encountering the multiple ways that pathos-with can manifest itself. "Communities are multiple," he writes, "The study of them is indispensable if one treats each one of them as being a variation of the eidos of community, a variation that would allow hitherto unperceived features to be conferred to this essence."[86] Henry's claim only makes sense if we note how he does not use "essence" to indicate some stable, concrete reality. Instead, it is encountering a community as a "variation" of the essence of community that we can get some sense of what that essence is. Eidos for Henry is precisely not known ahead of time, but is only something that can be posited, as he does in this passage. If we act as those eidos exists—and we can do this and many people do—then we must do so through an encounter with actual communities, allowing "hitherto unperceived features" to be shown, read, identified, or felt.

In fact, it is all manifestations of affect that allow us to glean some understanding of auto-affective life. Regarding concrete examples of affects, such as fear, joy, or sorrow, Henry says,

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[85] Rebidoux, Michelle. *The Philosophy of Michel Henry (1922-2002): A French Christian Phenomenology of Life.* Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012,160, footnote 32.

[86] Michel Henry*, Material Phenomenology.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 134

"what do they refer to, if not to the fundamental affective determinations of life, to the individual's ownmost and deepest essence?"[87] Again, an individual's essence, auto-affective life, is being referred to by these fundamental affects, but it is also life that, by the relatively concrete ways that individuals act in the world, confers meaning on their worldly contexts. In other words, the meaning one associates with any object in the world is fundamentally related to the affective relationships one has to it. By understanding these not as socially shared emotions but instead the prior affective orientations of bodies (with minds fully understood as parts of these bodies) Henry returns our attention to the ways that it is bodies as such, and not any particular way of being embodied, that is meaningful.

The political payoff of this seemingly less determinate philosophical position is an extraordinary expansion of what might be considered meaningful subjective experience. Where political solidarity is typically understood as the sharing of some concrete or at least articulable aims, emotions, or understandings, the Henryian subject is not required to have a shared *social* understanding of their affective essence. Thus, a neurodiverse individual who prefers prose expressions of their political positions and a neurotypical painter may share meaningful relationships to one another and to their world through co-existence and grounding in their own affective experiences.

This shared political realm can be understood by the way Henry casts existence as an experience that life has, rather than existence being defined as a temporal experience of a subject defined by its presence. Subjectivity is thus defined as living, and Life is the condition of possibility of existence, of the existence of any living thing. The analytical yield of Henry's

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[87] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson. *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 40.

concepts is that they allow us to talk about individual subjectivity in ways that resist the temptation to posit an individual that is self-reliant or solipsistic.

Henry argues that life experiences pathos, that life is essentially *pathétique*. Far from the modern sense of "pathetic", this term designates for Henry something close to the Greek sense of *pathos* as experience and suffering.[88] Translators typical render Henry's *pathétique* in English as " pathētik" which, as the translator Susan Emmanuel discusses, captures how "the adjectival form [...] means 'subject to feeling, capable of feeling something.'" Emmanuel also notes that "for *pathos*, that semantic domain extends from 'anything that befalls one' through "what one has suffered, one's experience' (including its negative inflection in some- thing like English 'suffering'), to 'any passive state or condition.'"[89] The Henryian pathos-with is something the subject always already has the potential for within it, because pathos-with relies on auto-affection. The affective subject, then, is one who can experience pathos-with because it is already experiencing pathos, it is already auto-affective.

V. The Affective Subject

In 1989, Jean-Luc Nancy collected nineteen thinkers' responses to his titular question *Après le sujet qui vient?* [translated into English as *Who Comes After the Subject?*] in the journal *Cahiers Confrontation*; this issue, with its subsequent English translation, serves as a generative intervention within the French—and Anglophone—philosophical discourse on "the subject" at

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[88] Liddell and Scott entries: πάθος [α^], εος, τό, (πάσχω) in Henry George Liddell. Robert Scott. A Greek-English Lexicon. revised and augmented throughout by. Sir Henry Stuart Jones. with the assistance of. Roderick McKenzie. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1940, in the Perseus Digital Library http://perseus.tufts.edu (accessed July 20, 2021).

[89] Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*. Translated by Susan Emmanuel. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003, translator's note.

one of its most pivotal periods, collecting as it does multiple generations of philosophers whose

work critiques and inflects the concept of subjectivity.[90] In what was for him a late-career text,

Henry takes up how Heidegger's subject, Dasein, serves as a claim to being the touchstone for all

Being, but he pivots to consider the human sciences, who are guilty, Henry believes, of

emphasizing the rational version of the Cartesian subject over and above its material affectivity.

As Henry says

> As diverse as these movements may be in their explicit aims and their qualities--
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> meaning the level at which they are situated—they have a common outcome,
>
> namely the critique of the subject, which is to say, in the end, the critique of man
>
> conceived as a specific and autonomous reality. But it is this specificity and this
>
> autonomy that must be understood according to the meaning bestowed upon them
>
> in the philosophy of the subject. Man identified as the subject (let us use for the
>
> moment this passive phrasing that occludes precisely what has to be illuminated)
>
> is not only a very particular and superior reality, but also one homogeneous with
>
> others. He is granted an exorbitant privilege in that there is in the end no Being
>
> nor being except in relation to him, for him and through him, and this insofar as
>
> he constitutes the a priori condition of possibility for all experience and thus for
>
> all that is and can be, at least for us.[91]

For Henry what is most important about Heidegger's critique is its dissection of the relationship

of human being to technology, wherein man makes himself the arbiter of all things, the "a priori

condition of possibility for all experience and thus for all that is and can be, at least for us." If

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[90] Directoire, Le. « Avant-propos », *Les Études philosophiques*, vol. 88, no. 1, 2009, pp. 3-5.

[91] Henry Michel, "The Critique of the Subject." in *Who Comes after the Subject?* Trans. Peter T. Connor. Eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, 157-66. London: Routledge, 1991, 157.

every attempt to see life objectively must fail, then we are left with the question of what role intentionality and representation do play. Yet rather than being paralyzed by "the infinite regress of perceiver-perceived" we are driven along by the affective character of life.[92] The living self is living even when it is not perceiving, and it must exist in order to perceive.

Life, as the auto-affective, or self-sensing, essence of existence, is defined by its movement, which is continuous, and its substance, which is immanent in its materiality. In turn, Henry positions "life" as the thing that must be the most fundamental object of phenomenological analysis. This is a paradoxical stance, which he recognizes and incorporates into his analytic framework. Not only is it a paradox that another living subject may have a radically different ontological perspective, it is also the case that any single living subject may change its views on ontology and existence at any time. Lives, by living, experience their own diversity alongside that of others. This is a voice-less, non-intellectual realm of experience that is capable of feeling itself being alive.

Henry's solution to the question of *what* it is that the subject is perceiving when it perceives Being is to argue that affectivity is the hidden essence of Being, "not the simple interplay of our empirical feelings, but their very possibility, their effectiveness and the effectiveness of Being itself."[93] Thus the subject that perceives Being, or the subject Dasein, is mistaking a late move in its self-feeling for the primary one. The living subject tends to miss, so to speak, the fact that it its living already that allows it to formulate the meaningful sense of Being-in-the-World. The sort of affectivity he means to evoke is not the experience of any single affect or blend of affects or of "our empirical feelings"— all of those experiences are crucial,

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[92] Seyler, 100.

[93] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, XII.

yes, still they are not central. What is central is, first, "their very possibility," which rests on the existence of the bodies, somatic living matter, in which the "empirical feelings" happen. Second is the "effectiveness" of those empirical feelings, their ability to have effects on the bodies they are in and around. Third is the *effect*-iveness of "Being itself," the fact that by existing, a being produces effects. By this Henry means that beings in general do things, that life affects the world, through action.

Henryian action is not intentional. It is instead the irruption or striking out of life; action includes random as well as intentional acts that produce effects. By not limiting effectiveness to human subjects, Henry's analysis attends to the unintentional aspects of live action in ways that draw the human very close to the non-human. At any moment, Henry maintains a privileged place for humans vis-à-vis the conditions for knowledge, but the effects of life's affects might be observed in diverse forms of life. For Henry, diversely effective beings are no more or less than diverse modes of life becoming manifest in the world. His acknowledgment of the human monopoly on theory is less aimed at elevating humans than it is at setting the stage for his own philosophy. In crafting his philosophy of life, Henry tries to re-mask, or to re-cover, a sense of philosophy's persistent failure to identify what makes any one being an unique individual. By showing how a theory of life can help us understand precisely how little we know about life and how little we can say about our own or others' subjectivity, Henry shows how the conditions of possibility for knowing are nothing more than the conditions of possibility for being alive. We can only "know", if that is even the right word, by experiencing life.

VI. Methodology and the "How" of Philosophy

Henry's method is to shift the paradigmatic task of phenomenology as always being to re-interrogate the subject itself and recharacterize it, and instead to look at the ways that the

subject's phenomenality, its appearance in the world, its manifestation, becomes the means to questioning the method of phenomenology and, rather than revising it, to specifically undermine and dissect it.

What Henry ends up asking is not about the phenomenon itself but rather about the conditions of discovery of it. It is the life of the phenomenologist that becomes the only starting point for the study of phenomena as such, so the existence of the subject of the one conducting the phenomenological investigation is his starting point. What, he wonders, can even be said about this existence? How does anything even exist as an object for phenomenological encounter and who is the subject that is present in that encounter? Henry's focus on manifestation is linked to his project's goal of not asking "how do we know that we know?" but rather "How is there anything that one can try to know?" and "How, in what manner, does the thing that tries to know exist in the world?"

Why does this "how" matter? One argument of this dissertation is that only by understanding the "how" of subjectivity can we start to understand the "how" of connecting with others given the fact of difference. Henry's discussion of living subjectivity is crucial because he theorizes of subjectivity not as a concept, but as an experience, while remaining in conversation with a philosophical analytic of subjectivity. In contrast to most phenomenologists, Henry does not think that ipseity, or the self-ness of the self, exists in a relationship where it necessarily divides the world into self and other, into subject and object. Instead, self-hood for Henry is something that does not require a transcendental outside—an other that is fully other—to give its sense of self. This understanding of the self does not do away with all experiences of isolation, alienation, or solipsism, but it does not privilege them; it does not think that the self is necessarily or even primarily isolated. Rather, if self-hood is rooted in affectivity, then it is

rooted in an immediate and regenerative living essence that is frequently expressed in diversity. The unity of the "I" is really an experience of potential differentiation at all times.

VII. Individual and Communal

The work of the remainder of this project is to flesh out the ways that using Henry helps us to reconfigure our approach to problems of political subjectivity. Of particular import in the following chapters is the way that we develop the ways that life operates through multiple beings. As this chapter discusses, life within the individual is always already linked to multiplicity and the potential for differentiation. Furthermore, we have also seen how Henry's anti-ekstatic version of subjectivity, his account of how thinking of subjects as having insides and outsides obscures essential qualities of existing beings.

As I will discuss later in the dissertation, Henry understands the worldly context in which individuals exist as having meaning because of the ways that individuals' lives refer to and interact with that context. It is the "subjective activity" of individuals that create concepts and contexts such as "work", "the factory", and "shelter."[94] The meaning that these "things" acquire only happens through the presence of a subject. This meaning-making link between the individual and the world that is forged as individuals use and make and create and refer to, is affective on at least two registers. First, the material conditions themselves may trigger or awaken affect; second, affect drives individuals to change or modify or act within/upon/toward the material conditions. Thus, the interplay between individuals and their contexts are described by "social characteristics", of which Henry says "the reality of each of these 'social characteristics' is a concrete modality of individual subjective life and can only exist in it."[95] His

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[94] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson. *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 16.

[95] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 40.

emphasis here draws our attention to the social as comprised of "concrete modalities." Only by the individual's existence in them does the social actually exist, because again, just as individual subjectivity is a how and not a why, these concrete modalities of individual subjective life have to do with the way life is lived and only in this way are they "concrete." What makes them concrete, however, is the affective quality of how life exists. How is it that life exists in conditions of precarity? It is "the uncertainty of work, the fear for tomorrow" which contrast with "a feeling of confidence or superiority[96]. These feelings occupy a doubled position to the world and the individual. The individual feels the feelings, they are "personal" but only the individual can reflect them back as a meaningful communal affective expression into their context. Likewise, it's individual life that, in its experience of being manifest in the world, undergoes affect in ways that respond to and rely on pathos-with and the material world writ large. Yet again the relationship is not uni-directional. Henry's conception of life cuts between the divide of personal vs. political, individual vs. communal, without negating the use of those terms, but while always keeping in mind that what they rely on is the expression of affective material life.

The practical transformation of these abstracted concepts into subjective proxies for reality distorts the relationships between political, epistemological, ontological positions and social praxis. Even without abstraction, the way that life is at once accessible to all and profoundly inscrutable makes finding a stable epistemological foundation very difficult. Yet for Henry, to talk about life is also not a fruitless, relativistic endeavor. It's instead the fundamental way that we come to understand existence as meaningful, and is thus a necessary basis for understanding society and its politics. The philosophy of life enacts life itself in its at once

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[96] Ibid.

inscrutable and radically personal relationship to individuals. As I read it, it is this that makes it an example of *political* theory rather than being itself a definitive ontology. As a philosophical attempt to capture the paradoxical qualities of life, Henry's approach lends itself to praxis that is attentive to the essential paradoxes that require as well as confound politic, paradoxes rooted in the fundamental tensions between individual and collective interests, the necessity of choosing where and when to allocate resources among diverse needs and forms of suffering, and the challenges of agential action and desire in the face of chaos, entropy, and despair. It lays the groundwork for understanding the philosophical and political stakes of how Henry distinguishes between the "philosophy of the subject" and the "subject itself."[97] The subject itself is what feels itself no matter whether it is represented. The problem with the philosophy of the subject is that it does not start by acknowledging this, but rather tends to start from an attempt to prove the subject's rationally representable existence.

In Henry's view, the concept of the subject as *res cogitans* is a history of attempts to describe life. For him, the concept of the "subject" is inherently ontological, an idea formulated in an attempt to describe what it is that exists in the world and how that "subject" relates to itself.[98] But he reads the evolution of accounts of this thing—the *res cogitans*—as being a history of *attempts* to describe life (any of those attempts is inevitably incomplete.) This leads him to condemn any kind of metaphysical claim that is based on acts of representation. Arguing against any "representational metaphysics"[99], Henry argues that any single claim to have captured the

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[97] Michel Henry, "The Critique of the Subject," in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991), 159

[98] Ibid., 158.

[99] Michel Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, 4.

essence of existence may purport to be all-encompassing, but is instead "ontological monism."[100] Henry's urgent efforts to refute ontological monism (recall Heidegger as his primary example) are in tension with his "single thought" of a philosophy of life. In resisting a singular ontology, he comes perilously close to espousing one, wherein "life" takes the place of "being" or the "ego cogito." But while he proposes his own phenomenology as one way of thinking the phenomenology of life, he rejects the notion that life is most truly or fully expressed through phenomenological thought. Instead, the essence of life is what any individual life feels its life to be. Life maintains an ability to resist representation because it is, at its core, an iterative experience of auto-affective feeling.

In sum, Henry's emphasis is on affect, whereas Descartes' and Heidegger's philosophies center thought. In responding to Heidegger's own critique of the subject, Henry characterizes that work as a kind of "philosophical rootedness"—"its extra- or para-philosophical origin in the human science, notably in Marxism and Freudianism, which were to be crowned by structuralism-to say nothing of linguistics."[101] Henry's reading of Descartes emphasizes how the experience of self-affecting undergirds key parts of the Cartesian theory of the subject. In addition to this affective foundation of the subject, he points to aporia that emerge in the Kantian problematic of subjectivity. He also emphasizes these over the emergence of self-consciousness of Hegel and Husserl and the attendant centrality of intentionality. In Descartes and his interlocutors, Henry finds early emphases on affect's role in will and of the importance of drives that find later, fuller expression in Arthur Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud.[102]

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[100] See Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

[101] Michel Henry, "The Critique of the Subject." in *Who Comes after the Subject?* Trans. Peter T. Connor. Eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, 157-66. London: Routledge, 1991, 157

[102] This is the focus of *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (1993 [1985]).

VIII. Revealing Auto-affection

Henry's materiality is the medium in which life is immanently present. For Henry, affect is the primal and primary quality of the living (material) subject, and in understanding the human, it is crucial to understand it as affective, rather than rational. Jean Leclerq highlights this in an essay on the internal structure and laws of affectivity in Henry's philosophy of life, quoting an unpublished note where Henry says: "In place of reason, I substitute affectivity, which to me is the true rationality since rationality is in fact the "reason" of things…. The phenomenology of life means everything except applying the phenomenological method to life as an object. It is not phenomenology that gives access to life. On the contrary, it is life whose self-revelation is given to us in this auto-revelation, which gives access to it [life]."[103] Life is a desire that is there, that lives there even if a subject is not aware of is. As he puts it: "Life is there in its own way, in emotion, feeling, sensibility, suffering, and joy. It is the ineffable happiness of feeling oneself and of living. Meister Eckhart says, one seeks to live even if one does not know why one is alive."[104] The extreme example of this is an infant—the infant eats although it does not know why it is alive—but even in those with cognitive consciousness, Henry thinks that the experience of auto-affection is something to which all living subjects return.

Henry is not interested in formulating a biological model for the relationship between affect and the body, since he is fundamentally concerned with the fact of life as it is, not mechanically but in terms of its significance to itself. He is also trying to describe whatever it is that life is that we cannot describe in terms of scientific laws or rational systems. Nonetheless, he is deeply concerned with what he calls the "organic" qualities of life, and its relationship to the

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[103] My translation, Leclerq, *Cahiers Phil. Stras*, 47. Leclerq quotes an unpublished excerpt from Henry in French.

[104] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson. *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 114.

solidity of "material reality." He speaks in some places of "organic life" and in others about how life only is in its experiencing, it cannot be properly and fully posited, nor can it be comprehended through the objectifying work of scientific rationality, which mistakes for objectivity the subjectively meaningful structures of bodies' materiality.[105] What does it mean to understand life as fundamentally graspable only internally, by the living subject itself? First, this is a way of understanding the "real" world that requires acknowledging the importance of one's own unthought, pre-linguistic, and/or affective relationships to oneself and one's own life. Second, it means that one must posit this same living quality in other lives. Thus, not only does one acknowledge the presence of other living subjects, but one recognizes that living subjects have a relationship to their affective reality that grounds and makes possible this experience of living, even as it continually lies out of reach of representation. The notion that one might authentically represent a conviction is thus an impossible projection. But as Henry writes, this does not doom the attempt at relationality to failure:

> The impossibility for feeling, as real feeling, of ever constituting the theme of the will or of action, the fact that, when 'aimed-at' as such, it rather necessarily comes to be deprived of reality, does not merely confirm the problematic in its essential results, it clarifies the paradoxical, and at the level of psychology, the necessarily enigmatic character of the relationship between existence and its own feelings, namely the relationship of affectivity to itself. That we cannot love our own love, for example, *that feeling cannot 'aim at' itself, cannot love itself, certainly does not mean that it remains deprived of every relationship with itself, but that this*

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[105] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 32.

relationship, namely affectivity itself, is irreducible to the intentional relationship as to every form of transcendence in general.[106]

What is possible is an affective relationship, one which constitutes feelings themselves as such, but form an "enigmatic" relationship to the sorts of drives or pulsions that seem necessarily for will, intention, action to result. There is a profound gap, in other words, between the affectivity that resides within one life and the way other lives appear as transcendent outsides to the living subject. This paradoxical relationship to one's self must also ground the subject's enigmatic relationships to others. To follow Henry's logic in the passage above, even as one cannot love one's own love, one also does not love another, but rather a transcendent, exteriorized version of the other. It is then vital for living subjects to acknowledge that this neither calls into question the reality of the other's fundamental affective subjectivity nor open up the possibility of some sort of genuine or authentic understanding of the other.

Grasping these relationships requires acknowledging that conscious desires rely on these pre-conscious or pre-linguistic affective movements, without necessarily needing to describe precise relationships between the body's affective needs, drives, or affects and its conscious desires. What is required from his perspective is to acknowledge that desires exist, that lives have basic needs if they are to go on living, and that if the very things politics attempts to eradicate are so central to human life, it may be that attempting to solve human problems ends up working against the real lives of individual people. I am arguing that auto-affection helps us to understand how an encounter with

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[106] *Essence of Manifestation,* 652.

something "other" could actually lead to connection. Henry positions auto-affection as the necessary subjective experience that grounds all of the philosophical inquiry conducted by thinkers like Husserl and Descartes. Specifically, any philosophical approach that takes "the subject" to be its center is rooted in an auto-affecting self. This chapter examines this concept and the role it plays for Henry, with particular attention to how he thinks it pushes back against the "thinking" subject. Bozga connects several Henryian concepts under the category of "singularity," arguing that these includes the terms of "'invisible immanence', 'pathos', 'self-affection', or 'life'."[107] Contra this account, however, I emphasize in what follows that Henry is more interested with how these terms contain both singularity and plurality.

IX. Life and Living Subjectivity

Paradoxically, Henry's theorization of life casts it as both the grounds for action (indeed the only grounds) but also as something fundamentally passive. Exploring this seeming contradiction, as I do in the following section, shows us how passivity is one of the strengths of life, and further, that passivity opens up the possibility for affective surges and acts born out of these. Since Henry does not provide a positive theorization of politics in his overall philosophy of life, I argue here that politics is one of the many ways that life has to move from passivity to action. Henry's attention to the dangers of politics provides a clear picture of where politics can go wrong; below, I draw out the positive work that politics can do in the situations he describes, filling out the picture of an Henryian politics.

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[107] Adina Bozga, *The Exasperating Gift of Singularity: Husserl, Levinas, Henry.* Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2009, 241.

Two of life's key features are that it is passive—and that it persists. The latter quality is straightforward—in general, life seeks things that will help it to continue. "Life" is a kind of leveling, present in any being that has the ability to seek its own ongoing existence.

When Henry says that life is "passive," he means first, that life is passive "with regard to its own being" and second, that it is through "a radical passivity with regard to its own being" that individual suffering occurs.[108] Let us take these points in turn. Life's "passivity" with regard to its own being means that life does not experience its being as something which can be an object for it. The primary experience of an individual life is that of a being that is "in some way already there for itself" as soon as it exists.[109] Life is thus "for life" or for its own life, but importantly this happens before life has any ability to understand itself as being for-itself as a being as such. In other words, before an individual life can understand itself as either an individual, a being, or a subject, it exists for-itself through a passive and pre-conscious rather than active and conscious relationship to its own existence. Life cannot understand itself as it begins. The living cannot even understand itself as living for-itself but rather it simply is this life that is for itself, since it cannot be for anyone or anything else, because it only has access to this primordial experience of existing as life.

How does Henry think that life moves from this primary experience of existing for itself to the experience of the self as individual, living subject? There are two key movements that bring a life from this original, bare experience to a sense of its own subjectivity. First it is important to know that Henry thinks that life cannot be separated from the individual. "One

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[108] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson. *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 17

[109] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 17.

cannot," he argues, "break the link that attaches oneself to life."[110] The experience of life (as life

for itself) "is insurmountable."[111] Recall that this experience is at once affective, inseparable

from and reliant on its materiality, and immediate. Although it practically happens "in time" or

"in history" (according to an external measure), Henry's disinterest in the status of time or

history for the experience of the life indicates, I would argue, that it is in fact non-sensical to

describe life's experience of itself as anything other than immediate and a-temporal. The a-

temporality of primary life self-experience is a by-product of the structure of Henry's argument.

The immediate experience of the self is utterly internal and utterly inaccessible by an outside

subject and nor is it able to understand itself in relation to some outside object, since what we are

talking about is the kind of self-experience that is centered on the self, as a necessary pre-

requisite for any external gaze. When life becomes conscious of its own existence, the concept of

an individual comes into being and the individual as such is "created."[112]

X. Absolute Life and Individual Lives

Interpreters of Henry disagree on just how much he is a theorist of individuality. On the

one hand, he understands subjectivity as being something we can talk about in the singular. There

can be "a subject" and that is in some ways the starting point for his analysis. On the other hand,

he notes that

> In a final effort of thought, one must continue to think community in what is its ownmost,
>
> that is, in life. In life there are the living, those who are living through the ipseity and
>
> auto-affection of life. It is the nature of the auto-affection of life that needs to be made

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[110] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson. *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 17

[111] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 17.

[112] Ibid.*,* 14-17.

more precise. To be auto-affected does not mean, as it does in the Kantian conception or in Heidegger's commentary on it, to be the origin of its own affection and thus to posit oneself in being, taking the opposing position from the internal sense of time by converting the 'I think' into the 'I am.' When these presuppositions of German idealism were applied to the individual, as was the case with Stirner, they led to the mythical concept of an individual who creates itself at each instant.[113]

Henry doesn't think that, at our core, we create or define ourselves. Instead, we are ourselves because of what it is that we are. "We generally call the needs of the body material needs." Henry says. To even talk about bodily life as material is a consequence of "intellectuals and idealist philosophy in general" he says. Truly opposing traditional idealism can happen through asserting the importance of 'material' life "as opposed to the spiritual life of a disincarnated subject and of an abstract Subjectivity."[114] The terminology of "material needs" and "body" and "materiality" stems "from a certain number of moral conceptions which (while bound to a kind of naive ontology) have taken on their own value and have developed considerably.[115]

Life is infinite for Henry, but does it matter whether this is relatively or absolutely so? It does in the sense that it gives perspective to our own finitude:

We are saying that this experience of the self as living emerges each time in life and its auto-affection. The living being is thrown into life, inasmuch as life, by throwing itself into life, throws the living being into life. As an indication of what is to be thought here, we can borrow the words of Kierkegaard: 'The I is the relation to itself as posited by an other.' We can adopt these words, if we understand that this relation to oneself designates

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[113] Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 132.

[114] Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, 221.

[115] *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body,* 221.

the absence of any relation, if the other is in the first place nothing posited or thought of

was other, and if the other is nothing that goes beyond what emerges within this relation

to oneself. The ground on which I stand is never larger than the two feet that cover it.

That is the mystery of life: the living being is coextensive with all of the life within it;

everything within it is its own life. The living being is not founded on itself; instead it has

a basis in life. This basis, however, is not different from itself; it is the auto-affection in

which it auto-affects itself and thus with which it is identical.[116]

For Henry, we should understand contemporary political subjects as "living individuals." Living

individuals should be understood as, fundamentally, human beings, but beyond a basic sense of

the human person, Henry's terminology is important because it highlights the human's

materiality, affectivity and, most significantly, the human relationship to life itself. For human

beings to be understood as living individuals, a contrast with past examples of political

subjectivity shows how distinctive this is. If we compare the living individual to Heidegger's

notion of Dasein, an immediate difference would be that Dasein is constituted via an awakening

and awareness of itself as a being-in-the-world, but Henry's idea of a living individual is, so far,

confined to its own individuality and not primarily constituted as being-there in a world. The

step-wise activation of Dasein through its worldliness and through thought is also distinctive

from the living individual, as will be seen below.

      Henry believes we have to consider the material reality of politics as not being about

social laws, but rather as being about the material lives of individuals, thus living individuals are

the subjective basis for understanding the world, politics, and etc. What he does is try to push

aside the idea of subject and object, claiming interestingly that the subjective individual feels

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[116] Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 132.

itself but cannot do so as an object. The living individual's relationship to its own life cannot be that of a subject to an object; instead it is a subjective relationship that comprises something beyond what "subjectivity" usually connotes according to the subject/object discourse. Individuals' relationship to their lives is more essential than that of a subject to an object, because it is a relationship that is definitionally and intrinsically linked. When the life is gone, the individual is gone, too. And the life is there as soon as the individual is there and vice versa.

The relation is fully organic while also being non-objective. The self has a subjective relationship to its own materiality, what he calls "le sentiment corporel"; primacy of the lived experience of life and the body. Henry thinks that the fact that human beings need things to continue living every day is at the core of subjectivity. Because, he says, "need is subjective," and need or needs—they emerge and can be grasped through lives themselves— "at the heart of absolute life." In other words, "absolute life," this phenomenon that seems so abstract, is only ever revealed through subjective needs that emerge from lives and are grasped, expressed, understood, or merely felt, through and by those lives. Concrete needs: food, safety, water, sleep, exist because "absolute life" exists.

But need also has the weight, gravity of "infinite existence."[117] Need cannot ever be fully eradicated or effaced, as long as there is life. Life is characterized by need, and it is at the barest level of life, life at its most simple and transparent. No life is self-sufficient. And, he asserts, "It is not at the level of abstract ideas, it is at the level of needs that our existence really takes place. This is why the satisfaction or the lack of satisfaction of our needs, and more profoundly, the manner in which this satisfaction takes place or does not take place, have such great importance

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[117] Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, 220

in the history of each individual as well as in the history of human groups."[118] By arguing that existence takes place at the level of needs, Henry does not just assert that "the body" or "the material" are important, but he also makes an argument about the implications of existence. Existence is characterized by needs, which are met—or not— through social and political existence. Needs are the link between the existential and the political.

But this also implies a particular ethical stance toward the body: "Because need is subjective, it does not have the innocence of a movement of matter; because it is not a simple transcendent displacement which one might consider as neutral from a spiritual point of view, so to speak, it is subject to the categories of ethics. Our bodies will be judged."[119]

As he puts it, further, "To call this bodily life 'material' correctly taken as a decisive element of human existence, is to construct the same ontological conception of the body as such an idealism does and, in a general way, as does any philosophy of Hellenic origin. However, to the extent that it recognizes the primordial importance of 'material' needs, i.e. of bodily life in general, every materialistic doctrine assumes a decisive importance in the eyes of the philosophy of the subjective body."[120] Henry wants to point out or claim that there's no big gap in between "materialist" and "idealist" philosophies. The primordial importance of 'material' needs or bodily (embodied) life in general means that materialism is important for the philosophy of the subjective body. Materialism is central. But Oeven idealism itself relies on the existence of the body to posit the concept of the subject. For Henry, "Nevertheless, materialism will be able to receive its full development and, in particular, it will be able to bring to the human sciences the enormous contribution which they can legitimately expect from it only when it will have been

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[118] *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body,* 221

[119] Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, 221

[120] *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, 221

interpreted in the light of the results of the ontological analysis of the body and, in a more general way, of the philosophy of the subjective body."[121] Henry thus both differentiates materialist philosophy from other materialist activities, such as scientific investigation, while suggesting that the ontological analysis of the body must be retained as a fundamental form of knowing. In other words, the philosophy of the subjective body results in an ontological analysis of (e.g. way of talking about and understanding) the body that is central for formulating a philosophy of subjectivity that can account for the material body.

In the concluding sections of *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, Henry writes: "The theory of the subjective body which rejects the traditional distinction between body and spirit obliges us to assume at all levels the consequences which such a rejection implies."[122] Here, by raising the question of merging a theory of body and spirit—Henry refers to the implications for the existence of a "soul." He continues, saying that understanding the "body" and "spirit" as one and the same, "merely allows us to become aware of a vast field of investigations which are open to the philosophy of the subjective body (and, in a more general way, to the philosophy of subjectivity), when it wishes to examine the particular and, nonetheless, essential problems of existence in the light of the general presuppositions peculiar to it."[123] This is a typical Henryian formulation: rather than going so far as to posit the existence of a soul, he instead points to the potential philosophical implications of assuming that that should a soul exist it could not be considered as discrete from the body. Thus, he side-steps the philosophical conundrum of whether a soul exists by making it a question of whether subjects experience a soul as existing.

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[121] Ibid.

[122] *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body,* 221

[123] Ibid, 221-222

Henry's philosophical posture here suggests an intersubjective attitude. Where individual living subjects will perhaps always disagree about whether or not an immortal soul exists, it is incumbent on those who are soul-less to allow others to claim their experience of a spirit as essential to their own subjective formation and, indeed, their overall ontological framework.

Henry emphasizes how the holistic experience the subject has of existence is prior to and a necessary condition of any possible ontology, arguing from what he calls "the essential problems of existence in the light of the general presuppositions peculiar to it."[124] In other words, human beings' presuppositions about what existence is relate to what they consider to be their own particular "problems of existence." Their own living experiences are their medium for relating to existence (or we might say, relating ontologically) whether consciously or otherwise. There is a holistic quality of experience, that unites not only what some call "body" and "spirit" but is true of any experience, not matter how it is represented conceptually or in language. Simply put, Henry means that any time someone wants to talk about an "existential" problem, they are drawing from a set of presuppositions about what it means to exist that cannot be separated from the body that they inhabit. Any subject's life is the necessary precondition for their potential consideration of existential problems.

For Henry, any philosophy must center how the individual experience of life precedes all philosophy by acknowledging that individual living subjectivity is a precondition for approaching any philosophical question. This hangs on the "apodictic" quality of the unified "self", in the way that the body is an undeniable fact. His assertion that bodily existence presupposes its own existential conditions of possibility that there is a subject before the subject, in the way that philosophical analysis always presupposes the existence of a philosophy, for

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[124] Ibid.

instance, or that biology implies a biologist. Henry seeks to go beyond merely the necessity of subjectivity as a formal precondition for existential questioning, to go further into how the body's relationship to its own subjective basis is always inescapable, insofar that the that life only persists as its body and subjectivity persist.

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In the remainder of the project, I explore the political implications of Henry's radically individual living subjects. Henry's analysis of radical individuality suggests that the subject's experience of itself is what grounds its ability to sense life in others. Unlike liberal individualism or autonomy defined by intellectual will, Henry suggests that subjects' ability to relate to others does not depend on their understanding or intellectually recognizing parity or similarity. Rather, Henry understands subjectivity as fundamentally experienced rather than conceptualized by living subjects themselves. As in the example which opens the introduction, the nun's experiences—within the ballot box, as a young woman, or with her community—each are constitutive for her own living subjectivity. The meaningfulness they accord to her exists immanently in her relationship to the experience of voting whether or not she identifies that meaning intentional through an objectifying process. The paradox from the Henryian standpoint is that in the process of generating such an awareness, the subject might misidentify what is most meaningful to them, through exposure to the harsh light of others in the world. The act of voting is particularly illustrative, since it requires a discrete choice among a pre-determined menu of externally articulate positions. This is precisely the sort of situation wherein what is most meaningful to the subject may be obscured by their need to negotiate representational forms within the lifeworld in which they find themselves.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERIOR LIFE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

This chapter turns to the problems described in the opening to the dissertation, the internal

subjective differences and embodied epistemological unease experienced by individual subjects.

As the introduction discussed, political theorists' longstanding interest in the politics of

difference has seen particularly close engagements in recent decades with how individuals'

beliefs, practices, and orientations unsettle traditional, Western agreements about political

community. Approaches to the question of "foundations"—about which beliefs members of a

polity must adhere to in common in order to have effective politics—have included feminist,

deconstructive, and deliberative frameworks. This chapter seeks to build on prior attempts to

theorize non-unitary and non-hierarchical approaches to "founding," while considering the ways

in which the inner lives of individual subjects pose challenges to overcoming political difference.

By difference, I mean the sorts of diametrically opposed epistemological standpoints that resist

representation in the public sphere. Positions such as the belief in an eternal afterlife, while they

can be discussed or argued, fundamentally cannot be negotiated, when they rely on

fundamentally differences in the temporal horizon of a life. At issue is the ontological horizon

that is at stake for individuals, the ways their understandings of time or existence shape their

decisions, beliefs, and perceptions. Included here are the kinds of ontological horizon that remain

unthought or unexamined (such as implicit bias). Michel Henry's theory of the subject posits an

irreconcilable relationship between subjective interiority and individual experience. As Chapter

One discusses, radical individuality on Henry's account is rooted in an immediate self-feeling or

auto-affection, yet because this foundation resists representation, it has a fundamentally shifting and instable place in how the subject relates to the world.

Where the previous chapter traversed the wider sweep of Henry's account of "living subjectivity," the present chapter closely examines Henry's attempt to understand how the inner life of this subject becomes meaningful outside of itself, in the social world. I look closely at how his critique of Western thought grounds his argument that subjectivity must be understood as "life." By considering interiority as fundamentally an affective orientation rather than an "inner voice" or a form of ratiocinatio, Henry also revises the Cartesian relationship between interiority and exteriority, between the ipseity of subjectivity and its ek-stasis. I argue that the gaps he identifies between these experiences require a politics that foregrounds modes of subjective expression, modes that allow subjects to draw from the non-representable aspects of individual identity while making space for intersubjectivity (and even community.)

I argue here that the way Henry grapples with the Freudian method and its object of inquiry help us understand better how the problem of political representation must take into account the ways life's empirical and metaphysical conditions are linked. As this chapter will show, Henry's genealogy of the history of subjectivity ultimately pushes the monistic and representational tendencies of any metaphysical account of existence to their limit. Furthermore, his methodological approach balances apophatic and cataphatic descriptions of what life is not— life as negation, as in apophatic theology—and the affirmative description of what life is, or cataphasis. These dual modes ground an existentialism that hovers on the abyss of describing the unknown while resisting the urge to nihilistically abandon the project of affirming life.

Henry's genealogy of post-Cartesian subjectivity seeks to question the primacy of the rational subject, insofar as that subject is considered to be an abstracted, thinking one. In this

aspect, his work resonates with other postmodern efforts to destabilize the primacy of the subject as such. Yet, this chapter discusses where and how Henry's work suggests that alternatives to hierarchical authority can emerge from the histories of subjectivity and reason that we have inherited, from between the layers of these histories rather than against them.

As I discussed in Chapter One, Henry understands a subject's "immanent interiority" to be fundamentally auto-affective, centered on an experience of "self-feeling" that, while it cannot be pinned down or grasped, is a necessary condition for all secondary affects to take place. Here, I examine this concept more closely, with specific attention to the ways that auto-affection is at once un-representable and inaccessible, but how it can have effects and make meaning in the world. Those effects and meanings lay the groundwork for an explicit political theory of living subjectivity based on Henry's work. Such a political theory argues that Henry's understanding of the "hidden" or fully interiorized aspects of identity can help us understand how any aspect of identity, belief, or position that is difficult to represent has effects and takes on meanings in the world, and how living subjects are to live with their own and others' deepest commitments.

In what follows, I connect Henry's idea of auto-affection to the problem of certainty. I argue that this subject grounded in affect helps us move beyond the act of labeling another person individual or their position as "unreasonable" in political matters toward a more comprehensive picture of the forms of understanding that may emerge despite fundamental differences in what we find meaningful or essential.

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As a political judgment, calling another's position "unreasoned" is to claim that it departs from accepted language games and other agreements (tacit and explicit) about the signification,

representation, and the social contract. To call someone unreasonable is to say, then, that they cannot be appealed to within those representational contexts.

This requires paying attention to how, in the first place, while the implicit ontologies that underlie unthought or unrepresentable individual standpoints may resist appeals to reason, they are not necessarily separate from reason. Rather, they are connected to reason through the material experience of the body. Following Henry's critique of how psychoanalysis attempts to represent subjective interiority, I argue that we should approach subjective commitments and orientations as being unrepresentable and constitutive, aspects of political being-with-others. This phenomenology of the "unrepresentable" explicitly grapples with what is unknowable, which is necessary if political thought and practice alike are to keep from erasing individual commitments and differences.

Another way to understand this is that Henry takes the immanence of the material body to be the condition of possibility for any affect. But what he considers important about the body's materiality is that it is the substantive location of auto-affection. What it is that matters about the body is not precisely just its materiality as a collection of atoms (a table probably does not have auto-affection, for Henry) but rather the aspect of its materiality that opens it up to feeling itself as being alive. This does not mean, however, that the life can be determined from the outside.

What this means philosophically is that while bodies may exist in relationship to an external transcendental structure, such as a set of social rules and conventions, those transcendental structures are not capable of fully representing what is most fundamentally rooted in the subject's affective life. Dufour-Kowalska clarifies this point through a discussion of *eros* or pleasure in Henry's thought, characterizing Henry's critique of social structures as akin to a

critique of sexual objectification of another's body.[125] Such objectification is problematic insofar as it "ignores what M. Henry calls 'the interiority of bodies.'"[126]

Whether and how a subject is able to relate its interiority to the outside world depends on factors ranging from its physical ability to move or make noises to the relational context in which it exists. Its significance arises not from its truth or its existence as a claim or a concept, but rather in its being a body, possessing a material reality in itself, and in its immanent grappling with that reality, and in *how* it grapples with that reality. This contrasts with, for example, Rousseau's General Will, which brings the desires and wills of the many into relation with one another using the vehicle of rational discourse, such that their appearance in public makes possible their negotiation. But the sort of interiority Henry considers is left out when politics relies on the essence of the subject to appear as object—whether an object like a speech or a manifesto—or in an act like voting. The ability to select among options *as though* these represent a subject's desires, is always going to be an experience of failure.

I. Materiality: Weaving together reason and affect

As the previous chapter discussed, Henry argues that the concept of "life" is underexamined as the basis for philosophy. This argument encompasses both the necessity of a living subject to theorize about subjectivity but also, more fundamentally, the necessity of a living subject that experiences *life*. Experiencing life, as I discuss above, is the condition of possibility for forming any understanding of or knowledge about life, the world, or oneself.

Henry's belief that the conditions of possibility for subjectivity are important leads up to dwell on the ways various philosophical frameworks come quite close to theorizing life. As I

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[125] Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska, "L'immanence: Raison première et substance," in Michel Henry, *L'Age de l'Homme.* Paris: Gallimard, 1939, 169.

[126] My translation of: "L'éroticisme comme 'system objectif' ignore ce que M. Henry appelle 'l'interiority des corps'" ("L'immanence: Raison première et substance").

discuss in the following sections, there are various misapprehensions of life that he believes point us toward something like a phenomenology of life.

As discussed in the previous chapter, for Henry no ontological claims about the nature of life can represent the fullness of life as such. This chapter will focus first on reason's immanent presence in the subject, which immanence is obscured as it is translated into thought, empiricism, and transcendence. In Henry's analysis, the clouding of immanent interiority occurs when reason (what some might call "thought" or "Being") is emphasized over "unreasonable" or "unthinking" affects. When we call a subject's position "unreasoned" or "unthought," we are saying that it functions separately from or without reason, sometimes even taking "without" to indicate that individual stances with strong affects attached to them are *outside of* reason, exterior to rationality's properly demarcated boundaries. In other words, we attempt to place subjective phenomena—affects, which are always located in a living, material subject—in a transcendental relationship to the subject itself. We do this, furthermore, by relying on seemingly objective tools: language, empiricism, and philosophical analysis.

But for Henry describing a personal position this way would be a very strange thing. How could it be that affects are separated from the subject this way, with reason being used to objectify those affects? As Henry understands it, this mistakenly equates ideas, which can be abstracted from an individual, with the natural, immanent basis of thought, namely that thought requires an affective body with all its somatic qualities which first of all include auto-affection. As Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska has noted, Henry's characterization of immanent affect places it in the most fundamental position, while whatever objectified position or ideal that is based on this immanent affect is necessarily secondary.[127] Simply put, Henry takes the inner life of the

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[127] Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska, "L'immanence: Raison première et substance, 163.

subject to be a) fundamentally affect-driven, and b) only secondarily engaged in thought. The former is required if the latter is to exist.

In "auto-affection," Henry explores the foundation of life as something that, by definition, exceeds and evades representation or exteriorization. Life can be conceptualized, but only in terms that acknowledge its utter immanence to worldly materiality, immanence which indicates the existence of an interior affectivity even if such a thing cannot be represented. In Henry's discussion of subjectivity, interiority is "brought to light" by, paradoxically, the ways that it *cannot* be shown using classical phenomenology. By examining the limits of a phenomenological approach to the subject, Henry shows us how the limits of any knowledge and any action relate to the very identities that we try to make most certain in order to grapple with them politically. This chapter turns from looking to Henry's overall understanding of subjectivity to several crucial moments in how he develops its account of interiority. Specifically, this chapter argues that the way Henry understands interiority as an unrepresentable corollary of material life helps to ground forms of political practice and communal life that resist representation and abstraction, while yet containing possibilities for accord.

Henry's philosophical framework for understanding interiority requires a deconstruction or destruction of the phenomenological method. This is because interiority has come to be understood as, on the one hand, an object of historicizing discourse, and on the other hand, as the aspect of the self that allows for subjectivity to resist and exceed objectification, but through its accessibility to the subject.

II. From Monism to Difference

Henry's particular critique of the Western tradition of seeking to understand the self through internal reflection opens up a way to speak to profound differences between those with

diverse beliefs. Where a common ontological framework and correlative epistemological positions cannot be agreed upon, the challenge of framing a politics of different that avoids absolute relativism has been answered, for instance, in Stephen K. White's analysis of the "weak ontologies" of George Kateb, Judith Butler, Charles Taylor, and William Connolly.[128] White and the four thinkers he discusses are broadly concerned with charting a political ethic that has an ontological stance but that remains self-reflective about its position and context. White writes

> Weak ontologies respond to two pressing concerns. First, there is the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable. Second, there is the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life. The latter insight demands from us the affirmative gesture of constructing foundations, the former prevents us from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion.[129]

An ontology that draws from Henry's phenomenology does cohere to White's definition of "weak ontology," but it also goes further in taking seriously Henry's contention that the essence of ontological reasoning is the contestable immanent interiority of the subject.

Two of Henry's texts are the focus of my reading here. The earlier text is *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (first published in French, 1985; English translation, 1993), Henry's critical rejoinder to the Freudian concept of the unconscious, which takes the form of several lengthy, linked essays.[130] The second is from roughly the same period and examines similar themes. "La critique du sujet" was Henry's contribution to *Après le sujet qui vient?*, the 1989 volume (no. 20)

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[128] Stephen White in *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[129] *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory.*, 9

[130] *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

of *Cahiers Confrontations* that included contributions from many major theorists of subjectivity

working in France at the time. These two works advance his examination of how the self

experiences life and brings its experience of life into its relationship to other persons.[131] Henry's

"genealogy" of psychoanalysis allows him to unite the material phenomenology central to works

like *The Essence of Manifestation* with an examination of how representation evacuates the

essence of life, a concern that animates his reading of Marx, which I continue in the fourth

chapter.

Throughout these works, Henry emphasizes how various metaphysical philosophies of

the subject remain committed to a singular basis for existence, a position he calls ontological

monism. Leibniz's monism is but the most explicit of these monistic philosophies; in their own

ways, Descartes, Schiller, Heidegger, and Husserl are each monistic thinkers, according to

Henry.[132] In contrast to so-called ontological monism, Henry positions his philosophy of "life" as

the paradoxical articulation of something that evades characterization at its core, while it's also

the very thing that is accessible to all living subjects. But in every instance where there is life—

or a life—something is manifested that has its *own* character, context, situation, and existence.

So not only can it not be understood from outside—no mother can say what or how her baby

thinks, or even if it does—but also no one life is able to make itself understand itself in such a

way that would fully represent its existence.

He thus turns to a method that aims at re-examining the phenomenological subject,

starting with Descartes, with particular attention to the relationship between thought and

sensation. Henry's turn to Freud considers the psychoanalytic situation as an example of an

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[131] This commitment owes much to the concern of his teacher/mentor Paul Ricoeur with Freud as a paradigmatic theorist of the twentieth century. See Michel Henry, "Ricoeur et Freud, entre psychanalyse et phénoménologie », in *Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, Paris: Cerf, 1991.

[132] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, Trans. Gerard Etzkorn, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973, 1-2

encounter between subjects, but his primary concern lies with how psychoanalysis continues the intellectual work of Cartesian subjectivity, on the one hand, while it also embodies modernity's investment in scientific reasoning, to the detriment of understanding something as fundamentally non-rational as the individual subject, on the other. Yet Henry also focuses on the ways that sensation, in Descartes, and understanding via and through rationality, are nearly related, and that one need only push the Cartesian subject a bit for it to spill over into affectivity as its primary grounds for existence. Where sensation might seem ephemeral, Henry's reading of Descartes argues that sensing is fundamentally linked to the reflexive thought that grounds Cartesian subjectivity. He thus shifts from a reading of Cartesian interiority as primarily *thinking*, to one that is first of all *sensing.*

A concern with the evasive, paradoxical qualities of something like sensation is a central part of how Henry deals with the question of interiority for subjectivity. In *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis,* Henry moves between a critical reading of other thinkers' attempts to describe or explain inner life and his own project of clarifying the limits and contours of using the phenomenological method to describe subjectivity. *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* finds Henry again positing that auto-affection is the essence of the subject, even as this essence remains inaccessible and ungraspable at its core. This central auto-affection is the part of the subject that cannot be represented and objectified by being made the ek-static (or transcendental) object of the subject. But it can be felt in the self by the self.

III. Can I Make an Appearance?

Henry wants to lead the reader to a necessarily *material* phenomenology of human subjectivity in its full embodiment, including its interiority not necessarily understood as unconsciousness. Henry's project aims to finish what he thinks Descartes was able to accomplish

only in part. Henry thinks that Descartes takes things nearly to the point of a material

phenomenology, but that he is too quick to separate the subject from what it perceives. Henry

argues that Descartes thus fails to trace the act of perceiving to its true root in the sensation of the

self, auto-affection. Henry argues that Descartes separates how we understand the perception of

thought—the feeling of thought—and thought itself. Instead, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*

opposes the acts of "*videre* and *videor*, of seeing and its immanent primordially self-presenting

self-sensing" (or, I see and I seem; of I seem to see, per the Latin.)[133]

     All of this gets back to the problem of what, exactly, is an "unconscious" part of being?

For Henry, it is the inner life of the subject, its auto-affective core that must be encountered

through a *radical* phenomenology, one that eschews the normal phenomenological modes of

seeing and perceiving in order to sense: "Only a truly radical phenomenology capable of

grasping life's essence and original appearance can, by tearing that life from the fantasies and

myths of an afterworld, hold life where it is: in us, as what we truly are."[134] As we will see

below, Henry's "radical" phenomenology tries to understand the individual as undifferentiated

self-feeling. The individual is not its rationality, nor does its rational or outward expression

reveal an identifiable or definite interiority, what psychoanalysis may call the subconscious.

     So how is this about the "inner life" of the subject? Because the debate about knowledge

is always a debate about whether we can know ourselves "from the inside" so to speak. Do the

material conditions of existence open themselves up to and allow for knowledge of the particular

existing thing that exists? In other words, is existence itself the condition of possibility for

knowing that one exists? What about the act of knowing anything? Do we need to know that we

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[133] *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*., 26-7

[134] Ibid., 4-5

exist before we know other things? Is whatever it is that allows us to keep on existing a form of knowledge or is knowledge later?

Sensation is key. For Henry, this means talking about "sensing" as an internal faculty or about "seeing" as something that relies on exteriority. Ek-stasis— "a kind of "going outside of" the subject in question in order to gain some kind of objective understanding of it—creates a situation where we lean toward fundamentally understanding the subject as either *subjective* or as *objective*, but in any case, this in an understanding of subjectivity that relies on separating the subjectivity and objectivity into two distinct experiences, rather than recognizing how they are, first of all, linked within subjects themselves.

Because of this tension, we may be more likely to lose sight of what exactly is central— and fundamental—about the faculty of knowing. And not just the faculty of knowing, but all the faculties that are related to it, all of the faculties that characterize life. Freud represents the latest in a series of thinkers who have tried to account for this and succeeded only in part. "Freud," Henry writes, "is an heir, a belated heir"…of the inability of all of Western thought that preceded him to "grasp the only important thing," aka life as it is lived and experienced; existence as it matters.[135] Henry may dismiss psychoanalysis as "a particular doctrine" but he does this on the way to damning its priors, writing "It is more important to bring to light the unthought ground from which this doctrine proceeds, for it determined nearly everything that came before Freud and will, if we don't take care, determine everything that may come after."[136] More than a rhetorical flourish, "the unthought ground" is, Henry thinks, precisely the consequences of the Cartesian project.

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[135] Ibid., 1

[136] Ibid.

These consequences are not just the *results* of what Descartes attempted but his method and how it runs into the limits of the ek-static, exteriorizing work of ontological analysis. Henry says of Descartes' ego:

> But this 'ego' doesn't insert itself into the history of Western metaphysics, not any more than into that of being. It doesn't arrive in Descartes's epochê, nor in the times that it inaugurates. It is not a declension of ek-stasis. It is there before ek-stasis, before Difference. It is the beginning that begins at the beginning and never stops beginning, appearance's initial self-appearing, the invisible coming of life into itself.[137]

There are, in fact, two belated heirs here: one is Freud, as Henry says, who wants to topple the results of enlightenment civilization by using its own tools. He thinks that psychoanalysis should be considered as a philosophical approach rather than as a human science. He charges objectivity—the idea that one can view subjective phenomena from an objective standpoint—with having a "reign of death over the devastated universe."[138]

The other heir is Henry himself: who wants to rid himself of the scientism of the Cartesian method while retaining its capacity to generate a phenomenological argument. Henry does not explicitly set himself up as Freud's opposite number, but rather he does something here rhetorically that helps us to understand why he chooses to read the thinkers that he does. Specifically, he wants us to understand that the consequences of ideas are not just things in the world but also the things that make those ideas possible.

Henry is careful to point out the "extraordinary fact" that he can read the concept of consciousness as an object of philosophical inquiry which yields a philosophy of the invisible

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[137] *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*., 102

[138] Ibid., 7

alongside a theory of the visible.[139] The surprise here is not that consciousness can imply the invisible or interior; from a certain point of view, an abstract concept is inherently immaterial. (This is what most of Western thought would say.) Rather, the surprise is that interpreting consciousness philosophically results in needing to articulate how the visible and the invisible relate to one another.

According to Henry, it becomes necessary to relate the visible and the individual because consciousness must "mysteriously doubled itself" in order to point to the original immanence of being, and not just its graspability as a "visible" concept.[140] Methodologically, this occurs because of the way that "the epochê of the world" reveals something "more ancient", reveals, in fact, the invisible immanence of the subject.[141]

How does he think this process works? First, the epochê is a crucial analytic move which he argues Descartes carries almost to its ultimate implication before hesitating and stopping. Bracketing the world, as in the epochê, is the necessary starting point to investigate what is most essential about the subject. Before knowing what can be known, the know-er must first figure out what it means to know something. But what does it mean to know something? What is this experience? How is this experience experienced?

Henry's phenomenology of appearance and its relationship to interiority, exteriority, and ek-stasis understands the phenomenon of life as having neither exterior nor interior, but as being both entirely invisible and inseparable from existence. This is, he says "subjectivity in its radical immanence, identical to life." If Henry is correct about the place of the epochê, the reduction rests on a more fundamental movement of life—an ontology of ontologies—the self's ability to

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[139] Ibid., 3

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid.

sense itself. What makes this multiple is that it is profoundly unpredictable and contingent, reliant as it is on the auto-affection of a living subject. Rather than pointing to a transcendent sense of Being, the act of a living subject opening itself up to the world rests on a razor-thin distinction between the act of sensing something external and the sensing of the self. As an alternative political ontology, Henryian subjects are fundamentally living, not reasoning, and when we step back and think about what it is that the Henryian politics looks like, it is designed in a way that profoundly reflects this in its practice and raises the question: what are the fundamental things that life needs? What are the major problems of a life? Given that a life is auto-affecting, what does it need to auto-affect? And what are the forms of knowing and being and doing and acting that are opened up by auto-affection?

IV. Analyzing the Invisible: The Immanent Inner Life

Life emerges from auto-affection, or a self-feeling that is a kind of eternally recursive self-revelation, that is, by definition, inaccessible but that gives rise to subjects' feelings, sensations, or affective orientations, and of course also the visual, conscious, or linguistic ways that subjects encounter the world. The way that he puts it is

> *The reality of feeling is co-extensive and consubstantial with its revelation as identical to the content of revelation*. The ontological determination of the reality of feeling constitutes the foundation of the absolute character of this reality, designates it and institutes it as that which, by showing itself in the appearance which it makes of itself, and exhausting itself in this appearance, by coinciding with it and by finding in it, in the reality of its appearing and of that which it allows to appear and in its substance, its own

reality, its own substance, posits itself and affirms itself in the positivity of its bare and

irrefutable phenomenological Being which cannot be questioned in any way.[142]

Henry's claims here go to the heart of this chapter's central concerns. The "*reality of feeling
[that] is co-extensive and consubstantial with its revelation as identical to the content of
revelation*" can and does take the form of suffering itself. In other words, suffering is an example

of a kind of self-revealed and self-feeling affecting "tonality", one of the primary aspects of life

that is necessarily revealed to and within a subject but as purely subjective, inseparable from the

subject. What Henry is emphasizing is the way that life, which *is* auto-affective, appears as what

he calls "tonalities." These tonalities are determined by the affective quality of life—in fact, they

are affective phenomena—but because life is the most "phenomenal phenomenon."

What kinds of things can we analyze and understand? How would we start to understand

something that we cannot understand objectively? My intention in taking up Henry's analysis of

interiority is that he demonstrates not only how to move toward a phenomenology of the

invisible/unrepresentable but that this opens up a fundamental problem of political thought: the

problem of difference. This section turns to the "immanence" that characterizes interiority in

Henry's work. Emphasizing immanence turns away from the binary qualities of the

inside/outside relationship, resulting in what I argue is one of the most important implications of

Henry's radical phenomenology. Specifically, I take Henry's argument regarding radically

immanent life to mean there is something immanent to living beings that is inaccessible and that

is not mirrored or matched by any corresponding outside whatsoever. This immanent feeling is,

however, the basis for the notion of individuality itself. While life's immanence does not imply a

transcendent identity, it is the basis for the material individual, or specifically the individual as it

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[142] Henry, Michel. *The Essence of Manifestation*. Trans. Gerard Etzkorn. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, 554.

moves and feels in the world. In other words, this is an individual that prior to any intentionality, has a sense of itself as itself.

In this reading, I am following Zahavi in reading Henry's primary concern as immanence. Although, as discussed in the introduction, readers like Zahavi have taken Henry's phenomenology to be essentially "a transcendental enterprise whose task is to disclose and analyse the structure of manifestation or appearance and its very condition of possibility"[143], Henry's emphasis on immanent life is so overwhelmingly the central part of his project that I focus my attentions here on his arguments about immanence.[144]

Below, I first show how Henry builds his argument about immanence by dismantling classical accounts of interiority and the self based on understanding subject-formation as a reflexive process. Next, I turn to Henry's discussion of ek-stasis and its fundamental impossibility as anything other than a posterior event, grounded on the subject's immanence, immanence even if it cannot access it. This has to do with the primacy of sensation as the mode in which immanence encounters itself.

To argue that life is fully immanent to the living, as Henry does, implies that interiority is rooted in a sensation that happens in some material form. This is different from equating interiority with the "inside" of a subject, as with a soul that resides in the person's body, or with the thought that is inside the person's head, but Henry in fact uses Descartes' and Leibniz's accounts of the soul and the mind to show that sensation is an inescapable component of their respective arguments.

[143] Dan Zahavi, "Subjectivity and Immanence in Michel Henry," in *Subjectivity and Transcendence,* eds. Arne Gron, Iben Damgaard, and Soren Overgaard, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, 133.

[144] Zahavi rightly notes that Henry wishes to distinguish phenomenology from the physical or social sciences but he takes the "meta-phenomenological" aspects of Henry's work to imply that the work is limited to such.

It is in reading Leibniz that Henry finds a way to show how searching for certainty about the innermost self does not actually yield stable knowledge for the subject. Leibniz himself argues that the "soul" escapes full comprehension by thought alone. In Leibniz's engagement with the subject's struggle to understanding itself as a thinking being, Henry finds the same endless regress that Leibniz does. By contrast with Leibniz, Henry makes the important move of emphasizing how this struggle to understand oneself rests on a kind of sensing rather than it being primarily the construction of some kind of knowledge. For Henry, Leibniz comes within a knife's edge of articulating the existence of "radical immanence" without fully realizing the implications of his argument.[145]

Leibniz was describing the relationship between thought as a reflexive activity and whatever it is that thought is perceiving. The most relevant example of this for a perceiving subject would be the case of self-reflection, or the act of thinking by a subject that is trying to grasp itself as a thinking subject. For starters, the stability of the subject's existence is, following Descartes, meant to come from the experience it has of feeling itself thinking. In order for that to happen, there would begin a chain of reflection on the thoughts that pass. One would think—then think about oneself thinking, then repeat this process *ad infinitum*. Except that repeating this process infinitely would completely arrest the subject in an endless reflection and thus foreclose growth, progression, or even, simply, rest.

Henry draws this out through comparison with Leibniz. For Leibniz, this halt indicates the gap between what thought can comprehend and the nature of the soul; yet for him the process of thinking about thinking, by going some way down the infinite regress of reflection, yields the subject's sense of its soul (mind, in other words, for Leibniz) as eternal. By contrast, Henry

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[145] *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*., 65-66

thinks Leibniz does not go far enough in theorizing this gap. Henry argues that the subject encountering this gap is instead not gaining any knowledge of the content of itself but rather than manner of its living. If there were something like a self that could be grasped, it would exceed any effort to perceive it fully, but also any effort to be understood in part.

Henry summarizes the relationship between the body's power to grasp itself as phenomenon with the problem of phenomenality as follows, arguing that where the immanent experience of feeling oneself is the condition of possibility for its extension into the world. But what is crucial is not considering any one thing that the body does as *necessary*. It is not the ability of my hand to grasp a tool that shows my power to grasp. Rather, the act of grasping always already requires that there be something that allowed it to grasp. But it is essential, in order to accord the grasping hand its phenomenality to understand that its power to grasp was present already and is there even if there is not a visible motion to act.

> Our body is the whole of our power over the world; through all its senses it weaves the strands binding us to that world; it has eyes, ears, feet, and hands. But the original hyperpower through which we grasp each of those powers in order to harness them, through which we can as Descartes observed, dispose of and use them whenever we want—that hyperpower contains none of those powers, nor does it accomplish itself through their intervention. It has no need of them, but they need it. There is an original body, an Archi-Body, in which that hyper-power resides and deploys its essence as identical to it. The body has eyes, ears, and hands, but the Archi-Body does not. Yet only through it are eyes and hand, the original possibility of seeing or taking, given to us as the very thing we are, as our body. Therefore, we are actually always slightly more than what we are, more than our body. Material phenomenology is the radical theory of that "more,"

which Nietzsche imagined as will to power, Life's hyperpower. Will to power is the Archi-Body in which our body first comes into itself as everything living and as life itself.[146]

As Henry puts, it, this assumption of the phenomenon's power means that "we are actually always slightly more than what we are." It is that more-ness that points to the immanent phenomenon. The materiality of the body, any extension it makes in the world, assumes there is something more there.

For Henry, the grasping of an object by a hand is "how" life does something, but life itself is not revealed by the act. The manner of its living is precisely the "how" of its life. How a life lives is indivisible from what it is. There is no point is differentiating between what and who and how. In order to answer these questions, we would need to go outside of the self; in other words, we would need ekstasis. But ekstasis, as an abstracting moving, is not really possible without losing access to the how, the process of living. "'That there be at length some thought which is allowed to pass without thinking of it'," Henry writes, quoting Leibniz, "arises from perception or reflection's inability to unveil the soul's entire content. But this inability is even more radical than Leibniz imagines: it disallows even the exception of our present perception or reflection's content. In fact, because apperception is neither partial nor total seeing of an infinite intuition, it excludes *a priori* every content of that sort. It is the exclusion of every possible seeing, the dimension of radical immanence in which ek-stasis is impossible."[147]

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[146] *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*., 325

[147] *The Geneaogy of Psychoanalysis*, 65-66

Henry is not just saying that there must be some gap between what the subject is able to perceive through thought and its internal essence. Rather, he is arguing that the essence of the subject, for any subject, can never be grasped. Henry understands the problem of trying to grasp the essence of the subject as one of infinite regress: if the effort to continue on trying to define essence results in one saying "I must stop, else I go on infinitely," one must recognize that one's own situation is that of not being able to continue. The question of whether representation can occur is, in other words, an unanswerable question *for that subject*. When I say that "*I cannot*" I am returned to the question of what it is I *can* do, to my radical immanence and the fact of my own existence. In order for me to know what it is that I can do I must know that I am. This is the "radical immanence" at the heart of subjectivity that Henry says means that a fully transcendent "ek-stasis is impossible."[148]

Why does this radical immanence imply that ek-static representation would impossible? For Henry, the immanent experience that there is something—a feeling that reality exists—is what in the first place defines individuality. In other words, the individual does not precede this feeling, but rather is constituted in this feeling. As he puts is "individuality [is] the immanent experience of reality instead of its illusory representation."[149] The experience of reality, then, is the basis for understanding any particular reality, including the reality of the individual. But the prior question in any case is: is there an experience of reality?

Consider the experience of awakening from a dream. One may be caught momentarily between the worlds of sleeping and waking; it may take a moment to realize which perceptual reality one is in. For while one knows that waking is from some respects more "real" than

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[148] Ibid., 65-66

[149] Ibid., 157

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sleeping, the vestigial traces of the dream may linger in bodily ways: drying tears in the corners of a pair of eyes, a lingering headache from a terrified, furrowed brow, a shaky breath. What links the two realities, waking and sleeping, which by definition cannot be perceived at the same time, is the material body that immanently is experiencing evidence of both. It is this individual body that experiences the inner life as well as the ephemeral, partial projections of immanence that emerge in dreaming and imagining.

This leads us to a third difficulty with representing inner life addressed by Henry. This has to do with the appearance of a phenomenon and its link to perception. Although appearance is usually an appearance *to* someone, as when a subject perceives an object that appears before it, Henry helps clarify how inner life can be perceived even as it cannot appear as an object.[150] The prior example of dreaming is just one instance of such perception. More generally, the perception of inner life happens when a subject perceives the foundation of its own life, in an experience that is at once absolutely unique and purely subjective. This perception, he argues, can be inferred from the "normal" sort of perception—that by a subject of an object. And this inference can be made by exploring the terms appearance and perception.

Consider the phrase: "it appears to me that…." These words might easily mark the start of a sentence wherein somebody states their political stance. In political discourse, such a statement indicates not just the person's opinion, but their implicit awareness of it as such. That something "appears *to* me" emphasizes the subjective, perspectival aspect of the position. Such a statement may, although not necessarily, open up the possibility that the speaker is aware of the limitations of their point of view. Such a statement may also lend itself to prompting the question

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[150] He does this by reading the place of apperceptio and perceptio in Decartes.

"How does it appear to you?" At the very least, it refers explicitly to the "mine-ness" of a political stance, its quality as a subjective position.

Phenomenologically, such a statement contains an intrinsic redundancy: everything that I express is necessarily *my* statement, even if it is my statement of another's position. I and my existence, are implied by the fact that I am making a statement. But does the implication that I exist demonstrate that I existed before anything appeared to me? If what appears to me is an object, or a thought expressed in language, my existence clearly precedes my experience of perceiving the object or the thought. The more important question is: when do I appear to myself as a living being?

In other words: which comes first—the appearance to me or me myself? For Henry, the answer to this question is that the subject appears through an act of *auto-appearance*, where I appear to myself as myself, and it on the basis of this self-appearance that anything else can appear to me. So in the phrase "it appears to me" I am making separate from me whatever it is I am talking about, but that act of making separate—of ek-stasis—refers back to the way it is appearing *to me*. The first sort of appearance is that of the self to the self. But the self's appearance to the self is actually not the first relationship between the self and itself. That first relation is the auto-affective one. The affection of ek-stasis can only happen because of some kind of auto-affection. Between the impossibility of the Cartesian self and the necessity of a pathetik materialism, there is only one option: to take for granted that the self is able to appear to itself absolutely through auto-apparition, which is based on auto-affection. He writes,

> Thus for example I can only see (whatever it might be) in that I re-present it to myself on
> the basis of the ek-stasis of the World. But this ecstatic opening itself would not appear if
> it did not auto-affect itself in the very movement of its ecstasy. This auto affection of ek-

stasis is fundamentally different from its affection by the world: the latter consists in the Difference that the former excludes.[151]

The world as ek-static to me, outside of me, only is apparent to me when I am able to perceive myself as being, like the world, an object. As the world appears to me, so I suddenly appear to myself. Instead of self-feeling, where I am all just myself, I turn into myself-as-subject and myself-as-ekstatic-object. "Subjectivity," he writes

> is the pathetic immediation of appearing as auto ap-pearing, such that, without this pathetic grasp of appearing in its original appearing to itself, no appearing—notably the aesthetic appearing of the world—would ever appear. Thus, for example I can only see (whatever it might be) in that I re-present it to myself on the basis of the ek-stasis of the World. But this ecstatic opening itself would not appear if it did not auto-affect itself in the very movement of its ecstasy. This auto affection of ek-stasis is fundamentally different from its affection by the world: the latter consists in the Difference that the former excludes. *Sentimus non videre*, says Descartes against hyperbolic doubt. But this can only be understood-sight being notoriously doubtful-if there is, in the originary feeling through which sight senses itself seeing and experiences itself not seeing. Sight is-appearance-only under the condition of a non-seeing.[152]

In other words, we feel ourselves first, and then we see the world. Our ability to see the world—to perceive anything—is based on the fact that we feel ourselves. So, subjectivity anything more than—or less than—the immediacy of auto-appearance. And to see anything externally means that there is a kind of self-seeing that such external sight requires. As he writes, "On the contrary,

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[151] Michel Henry, "The Critique of the Subject," in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, trans. Peter T. Connor, eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991)., 166.

[152] Ibid., 166.

this mode (the seeing on which people have attempted to base all possible knowledge, from ancient Greece to the present) finds itself (in its pretension to found such knowledge) struck with nullity. And this nullity is undoubtedly non-provisional since its impotence is inherent in the very phenomenality of that power. For what is seen is always estranged from the very reality of seeing and from its own reality: it is seen and manifests itself in its self-exteriority; its vision is nothing but that self-exteriority, which therefore *is* only in its self-immanence, as exteriority's radical interiority, as the *videor* inhabiting and enabling seeing. But this interiority cannot be maintained in the problematic as a simple concept or structure, as the formal anti-essence of ek-stasis."

Interiority is not the opposite of ek-stasis ("formal anti-essence" here indicating the status that ek-stasis holds as an expression of the subject's essence.) Schopenhauer, writes Henry, "Does brilliantly establish the impossibility of ever perceiving representation's other in representation and then designates primal corporeality as its site of accomplishment and simultaneously as what identifies us with it."[153] Regarding Kant, by contrast, Henry argues, "By reducing inner sense (i.e., absolute subjectivity) to the ek-stasis of time and so to representation, prevents Schopenhauer from giving phenomenological meaning to the immanence that ultimately defines Will. Once again, will stands yokes to Western thought, submitted to its destiny, that of producing itself in the light of temporal ek-stasis or sinking into night: either representation or unconscious. Life is lost the moment it is named, and Freud is already there in his entirety."[154] Henry draws here on Nietzsche's account of drives to capture the unrepresentational excess of life. That excess of life, Henry says, is what allows Nietzsche to give an ontological account "that discovers affectivity as the revelation of being in itself, as the

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[153] *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*., 6

[154] Ibid., 6

material from which it is made, as its substance and flesh."[155] Henry infuses his own concept of life with this Nietzschean energy.

What this means for Henry is something between positivity and negation. Representing life is maybe a fool's errand. What is actually possible is to look around and say—where is life emerging? Where are the immanent things that betray the singularity of lives that are grounded in and emergent from this subterranean force? In fact, for Henry the aesthetic may be a possible means for representing Life as such—he explores this in his work on Vasili Kandinsky—but it cannot represent the singularity of one life. Only life in its alive-ness can do that. So where does this leave not just politics, but philosophy, as well? The foregoing set of readings has highlighted how Henry's excursus on inner life reflects his overall epistemological and phenomenological commitments. I have argued that his method engages with the problem of how to represent inner life through its discussion of the importance and limits of ek-stasis. The ek-static aspects of how the subject understands the world are what the representing subject grapples with, but its engagement with the inadequacies of these aspects are what awake in it a sense of its own subjectivity.

Politically Henry's method points out the uneasy relationship between clarity and self-evidence and the ways that our representations to ourselves are not connected to our most fundamental realities. When I characterize my beliefs in a certain way—in a class, on a date, to my child—I am often deeply aware that there is a gap between how I am representing myself and the fundamental motivations of my life. At the same time, that feeling of the gap in representation shows us something about how important a certain kind of feeling is—how we deceive ourselves into rationality as well as feeling. The rare moments we have of relative

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[155] Ibid., 5-6

authenticity do not necessarily lead us to be more authentic or better at communicating, but they do awaken in us a sense of that not all feeling is deceptive, and that feeling can tell us something about ourselves. For an Henryian politics would be about working such that we can learn to understand and recognize which kinds of feelings are more "essential" and why and how we should recognize them.

In the next chapter, I discuss how this engagement takes place in political-institutional contexts. I examine Henry's understanding of praxis, which troubles the idea of a subject working *on* or *with* the world and instead considers subjective praxis to be internal to the subject itself as the necessary condition of possibility for action in the world. In the context of economic and social production, Henry's praxis returns our attention to the role of life in the institutionally governed spaces where political life occurs and helps us understand how representative democracy might be critiqued not only for failing to represent, in practice, the stated views and aims of individuals, but also for failing to facilitate their knowledge of the many subterranean and inarticulate interests that lives may share. For example, by focusing on representing interests that can by loudly proclaimed by those with the power to speak, the interests shared by all lives in the flourishing of diverse species and a healthy ecosystem remain under-represented and even excluded from the public sphere altogether.

Between the withdrawal from ek-stasis that grounds Henry's argument about appearance and how something appears *to or for* a subject understands the process of "making objective" to a subject as a process that relies on the subject having an ek-static relationship to, not only whatever appears, but to itself as well. conclude with an example of this how Henry's account can inform political institutional responses to difference.

V. Conclusion: The appearance of the unknowable

This project's interpretation of Henry takes him to be theorizing the conditions of possibility for an ethics of intersubjectivity. Not only is such an ethics always already ethics-in-practice, ethical relations between living beings require the self-sensing of auto-affection. While this auto-affection persists as long as we live our lives, relating to the unknowable interiority of others requires an affective awareness that hovers on the border of the knowable. For human lives, to relate ethically to the unknowable in ourselves and others means giving up on the idea of certainty and being present to the indeterminable affective states of our own bodies. Where Levinas turned our attention to the face of the other as it reflects on our own, Henry turns our attention to the indeterminate affective interiority of all lives. The only precedence that our own interiority takes over that of others is through our own, limited yet primary experience of our own aliveness. The unknowable center of that experience is what opens up a kind of deference to the aliveness of other lives.

Rather than trying to *represent* what is difficult to grasp about the self, what if subjects approach one another with a generosity that acknowledges that the core of selfhood is unknowable, for all selves as much as for all others? At the level of the individual, such generosity is a question of ethical practice and self-reflection. From the perspective of groups, however, acknowledging ambiguity and unknowability in socio-political contexts, would be a radical change in public practice. Yet calcified oppositions and binaries in public life already reveal radical differences in how people live their lives. It is simply that, at present, epistemological uncertainty or layered ontological commitments are easily dismissed as contradictory, hypocritical, syncretic, or irrational. To avoid these charges, living beings in all their complexity attempt to hide those ambiguities but the ambiguous affect that grounds them is,

as discussed in the prior chapter, always already submerged and immanent. Henry's answer is not simply to live out the eternal return of the will, to act in public, or to take recourse in the disclosure of Being-in-the-World. Rather, it is to rest and wrestle with what remains hidden, the part of what it means to be alive that can never be fully recuperated, captured, expressed, represented, or grasped.

It is possible to structure our political communities in ways that build these forms of generosity into our political practices. Would putting the "unknowable" at the center of how we understand relationship and sociality make a difference politically?

The following chapter on suffering will expand on the political implications of this idea. In particular, I argue that an Henryian account of interiority can inform political institutional responses to difference by fostering spaces for individual expression and non-verbal perception, and promoting experiences where subjects can encounter one another. Henry is concerned with how attempts to identify who and what is a subject usually work to obscure the very things that ground subjectivity, namely its interiority, inner life, its ipseity. This inability to really speak about interiority becomes even more meaningful in the experiences of suffering and pain, which I discuss in Chapter Three. It is "the anxiety of life's inability to escape itself," which is a form of the "suffering existence" that he is concerned with as the baseline for living subjectivity. Not a pleasurable sensation in itself, life's existence is an "entropic schema."[156]

To recap the stages of this chapter's argument, an initial step is to take profound political differences as being rooted in diverging metaphysical or epistemological orientation. This raises the question of the nature of these diverging worldviews and their relationship to individual subjects. The chapter argues that, first, Henry's view of meaning as intrinsically tied to the

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[156] Michel Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 7.

immanent materiality of the subject must be taken seriously if we are to understand how ethical relationships arise that rely not on reason, but on experience and feeling. Considering the sorts of different experiences that can be rationalized or described takes us only so far. Where negotiation is possible, calling on political ethics that aim to engender respect, dialogue and, where necessary, distance, may lead to the overcoming of difference, or at least a livable compromise. Political communities should care, nonetheless, whether these are rooted in experience and feeling. And we should not be surprised if profound lapses in ethical commitments arise in the absence of shared experiences or feeling with and for others.

CHAPTER THREE

TO LIVE IS TO SUFFER

In the beginning was suffering.

-Julia Kristeva (from *Proust and the Sense of Time*)

In Henry's phenomenology of life, the living subject suffers affectively—by feeling, sensing—but suffering is also temporal; one suffers through the experience of living. Enduring one's life is to suffer in time and because of time. To live is, therefore, to suffer.

To say that living is suffering might seem less like a foundation for a political theory of community and more like an opening onto an abyss. But as this chapter will discuss, taking suffering to be a fundamental ontological quality of living subjects helps us grapple with some of the most challenging problems of contemporary political life. In our planetary context, suffering is ubiquitous but not universal. In this way, suffering reflects the ontological structuring of life: everyone experiences suffering, but multiply and diversely—just as everyone lives, but in infinitely different ways.

As something both shared and differentiating, suffering is at the heart of what and how the affective political community *is*. A political theory that seeks to address suffering in both individual and collective ways must take some time with these qualities of suffering. Because the boundaries of pain are moments where the political flickers in and out of existence. In other words, the conditions of possibility for politics either exist or do not exist where subjects' experiences of pain yield to experiences like death or unconsciousness, feelings like pleasure, or even where pain yields to the total lack of feelings: non-existence.

How does Henry's analysis of suffering as a condition of all lives inform a political theory of quotidian suffering as well as of suffering as a limit condition, even when suffering consists of extraordinary pain or violence? This chapter examines what it means to consider suffering as a condition of all lives, the implications of ubiquitous suffering for political subjectivity, and, finally, the problem of acute suffering in light of theorizing the living subject as always already a suffering subject. This chapter's analysis builds on the insights developed in Chapter Two's consideration of individual interiority, arguing that Henry's concept of pathos-with helps illuminate what is shared intersubjectively when one suffers.

As Chapter Two argued, the sheer impossibility of representing individual interiority is linked to the difficulty of representation in general, whether through language, aesthetic practice, or politics. If we take seriously, however, that individual affective states not only matter politically but serve as foundations for belief, orientation, and action, bridging interiority and exteriority has a specifically political importance. Furthermore, theories of affective politics have largely centered on either the political work, in lived contexts, of specific affects and emotions (rage, love, jealousy) or the ek-static work of excessive affect—its ability to take subjects outside of themselves, to move them beyond stasis or rooted political orientations. This project asks a parallel question: what does non-ek-static affect do? How does understanding affect as non-ek-static help us, paradoxically, to navigate politically those affective states which form the trickiest barriers to intersubjective belonging?

I. Suffering as a political challenge

In *Liberalism and Human Suffering*, Asma Abbas argues that subjects in the contemporary world are surrounded by "schemes of managing human suffering whose arbitrary claims about what suffering is and how it matters in society form the basis of our lives and the

relations that allow us to live."[157] Abbas does significant, ground-breaking work toward a

political theory of suffering, making a strong case that suffering reveals the subjective heart of

politics and the political heart of subjectivity. As she puts it,

> The limits of the political, then, are not reliant on epistemic assessment but are
>
> experienced relationally and aesthetically as a question of the nature of our very being—
>
> the degree to which our senses contest the imposed modes of the presence and absence of
>
> suffering is the degree to which we are political.[158]

Further, the temptation to represent suffering as external or objective must, Abbas suggest, be

countered by turning to "a materialist possibility that does not treat suffering as topic or object

but regards its irreducible materiality as intrinsic, even immanent, to a desirable political

method." (Abbas 14) Abbas articulates the stakes of this beautifully——they are nothing less

than the political belonging of those "who do not speak in the voice that liberal structures can

hear, and whose suffering does not matter."[159] Henry makes a similar point differently; his attack

is not on liberalism but on politics as such. For him "politics" is the politics of Western thought,

inclusive of both liberalism and socialism, communism as well as capitalism. According to

Henry, politics requires representation and abstraction in ways that resist, overturn, or strangle

the immanence of life. His alternative is a philosophy of life that centers the unrepresentable, the

immanent, and the material. Henry's theory thus answers *avant la lettre* some of Abbas' call for a

politics that allows the suffering of the excluded subjects to "matter."[160] The discussion that

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[157] Abbas, Asma. *Liberalism and Human Suffering.* London: Palgrave (2010), 2

[158] *Liberation and Human Suffering, 4.*

[159] Ibid., 91

[160] Ibid.

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follows shows how Henry does this by understanding matter as always already suffering and subjects as auto-affectively sensing their own suffering.

II. How does suffering matter?

Of particular concern in Henry's argument is the relationship between suffering and passivity. One typically thinks of suffering as something that *happens to* the subject. For instance, I suffer a loss, or she suffers migraines, or he suffers from carpal tunnel syndrome. In these situations the suffering is not volitional but is the causal result of an implied active agency: something (the universe, bad luck, chance, age, God) is causing the suffering. It is also common to speak about suffering as though the sufferer's agency is called into question by what they are enduring.[161] For example, we praise the fortitude of the ill and imply that survival is a matter of will; we might say to a friend suffering through a bad relationship: "Why do you persist in suffering his abject treatment of you?"

What is common to these perspectives is a *passivity* implied in the experience of suffering although it is only in the latter example that we find an implied agency for the sufferer in the way we ordinarily speak of that suffering. Such an agential subjectivity is an attractive basis for political subjectivity, in how it grounds a subject who is *free to act*. But where does that agential subjectivity leave the sufferer who has no choice in the matter?

An Henryian analysis, by contrast, draws attention to a different basis for subjectivity: the underlying common passivity that the migraine sufferer and the miserable lover both feel. For Henry, this passivity is a fundamental condition of life: what he calls its *pathetic* existence as

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[161] See also the discussion of how privileging agency results from neoliberal accounts of choice and interest—that suffering both troubles these and is often cast in relationship to the choices of the sufferers in ways that bely the aims of late capitalism rather than the conditions of sufferers. For more on this: Jane Elliot, "Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Great Britain." *Social Text* 115, Vol. 31, No. 2, Summer 2013.

auto-affective. As I discussed in Chapter One, Henry means by the word "pathetic" (fr. *pathéthique*) something different from the common use of the English adjective to describe "an object of pity" or even scorn. Rather, Henry's usage in French signifies the feeling or sensory quality of life—the way life is characterized by *pathos*. In the Greek, we find the root, then, of what contemporary English usage has mostly lost: pathetic life is life that feels, that full of pathos. This is what the different sufferers have in common: they *feel*.

Suffering is thus central to the pathetic community, or what I am calling an "affective political community," namely that community characterized by a form of subjectivity that Henry calls "pathos-with." While suffering is fundamentally individual, Henry is also concerned with how politics engenders suffering. I connect these two discussions, arguing that the suffering subject describes not only the victim and witness but also the perpetrator of suffering; the passivity of the perpetrator is fostered by political devaluing of life such that collective suffering occurs. Henry is concerned with understanding suffering as an integral experience of all living beings and argues that when the political decenters life, its passive lack of support of life allows violence and extraordinary suffering to go unchecked. He has less to say about violence as a particular instance of suffering.

Of particular concern in this argument is the relationship between suffering and passivity. Suffering is sometimes considered to be a fundamentally passive experience. Is suffering something that robs me of my agency, since it is something that "happens to me"? Neither purely passive nor able to be controlled or predicted, suffering is distinguished by its constant and recurring presence for living beings, as one among many forms of affective experience. Consider the forms of embodied pain that result from repetitive stress, ranging from carpal tunnel syndrome or tendonitis to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD.) These experiences of suffering

and embodied pain do indeed occur without the sufferer's intentionality being awakened or directed toward the affect. In this sense, they do "happen" to the sufferer. And yet the sufferer's agency and intentionality might be bound to the *experience* of the pain in complex ways. One may develop pain in the arms or wrists from spending too long typing or from practicing the violin. Agency, intentionality, and action are clearly at work. PTSD may also develop in reaction to situations where the sufferer has little or no control or agency whatsoever. While there may be some hope that a political body could decide to protect its members against or even prevent the most extreme forms of harm, forms of suffering that are bound up with our experiences of freedom are much more difficult to address politically. Yet these situations that politics struggles to account for are also among the most ubiquitous human experiences that exist. In contrast to joy or delight, for instance, suffering permeates all of life, helping life continue as it is awakened by bodily need and the feeling of persisting in being, of enduring or lasting that suffuses the experience of being alive.

While suffering cannot be represented as such, it must still be included in our politics. Life is, after all, what we are trying to represent in politics all of the time— suffering must be understood as part of what politics is attempting to account for, while recognizing that it cannot be represented fully. Second, the political recognition of another's suffering may require deep empathy but politics must also account for a decision to acknowledge the other's suffering without feeling empathy. This is not to say that we need a political solution for carpal tunnel syndrome. What is needed, however, are ways to grapple socially other forms of suffering that emerge from the agential actions of individuals *and* collectives, such as the suffering that attends extreme poverty. Navigating a political response to suffering necessitates carefully negotiating

how differential experiences of individual suffering intersect with collective vulnerability to violence, such as that against socially oppressed groups.

<div align="center">***</div>

What does Henry mean by suffering? Throughout his writings, Henry develops an account of suffering as a special case of what he called "that which experiences itself," as he puts it in the passage I quoted at the end of chapter two, where suffering is listed as one among other experiences, "like hunger, cold, suffering, pleasure, anguish, boredom, pain, drunkenness."[162] That suffering is an affective experience remains constant from his early writings in *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* to his later, theological works *Words of Christ* and *I am the Truth*. Nonetheless, his emphasis changes dramatically. He is concerned in his earlier writings with suffering as an experience that living bodies have. He later understands suffering as one of the conditions of appearance for Life (in other words, for all that lives or has lived or will live.)

We ordinarily think of suffering as the experience of feeling pain, grief, despair, or something else bad that lasts for more than a moment. The phrase "she suffered a loss," indicates not the instance of losing but the extended experience of having lost. Henry's definition takes this position and pushes it further: he is more interested in what he considers a deeper, more essential suffering that makes our experiences of pain or grief possible. Existential suffering, for Henry, is one of the conditions of possibility for particular suffering.

In what follows, I talk about both suffering *as* experience and suffering as condition of possibility for life, as well as what links these two discussions: the affective *character* of suffering, its fundamental importance in the experiences of individual bodies.[163] It is crucial to

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[162] Henry, Michel. *I am the Truth*, 238.

[163] Henry sees Christ as the figure whose life *as it was suffered* is the condition of possibility for all life. In Henry's hands this explicitly Christian theology becomes something more deist than fundamentalist: he ultimately

understand this idea of suffering being a condition of possibility for life in the sense Henry

means it: not as a temporally prior condition, but rather an ongoing condition. This *ongoing*

quality that suffering has is what characterizes it as experience, and even more specifically, as

interior experience. He discusses this in the following passage,

> Such is the transcendence present in any immanent modality of life, for example in any
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> suffering; there is not some exteriority in which this suffering would find the means to
>
> avoid the self and flee itself. It is within suffering, on the contrary—since, in its radical
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> immanence, it is crushed against itself and overwhelmed by itself, as it were, by the
>
> oppressive part of its con- tent and by this burden it is for itself—that the work of
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> absolute Life's self- giving that gives it to itself takes place. Suffering is within Life, as
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> that which is of another order than it, that does not come from it, and to which alone it
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> owes its coming into itself, to which this particular suffering first owes the experiencing
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> of itself and of living. Thus, suffering is always more and other than itself. In it is always
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> revealed—as what reveals it to itself, yet more hid- den and more contestable than its
>
> own—another life, the "to suffer" and "to rejoice" of absolute Life, whose suffering is
>
> never just a modality. But because suffering never reveals itself without there being
>
> revealed in it at the same time what suffering reveals to itself, therefore in fact it is never
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> alone but always surprised, surpassed, submerged, by this antinomic structure of life that
>
> inhabits any life and thus any of life's modalities. It is not suffering itself but the "to

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understands Christ as more a *condition of possibility for all existence* than a particularly personal figure. Thus the phrase "I am the Truth" becomes, like other words of Christ ("In the beginning was the Word"), the fundamental basis for life rather than its post-facto redeemer.

suffer" included in it as what delivers it to itself that leads to the "rejoicing" implied in any "to suffer" and made possible by it.[164]

In the original French, Henry's discussion of suffering draws on several meanings of the term "suffering" that may not be immediately apparent in English. In the French, the suffering (*souffrance*) of life is not just that of *souffrir* but also that of the sense of, as Henry has it, "*l'épreuve de la vie*", or "the test/proof of life" which, along with the sense demonstrating or indicating that life is present, also evokes the action *éprouver*, or the act of undergoing an ordeal or test. To suffer, in the active sense, often takes the form in French *subir,* or a suffering endurance that underscores the passivity of the subject as well as its experience of suffering. The latin root *sub-* of *subir* recalls the sense that one suffers "under" something, such as an oppressive structure. Thus, suffering in Henry's sense evokes the fact of undergoing, and furthermore emphasizes the passive character of the being that is experiencing it. Suffering *may* mean undergoing a bad experience, but it also can mean undergoing an ordeal or a test, or have the sense of tolerating. Suffering, even if it is not acutely painful, is what we do as we live. We tolerate life even when we do not understand it. This tolerating and experiencing aspect of suffering is central to life, as he argues in one passage that identifies these movements as part of an inexorable history of life:

> *The history recounted to us here is the history of life.* It is the history of a force coming up against an increased resistance—its decreased effectiveness and powerless effort change into fatigue and an increasing suffering in search of relief, a rest and a stopping point. The journey of a human being returning home at the end of an exhausting day or trip is thus only one particular representation, among an infinite number of possibilities,

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[164] *I am the Truth*, 204.

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of a much broader development. This is the development of the absolute subjectivity of

life and the fundamental affective tonalities into which it changes, in passing necessarily

from one to the next along the continuum of an uninterrupted series going from the

extreme of suffering to the extreme of joy, like the tonalities of the plane.[165]

For Henry, suffering, like any other affect, can only happen where there is an affective being.

Affects rely on someone or something being there to feel them. Henry thinks that *all* life is

affective, that it is feeling, living, because it is material. So even though suffering seems like it

might be the opposite of joy, it can also include just feeling the stuff of life. Henry's argument

about suffering emerges from his analysis of auto-affection. The auto-affection of life feels its

suffering of want or lack, and this movement of affectivity pushes the subject to respond to its

own desires and needs.

Again, what characterizes life? How does a living thing act? It tries to keep on living. A

life is always striving to get the things it needs to continue living. It can't escape from its needs

and so its needs must be met. But this doesn't have to happen consciously. No matter how much

we know about a life empirically, there is something about it that remains inaccessible, even to

the living thing itself. Henry talks about Life suffering under this need, of it being a kind of

weight that is all about the weight of living.[166]

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[165] Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible* [Voir l'invisible], trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009)., 64 (reference to Kandinsky's analysis of the tonality of color in the plane - rays of light hitting planar surfaces create different tonalities (sound operates analogously, in relationship to the hearer as well as the source of sound.) - see p. 38 in Seeing the Invisible.....also the related and overall tonality as a thing that Henry thinks is vital and important. Tonality is related to representation and the function of the signifier. The sign may evoke a strong tonality or a weak tonality (or rather, may weakly evoke a tonality or strongly evoke a tonality. Abstract painting, as opposed to abstract politics, disrupts representation. The non-political and non-linguistic work of politics. (Cavell might disagree with Henry's idea that we only "perceive stereotypical meanings" in ordinary life, but if anything, the problem of stereotyping in the political is even deeper. Ordinary language may not have much power to overcome this.)

[166] Contrast this with Heidegger's notion of Dasein as thrown with all weight of this thrownness.

III. The Problem of representation and the wordlessness of trauma

Henry's characterization of suffering as a subjective experience that life undergoes helps identify and address political violence. A crucial element of this work to identify, untangle, encounter, and take seriously political violence like torture is what trauma studies scholars describe as the act of witnessing or giving testimony to the individual experience. This form of exposure often requires external representation, as through spoken or written testimony, for example. But Henry's account of life as suffering should spur us to identify and amplify less representational forms of testimony. This is not to say that a wordless cry is *more* valid or true than an articulate testimony, but rather that it is imperative to never exclude it. The problem of how suffering becomes political is not only a problem of representation, it brings up our difficulties of representation in ways that push back into questions of knowledge, and problems of witnessing.

The "inaccessibility" of our core is part of what makes living—whether individually or in a group—so difficult. Not only is life as difficult in isolation as in community, but this difficulty may also make the movement from individual suffering to collective reception or answer to that suffering more challenging. If we take even the small-scale movement from an individual to a pair, Henry's emphasis on suffering life being affective and material means that we are talking about a way of interacting with other people that is not about debate or agreement, but rather about co-existence and co-affection.

For Henry, people do not build relationality through cognitive or rational acknowledgement of the other. I don't see the other and think consciously "that other one is like me". Relationality—intersubjectivity—centers on affect. Adina Bozga argues that, for Henry, the relationship between one individual and another happen through a recognition of the other that

takes place through *impressions*. Impressions rather than seeing the other build relations between lives. It is an impression of the other rather than perceiving the other intentionally.[167] What does this look like in practice? For Henry, when we see another person, we are not seeing who they *are*. We see one aspect. What really *animates* a person is only revealed by experiencing impressions of them. Conscious examination of two other people might help us to differentiate between them, or to individuate them. But it does not help us to understand them as *individuals*. To know them as individuals we have to encounter them as affective lives. Furthermore, just because we can distinguish between people does not mean that we should or ought to view them separately, as isolated. For Henry, being an individual means that the human life matters as itself, but it matters because it is *alive*.

The meaning of life does not emerge from a being's ability to appear in the world, to act, or to make any sort of effect on others. To say so would, for Henry, be to characterize the significance of existence as a feature of its ontic character. As he puts it:

> If phenomenality finds its immediate effectiveness in the determination wherein it appeals, the latter has no less immediately the meaning of not being the essence. *The essence of pure phenomenality is something other than its effectiveness.* Insofar as the essence of phenomenality is other than its effectiveness, it rather finds in the latter its own suppression. The determination manifests the essence, however, in such a way that

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[167] Re: Husserl, "As a result, primal impression is a duration block devoid of an original self-coincidence that could define it. The intentional openness of the present is, for Henry, the origin of the alteration of the impression from its self-presence to the non-being iof the 'just-having-been' of intentional consciousness." Adina Bozga, *The Exasperating Gift of Singularity : Husserl, Levinas, Henry* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2009)., 76) - referring to first part of material phenomenology "As Henry states, it is not impression that needs the now-mode of consciousness in order to be given to itself. On the contrary, the tripartite form of the flow develops precisely out of impressional contents. There is therefore a double dismissal of impression in Husserl's philosophy....Henry opposes this division of impression underlining its absolute and non-reflective self-affection where no distance can ever be interposed. Moreover, impression never changes since 'that which never changes, that which never breaks, is that which makes it an impression, it is in it the essence of life.' Subjectivity is thus impression, self-donation that remains unchanged through the advent of every new actual phase." (ibid., 78)

the essence hides itself in this manifestation. Insofar as the determination manifests the

essence, it is its truth. Insofar as the essence hides itself in this manifestation, insofar as it

is not coextensive with the effective phenomenological content of the determination, the

truth of this content is foreign to it, it is rather non-truth with respect to it. Finally, it is

this non-truth of the essence which hides itself in the truth of effective phenomenality.

The latter passes itself off as the truth of the essence; but the truth of the essence is the

non-truth of its non-truth.[168]

The ontological character of what manifests itself in life is suppressed in its process of becoming

determinate. And so, to locate the essence of the phenomenon of life requires holding open the

realization that trying to grasp the significance of life politically requires holding open that the

essence of life is both revealed and concealed in attempts to determine it. But as the condition of

possibility for determining the meaningfulness of life, the essence of life's phenomenality—its

ontological character—must remain philosophically meaningful precisely because it is

ontologically meaningful, essential to the *experience* of any reality even if it cannot be

characterized with certainty.

Suffering, thus, functions as an example of this indeterminacy coupled with necessity.

Henry provides an example of the suffering of life in the experience of infancy:

As to this pure experience we ordinarily refer to as infancy, we can conceive it only in

terms of the subjectivity we are talking about as driven back to itself, left to its own

modalities, and unable to get rid either of them or itself. It suffers them in a primal

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[168] *Essence of Manifestation*, 110.

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suffering that defies every liberty and every possibility of getting rid of oneself in the ek-stasis of a world.[169]

Here is an example of this from ordinary life: a nursing baby is an individual being, but it may not be individuated or fully divisible from its mother. None of us are fully individuated from the air we breathe and thus from the trees and plants that consume the carbon dioxide we emit. But political processes tend to treat individuals as though they are fully individuated. And this can make some judgments or decisions or actions that seek to address suffering very problematic. The infant can no more end its own life than it can determine that its life exists, yet it—like other beings—continues to live and what makes its life meaningful has nothing to do with its own ability to determine or effect action in the ontic world.

The crucial paradox of action—whether political, social, or phenomenal—is that its meaningfulness arises from the conditions of inaction and indeterminacy that ground its existence. If we understand this—if we take seriously that the sustenance of life is necessary and sufficient for any action—then we begin to understand the value of supporting diverse lives regardless of what they make manifest or determinate in our shared world.

Thus, I find in Henry's discussion of suffering a mode of being that is not only central to the human condition, but that can also contribute to political action. Henry's understanding of materiality and life presents an alternative understanding of suffering that cuts between the psychological and the physical through the very inter-reliant intersection of subjectivity and objectivity in Henryian life. While suffering does indeed reveal the passivity of the material being, it only acquires its meaning in relationship to the life for which it is occurring. For Henry, life itself cannot be distanced from its active qualities and one cannot understand material life as

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[169] Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 1st ed., Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 127.

only passive—because it is also always active, as it seeks to meet its needs by acting. Henry links existence, which is predicated on needs continually being met, to suffering as experience of enduring the cycle of needs felt and satisfied, and thereby to action, which moves the individual toward the satisfaction of its needs.

Thus, Henry's concepts shift theories of suffering into explicitly active and political terms, while remaining attentive to the material and affective aspects of suffering. In turning to Henry for an account of action, I am bringing him close to an ongoing debate in political theory about how societies grapple with the political challenges caused by suffering.

This suffering includes but is not limited to experiences of extreme violence. As Balibar notes in *Violence and Civility*,

> [T]he phenomenology of extreme violence that—on the basis of the contemporary manifestations in which we find ourselves located or of which we are the "spectators," manifestations that are also connected to the inquiries that have defined political anthropology since its emergence—obliges us to reconsider the very conditions of the possibility of a political action.[170]

Balibar also makes the important point that challenging violence often requires a reconstruction or reinscription of concepts like violence, evil, or cruelty. In so doing, these attempts reproduce the challenges of the phenomenological experience of extreme violence, namely its inability to be fully captured in either quantitative or qualitative terms.[171]

Taking violence seriously as a part of politics requires deeper attention to the ontological status of suffering, and requires us understanding suffering within politics as fundamentally

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[170] *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Anthropology*, 9.

[171] *Violence and Civility,* 10-12

subjective, as an existential condition of politics, but also as an existential condition of any subject, including the political one. If we understand suffering as a fundamentally subjective experience, then thinking conceptually about suffering as a legacy of violence must emerge from a subjective understanding of what we can grasp about the experience of violence such experiences. Furthermore, Henry's understanding of suffering's relation to existence provides a way to counter the opposition of the individual and collective by dealing with suffering both politically and as a feature of human life.

For Henry, suffering is ante-political in that it exists necessarily prior to any form of politics, since suffering is a characteristic of life prior to society or consciousness. Suffering is meta-political because he takes responses to suffering to be one of the key motivations for politics, arguing that "Clearly, a social context does exist before an individual has either the privilege or the misfortune of being born into it."[172]

Many other scholars of politics take seriously the idea that a threat to life or existence makes politics high stakes. Henry's emphasis, however, is notable for the way that it not only identifies that politics is most high stakes when "human lives" are suffering or threatened, but that he situates this in the ontological status of the individual political subject. Taking suffering to be an integral part of human life, as Henry does, helps understand how it sometimes leads to political responses and sometimes to political paralysis, but that if we want to understand how individual suffering ignites action, we need a theory of suffering.

A second problem arises when we attempt to define the universal value of the human. To agree on this essence would require an objective way of defining humanity, only then would we be able to determine how suffering affected that human. In other words, what makes

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[172] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 40

acknowledging suffering possible—a kind of objective distance—also makes it difficult to argue for justice, because of the fragmenting nature of this distant gaze on the other's suffering. What results is thus distance, rather than belonging or community. It certainly seems to foreclose forming impressions through affect. To address Henry's kind of suffering in politics would require being close enough to the other to form those impressions.

There is a major obstacle here: even our impressions of ourselves are incomplete. Recall that Henry thinks there is an inaccessible quality to our "self-feeling." So not only is it difficult to experience another as an individual but it's difficult to experience ourselves as one. What can we do? This question gets at the heart of why political theory cannot ignore Henry's work. On the one hand, suffering is hugely important because it is life itself that is at stake. Quite literally. Whatever politics is, we can't have a political process without actually having people who are alive to do it, to make that process happen. On the other hand, suffering can continue to a point where people are physically or psychologically unable to represent themselves through political action. This would seem to be where other people would necessarily jump in to speak on behalf of those who couldn't, but because suffering is an example of a life experience that is difficult to represent, it cannot be understood as about finding the right words, but about being close enough to the life in question that the proper kinds of impression are formed. Modern political-economic systems make this difficult. Henry bases his definition of life as always undergoing the suffering of its needs on Marx's analysis in Capital Volume One of how value starts to emerge in human societies through people's attempts to trade and labor to fulfill their own needs. Only later, as value becomes more and more abstract, does society separate the everyday acts of living from the needs people have. For Henry, this is the high stakes part of political life that politics has forgotten. "Reality," Henry says in his book on Marx, "is the movement of life transforming

nature in order to satisfy its need; it is praxis".[173] Only by actually having forms of political

praxis that are close to the lives that are suffering, can politics get nearer the heart of what

matters most for living beings.

IV. Suffering as Subjective Experience

From Henry's concern with life emerges his understanding of suffering in the sense of

enduring or undergoing a test but also in the sense of being in pain. The categories of suffering,

pain, and torture overlap, and so for the purposes of asking what Henry can tell us about them, I

will be starting from the assumption that they do or don't coincide depending on circumstance

and subjective experience. Torture is, of the three of these, most directly a political concept, often

defined as being exercised by a state or by non-state political actors. Suffering can be either

existential/experiential or objective.) What I take here to be the most distinctive about pain is its

connection to a kind of bodily measure or experience. Where torture raises difficult questions

about the intentionality of the perpetrators versus the perception of the victims and suffering is a

subjective experience, pain is more like the latter. For Henry, suffering is one of the primary

modes or "tonalities", as he puts it, of life. As he puts it "Hate is hate, suffering is suffering. Each

tonality is what it is ; this means that *the stuff of which it is made is its phenomenality and the*

mode according to which this phenomenality takes place in every case, the mode according to

which affectivity determines itself in every case in it in order that it may be what it is, is this

determined reality."[174] A "tonal" aspect of life is something that cannot be objectified for, once

it's understood from an objective standpoint, ceases to be an internal affect and becomes

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[173] Michel Henry, *Marx : A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 224.

[174] *Essence of Manifestation,* 554.

something else. The example of pain is one of the clearest: pain ceases to be pain as such when we view it from a distance.

Suffering is a mode of life that it is what Henry calls subjectivity "enflamed."[175] In an experience like torture, despair or pain, he says that

> The capacity to feel in the sense of undergoing what one is and of suffering from it by being driven back to it without being able to withdraw or slip away, is carried to its incandescence, to the extreme point of suffering. Life is set ablaze. It burns from its own fire which is nothing other than the exaltation of this suffering that dwells within life and makes it into what it is.[176]

Suffering "makes life what it is" because it "dwells within life" but also can be understood as a auto-affection amplified, on fire, or alight, a heightened sense of affective subjectivity.

Suffering is then one of the primary aspects of life that is necessarily revealed to and within a subject but as purely subjective, inseparable from the subject. As he puts it, "Each tonality is what it is."[177] In other words, these "tonalities" are simultaneously objective and subjective. Just as with light hitting a shape, whatever is *there* cannot be changed, but it is always already experienced subjectively.[178] A "tonal" aspect of life is something that cannot be objectified for, once it's understood from an objective standpoint, ceases to be an internal affect and becomes something else. The example of pain is one of the clearest: pain ceases to be pain as such when we view it from a distance.

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[175] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism : Theory of a Catastrophe* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)., 49

[176] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 49.

[177] *Essence of Manifestation,* 554.

[178] Ibid.

The connection between suffering and existence hinges for Henry on a layered reading of what it means to suffer, with a joint emphasis on the qualities of life as: enduring its own existence in time and space, evoking affective experiences of patience, waiting, or undergoing; experiencing recurrent needs necessary to continue its life, or suffering hunger, cold, heat, or thirst; and suffering embodied pain or anguish, perhaps even psychological.

Not only is there an intrinsically subjective aspect of an affective tonality like suffering, but these tonalities are related to one another through their similar relationships to the diversity and multiplicity of life. Taking the examples of hate and unhappiness, Henry argues that "hate is unhappiness." He continues, asserting that

> [T]his proposition…[t]hat hate is unhappiness does not mean that it involved unhappiness as its consequence, as an ensemble of unhappy repercussions on the life of him who hates, on his active, intellectual, or moral life, or even on his specifically affective life, determining in him the appearance of a certain number of difficulties and new and painful feelings such as remorse, uneasiness, anger, in brief a series of angry disorders; it means that hate is in itself unhappiness, that its unhappiness character is a phenomenological character of the experience in which it consists; it expresses nothing other than the tonality of this experience, this suffering of a certain type, this despair of a certain type to which the *Erlebnis* of this hate considered as such refers; it expresses nothing other than hate itself.[179]

This passage illustrates how the relationship between the tonalities of hate, suffering, and unhappiness is not at all logical. As a "proposition", these should be understood philosophically as not related as action leading to consequence, but rather as being in-themselves connected

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[179] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973)., 555

through a shared affective or material experience. For Henry, experiences are phenomenologically encountered by the living as interwoven or connected—except that even this language makes life seem too discrete or modal. Suffering, as a primary and necessary part of life, is thus a tonality that is with(in) other tonalities, or that has those with(in) it.

V. Suffering in the form of pain: the challenge of representation

The literary theorist Elaine Scarry's 1985 book *The Body in Pain* remains central in the discussion of whether and/or how pain can be represented. Scarry's work is notable for the strong position it takes on the unrepresentability of pain, with an accompanying account of the troubled relationship between pain and language. In arguing that pain is a transcultural[180] phenomenon where language fails to express a subject's interior experience, she evokes the ways that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[181] Pain is not only *one* way that language is uncoupled from intentionality, it is this uncoupling that helps identify pain as a phenomenon. As she argues, [pain's] "resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is."[182] Pain's power, for Scarry, comes from its ability to take away the subject's agency as expressible through language, as the subject loses the ability to represent its position in the world, its experience.[183]

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[180] Scarry acknowledges cultural differences, but believes that all languages will eventually reach a limit in expressing pain.

[181] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Prss, 1985)., 4

[182] *The Body in Pain,* 5

[183] But see Scarry's discussion of "analogical substantiation" and "analogical verification" of pain in *The Body in Pain*., 13-14

At first blush, to characterize pain as something that can prevent a subject from communicating its position, belief, or experience would seem to make the existence of pain a limit condition for politics, insofar as politics requires speech acts, discourse, or deliberation of some kind[184]—precisely the sorts of actions that pain interrupts both temporally and experientially. But Henry suggests that suffering, in its existential dimensions, is also a condition of possibility for politics. The key, then, is to ask whether and how we can connect the particular, painful suffering of some to the existential suffering of all.

Henry's suggestion that the words we use to talk about suffering may make particular reference to particular forms does not mean that he is positing a direct correspondence between experiences and how people understand them. His point is instead fairly subtle but straightforward: meaning inheres to the experience itself, which cannot be grasped or understood as such, but which must be represented in order to be called by the name of suffering.

Acts of representation do not have direct access to the meaningfulness of life experience, but the attempt to represent experience serves to ascribe meaning to and name experiences. In this case, however, there is an unavoidable gap between the reference and the referent.[185] This gap indicates two things: first, that there is some meaning connected to the material, affective facticity of life, and second, that the fact that life exists is not necessarily related through a shared meaning with attempts to describe or understand it.

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[184] But see Ayten Gündoğdu's discussion of the distinction between political speech and logos in Rancière, as it relates to political oppression in particular. But see Ayten Gündoğdu's discussion of the distinction between political speech and logos in Rancière, as it relates to political oppression in particular in Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[185] It is beyond the scope of this discussion to relate it at length to Derrida's account of *différance*, but I believe that Henry's position is closer to Derrida's on the question of signification than has been argued by past readers of their works, such as Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

As I discuss below, the possible lack of relationship between representations of an affective condition like suffering and the experience of suffering emerges from an implicit philosophy of language in Henry's work and his account of how representation works as a socio-political act. The similarities between Henry's treatment of language and Wittgenstein's language philosophy have been noted by John Milbank, but while he argues against both Henry's and Wittgenstein's rejection of the idea of an immortal soul, I argue below that reading Henry and Wittgenstein together helps us to see that the existence of the soul is not a prerequisite for understanding a being's interior life as a foundation for the generation of meaning.

Furthermore, while this problem of the inaccessibility of meaning applies to all life, suffering is one of the most profound and difficult examples of life's affective experiences in the world. Henry's summary of the problem makes this clear:

> For no meaning given to the Being of suffering can change anything in its regard or in any way diminish the weight of its presence or parody its 'truth', viz. *this truth, which is consubstantial with it, which is its own revelation as constituted by its own affectivity and by the mode according to which the affectivity takes place in it, i.e. as constituted by suffering.*[186]

In other words, suffering is profoundly important because of its deep relationship to life's affectivity, which constitutes the experience of suffering; suffering is profoundly difficult because as an existential phenomenon, it cannot be changed by anything immaterial. Furthermore, while this problem of the inaccessibility of meaning applies to all life, suffering is, for Henry, the most extreme example of something being obscured in the instance of its representation, which brings us back to the politics of representation.

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[186] Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation.*, 555.

As a form of objectification, political representation of the suffering subject fundamentally mischaracterizes the subjective nature of suffering. In this section, I explore ways that suffering is, for Henry, the most extreme example of something being obscured in the instance of its representation.

Suffering is a fact of life for Henry but politics struggles to represent it and at its worst uses and produces suffering. This is significant, because suffering is a fact of life that all life holds in common, but it can certainly be magnified by political or social action. Suffering is a fact of life because it is an existential fact. Suffering may not only be related to the affective experience of pain, but it is also related to the experience of living in time and space. But when suffering is abstracted and made into an object for politics, the result is to obscure suffering by some forms of suffering as things that can be eradicated. The politics of action relies on the idea that we can relieve suffering but this can also result in devaluing politically the forms of *existential* suffering that are so intrinsic as to be ineradicable.

The purpose of following Henry's logic on suffering is to speak to the dilemmas political theorists face when articulating normative claims about the consequences of political actions. Like all political scientists, we are often caught between competing claims concerning groups versus individuals, majorities versus minorities, and practical versus ideal aims. Aside from utilitarianism and its ilk, however, we tend to approach these problems one situation at a time. As an alternative, I propose that how we understand concepts like freedom or autonomy can be enriched if we talk about them in relation to a political subject who embodies Henryian "living subjectivity." Following Henry's account of "suffering" can provide us with a helpful way to link what we understand the object of politics to be, i.e. alleviating suffering, and how we understand the political subject, i.e. an individual life that "suffers."

Tackling suffering as a political phenomenon requires that we first understand suffering as part of the broader story of what it means to exist (as I did earlier); only subsequently can we theorize the intersections of suffering and politics, and the limits of the latter's ability to address the former. One implication of foregrounding the claim of existence as suffering is that if all life exists in a context where suffering is always imminent, then politics cannot be fully judged by whether it is able to prevent suffering. Yet while we can neither prevent nor eliminate suffering, we must still judge politics by its effects on suffering, particularly its ability to alleviate or mitigate suffering. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, it is tempting to simply discard suffering as a "category" of judgment, in favor of the highly rationalized frameworks liberty, morality, or utility. But these frameworks require individuals to represent themselves as free or ethical subjects working as part of society toward some end, in order for shared terms to emerge that can be used in the determination of how political judgment should proceed.

One clear lesson is that suffering is always conceptually elusive as a phenomenon. In light of this, as theorists we have a choice in terms of how we understand the social importance of something like suffering or pain. Is the "suffering" that is most important socially the suffering that I experience *with* others in a way that can only be determined through some form of inter-subjective communication? Or is the "suffering" that is most important socially the one that I experience myself in a way that is so completely in-communicable that it actually affects social relations by opening up gaps in how people relate to one another?

Suffering as such is an existential fact, but when politics obscures suffering it can frame some forms of suffering as things that can be eradicated, and other forms as things that can be obscured and not granted importance understand, grapple with, and address productively. What I described as the "inaccessible" aspects of subjective life for Henry can also be understood as

life's "clandestine" qualities.[187] While politics may try to co-opt clandestine or resistant forms of subjectivity, Henry nonetheless identifies how underground, deeply felt, internalized drives can be important opponents to politics, ones that empower society's defense against itself.

A comparison with Wittgenstein's form of post-Cartesian subjectivity may help clarify the question of pain in Henry. When Wittgenstein says "Pain-behavior can point to a painful place—but the subject of pain is the person who gives it expression," he argues that pain can be "expressed" but this statement also indicates a certain gap between between the material context of the pain (the "painful place" and the bodily gestures of "pain-behavior" and the "subject of the pain…[a] person."[188] For Wittgenstein, these gaps indicate that not only the other's pain but also our own pain cannot be known or comprehended fully, and our attempts to use language or thought to do so expose gaps between the material experience of pain and our ability to find some common vocabulary for them.

Like Wittgenstein, Henry points out that pain cannot be an object of comprehension but he does not distinguish between the material aspects of the "pain-behavior" and the "pain experience." Where for Wittgenstein either gesture or sound may be part of the grammar of how pain is expressed in the language game, Henry believes that the subject ought to be understood as arising prior to this, as the living body whose experience is of an affective, material pain tonality. For Henry, it is impossible to make "pain or suffering, or more concretely, hunger or cold," an object that can be perceived and represented.[189] But this is true not only of the other's pain but

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[187] Theologian Michelle Rebidoux connects this to Henry's experience of clandestine political action as a member of the French resistance in her dissertation, published as Michelle Rebidoux, *The Philosophy of Michel Henry (1922-2002) : A French Christian Phenomenology of Life* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012).

[188] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, section 302, p. 101e.

[189] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 23

also of our own pain. As soon as we start to represent hunger or cold to ourselves, we have started the process of separating our suffering from our subject-hood, through its objectification. Now, Wittgenstein's understanding of the work that that representation does is closer to a kind of self-translation, from the experience to its representation. In either case, the product of our attempts to represent even our own hunger to ourselves fall short of action—they cannot "do" anything to transform or affect our pain, as *our* pain. If we cease to exist, our pain ceases to exist, and whatever we do, we can't get rid of it or transfer it to another, even through the process of objectification. When we point, in the doctor's office, to various cartoon faces that range from toothy grin to furrowed-brow grimace, what we're expressing is not pain, but something distanced that we can only "name" pain.

Henry and Wittgenstein are very close on this point. The latter points out, after all, that "An image is not a picture, but a picture can correspond to it."[190] Wittgenstein acknowledges something akin to Henry's affective tonality when he says of the "pain image" that "The image of pain certainly enters into the language game in a sense; only not as a picture."[191] By sensing the image of pain, the subject comprehends it, even plays with it in the language game, where they may not have cognized or rationalized it. There is an understanding within the language game that is not about comprehension but about familiarity.

I have begun here to show how Henry provides a counterpoint to many Wittgensteinian approaches to pain; further, this Henryian approach to pain usefully contributes to Wittgenstein's account of the social. While it is possible to understand Wittgenstein's emphasis on the intersubjective aspects of the language game as implying a lack of relationship between what the

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[190] *Philosophical Investigations,* section 301, p. 101e.

[191] Ibid.

subject experiences as pain and the verbalized "pain" that is no longer mine once it is expressed, this is not a sufficient account of the embodied experience of another's pain. But of course, Wittgenstein is not pretending to focus on the body; if he were disavowing the importance of the body, then that would indeed be problematic. To see pain as only acquiring a social meaning through language would be to replace the idea that some "true" communication can happen from one person to another with (roughly, a correspondence theory of truth) only to land on an equally rigid idea of authenticity happening only alongside the human and through the social. In other words, assuming that pain is only meaningful in a social context through the language game is just as problematic as saying that it is only meaningful not through the language game. If we care about something like an authentic experience, there has to be some way of thinking about the relationship even if it is imperfectly or incompletely.

Using an account of the individual that relies on its status as living, rather than human or rational, disturbs the notion that an experience must be representable in order for it to be politically manageable or comprehensible. For while representation can be a mechanism for expanding whose suffering and which forms of it become important within a political context, it is also relatively easy to exploit.

We need to talk about suffering because it allows us to discuss what must be protected or accounted for regarding the personal/individual. If we do not take this into account, then we risk remaining on the level of mere representation, thus making exploitation of the process of representation easier. Suffering is important to consider since it opens onto the dimension of the personal/individual—it re-centers the discussion on experience, not representation or abstraction or object.

Lest one think a focus on suffering should be too depressing, Henry helps us to see that

is a necessary condition of life, one that can lead to deeply motivated political action. In fact,

suffering is something that pushes us together as what he describes elsewhere as "pathos-with",

and this provides us with a picture of how to account for the ontological primacy of suffering

life, while, at the same time, recognizing our own limitations in doing so.

VI. The Subject of Violence

Henry's understanding of suffering also elucidates the status of the political subject that

faces violence. As I discuss below, Henry's understanding of the living subject as one that is

always already suffering means that suffering exists prior to, during, and after the act of violence.

Thus, the status of violence must be understood as it relates to this overall condition of suffering

existence. Ultimately, this approach does not undermine a critique of violence's irruptive

capacity to harm, but instead situates the stakes of this capacity to harm within the overall

suffering and meaning of existence.

The effects of violence on the individual can also be viewed through the theoretical and

psychological lens of trauma. Indeed, part of what motivates political responses to violent

histories is a recognition that not only do experiences which are traumatic for a human subject

have political resonance, insofar as politics emerges from a human activity, there are also other

political events that are themselves directly or indirectly violent. After all, violence can appear at

multiple points in a political history, now as cause or consequence, now as origin or means.

There are powerful arguments against forms of violence caused by people or institutions,

particularly the violence of the powerful against the vulnerable. These relatively straightforward

situations are difficult enough to address; to grapple with violent actions or consequences that

appear inevitable, inescapable, or justifiable in some particular context is a problem that

highlights the inadequacy of discursive responses and action alike. Violence is a problem that we can't talk our way out of, both because words fail, literally, in describing trauma or pain or suffering, but also because trauma or suffering can engender a kind of paralysis that is itself inhospitable to political action.

What is more crucial for Henry is that, with torture, "[t]he means employed is suffering" and that when the suffering reaches its apogee, "the one who undergoes it will have no other desire than to make it stop, and no other means to stop it than to speak."[192]

VII. Torture as Unrepresentable and Unmournable Suffering

The discussion of torture takes up relatively little space in Henry's phenomenology of life, but it is a pivotal element in his account of how suffering can be turned to political ends and pushed to its limits. In his discussion of totalitarianism, Henry identifies torture as what shows fascism for what it is. Torture is the "limit situation where the truth of fascism is revealed."[193]

Following Henry's elucidation of suffering as an existential feature of living subjectivity, I focused on the particular forms of political violence present in human-on-human torture. To value, preserve, and support life is what gives the political its ethical power. When life is evoked, however, it is with emphasis on how its existence—and often, its loss—are fundamental parts of politics. Butler makes this specific move in the introduction to their book *Precarious Life*:

> Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener
> sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold. So, it is not that mourning is the goal of

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[192] Ibid., 49

[193] Ibid., 48

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politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence.[194]

Although the focus of the text is mourning and the mourn-ability of various bodies, in this passage Butler is clear that the *stakes* of mourning rest on acknowledging the importance of possessing a "sense of the value of life" as part of "opposing violence". For them, mourning is a way of making a life public such that the value of all life "takes hold" in those who compose the political. Butler's comment moves from the "sense of the value of life, all life" to simply the "sense of life." Reading this as, not a slippage, but rather a statement that highlights a relationship between a "sense of the value of" and a "sense of" when it comes to, specifically, "life, all life." For Butler, the admitting to view effected by mourning means seeing and hearing the faces of those with precarious lives.

In Butler's discussion of mourning, making public the vulnerability/suffering of all life is one aim of politics. This making public is first a way of ex-posing and thus op-posing violence. Yet this opposition also calls into question the very nature of political difference. To be opposed to the violence of torture would imply a legitimate basis for debating its permissibility.

Their use of the adjective keen is telling here. There is a sharpness to mourning and, if it is to cut through or interrupt the ordinary, it may need to be noisy. Lamenting aloud for a life, as with *a* keen, intersects and draws on both the inarticulate quality of a wail and the articulable sense of life required to sing a song about a life.

Rather than just prompting the affirmation of human rights in a negative sense (e.g. rights to *not be tortured*), the presence of torture in politics suggests that the fundamental positive right *to continue to exist* cannot be disregarded.

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[194] Ibid., xviii-xix.

Understanding life as suffering adds another layer to analyses of political violence like torture, linking the lives of the tortured with those of the torturer. For this to be possible without making a facile connection between the two requires that we expose the experience of the tortured without replicating the violence of the torture itself. As this chapter has shown, the exposure that the subject of analysis undergoes in the Henryian phenomenology of suffering allows us to conceptualize the sufferer as radically inaccessible. This clarifies a particular quality that the torturer's violence engenders: the violence of attempting to expose that which is most inaccessible, which the subject does not want to expose. The violation of what the subject does not give up with volitional intention.

Pain marks the relationship between each individual's experience and the experience of enduring one's own life. This requires refashioning the account of torture to emphasize not only how it risks and threatens life, but also how it amplifies the fundamental experience of suffering. This heightened suffering is horrific because it alienates the tortured from the torturer through an experience that ordinarily would be one where suffering could be shared. To respond to torture politically requires untangling the various experiences of suffering that are present in a political context through encounters that call on individuals to take seriously that suffering is both real and universal even if it is not always excruciatingly painful in a way that can be represented.

These acts cannot be divorced but they also cannot be privileged over one another. Both of these acts require spaces that allow radical individuality to emerge while also remaining committed to the ways this individuality does not depend on intentional action or will. If even the capacity to witness is limited—as it certainly is in many cases—the radical individuality of life, and not just its materiality, remains to ground political action.

Recall how Henryian life is always already about the sensation of auto-affection, which gives the implicit yet sensible value of life as a phenomenon so that politics can then "bring [it to] light."[195] This suggests another approach to what Butler has called the "keen sense" of life that politics requires.[196] Butler is only one among many theorists who remain attentive to the ways that life must exist in order for one life to respond to another's need. Henry's emphasis on life highlights the role "life" plays as a term in work like Butler's and to argue for the necessity of considering the category of life in social, psychological, and linguistic analyses of pain, suffering, and violence. I also examine two contemporary contexts in which the Henryian analysis of life helps us to understand better what political actors are doing when they evoke the concept of life.

Henryian Life crosses the interior and exterior aspects of the subjective experiences of pain, suffering and violence—and because of its subjective character—shows the danger of objectifying violence to the exclusion of its subjective character. Henry's work borders theological treatments of pain and suffering. Where the monotheistic tradition takes suffering as a fundamental feature of human experience, it tends to situate it within the problematic of theodicy, while Buddhism does not so much ask *why* suffering exists but rather recognizes its omnipresence and orients individual practice toward developing freedom from suffering. Yet where religious practices are compelled to acknowledge and account for suffering as part of the human condition in order to construct meaning for existence, Henry is not concerned with creating transcendent meaning. Instead, his focus is on life as *immanently* meaningful. This chapter argues that taking suffering as a central feature of political subjectivity admits a richer

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[195] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004)., xviii-xix

[196] Ibid., xviii-xix

approach to problems of political violence because violence's effects on other forms of suffering help clarify its meaning for individual lives and collectivities alike.

Henry's discussion of torture goes to the way this form of subjective violence distorts the life experience of the tortured person, by employing suffering toward a specific end. Where suffering is a bare fact of life for all persons, an intentional increase of suffering of the tortured by the torturer shifts this condition of existence to a social means "for the sake of a specific end": "Torture appears, first of all, as a means utilized for the sake of a specific end."[197] Part of what identifies torture is that it works through a kind of force that deliberately subverts the desires and sense of life of the person involved, in order to achieve "some specific end." These "ends" can vary, though.

Also crucial for Henry is that, with torture, "[t]he means employed is suffering" and that when the suffering reaches its apogee, "the one who undergoes it will have no other desire than to make it stop, and no other means to stop it than to speak."[198] This logic of the means and ends unites Henry's discussion of torture for political ends (the kind of torture that he is concerned with emerges as the political disregards life, so this is a feature of authoritarianism but also other places too.)

When Henry discusses torture in *Du communisme au capitalisme* (2008), the example he uses is of a captured combatant being tortured into giving up their cell, into betraying their comrades.[199] This form of torture was made public as a feature of French military action since the 1960s when Roger Trinquier, a retired special forces officer of the French army published a tactical discussion of counter-insurgency measures titled *La guerre moderne* [The Modern War]

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[197] Henry and Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe.*, 48

[198] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 49

[199] *Du communisme au capitalisme*, pp. 49-50.

(Paris: La Table ronde, 1961.) In this book, Trinquier advises the practice of torture specifically in the case of getting a militant to give up the location of their cell, in words almost identical to those Henry uses decades later. In the 1990s and 2000s, renewed discussion to these forms of torture accompanies the publication of various French military leaders' accounts and memoirs by Algerian revolutionaries, of French tactics in the Algerian revolution, in Vietnam, and elsewhere. Torture, after all, unlike murder, does not have has as its primary goal to negate life, but rather to exploit and attenuate it. This attenuation is indeed psychic—the narrowing of the victim's desires and mental capacities—and yet even more fully: it is material, embodied, affective.

VIII. Conclusion

For Julia Kristeva, as quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, suffering serves in Proust's thought as a starting point for living, inasmuch as suffering emerges from the intersubjective affect of love. As she puts it:

> …[T]he writer still has need of a certain intelligence. What might it be? In the beginning was suffering. People whom we love necessarily make us suffer. The sole recourse that we have in the face of this inevitable affliction is the art of living, which is indeed dependent on a special form of intelligence. It consists in being able to regard the person who tortures us as a 'reflection', 'fragment' or 'stage of an Idea, a 'divine form': in other words, as a type of divinity.[200]

Vis-à-vis Proust's male avatar the fact that "people whom we love necessarily make us suffer" might bring to mind the suffering that attends romantic love; Kristeva hints at as much as she continues to develop the notion of regarding the other people as a "reflection" or "form."

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[200] Kristeva, Julia. Proust and the Sense of Time. New Yorkl, Columbia University Press, 1993, 79.

For Kristeva, this suffering occurs not only literally but literarily: love of others engenders

suffering but the act of writing itself is something that Proust suffers through, both in his bodily

suffering and in the re-living of past suffering through the articulation of his ideas about

suffering. Yet, this necessary suffering has much in common with Henry's notion of suffering as

enduring or persisting. For Proust, to re-live the memory is both to encounter it anew but also to

encounter its representation, a ghost far less fearsome viewed from the writer's vantage point.

One's personality of today, he writes, is like an abandoned quarry."[201] In this sense, Kristeva is

highlighting the very problem with affective experiences like suffering that preoccupies Henry:

these experiences are unrepresentable, and risk being re-inscribed into the experience of the

sufferer more fully the closer they approach representation. For Kristeva, this results in a kind of

joy in Proust, wherein "Art alone is capable of taking its point of departure from the painful and

the sordid, of building up a character of universality and thus of 'joyously peopling our life with

divinities'."[202] Henry's account of the unrepresentability of feeling "results from its very essence

and from the structure of the phenomenality in it as irreducible" to representation.[203] Since

representation is abstraction, for Henry, it can only ever refer back to the phenomenon being

represented. From this light, the written-about-suffering of the writer (here, Proust) always

presupposes and refers back to the affective experience of the writer himself. What is the

significance, however, of the failure of representation? While Henry's pushes us to spend time

precisely with how the failure of representation necessitates experiencing the self affectively,

Kristeva provides us with an example of what this may look like in practice. The practice of

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[201] Proust, Marcel. *Time Regained.* In Search of Lost Time. Volume VI., transl. Andreas Mayor and Terence
Kilmartin. Revised by D.J. Enright. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, 285,

[202] Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, 79.

[203] Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation,* 607.

writing about suffering, as in Proust, does not per Kristeva doom either him—or her—to conceal suffering. Reading Henry's alongside this example in Kristeva might also open up experiences like Proust's to something beyond Ideas, Art or Universality. What would it mean to take seriously the body of Proust, the affective experience of suffering through writing, and the very feelings that arise when encountering the representations of suffering? To return, in this way, to "the beginning" would be to constantly remind ourselves, as suffering and all affects do, of the bodies that are affected by harm and which cannot escape it.

CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL LIFE BEYOND ABSTRACTION: HENRY'S CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL

For Henry, the political is not a source of freedom, but rather something that constricts it. Specifically, it constricts the individual's relationship to its unknowable interiority. In this chapter, I turn now from my prior discussion of suffering to the question of how interiority, including but not limited to affective states like suffering, comes to matter in the "outside" world and shape the politics of difference. Henry's reading of Marx and his critique of the political clears the ground for a political theory of phenomenal life that protects and sustains the radical individuality and difference of living subjects. This means identifying forms of political belonging that allow for the flourishing of individual interiority while they protect its fundamental unknowability.

If politics takes Life seriously, it must wrestle with two dynamics: one, the fact that lives have needs that should be met and, two, the way that the abstraction which usually allows for politics is in tension with this the articulation of individual and particular needs.

Henry's response is surprisingly not individual, but rather communal. I draw on Henry's idea of a community of "pathetik" beings, wherein an understanding of the centrality of pathos can dismantle abstraction while still providing spaces for the articulation of a politics.

Henry's critique of the political, built as it is on an understanding of political economy as an abstraction of human reality, contributes a critical perspective on the challenges of political community, highlighting the necessity of preserving radically individual life and diminishing abstract political formulations. A politics that supported life would require rejecting abstract definitions of life and preserving conditions for life to express itself. If it relies too much on

abstraction, "the political" cannot support human life as such. Contemporary readers will find Henry's later, more polemical writings that address politics directly most enlightening when they are read via the theorization of the representative force of life that emerges in his earlier reading of Marx.

Henry's reading of Marx advocates critiquing politics as Marx does, for its effecting the actual suffering of the individual. Henry's attentiveness to this insight does not mean that the structural conditions for economic inequality should be ignored, but rather that they derive their meaning from ordinary life. Taking Marx's thought beyond the text, Henry stresses that the meaningfulness and energy of Marxist critique relies on an awareness of the consequences these have for of living individuals. Structural conditions matter, but actual, lived suffering is the best argument for continuing to develop Marx's ideas and to use them reflexively to critique politics because both forms of politics are capable of engendering suffering and threatening survival, on the one hand, and of turning a blind eye to these things in lieu of focusing on abstract terms, on the other hand.

This chapter first takes up Henry's concern with how a historical materialist concept of the human can function as an abstract representation of living life, pointing away from the human toward capital rather than from the value of life to its meaning.

Henry draws from his reading of Marx on human life and the emergence of exchange value out of use value. This abstraction pushes in several directions—towards ideology, or the abstraction of human values into concepts, on the one hand, and toward the economy, or the exchange of capital value divorced from human needs. I also discuss how he refines the specific account of the role of labor in the move from need for survival to social context. The following section closely reads the role of thought and consciousness in Henry's reading of Marxian praxis.

Finally, Henry's recuperated humanism contributes a rich notion of how contemporary political theory can center material life as the necessary medium for theorizing. Life is the medium a form of theorizing where thought and practice meet, that is cognizant of how lived experiences can never be fully captured in abstract terms.

What are the practical implications of taking seriously Henry's analytic of praxis? I think we have some clues when he says that "totalitarianism is the result of the hypostasis of the political and the correlative lowering of life as well as the individual" that it "is a threat that "looms over any conceivable regime in which the political is taken as the essential and in which the concealment of life's own way of appearing extends its reign over human beings, thereby determining a phase of their history."[204] This happens where I am forced to identity my political motivations in representational terms that may have little-to-no connection to my individual desires and personal actions. If the political does *not* reflect the personal, then it risks becoming not only alienating but destructively so.

Henry's alternative is to understand these two things—the personal, or individual, interiority and the worldly or external—as *imperfectly* connected but nonetheless related and capable of exemplifying one another. He calls this Life's own self-unveiling, when its "own way of appearing" is not concealed, is a key to this form of humanism.[205] By placing "life" as the necessarily fundamental basis for society, Henry articulates and extends the "existential" stakes of Marx's thought, and its application in twentieth century political situations. Henry argues that existential foundations for politics can have profound stakes under capitalist and communist

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[204] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 103.

[205] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 103.

conditions alike.[206] The economic structures that exist in a polity may exacerbate the forms of suffering that individual experience, but these do not fully correlate to either capitalism or communism, or anything in between. Rather, any form of politics may foster or even require disregarding of human suffering.

For debates about the beginnings and ends of life, this has several implications. First, the primary focus of discussion cannot be on defining "personhood" or even "life." Despite the attractions of the relative clarity inherited from how the term "person" has been used legally (and its correspondingly long history in political theory), the term is for that very reason susceptible to objectification. And, while objectivity may be appropriate in certain bounded discursive situations, determining the boundaries of life is not one of them. Because our relationship to life can only ever be subjective—just as our relationships to the things we require to live always have a subjective element—claims to objectivity and the use of historically redolent terms only work insofar as they have subjective weight in our present context. Incidentally, this should caution us against reification in general including, of course, reification of the term life that accords it universal qualities or claims not grounded in life as it is experienced and lived.

What we see, then, is that the destruction of the individual happens far before state structures start to look totalitarian or universalist. These acts are not a turn to something different, because they are the result, if we follow this logic, of any way of thinking that demands the sacrifice of any individual for the needs of public affairs. War is the primary example of this, where lives must be sacrificed for love of country, a love that is precisely an abstraction, an emotion directed toward an abstract concept, the state.

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[206] Ibid., 10, 102.

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Henry's work on Marx first appeared in French in two volumes, subtitled "A philosophy of reality" (*Une Philosophie de la réalité*) and "A philosophy of the economy" (*Une Philosophie de l'économie.*)[207] For publication in English, Henry himself abridged the text and it was subsequently translated, with the subtitle "A Philosophy of Human Reality."[208] This latter formulation captures precisely how Henry understands Marx: as a theorist whose political economic theory is most significantly a critique of the effect the political has on human existence. This reading brings together several key aspects of Henry's philosophical framework, namely his interest in gaps between how life is understood philosophically and how it is experienced individually, and his concern with questions of suffering. Henry's critique of politics attends to how the gap between unknowable individual interiority and political life is often bridged by abstract concepts rather than by lived experience or praxis.

I. Historical Materialism and Difference

In his discussion of race-based US politics, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva takes up a statement by Albert Memmi about how racism persists in spite of most Americans disavowing the identifier "racist."[209] Bonilla-Silva's project makes a crucial intervention into the literature on racism by separating "racial hostility," a form of affective racism played outward in explicit prejudice from what he calls "racial ideology," arguing via Marx that racism is expressed socially through effects on individuals and groups' social, material realities.[210] In identifying how racialization ossifies intra-group identification and reshapes the material stakes for racialized persons,

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[207] Michel Henry, *Marx,* Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

[208] Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 1983.

[209] Edouardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, Lanham,: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 1.

[210] *Racism without Racists,* 8-9

Bonilla-Silva's work exemplified how a classical Marxian analytic can be transformed and extended to address difficult cases of political difference.

Yet, there is a problem with ignoring affective materiality in an analysis of historical-materialist conditions, a move that characterizes not only Bonilla-Silva's work but most readers of Marx (not least Althusser.)[211] Turning away from the importance of sensual materiality in Marx risks misunderstanding the very forms of subjective power that operate in and through racism, as well as those forms of affective solidarity that open up possibilities of overcoming analogous forms of extreme political difference.

By dividing the analytic frameworks of affect and historical materialism, scholars like Bonilla-Silva focus on the collective ideological interests of groups—races, classes, nations—but leave behind a crucial aspect of Marxist philosophy—its origin in the living human subject. The genesis of the Marxian subject as a *living* subject is what preoccupies Henry in his lengthy engagement with Marx. Not only does Henry argue that the living roots of Marxian subjectivity must be emphasized in order to read Marx aright, he argues further that life is neglected in the reception of Marx, particularly in Marxism-Leninism.[212]

If there is a reading of Marx against which Henry would seem to be arguing it is the one that Althusser outlines in *For Marx*. There, it is the "epistemological break" between the early, philosophical Marx, and the later, historical and social-scientific Marx, that prefigures the questions Althusser asks about Marx. In that text, the question of whether and how the early or the late Marx are truly "Marx" requires the concept of a "Marx" and a "Marxism" that, in their

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[211] See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* [Pour Marx], trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2005. and Etienne Balibar and Gregory Elliot (afterward and appendix), *The Philosophy of Marx* [La philosophie de Marx], trans. Chris Turner London: Verso, 2017.

[212] See Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

ideological and historical specificity, may or may not be represented in texts written by Marx.[213]

Yet Althusser and Henry share a concern with what Althusser calls the "*theoretical* effects of ideology,"[214] namely where political struggle in lived material experience (as in the case of class struggle) is abstracted from reality. Henry, however, sees this abstraction as the expected result of the position Althusser takes, making no bones about saying that:

> The elimination of Marx's philosophical thought in favor of the dogmatic
>
> theses of dialectical materialism as it had been constituted and defined over
>
> almost half a century in ignorance of this thought is the explicit project of Louis
>
> Althusser and the avowed aim of his investigation.[215]

Where they differ, is that for Althusser "objective social reality"[216] does exist—it is ideology seen as separate from this reality that is dangerous. Henry, by contract, insists on the subjective quality of reality, and commits to finding this in Marx's writing wherever it emerges.

His objection to Althusser grounds an interpretation of Marx that makes a crucial and often overlooked intervention into how Marx can speak to the ways that political community may occur among post-Cartesian subjects. Notwithstanding Henry's personal antipathy to Marxism-Leninism in its twentieth-century manifestations, I suggest that the Henryian framework may help eventually bring affective materiality back into the Marxian historical-materialist critique.[217] In doing so, I argue that Henry's work is both a critique of politics qua

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[213] See especially Althusser, *For Marx*., 75-85

[214] *For Marx.,* 12

[215] Henry, *Marx: A philosophy of Human Reality,* 8.

[216] Ibid., 12

[217] This is not to downplay the importance of historical-materialism; far from it! Rather, bringing affect back in to Marxian historical-materialism strengthens its critical purchase while also showing how interpretations of Marx that

ideology and the foundation for subjectivity and belonging that expand socialism beyond what are usually considered the borders of the political.

One problem is that most of the time humankind does not bear reality so well. As the third chapter of the dissertation discussed—the suffering that inheres in living is necessarily indivisible from the experience of life. The third chapter discussed how Henry deepens our understanding of what it means to grapple with the unrepresentability of interiority, but did not yet provide a *political* vision for how to address this. Given this nearly impossible task, how can Henry's concept of life enrich answers to political problems that resist resolution?

Henry argues that Marxist theory has taken Marx's own critique of the individual to be fundamental for politics, which is "decisive theoretical error" that ends up distorting most version of Marxian political practice. Instead of the individual being something that Marx is univocally against, Henry argues that Marx critiques the thinking individual, the individual as "the power of consciousness to freely modify its representations of reality."[218] This overturns a couple of accepted features of Marxist and post-Marxist thought, including the notion that a theoretical analysis of class, structure, labor-power, etc. will effectively pave the way for a reshaping of reality. From a traditional Marxist perspective, articulating the concept of class, for instance, allows individuals to understand their reality as members of a class.[219] Thus Marx's critical apparatus helps awaken the action of those individuals as a class (and thus not as individuals.) What is important for these versions of Marx is that the individual must be critiqued in order for the class/group to arise. Turning back to the living individual, as Henry believes we

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focus on class-consciousness or ideology to the exclusion of other forms of affective relationality (arguably including far stronger affect relations) are critically inert as well as fundamentally mistaken.

[218] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 22.

[219] For an excellent and lucid discussion of this see Etienne Balibar and Gregory Elliot, *The Philosophy of Marx,* [La philosophie de Marx], trans. Chris Turner, London: Verso, 1993.

must, would thus (to these "Marxists") be a regression that would foreclose politics, rather than enable creative political formations that enable lives to flourish.

Historical materialism is thus problematic for Henry because it attempts to use an abstract concept—that of "history"—to understand material conditions, an attempt that ends in erroneously positioning this abstract concept as a-historical. As Henry puts it,

> The error of materialism has always been to claim that reality and social laws are prior to the efforts of thought to understand them and ultimately transform them, that they are thus external to representations in the sphere of consciousness and then to identify them with 'external reality,' understood as the reality of the material world.[220]

In other words, Henry asserts that the concept of reality and the abstract social structures, such as laws or concepts of nature, are created by thought, in and through consciousness. He opposes this to a version of materialism that, first, takes the material world as something to be grasped by the subject, and that the concepts formed by the subject exist externally as the means of grasping the material world, and that these concepts represent the actual reality of the material world, in other words, to traditional Marxism, writing that

> [E]ither the subject creates the object and consciousness determines its representations, or the object determines the subject and consciousness is only an effect of material processes. *Either idealism or materialism*.[emphasis original] Regardless of how one might answer this question—idealist or materialist—to answer the question thus posed is to lose sight of what in Marx's eyes is the essence of true reality, namely, the subjective

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[220] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, London: Bloomsbury Academia, 2014, 21

life of individuals. This is neither a representation of consciousness nor a material

reality—it is not conceivable as an object.[221]

In strongly asserting a counterposition—that the subjective life of individual is not conceivable

as an object—Henry seeks to retain Marx's concern with material conditions without

incorporating a Marxian ontology, in which the subject's efforts to objectify the material

conditions as well as the subject's own identity are fundamental

Instead, from his earliest treatment of material needs, Henry considers how "we generally

call the needs of the body material needs."[222] There are contrasting ways to understand the act of

calling these bodily needs "material." On the one hand, there is what Henry terms "a naïve

ontology," an ontology that does not require pre-existing knowledge, but rather simply equates

materiality with existence.[223] On the other hand, he is pointing out how the supposedly

straightforward term "material" is not opposed to "intellectualist and idealist philosophy in

general" but rather results from it.[224] By insisting on an ontological account of the essence of

materialist needs, Henry connects his reading of Marx to his earlier analysis of the essence of

manifestation (the ontological account of life's hidden essence as auto-affection), as discussed

earlier in Chapters One and Two.

II. Materialism and Subjectivity

If philosophy (or even just phenomenology) is not about the objectifying work that

thought accomplishes, what then is it? For Henry, one place is to begin is by noting that the

abstract concept of thought is neither fundamental nor productive in Marx. Rather, the material

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[221] Ibid., 21-22.

[222] Michel Henry, *Philosophy and the Phenomenology of the Body*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, 221.

[223] *Philosophy and the Phenomenology of the Body,* 221.

[224] Ibid, 221.

substance of the world is what is taken up by the material subject as something thought. Affective existence is essential for any kind of thought, and as praxis, thought bridges the subject's experience of the world and its interiority. By resting on sensation, however, thought is not an abstracting function, but rather must return again and again to the natural, material conditions of the world.

> Capitalism is the system of value, its development and its maintenance (money being the eternal value); value is produced exclusively by living labor; the fate of capital is thus the fate of this labor, of the subjective praxis of the individual. Inasmuch as the real process of production includes within it the accomplishment of this praxis, it is at the same time a process of value formation, a process of the realization and increase of value.[225]

Here, we can see that Henry's reading of Marx makes it difficult to see abstracted analysis as at all productive. Through its focus on the original relation of labor to the human body as what allows it to, Henry emphasizes how labor, quite literally, interacts with and gives value (metabolic value) to the material world. Contra most neo-Marxists, Henry believes we have to consider the material reality as not being about social laws, but rather as being about the material lives of individuals, thus living individuals are the subjective basis for understanding the world, politics, and etc.

Thus, Henry pushes aside the idea of subject and object, claiming that the subjective individual feels itself but cannot do so as an object. The living individual's relationship to its own life cannot be that of a subject to an object; instead it is a subjective relationship that comprises something beyond what "subjectivity" usually connotes according to the

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[225] Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, 289.

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subject/object discourse. Individuals' relationship to their lives and their labor (in the original sense as outlined in the *Grundrisse*) is more essential than that of a subject to an object, because it is a relationship that is definitionally and intrinsically linked. When the life is gone, the individual is gone, too. And the life is there as soon as the individual is there and vice versa.[226] A materialism that loses sight of this, whether Marxian or otherwise, would be considered erroneous by Henry. Importantly, there are two versions of "reality" that are at issue here. The material "reality" of the world, life in the biological sense, is prior to the discussion Henry has with Marx. But for Henry, we must both take this reality to be a given, prior phenomenon but also understand that as soon as we are talking about it, we are referring not to it but to a second conceptual reality, the reality of our understanding of the world. It is this second reality that is encountered through thinking, as conscious subjects try to understand reality as external to themselves, but through thought.

Here Henry's divergence from Husserlian phenomenology becomes clear: a subject, for Henry, believes that the way it represents external reality in its consciousness objectively corresponds to the "external, material reality," neglecting to realize that its own materiality and subjectivity are at issue in the construction of social concepts. The Marxists' mistake is to confuse these concepts with that deeper underlying reality:

> According to Marx's great and decisive insight, the economists' notion of
> abstract labor is real labor set in opposition to itself, placed in front of itself, and
> objectified. But, this is no longer real labor—it is only an abstraction instead of
> and in place of life. When thought thinks life, it performs an essential de-
> realization of life. When this is forgotten, the objective equivalents themselves

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[226] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 23.

claim to constitute reality, especially the reality of living subjectivity, and they

simply take its place. Here a murder is carried out.[227]

Why is this a mistake? Firstly, because concepts of the "external" world are not objective, but

subjective; they are outside of both the subject's material reality as a being and its relationship to

its ordinary life. Concepts of "social reality" like history or class are thus second-order concepts.

The process is carried out as a material subject in a material world uses thought to understand

reality, which comprises both the subject and the world through a "subjective relationship" (to

itself and the material world).

What the subject thinks conceptually about the world can be understood as its "abstract"

notions of reality, but these abstractions can never be "objective" precisely because they depend

on and emerge from the subject's subjective reality, "what in Marx's eyes is the essence of true

reality, namely, the subjective life of individuals. This is neither a representation of

consciousness nor a material reality—it is not conceivable as an object."[228] In other words, to

take the important example of class, something like a class originates in lived need, not the other

way around. But this is precisely the mistake that 'Marxism' makes:

> What characterizes Marxism from a theoretical point of view is the replacement of the
>
> living individual with a number of abstract entities through which it claims to explain
>
> the totality of economic, historical, and social phenomena, and ultimately these
>
> individuals themselves. This leads to an extraordinary reversal of the order of things at
>
> the end of which the principle, the living individual, became the result of abstractions
>
> that took its place. These abstractions are the products of thought, the objects of thought.

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[227] *From Communism to Capitalism* , 116

[228] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 22

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They refer back to it and would not exist without it. As objects, they are dead things in the rigorous sense of the term: life is not present in the represented contents which have taken its place. As objects, they do not feel and do not feel themselves, they do not experience, they do not suffer, and they are not animated by any drive that leads toward their happiness—in short, they do not obey the general law of pleasure and pain. They are not alive. The objects of thought by which Marxism replaced living individuals are Society, History, and social classes.[229]

For Henry to emphasize the political as a distinct realm would be miss the fact that the most objective and reliable reality for the individual is the material world. As he argues, "Even when the lot of the individual is considered, its being is perceived, evaluated, and understood on the basis of another reality than its own. To act on it, it is necessary to act on another reality than its own. Moreover, this action on the individual has only become possible because it is determined completely by another, objective reality that makes it possible."[230] In other words, the political impulse to speak to, for, about, or with an individual *as object* relates to the individual through the alienating external reality of the political realm. This other, "objective reality" losing the threads of connection to the essence of the living individual that are meant to give politics its urgency and inspiration. Thus, the reality of political life becomes one in which the reality of the lives affected by it become profoundly alienated, separated from their own fundamental and most meaningful, real existence.

Henry positions a return to a living body as that which holds reality together. Thus, any form of alienation such that action does not help sustain individual life is among the most

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[229] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 26.

[230] Ibid., 96.

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harmful form of politics because the individual cannot be really alienated from their life. Henry connects this to Marx's work on the alienation of labor, arguing that since the body is itself at issue, the subjective ability to work and act cannot be separated. For Henry, there can be no "separate realms" in the world. Rather, the separate realms that matter are the material world and the abstract world. In the face of the consistent need to both produce and consume in order to survive, the "this way of being riveted and thrown against oneself," unable to be sold off.[231] As he puts it, "Social relations presuppose that the object is naturally separated from me and thus alienable. This is not the case for my *living* body with which I am identified in such a way that its suffering is my suffering and its effort is my effort. I am unable to take any distance in relation to it or to separate myself from it by selling it."[232] My body thus should not be understood as an object to myself, but instead as something into which I am continually thrown and existing within.

III. Life and Praxis

As an individual I experience the connection to the political through both intentional and unintentional praxis. Recall Henry's articulation of the necessity of auto-affection as the essence of existence, we must ask: how does auto-affection ground praxis? While praxis is typically considered as an exterior action, the result of consciousness if not intentionality, Henryian praxis relies on the intimate movements and sensations of auto-affection itself.

Thus, while auto-affection is not a form of praxis as such, in Henry's account of political subjectivity, praxis plays a crucial role in helping living subjects bridge their interior experience and the outside world. Whereas Henry understands *life* as containing fundamentally unknowable

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[231] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 24.

[232] Ibid.

aspects, praxis is a result of life and depends on life. Because praxis requires life but is not identical to it, praxis represents a separation from or gap between the interior life of the individual and then external world, even as it also provides a means of communication that life itself does not necessarily facilitate.

Ironically, for Henry, Marxism (or what he sees as bad applications of Marx's philosophy) ends up reifying the necessarily unidirectional relationship between subject and object that had occupied its predecessors. He identifies this problematic in an interpretation of Marx's critique of the capitalist abstraction of value that suggests Marx is only reassigning value from the capitalist to the laborer or laborers. Thus he asks,

> What happens, then, when the productive forces are no longer constituted in their very essence by subjectivity and become objective? As we know, the market economy, and capitalism along with it, is thereby struck to the quick. *And is the philosophy of praxis not affected in the same way?* Does not the decline of capitalism signify at the same time the decline of Marx's thought?   What indeed remains of the interpretation of being as production and as subjectivity when production, identifying itself with the mechanical instrumental apparatus, is no longer anything but the operation of this apparatus and, as such, a third-person objective process? Is not the individual eliminated from the problematic along with the praxis by which he is defined, eliminated, that is, from the concept of being as production?[233]

What Henry is missing here is the possibility of generating novel forms of community or value that Marxian critique makes possible. While the social realities that Marx envisioned may not

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[233] *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 294

rearticulate the notion of value as belonging intrinsically to the laboring subject, Marx's critique

nonetheless opens up the possibility of such a social arrangement.

Instead Henry remains focused on the ways that Marx's analytic remains rooted in the

necessarily abstracting discourse and praxis of economic thought. Henry acknowledges,

however, that Marx does provide a basis for regaining a focus on economic praxis and the

attendant suffering of the subject as part of a fundamanental social reality, and that "one should

conceive *this social reality and its specific laws as foreign to the sphere of conscious*

representations as well as the material world—one should say with Marx: this reality is the

reality of life. In his terminology, the reality of history is the reality of living individuals. Social

reality is a subjective praxis; it is social praxis.[234]" For Henry, something else is going on: reality

is to representation as praxis is to theory.[235] Theory is a representation of the reality of praxis, not

praxis itself. What Marxism gets wrong, Henry thinks, is its understanding that the work that the

representation does is in service of the creation of a new kind of reality. He resists this, arguing

that there is in fact this underlying, immanent ontological reality that cannot be denied even if it

cannot be expressed or re-presented (brought forth) into view.

Henry says, "Praxis designates the internal structure of action as it excludes from itself

the objectification process, all distancing, all transcendence in general."[236] Action is based on the

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[234] *From Communism to Capitalism*., 40-42

[235] On the question of representation in political ontology with particular reference to the Arendt-inflected work of Philip Pettit, see Miguel Vatter, "Political Ontology, Constituent Power, and Representation" in *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 18:6, 679-686, 2015. In her own words, Arendt dismisses the idea that praxis in Marx would be related to thought. As she puts it in a footnote in *The Life of the Mind*: "Even Marx, in whose work and thought the question of action played such a crucial role, 'uses the expression '*Praxis*' simply in the sense of 'what man does' as opposed to 'what man thinks.'" (Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt, 1978, 7). Her internal cite is to Nicholas Lobkowicz *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame, 1976, p. 419). Her epigraph also seems to inform this conclusion strongly: "Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences. Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom. Thinking does not solve the riddles of the universe. Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act. - Martin Heidegger."

[236] *Marx: A philosophy of human reality*, 160.

real experience of the self, where the self is acting not out of a transcendental ideal or out of some objectively determined sense of the self, but rather is "in touch with" the self—where self-distancing is not the goal, one gets praxis. In other words, for Henry, the kind of action that is based on the self's experience of the self is praxis.

What role does theory play and how does this matter for politics? Theory plays a role as a dialectical opposition to the experiencing of the self, for Henry being tantamount itself to an experience of alienation. It is crucial, Henry thinks, to move from the abstracting work of Marxist theory to the material reality it describes. For Henry, Marx*ism* is a glass through which, cloudily, Marx's thought is poorly grasped. The practical outgrowths of Marx's work—socialism and communism—and the ideologies in which they are rooted pay insufficient attention to the human in Marx. Henry states this clearly in beginning a late text that takes up the ideas from the longer, earlier *Marx*: "Marxism places a screen between Marx and us. To be sure, Marxism proceeds from Marx, but it forges its own path. Essentially oriented toward political action and its problems, it does not grasp within Marx's work that which makes possible such action, that which helps and clarifies it."[237]. As we have seen in the previous three chapters, Henry argues that life takes the form of immanent existence, intensely expressed through experiences such as suffering or joy. While existence is inseparable from immanent interiority, even though this basis remains in some sense inaccessible, there is another sense in which life is immanently constituted. The interior experience of life, being material, is always already contained by the immanent conditions for existence, the material circumstances that support, sustain, and nourish life's continuation in time.

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[237] "Le marxisme fait écran entre Marx et nous. Le marxisme procède assurément de Marx mais il a suivi son cours propre. Essentiellement orienté vers l'action politique et ses problems, il n'a pris dan l'œuvre de Marx que ce qui pourrait être utile à cette action, l'aider, l'éclairer." (Michel Henry, *La Socialisme Selon Marx* (Cabris: Sulliver, 2008)., 9), my translation.

Henry develops his understanding of the human in Marx being necessary to Marxian critique by, first, effecting a reduction of the Marxian subject's economic context. Henry finds that this context functions as the sustaining space for the subject's existence, bringing the reader's attention back to the subject in Marx and its place as impetus for the entire critique.

This renewed attention to the human is meant to function as an argument against dominant Marxist-influenced political institutions (those of the USSR and Maoist China) but also to relocate materiality within historical materialism. For Henry, human action and human needs drive Marx's derivation of value, while in Marxist practice, the human becomes increasingly abstracted and neglected. Henry attempts to carry over from Marx the emphasis on the human as a foundational entity into the later economic analysis but in order to argue that the existential stakes of the subject's alienation from its labor aid in understanding how the subject's affective embeddedness in the material world can ground political action that is attuned to both affective materiality and the rôle of capital.

As Chapter One discussed, Henry's version of existential philosophy is based on his understanding of fecund, self-generating life. Life, on this account, does not acquire its significance through its social relations, but social relations emerge from the ways that life generates life, that lives generate lives. Placing this claim of Henry's alongside Marx's analysis of how the market inures individuals to the transfer of social relations to objects. By placing "life" as the necessarily fundamental basis for society, Henry articulates and extends the "existential" stakes of Marx's thought, and its application in twentieth century politics.

For Henry, we should understand contemporary political subjects as "living individuals." In this, he follows Marx's statements that "The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals" and "the premises from which we begin are real

individuals[238]." Living individuals should be understood as, fundamentally, human beings, but beyond a basic sense of the human person, Henry's terminology is important because it highlights the human's materiality, affectivity and, most significantly, the human relationship to life itself.

IV. The Idea of Human Needs as the Basis for Life

The matter of human needs orients Henry's understanding of politics, since he identifies the problem of needs as the central challenge for political economy in the Marxian project. Henry focuses on needs as ontologically grounded. In Henry's reading, the kind of material abundance that Marx's overcoming of subsistence labor requires serves to bring forward Marx's fundamental insight (not coincidentally, Henry's as well) namely that it is real human lives that are the movers and drivers and consumers of the economy, and that they are inseparable from it in reality no matter the theoretical distance proposed by Marxist *philosophers.* Individuals are inseparable from the economy because they never cease to need the things that drive it. In *From Communism to Capitalism*, penned just after the fall the of the Iron Curtain, Henry attributes to "socialist ideology" not a flawed economic theory, but rather the flaw of neglecting and devaluing the individual.[239] His language at once valorize the individual, claiming that "individuals alone create the wealth of societies," but also positions "individuals themselves" as the "cause" of the fall of the Eastern Bloc.[240]

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[238] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology,* Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1976, 107-112.

[239] The central question of that work is, as he puts it: "Here an undeniable fact emerges before us: today the economic failure of the socialist camp constrains it, and, in order to save itself, it is forced to play the card of opening to the West and to democracy. This gives rise to the true question, the one which motivated this work and to which it will try to respond: *What is the cause of the economic failure of socialism?"* (italics original) (Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 5)

[240] See especially *From Communism to Capitalism*, 26-31

Notably, it is the *material* aspect of individual needs that is crucial for Henry. Henry considers Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* to be the first major work in which Marx outlines the building blocks for his economic theory. Crucially, Henry identifies Marx's critique of Hegel as being about how the merger of the universal and the particular is predicated on what Hegel calls "the Idea" rather than on the everyday realities of the particular communities and activities that make up the state, namely the family and civil society, writing that

> Marx himself wants the identity of the particular and the universal, and what he reproaches Hegel with is having affirmed this identity without being able to establish it, as becomes apparent in his discourse itself. For how could the State present itself as a necessity external to the family and to civil society if it truly constituted their internal reality and their immanent' end?[241]

What matters for Marx, according to Henry, is how difficult it is to actually determine the meaning, within their philosophical systems, of those "particularities." Henry reads Marx as asserting that, for Hegel, it is the relationship of family and civil society to the Universal that gives them their meaning; in other words, that gives family and civil society their connection to thought and reason, and their logical place in the world.[242] But Henry thinks Hegel is mistaken, arguing that reason as such cannot be what links the individual and the state; for Henry, they must be connected materially, through their relationship to the activities or actions of individuals themselves. To think otherwise, according to the Henryian reading, would be to see individual lives as somehow being expressions of the universal essence of the state, discounting their particular qualities.

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[241] Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, 17, the discussion continues to p.19. Marx's concern here intersects with Engels' on the neglect of the family as a social structure more generally.

[242] *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality,* 9

Aside from the reading of Hegel or Marx, the point Henry makes demonstrates how important the particularities—the matter—of everyday life are to him. The state is important because it is something people make, not because it is an expression of a universalizable relationship between individual and group, or concept and manifestation. As in Henry's earlier major work *The Essence of Manifestation*, the argument hinges on trying to find a way of remaining attuned to a non-monist ontology, or what he calls the ontology of life rather than Being.[243] "Life" is what determines meaning for Henry, not Being or reason, and this is what cannot be reduced to a universal relationship.

And so Henry finds Marx's dialectics to be an attractive alternative to and extension of Hegel's, writing that Marx "understands, in the same stroke, that Hegelian action is only pseudo-action, not because it is incapable of positing beings, but because it is itself a seeing, a theory, and it is for this reason that it is, in reality, incapable of positing beings."[244] Henry situates himself as critical of both Hegel and Feuerbach in Marx's wake, in order to understand what theory and praxis come to mean in the later Marx.[245] At first it seems to Henry that Marx is making a facile move to reject Hegel on the too-simple grounds that Hegelian thought is just about abstraction and objectification, not reality (or at least not material reality.) But there is something more subtle at work in Marx: the critique of Hegel instead attends the precise role of objectification. When, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx emphasizes the role of subjectivity in philosophizing ("The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is

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[243] Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

[244] Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, 153.

[245] See especially, *Marx*, 8ff.

to *change* it"), Henry believes that this is over and above the objectifying aspects of the philosophical act.[246]

Henry argues that existential foundations for politics can have profound stakes under capitalist and communist conditions alike. He thinks that neither socialism nor capitalism can make the individual fully free, with their needs met and able to pursue their individual destinies/social lives. He is particularly concerned with how state/market "value" individual labor, and the aporia created between the objective and subjective measurements of labor-value.[247] This gap is addressed, however, by the living reality of the individual. As Henry writes, "What, in fact, shows the identical essence of "qualitatively different kinds of labor" like tailoring and weaving is that they can be performed by the same individual. It is in the individual that they are the same thing, namely this individual himself."[248] Henry underscores the distinction between Marx's dismissal of the "thinking" individual and the individual as such. In fact, Henry thinks that "*for Marx, the critique of the thinking individual is only an antithesis which allows him to define the living individual in full force*."[249] Henry's understanding of the relationship between theory and praxis talks about both the intrinsic movement of life - and also the role of thought as praxis.

For Henry, Marx's early articulation of the concept of the human individual is a fundamental part of Marx's overall perspective on politics and society. The individual *must be* included in any complete discussion of Marx's thought, because the individual is, in fact, what

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[246] Overall, Henry's reading of Marx reveals a process theorist, rather than a teleological one.

[247] See O'Sullivan, *Michel Henry*, 113 and Rockmore's introduction to *Marx,* vii-x

[248] *Marx*, 206-7

[249] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, 22 (emphasis original.)

gives Marx's critique of political economy its moral weight. Marx's followers thus, according to Henry, mistakenly stop valuing the individual at precisely the point where individuals should be most protected, namely when individuals are living through the conditions of late capitalism and the birth of communism.

At this crucial juncture where Marx focuses so much of his critique—the transitional stages of late capitalism—Henry thinks that Marx*ism* in fact replaces the concept of the living individual (indeed the individual subject tout court, see above how these are the same thing for Marxism) with a series of "abstract entities" that result in " ruin of the regimes that were built on [Marxism]", (and not just these but any modern regime that tries to do the same.)[250] What Marxism tries to do, Henry thinks, is substitute subjective reality with an idea of objective reality, effected through an objective realism that purports to be material while in fact neglecting the material realities of the real social world of human beings.[251]

One crucial abstraction is that of the individual to the "worker." Henry argues that this designation on Marx's part reduces the individual to its purely economic or market identity, while obscuring the differences that may affect the myriad ways that the individual appears in the economy. As he puts it, "in this private life there are numerous circumstances that result in the needs of one person being greater than those of another," which Marx acknowledges is the fundamental inequality of individuals.[252] Thus, he writes, "we are led back to each subjectivity and to the interiority proper to it."[253] But the social is always pushing back against this interiority, abstracting from it and alienating it.

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[250] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 21.

[251] Ibid.

[252] *Marx: A philosophy of human reality*, 198ff

[253] Ibid.

Henry's analysis of how the individual is overtaken by the social is the grounding for his reading of Marx. Henry argues that we must rethink "the oppositions between individual/society, singular/ universal, private interests/public affairs.... [that] lead each individual to seem insignificant in relation to the collectivity that dominates it, and into which the individual must be integrated."[254] Furthermore, he argues that community life must be understood in strict relationship to individual life. Community life, grounded as it is in pathos-with, requires individual auto-affection to continue and be experienced by the living subjects.

For Henry, praxis is simply anything that life does. Life and praxis are necessarily linked and occur within finite time. Political life can work either to frame and illuminate this linkage or to break it. Henry's analysis of the role of thought in political theory suggests that the role of thought in shaping the political relationship between life and praxis must be critically examined and, where thought weakens this linkage, the political must be reshaped or repaired.

Placing the praxis of life at the center of how we understand politics produces a vigorous critique of instances where ideology and ordinary life are severed. For Henry, the paradigmatic modern example of such a severing was totalitarianism. The ordinary character of praxis matters because it serves as one of many links to material reality. Henry's work not only presents us with an account of life that includes life forms beyond the human, he also recuperates from Marx a link between the affective material conditions of life and the human subject itself as a material thing.[255] He does this by drawing out the affective, humanist emphasis in Marx's account of how value comes to inhere in material things.

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[254] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 100.

[255] I will explore the implications of this theoretical emphasis in his work in a later version of this project.

Henry points to Marx's concept of thought as one kind of praxis. For Henry, this has some positive possibilities, but he also argues that Marxism as a political philosophy has understood the power of thought in counterproductive ways. If Marxism relies on thought as a means to political change, it risks, Henry thinks, confounding the praxis of thought for material change in the world. Furthermore, responding to the ontological conditions in which they find themselves requires a constant negotiation for individuals.

Henry argues that the *German Ideology* is where Marx is really trying to understand the relationship between "praxis and "theory".[256] For Henry, Marx is right to point out that the abstraction *to* a capitalist economy hinges on making the opposition between "reality and representation" explicit.[257] Although the *German Ideology* is not where Marx does this with regard to capital, as such, that text does the philosophical work that will later be important in, for instance, the third volume of *Capital*.[258]

V. Can Human Life be Other than Universal?

One of the things Henry opposes most in political or social acts is when human praxis makes its object an *idea* rather than the survival of those concerned with the praxis. Ideas are harmful objects, because they lend themselves to universalization and thus a separation from any particular context. But a true universalism is not even the worst possibility. Rather, the possibility that a local collective can mask itself as a truly universal is an even greater danger. This is the

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[256] Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1983, 160

[257] *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, 160

[258] But is something more subtle happening in Arendt's account of Marx's theory than Arendt herself may have realized? As Gündoğdu also notes, "Arendt describes Marx's representation of poverty as a practice of translation. Translation in this case does not indicate the mere transmission of content from one language to another; it instead entails the invention of a new language that depicts poverty in an entirely novel way, brings to view its origins in violence, and demonstrates that it is a problem that stands in the way of equalization and freedom.[1]" Understanding the representational aspects of Marx's theory as *translation* rather than *abstraction* opens up a third way between the opposition of theory and praxis (Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 69).

basis for Henry's critique of politics. When he claims that "the political is the aim for the universal," this is not as much a historical statement as it is a structural account of how politics results in the "hypostasis of the political" as societies transform individuals' subjective experiences and needs into objective aims. The "hypostasis" to which he refers is the way "the political" for him (where "the political" should be understood as a process whereby the particular experiences of individuals at once create universalizable principles or concepts and are overshadowed by the collective or collectivity. Instead of the political as a structural means for being-in common with others, Henry argues that "This original being-in-common unfolds in life and draws the force of its drive from life, but is appropriated by political thought."[259]

Once politics has defined abstract concepts like the state as the objects of individual and collective support, Henry says that this has become a situation where "public affairs are all that matters, if they are placed above the individual, and if they claim the right to their needs over those of the individual."[260] His use of "right" is important: because the public relies on all of the individuals, its "right" cannot be understood as independent and unitary, but rather must be understood as irreducible from its members.

Henry insists throughout his work that life is subjective and that this subjective quality is what makes economic life such a harmful abstraction. In the light of this differently articulated humanism, preserving the political subject becomes even more necessary, as long as we understand it as something that emerges from a political context but that can and must refer back to the fact of life. Henry recognizes that for any one contemporary individual, society always exists prior—humans are auto-affective but not auto-genic. Still, while society emerges from and

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[259] Michel Henry and Scott Davidson, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, 102.

[260] *From Communism to Capitalism,* 103.

depends on individual lives, for most subjects it is also society that provides the means and contexts for its generation. Certainly, most human lives emerge within a social context that is not merely intersubjective.

The dichotomy between individual and collective diminishes the individual while also trying to integrate it into the collective. This inability to see individual uniqueness/distinction within the collective as part of what calls the collective into existence, rather than a result of the culture society makes possible can happen through politics regardless of regime type. Henry argues that

> The political is the aim for the universal. It takes into account the various activities of particular individuals in order to consider them as a public affair…considering everything as political—is detached from the prior view of the world in which every consideration and every possible aim are inscribed.[261]

The problem with the political, for Henry, is its detachment from the lived experiences of individuals. By seeking to articulate individual lives' needs *for* those lives, the political world ends up silencing them through its claims to the universal.

So how then should we view the individual politically? Following Henry does not necessarily mean characterizing the individual by seeking some account of universal ontological "reality". What I am asking here is rather about the implications of using this ontological theory politically as the basis for thinking about diversity and individuality within the context of the collectivity. This means taking seriously, not universal experiences of being, but a recognition that the work of politics requires understanding individual subjects' importance as the source of organic political action "no project of this kind can be formed independently from its rootedness

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[261] Ibid., 100.

in the organic structure of desire and action."[262] This rootedness in "the organic structure of desire and action" crosses both individual or personal forms of political actions—as when a person participates in a #MeToo statement—but also those that emerge not from a personal desire but from the affective connection between desire and action that is fed by connections some persons have to other persons. This critical understanding of how desire and action jointly *move* individuals is a crucial instance of a non-intentional will-ing that unites the conscious desire to act with instances where one is moved from unwillingness to willingness.

Henry's concern is that the objectification encouraged by politics "transforms all of these lives into empirical individuals who are seen from the outside and cut off from their acting and suffering interiority" threatening their ability to express freely what moves them.[263] Their "acting and suffering interiority" is not the full extent of their individuality, but if people are blocked from expressing that interiority freely, they are placed in an objectified relationship to the political world. This objectified relationship does not merely mean that other people fail to apprehend what it is that is most interior and important to me as an individual. Henry suggests that this objectified relationship also makes it more difficult for me to sense my own interior life.

By seeing others as primarily to be defined "from the outside" rather than as independent individuals who are themselves always full of life, politics "produces another illusion."[264] Politics can mask the ways that "individuals are never isolated: traversed by life and its drives, individuals are thrust toward one another."[265] while at the same time he thinks that politics can also, through this process of abstraction and viewing from the outside, see individuals as not

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[262] Ibid., 103.

[263] Ibid,102.

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid.

inclined toward collectivity, and thus devalue the very thing—life—that can help to build a political community in the first place.

The appropriating work of abstraction happens, however, when what is held in common is understood as being something abstract or universal, rather than the shared experience of life. It would be a mistake to characterize this being-in-common as anything except for the common situation of alive-ness. If "one can only reconnect with others through the aim for the universal," he believes, unfortunately "everything is turned upside down once again."[266] Importantly, for Henry politics must refer to the life of "each of those whom it concerns and thus to the community of life in which all living beings exist."[267] This community is characterized by its relationship to the affective root of existence. The affect that grounds "living subjectivity of all individuals" that he thinks existed "well before political thought turned it into the object of its aim in the form of public affairs."[268]

The problem then is that community seems to demand adherence to a universal while also keeping us from being clued into our own real lives. The universal thus makes the self into an "object," e.g. by making our relationship to ourselves and our desires one of objectivity rather than subjectivity, as he puts it "inasmuch as it is a way of going beyond oneself and leaving oneself." This tends to reverse the relation of individual life and its community of life to the political community. "Instead of being the result of this aim or being constituted in this aim, the community of life is its cause and its condition," making it seem like individual life relies on a universalist community to exist, rather than being rooted in structures of desire and action.[269]

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[266] *From Communism to Capitalism*, 103

[267] Ibid.

[268] Ibid.

[269] Ibid., 100-103

VI. Conclusion

While this chapter has focused on Henry's critique of Marx and the concept of the political, his critique of capitalism is equally pointed if more condensed. He is suspicious of both for their emphases on abstracting values of various kinds out of praxis—capital value or labor value, patriotism or service to "the state." Yet beyond a discussion of socialism at the end of *Marx: A philosophy of human reality*, he does not attend to what might give rise to political communities that foster subjects' experience of immanently connecting to their own lives. Such a community would arrive through the affective structures of existence, and perhaps most strongly through those powerful ones that risk both taking over individuals' lives—such as love—but which resist totalization. Resisting the abstraction of the things we feel most deeply could be a path to understanding that others, too, are affective beings with deep commitments. The act of resisting abstraction then can be understood as an act of profound generosity and openness to the existence of the other, but a generosity that is grounded in the subject's fundamentally knowing that its own existence is not only meaningful but necessary.

CONCLUSION

TOWARD AFFECTIVE POLITICAL COMMUNITY

It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting. -Audre Lorde quoting Simone de Beauvoir[270]

When Audre Lorde quotes Simone de Beauvoir in her speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," she articulates a feminist epistemology that unites self-knowledge with materialist critique. This resonates with the vision of political subjectivity I have drawn from Henry's work, which takes the lived experience of life to be both background and foreground of politics. Life matters; it is the substance and the center of politics—the end of any politics that is not necropolitical and the means by which all politics are acted out. Like Lorde and de Beauvoir, I have asserted that "the genuine conditions of our lives" must be considered, particularly in how lives include sustained experiences of suffering and, for most of us, the reality of enduring external oppression. Taking seriously Henry's claim that each individual must encounter ontological reality by and through auto-affection leads to the conclusion that such "knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives" is fundamentally affective. It emerges from a life being present to itself, from an individual drawing strength from feeling itself feel.

I have considered Henry's emphasis on how our lives themselves are the only basis we have for continuing to live. I have also argued that even on an individual level the emphasis on a life's ability to sense its own liveliness is not a solipsistic one. But it is in the application of this insight to social and political communities that we see the revolutionary potential of Henryian

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[270] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1984).

auto-affection. Communities, polities, institutions—each of these either suppresses lives or sustains them.

If for de Beauvoir and Lorde "our reasons for acting" emerge from our lived experiences, for Henry our reason for acting is that we are alive and our ability to act emerges from our experiencing our own lived affect, from our drawing closer to that "feeling of feeling" that for him is termed auto-affection. Our pulsions, drives, or impetuses to live will either be strengthened or damped by our experiences of living, so it matters greatly whether political spaces allow us to not only act, but feel. Where our experiences weaken us, where we find ourselves unable to feel alive, we find signals that things are not as they might be. From these signals, we may know, with a kind of sensory, affective, full-bodied knowing, that the social and political conditions that surround us must change.

Taking Henry seriously means recognizing that knowledge born of sensory experience displaces conscious knowledge and that the ways political communities privilege consciousness result in alienation and a devaluing of individual and collective life. A political community where abstract or quantifiable "facts" are valued over the suffering of its members or their embodied experiences is one that fundamentally alienates the lives within it and risks its own collapse.

If we take Lorde (and de Beauvoir) to be calling for a form of "consciousness raising," then where Henry speaks to the affective conditions of possibility of lives experiences of political consciousness. An awareness of the political importance of these affective conditions is recognized perhaps more strongly by political movements and actors (for instance in adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism* or the intersectional disability practices discussed by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha in *Care Work*) but institutional spaces remain dependent on a

theoretical account of subject-formation that privileged language and external expression.[271] My

excursus into Henry shows that far from being considered marginal, the awareness of affect that

is present in political movements that take suffering seriously should instead be central to

attempts to negotiate the political challenges of difference.

While forms of knowledge sustained by affective, material, living subjectivity are not

precise substitutes for conscious knowledge of one's own experience or external structural

conditions, these forms of knowledge are necessary and frequently overlooked in political

processes that emphasize rational, representable concepts and claims. In practice, this ought to

affirm the instincts that many people have that regarding their own bodies and experiences: their

affective conditions matter, further, their suffering matters. It should also deepen our patience for

the difficult or even irrational acts of "pathos-with" that may characterize a politics that takes

suffering seriously.

A few models exist for what it might look like to take affect seriously in the public

sphere. In the 1990s, the "New Labour" movement in Great Britain ushered in a series of reforms

to overhaul Britain's governance, proposing dramatic changes in its social policy, constitutional

framework, and scope. Among these was a project called "Antidote," a think-tank and social

initiative that sought to support the emotional and psychic well-being of British society.[272] This

focus on emotional health drew some ridicule, particularly from the right, signaling as it did such

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[271] See brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good.* (Oakland: AK Press, 2019) and Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. (Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018)

[272] See for instance: Pilgrim, David, and Shulamit Ramon. "English mental health policy under New Labour." *Policy & Politics* 37 (2009): 273-88. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557309X411282. David, Miriam E. "Home, work, families and children: New labour, new directions and new dilemmas." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 9, no. 2 (1999): 111-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620219900200040>

a strong contrast to Thatcherism's more austere political ethos.[273] Yet it also exemplifies how one might start to formulate a public policy aimed at sustaining affective community. The notion that the well-being of the body politic requires the well-being of all its bodies will draw ridicule from those who see social policy as superfluous, but taking seriously that all subjects exist in states of pathos-with requires reconceptualizing what the sustenance and survival of the body politic requires. That the survival of the affective community requires something that cannot be fully described or captured does not foreclose the necessity of feeling our way into contingent and inarticulate expressions of what life means and what all lives need—and what many lives are currently not in possession of—safety, care, shelter, food, expressive possibility, and the acknowledgement and redress of extreme suffering.

The inescapable importance of the unrepresentable has been considered at each stage of this dissertation. Chapter One's discussion of life per Henry highlighted the urgency of recuperating a politics of the unknown or unknowable as it relates to the existence of political subjects. In that chapter, I also highlighted the ways that Henry's critique of monistic ontology contributes to a material phenomenology of individual subjectivity. Going deeper into the material experience of individual subjectivity, Chapter Two looked inward to the unknowability at the heart of auto-affection, arguing that Henry's reformulation of the unconscious as a result of the Cartesian move to find certainty within doubt should destabilize the idea of a knowable unconscious and bring the notion of a *lack* of self-knowledge to the center of how political community is understood.

In Chapter Three, I turned to suffering as a mode of existence, taking up in turn what is revealed and concealed in suffering, and using Henry's insights into the role of suffering in the

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[273] See the discussion in James Park, Alice Haddon, and Harriet Goodman, *The Emotional Literacy Handbook: A Guidebook for Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2012.)

phenomenology of life to draw out his insights into how political life might grapple with the character of suffering which is as much inescapable as it is inescapably unrepresentable.

Finally, Chapter Four looked at Henry's critique of how life refracted through politics relies on processes of abstraction, wherein concepts and ideology threaten to overtake the real needs and material realities of individual life. The latter are, however, the conditions of possibility for freedom of the individual. In Henry's reading of Marx as a theorist whose ideas require abundance, I suggested we foreground the question of life's and lives' needs is necessary to counteract the abstracting tendencies of political and economic life. Like the refrain of a protagonist's melodic line in an opera or on a film's soundtrack, life has to be interjected somehow in the stream of all experiences. The worst thing any politics or ethics or praxis can do is to become just that: an abstract term that people try to act out without remembering that what makes all terms meaningful is the lives that are living them.

This project has had two prongs. I have sought on one hand to engage Henry's work as a resource for the political theory of difference, examining how Henry considers individuality and the relationship between the individual and the collective. On the other hand, I have used Henry's philosophy of life—his specific critique of how subjectivity has been conceived out of the Enlightenment—as the basis for a materialist philosophy of life that takes political subjectivity to be primarily *living subjectivity*. In particular, I have argued that the "living subject" is characterized by its relationships to the affectivity that characterizes its interiority and drives its praxis, affectivity that is crystallized in the experience of suffering. It is these three features—interiority, affect, praxis, each vital to Henry's understanding of the subject—that are critical for dealing with intractable political difference.

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While my primary goals throughout this project has been to consider what Henry's thought can contribute to political theories of subjectivity and inter-subjective difference, I will also note that this project contributes to Anglophone reception of Henry. This project itself is an extended argument that Henry's work has much to contribute outside of the theological and phenomenological circles where it is typically read, with implications for new materialist readings of being, becoming, and belonging, for feminist and queer theories of affect and lived experience, and for philosophical engagements with pain and suffering.

In the twenty-first century the conditions of possibility for individual lives to sense themselves rest on species' continued existence. Extending Henry's concern with the affective stakes of life means deepening our awareness of how the auto-affection immanent in individual lives requires not only that individuals live, but that the conditions of possibility for their species to live must also exist.

Henry's work may have much to contribute to efforts to consider life's future. The literal future of life—of human beings' lives, but more broadly of organic materiality on a planetary scale—is uncertain when we take into account the social, ecological, and individual implications of planetary decay. The next stage for this project is to consider Henryian life from the perspective of not only the living subject or the smaller community, but on the level of the species. An Henryian politics of inter-species-life, merely hinted at in his later work *Materialist Phenomenology*, would be a turn from how species-life typically functions in, for instance, neo-Marxist readings. In Henry's disavowable of the "merely material" is a stance that echoes in such different projects as Fredric Jameson's critique of materialism in *Postmodernism*[274] and

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[274] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989)

Haraway's dismissal of the turn to materiality[275]. Henryian materialism encompasses both the merely material and the profoundly material. It builds a materialist critique of political speech and practice that still holds out hope for human action.

In the example of environmental crisis, such a move is sorely needed. Catastrophic climate change, especially now that its scientific basis is accepted by all but the most marginal voices, is one of our planet's most pressing concerns. Our planet's possible demise threatens the existence of politics itself, by threatening the existence of human life. Understanding the political subject as a living subject will be critical for finding ways to identify the most essential acts for sustaining planetary life. Furthermore, the way life is shared inter-species provides one bridge for linking the fates of particular humans and particular non-humans. Most of all, considering the planetary context is critical because it provides a limit condition for toleration of difference in politics. If the existence being threatened is not only one's own, but that of the entire biosphere in which life exists, then those who cannot accept that continued existence of life is a basic precondition for politics cannot expect their views to be accommodated within a polity. The groundwork I have laid in this dissertation will allow me to address concerns of the changes observed in the "Anthropocene" as I expand the project. What a politics rooted in Henryian life must account for is the how lives that do not value other lives should be treated. The status of even those lives requires holding open the possibility of those lives becoming more alive and more valuing of life. If there is reason to see a path through these difficult times, it will be through political practice that is able to recuperate, from instances of profound difference, those forms of common liveliness that can ground collective politics without obscuring the individual.

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[275] Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (College Park: Feminist Studies, Inc., 1988)

Emphasizing the "living" subject, over and above the abstract subject, the dead subject, the linguistic subject, clears space for political relations that actively wrestle with this life. To talk about the mortal life of the species, rather than its death, is to push beyond the individual imperative to face one's own mortality and ask what it means to hold and sustain the life of another, of more than one other.

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