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# Michel Henry's Phenomenological Christology: From Transcendentalism to the Gospel of John

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■ Jeremy H. Smith

■ **Michel Henry's Phenomenological Christology:  
From Transcendentalism to the Gospel of John.**  
■

**Słowa kluczowe:** doświadczenie religijne, chrystologia, transcendentalizm, barbarzyństwo nowoczesności, strumień życia, bycie-w-życiu, autoafektacja  
**Keywords:** religious experience, christology, transcendentalism, barbarism of modern Times, stream of life, in-life-beign, self-affectation

## Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to interpret and evaluate Michel Henry's vision of Christianity and of religious experience. I first deal with the crucial notion of non-objective self-experience. Henry's earlier term for such experience is "autoaffection"; later he simply names it "life." According to Henry, life is prior not only to the world but also to all forms of intentionality, including temporality. The phenomena both of despair and of what he terms the barbarism of modernity are tantamount to life forgetting itself, forgetting its true essence. What Henry terms "second birth" is the return of life to itself, of an inner transformation of life by which it realizes the essence it had forgotten but never really lost. For Henry, the flow of life into myself which is my autoaffection cannot be separated from the flow of life from God into myself.

The terms Henry employs in these analyses are novel and strike many readers as strange. In the first part of this paper, I attempt to provide an exposition and explanation of Henry's position through a comparison with key ideas and passages in two American thinkers: the philosophical essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and the philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910). These writers introduce related issues in somewhat more familiar terms. I consider Henry's work to be an instance of the rebirth of transcendentalism in recent philosophy, a transcendentalism akin to the nineteenth century transcendentalism of a figure like Emerson. I draw specifically on Emerson's idea of "the Oversoul" and of James' idea of "the More" to help elucidate Henry's notion of "second birth" and also the theological context in which he develops that notion. I then

consider critically certain key issues that arise in Henry's religious philosophy: what is the status of "second birth" in relationship to faith? Does the experience of the transcendental source of the self have the same absolute self-certainty as non-objective self-experience? What is the status of world in Henry's philosophy? How are we to reconcile his repeated assertion that intentionality derealizes all that it makes objective with his repeated assertions that life is the essence both of intentionality and the world? And what are we to make of the fact that he does after all write as if objects in the world – such as artworks, including literary artworks as well as sacred texts – can play a role in leading a self back toward its "second birth"? I conclude by proposing to supplement Henry's analysis with a further notion, that of being-in-life. The return to itself of life which constitutes "second birth" is not only a matter of ipseity as ipseity or life as life, but also of the being-in-life of the world. The being-in-life of the world is its being, and as such is genuine being. Objectivity as such is not tantamount to derealization. Rather, for reasons that may be ultimately mysterious, derealization is a temptation objectivity offers to life's potential to turn against itself. The objectivism inherent in modern barbarism is precisely the attempt to limit reality to that which is objectively graspable. In doing so, objectivism, in denying the reality of life and attempting to live out that denial, also undermines itself since the reality of the objective is itself impossible without life.

### **Autoaffection and the Transcendental Origin of the Self**

As a first introduction to the set of issues I am approaching in this paper, I would like to look closely at the first two paragraphs of Emerson's essay "The Over-soul." This essay is one of the clearest and most powerful expressions of the essence of the transcendentalist outlook as the American interpretation of German idealism. Emerson is engaged in the quest to discover what the soul is and where it comes from:

There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences. For this reason, the argument which is always forthcoming to silence those who conceive extraordinary hopes of man, namely, the appeal to experience, is for ever invalid and vain. We give up the past to the objector, and yet we hope. He must explain this hope. We grant that human life is mean; but how

did we find out that it was mean? What is the ground of this uneasiness of ours; of this old discontent? What is the universal sense of want and ignorance, but the fine innuendo by which the soul makes its enormous claim? Why do men feel that the natural history of man has never been written, but he is always leaving behind what you have said of him, and it becomes old, and books of metaphysics worthless? The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. The most exact calculator has no prescience that somewhat incalculable may not balk the very next moment. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

As with events, so is it with thoughts. When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up, and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come<sup>1</sup>.

I would like to focus on just one issue encompassed within the vast panoply of issues Emerson here raises. That issue is the nature of human consciousness, of what it means to be an "I." What Emerson has to say about this issue is summed up in two sentences: "Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence." Emerson of course is asserting that our being and our consciousness are not within, or merely within, nature, but are prior to nature and in a sense encompass nature. He is also saying that our being flows from God, and that we experience this. I would like to explore how the idea that "man is a stream whose source is hidden" may be understood from the viewpoint of Emerson, James, and Husserl, in order to set the stage for the unique contribution made by Henry.

William James as well as Emerson explicitly described human consciousness as a stream. In his *Principles of Psychology* James focuses very intensely on the lived experience of the stream on the most fundamental level. At issue is our primordial experience of time, and of ourselves in time. Our experience of time is our experience of the present, past and future. But what does it mean to experience the present, past and future? James makes it clear that what we normally call remembering is not at the foundation of our primordial experience of the past. For example, James asks, consider the experience of speaking a sentence,

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<sup>1</sup> R.W. Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, eds. J. Slater and D.E. Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 159-60.

such as “the pack of cards is on the table.” At the instant one decides to speak the sentence and the first word of the sentence begins to emerge from one’s lips, the whole sentence is present all at once in anticipation. It does not take any time whatsoever to anticipate that whole sentence – we do not need to take time to anticipate it word by word. And as one speaks the word “of,” the very moment in which “of” is spoken is colored by the previous word “pack” as just having been spoken. One makes no special effort to pull from one’s memory the word “pack” or one’s just-having-said the word “pack.” This means that our experience of what we normally call “now” always includes a “little bit” of the past and “a little bit” of the future so that the past and the future in some sense interpenetrate the present. This “little bit” of the past is the primary manifestation of memory. We so much take it for granted that we habitually do not think of it as memory at all<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, it is part and parcel of what we normally consider to be “the present.” James here of course anticipates – and may even have influenced<sup>3</sup> – Husserl’s analysis of time consciousness in terms of primal impression, retention, and protention. Husserl himself adopts James’ term “the living present” to designate this fuller present in which the immediate past and immediate future are immanent<sup>4</sup>.

The flow is as much an immediate holding on to the past as it is an immediate advance into the future. And the primordial truth and rationality of experience is established through this primordial flow. As an event sinks down into the past, a rational order is established and maintained. If event A follows upon event B, it will forever be true that event A followed event B, and not the reverse. People may remember the order incorrectly. But that the order itself is irreversible we know through our immediate experience of the flow of time as James describes it.

I have begun with an exploration of the idea that consciousness is a temporal flow, or as Husserl would more likely say, is *the* temporal flow, because this is the most obvious and accessible sense of the notion of flow, and it is also what the flow is taken to be by the tradition I am tracing from Emerson through James to Husserl. Henry’s philosophy, especially in his later work, is founded directly on the achievements of Husserl. But to Henry, Emerson’s sentence “Our being

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<sup>2</sup> W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950; Rpt. H. Holt, 1890), see chap. 9, “The Stream of Thought,” esp. pp. 278-83.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g. R. Cobb-Stevens, *James and Husserl: The Foundations of Meaning* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 40ff., 62ff.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Husserl, *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution: Die C-Manuskripte* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), e.g. Nr. 8, Nr. 17.

is descending into us we know not whence,” would suggest something about our intimate self experience quite different from the flow of temporality. For Henry, the issue at the heart of “our being descending into us” is not the issue of time, but of what he calls autoaffection. Autoaffection is the central theme of Henry’s entire philosophy. And Henry would certainly agree with Emerson when he sees himself as “not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water” (although Henry would object to the word “spectator” as applied here). Henry’s rigorous and thoroughgoing analysis both of the nature of autoaffection itself, and of its religious dimension, is his unique and original contribution to the phenomenological tradition.

One way to approach the theme of autoaffection is through Henry’s critique of Husserl’s notion of intentionality – a critique which, it should be noted, Husserl himself to some extent anticipated. Husserl for the most part defines consciousness as that which is directed toward objects. The life of the mind is the life of acts of the mind, and acts of the mind work upon objects. (One should note here that objects are not first of all ready made and complete, but that they only emerge as objects through acts of the mind.) One example of an act of the mind would be seeing. If I am taking a walk in the park and I see and look at a tree, the activity of my mind is directed toward an object – the tree. This act is not simple – it is only through a complex synthesis of acts that the tree appears as a three dimensional object in the world. But running through that complex synthesis is the basic structure of act directed toward object. Now the question that intrigues Henry is, how do I know I am seeing, *while I am seeing*? The object I am aware of as I look at the tree is the tree itself, and not the seeing of the tree. One explanation would be that I am aware of my seeing by reflecting on my own acts, so that I make my own acts objects of my awareness. But if I reflect upon my just past seeing, how do I know that the seeing I have now objectified is the same seeing that I was *engaged in* a moment before? The same line of questioning applies to the whole notion of “I.” How do I know that it is “I” who am seeing the tree, and that when I remember seeing the tree a moment ago, that the I that now remembers is the same I that was seeing the tree just a moment before. Husserl considers the possible explanation that I know myself, that I know that it is I who am seeing, and was seeing, the tree, by reflecting upon myself as an “I,” making “I” an object of awareness. But this object of awareness must necessarily be an immediately past “I.” How do I know that the “I” now engaged in the reflecting is identical to the immediately past “I” being reflected upon? In this context, Husserl himself, at least at one point, acknowledges that there is a form of awareness

which is not the awareness of objects or in any sense an objective or reflective awareness. To be “I” must mean to be self-aware prior to any reflection upon “I”<sup>5</sup>. And my seeing of the tree must be self-aware in its very act of seeing, prior to any reflection upon that act of seeing. Consciousness is, after all, *not* primordially or exclusively a matter of consciousness-of. Consciousness is as it were self-luminous: it is not only a light which shines on objects, lighting them up, but rather in this very shining it lights itself up from within. While Husserl does acknowledge this notion of the self-luminousness of consciousness, the bulk of his analyses focus on the nature of the consciousness of objects. “Autoaffection” is one of the terms that Henry uses for this notion of self-luminousness, and Henry’s philosophy is devoted to the analysis of autoaffection in all of its modes and dimensions.

The term “autoaffection” itself is most fitting in a psychological context, as a descriptor of objectless feelings or affects such as anxiety or joy. Henry explores this dimension especially in his study of Freud, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*. In his last three works: *I am the Truth*, *Incarnation*, and *Words of Christ*, Henry develops a new vocabulary to describe autoaffection. The word “life” comes to supplant the word “autoaffection” as his term for non-objective self-awareness. Non-objective, self-luminous self-awareness is a matter of, as Henry now puts it, life entering into itself, of life coming into itself, of life embracing itself. The utterly primordial way that “my I” flows into itself is simply another matter entirely than the flow of time. For Henry, time itself is the primary

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<sup>5</sup> “In allen Reflexionen ist das Ich gegenständlich – und zugleich ist immer das Ich da, das nicht gegenständlich ist... Also das Sein des Ich ist immerfort... Sein und Für-sich-sein durch Selbst-erscheinen, durch absolutes Erscheinen... In diesem Erscheinen... es ist... in dem betreffenden unreflektierten Leben Pol als seiner ‘unbewusstes’ Ich, und es besteht nur immerfort die Möglichkeit, das ein neues Leben mit einem neuen Pol auftritt, welches den Pol des früheren erfaßt... das aber setzt ein neues reflektierendes Leben voraus mit einem unerfaßten Pol.” E. Husserl, *Erste Philosophie*, vol. 2, Hua 8 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1959), p. 412 (Beilage XVII). Husserl’s discussion of reflection in *Ideas II* does not seem to acknowledge the point makes in this quote from *First Philosophy*. In section 23 of *Ideas II* Husserl states that “Zum Wesen des reinen Ich gehört die Möglichkeit einer originären Selbsterfaßung, einer ‘Selbstwahrnehmung’” but this self-perception is apparently here a matter of reflection. Here Husserl apparently holds that the identity of the reflecting I with the just past reflected-upon I is established „dank weiterer Reflexionen höherer Stufe.” *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch: Phänomenologischen Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, Hua 4 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1952). D. Zahavi, after a thorough survey of the relevant passages in Husserl, concludes that Husserl did in fact hold that we are pre-reflectively self aware, despite some texts we tend to suggest we are not. See his *Self Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1999), esp. pp. 53-59.

manifestation of the world, and life is not a phenomenon within the world, nor is it some kind of inner world, but is prior to any and all sense of world.

Henry makes a fundamental distinction between what he considers to be the two fundamental forms of truth – the truth of life and the truth of the world. And he sees these forms as radically opposed to one another. The truth of the world is the truth of our awareness of objects – the truth of what Husserl calls intentionality. The fundamental character of this truth is that it is outside of itself, and the fundamental character of the world is also that it is outside of itself. The truth of the world is outside of itself because the manifestation of an object is essentially other than, and different from, the object itself. The import of this critique of the truth of the world for Henry is that the world, insofar as we experience it merely as a collection of objects, can have no unity or meaning. The truth of life, on the other hand, is not other than life itself. Life manifests itself to itself in itself. Life does not manifest itself to itself through any kind of medium or mediation that is other than life itself. And for Henry, only in life is there any meaning, unity, or value, either for life itself or indeed for the world.

I regard Henry's exploration of the nature of autoaffection or "the truth of life" as one of the most significant and path breaking contributions ever made to Husserlian phenomenology. And the distinction he draws between the two forms of truth is a key recurring theme in his analyses. But the *relationship* between what Henry calls life and the world, and between the truth of life and the truth of the world represents an extremely difficult problem both in itself and for his philosophy. And while what Henry does have to say about this issue is provocative, Henry has simply not addressed this specific issue in a way that could really be called adequate. The question of this relationship is perhaps the most significant issue Henry's philosophy raises for any research that would attempt to further pursue his philosophical path.

To guard against a really major possible misunderstanding at this point, I should note that in speaking thus of the flow of life, Henry explicitly rejects the interpretation according to which Life is without individuality, according to which life is a sea in which the individual drops – each individual you and I – dissolve<sup>6</sup>. Life only ever is as what he calls the Ipseity of an individual "I." Henry's

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<sup>6</sup> *C'est moi la vérité : pour une philosophie du christianisme* [hereafter, CMV] (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p. 152; Translation: *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* [hereafter IAT] trans. S. Emanuel (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford Univ. Press: 2003), p. 120.

term “ipseity” may be understood as “individuality” if we bear in mind that the “individuality” in question is nothing like the individuality of a thing and also is not a universal to be found exemplified in the world. And each individual “I” flows into itself in the non-temporal way Henry describes.

At the very heart of Henry’s theological viewpoint is a profound agreement with the second sentence of Emerson quoted above: “When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water.” As we have seen, Henry would never say that the flowing river manifests itself to us as something we first and foremost, watch. But “that I am a pensioner; not a cause... of this ethereal water” is precisely what Henry is trying to say about the most intimate experience of each “I” as an “I,” of the non-temporal flow of me into me whereby I even am “I” in my primordial self-awareness. Autoaffection has for Henry an essential dimension of passivity. And it somehow contains within itself a sense of its origin in that ultimate “I” which is not passive and does have the power to give the being that I can only receive.

Now autoaffection is by no means merely the realm of passivity. Especially in his work *Incarnation*<sup>7</sup>, Henry shows how power, ability, and freedom can only be what they are as autoaffection – how they are dimensions not of the world, but of life. We have the power and the freedom we have to think and create, and to move our bodies through the world, interacting with other forces and powers. Indeed, Henry asserts that the lived body – not the entity studied by biology, but the body which acts and feels, and which has powers and abilities – is not in the world at all, but in life. But at the heart of this freedom is an essential unfreedom. No matter how skillfully I act, and no matter with what determination, I remain “not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water” the ethereal water of the flow of myself into myself whereby I even am an “I.” I do not have the freedom to stop that flow of myself into myself. Again, in order to guard against a possible misunderstanding I must reiterate that Henry does *not* mean that the unfreedom whereby I cannot escape from being “I” is in any sense a denial of the reality of freed will. Nor is he here making the indisputable point that what any action is able to accomplish is finite and limited. Rather, he asserts that all activity itself depends upon an underlying passivity.

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<sup>7</sup> *Incarnation: une philosophie d la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), see esp. §26-30.

## From Transcendentalism to the Gospel of John

“Our being descends into us from we know not whence.” Yet, the unknowing of which Emerson speaks is not some empty blank; it is at the same time a knowing. Emerson even names the “whence,” not only with the word “Over-soul” but also with the word “God.” He goes so far as to describe the relationship between God and the soul: “Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable”<sup>8</sup>. And Henry, too, asserts that our being descends into us from God. In his work *I Am the Truth*, Henry makes the startling claim that the sense in which our souls descend into us from God is expressed with perfect precision in the prologue to the Gospel of John, and even in the wording of the traditional doctrine of the trinity which grew out of it.

The prologue to John circles around the words “word,” “life,” and “light,” and for those words Henry reads “autoaffection.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God... In him was life; and the life was the light of men... The true light, that enlightens every man was coming into the world... And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 4, 9, 14). According to Henry, Christianity teaches the truth of life, which is opposed by the uncomprehending world. The origin of each individual “I” is in God, who is primordially “I.” God’s ipseity is “the light which enlightens every man.” And Henry’s startling claim about the nature of Christ is that Christ *is* God’s non-objective self-awareness. Christ *is* God’s autoaffection. The Word of God, which is co-eternal with and inseparable from God, which was with God in the beginning, and which indeed *is* God, is none other than God’s primordial non-objective awareness of himself. But God is unique in that his primordial self-awareness is none other than his primordial self-generation. God the Father only is the origin of himself, and in God’s eternal self-generation, he eternally generates his Word. The Nicene creed asserts that this word is “begotten not made.” For Henry, this means that God, in generating himself, and thereby his Word, is not creating a creature which is outside of himself at a distance from himself, but is generating none other than himself.

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<sup>8</sup> Emerson, *Collected Works*, pp. 172-73.

God's eternal self-generation is the primordial fact, not of or in the universe, but the primordial fact prior to all world. What then is the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, to human beings? The "true light" of the "word of God" which was with God in the beginning, and indeed is God, is none other than the light which enlightens every man. Henry sees this relationship expressed not only by John's statement but also by Paul: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" (1 Corinth. 7:19); by the statement of book of Genesis that man was made in the image of God; and by the words attributed to Jesus in Matt. 25:40, "as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." These statements, and especially the last, Henry insists, are not metaphors. For Henry "what you have done to the least of these, you have done to me" is to be taken literally. In Henry's interpretation of the notion of incarnation "it is impossible to touch flesh without touching the other flesh that has made it flesh. It is impossible to strike somebody without striking Christ"<sup>9</sup>.

According to Henry, a human soul is not a creation like an object in the world is. God the Father, in his self-generation, generates the Son, thereby generating what Henry calls the first one living (*le premier vivant*). God, generating the Son, generates the first one living in his essential ipseity. Another way of saying this might be – the ultimate reality is I. The autoaffection, in its ipseity, of each human has its ipseity not as an object distinct from God and at a distance from God, but rather has its ipseity in the very ipseity of God. As Henry puts it in *Words of Christ*: "Life is uncreated. Stranger to creation, stranger to the world, every process imparting life is a process of generation"<sup>10</sup>. Our being descends into us not like rain from the sky but in a flow which is one with the flow in which God flows into himself. And my being flows into me in a flow which is not other from the flow in which I flow into myself. And though it is I who am flowing into myself, yet, as Emerson put it: "I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water," which is none other than I. Christ as the word of life speaks as my very non-objective self-awareness. Christ is not the word of life that I speak, but the word of life through which I am spoken. The word of life which speaks my

<sup>9</sup> "Impossible e toucher cette chair sans toucher à l'autre chair qui a fait d'elle une chair. Impossible de frapper quelqu'un sans frapper le Christ" (CMV 148; IAT 117).

<sup>10</sup> "La vie est incréée. Étranger à la création, étranger au monde, tout procès conférant la Vie est une procès du génération." *Paroles du Christ* [Hereafter PAROLES] (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 84; Translation: *Words of Christ* [Hereafter WORDS], trans. Ch.M. Geschwandtner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 84.

own non-objective self-awareness, in so speaking, also speaks itself. And this very speaking is my very living. It is in this sense that Henry understands the teaching that we are all sons of God<sup>11</sup>. Or, as he specifically puts it, we are “sons within the Son.” “Sonship within the son” is the true sense of our birth. The true sense of birth is not the birth of our bodies as biological entities in the world of space and time. In our true birth, our being descends into us as the primordial unity of non-objective self-awareness. My “I” is spoken as “I” by God who is primordially “I.”

### **The Issue of What It Means For My Life To Experience Itself As Absolute Life**

While Emerson certainly did not embrace the traditional language of the doctrine of the trinity as Henry has, Emerson's sense of the unity of the soul with God is in fact quite close to Henry's: “Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable... Let man, then, learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this, namely; that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there”<sup>12</sup>. Emerson states that the simplest person becomes God in worshipping God – but God is yet an “alien energy” who brings and influx ever “new and unsearchable.” Henry as well speaks of a unity of unsurpassable intimacy between God and the soul. And yet for Henry as for Emerson, the human soul is different from God as the receiver is different from the giver of the gift. Again, for Henry, the soul is not as a drop to be dissolved or already dissolved in the ocean of God. What the soul has from God is precisely its ipseity – its individual life that differs not merely in its contents but in its very individuality from each other individual life.

And yet, Henry knows, we have for the most part forgotten life. We have forgotten life because the very structure of life tempts us to do so. Within life, there is the real ability and freedom to act. Action directs us toward objects in the world. We become preoccupied with those objects – with our plans for the future, with our physical and intellectual possessions, with the objects of our biological de-

<sup>11</sup> Luke 6:34; PAROLES 44; WORDS 33.

<sup>12</sup> Emerson, *Collected Works*, pp. 172-73.

sires, with our striving to pursue, attain, grasp, and keep all of these. We fall under the illusion that objective reality is primary, and that our actions are the master and sovereign lord both of themselves and of this objective reality. Henry believes that our contemporary world is, on a massive scale, in fact the dupe of this illusion.

Henry's philosophy raises an essential and vast question: if the word of God is constantly speaking *as* my very life, how is it that I have forgotten it, how is it that an inner transformation is necessary to return to it, and what could such an inner transformation possibly be? Henry does acknowledge and explore this question, and the concise form of the answer he proposes is: the transformation is through works of mercy. Works of mercy return my life to the life that it truly is through a higher form of self-forgetfulness. Works of mercy suspend my egoistic concern with myself as an object: "Only the work of mercy practices the forgetting of self in which, all interest for the Self (right down to its idea of what we call a self or a me) now removed, no obstacle is now posed to the unfurling of life in the Self extended to its original essence"<sup>13</sup>. Works of mercy in fact constitute what Henry calls the "second birth" of the life of ipseity. The forgetting of Life is not the forgetting of an object, but rather a self-distraction from life's own essence in favor of objects it grasps. This self-distraction somehow starves life, or weakens it. The mode of life which is life's essence is scarcely noticed and implicitly dismissed as insubstantial, childish, weak, irrelevant. This forgetting may eventuate in a false confidence, an arrogance, an obsessiveness – in all the practices of what Henry calls barbarism. Or it may eventuate in despair. What Henry means by second birth, by life returning to itself, by life remembering what its own essence, is more than the simple realization that self-awareness is a mode of consciousness different from intentionality. It is also the lived experience of life as meaningful. As such, it is the lived experience of the overcoming of despair.

Emerson cries that "our being descends into us we know not whence." And for Emerson, what descends is not our mere temporal flow, but inspiration and energy: "There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences... From some alien energy the visions come."

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<sup>13</sup> "Seule l'œuvre de miséricorde pratique l'oubli de soi en lequel, tout intérêt pour le Soi étant écarté et jusqu'à l'idée de ce que nous appelons un soi ou un moi, aucune obstacle ne s'oppose plus au déferlement de la vie dans ce Soi reconduit à son essence originelle" (CMV 214; IAT 170).

The “alien energy” of which Emerson speaks has a correlate James’ notion of “the more.” In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James’ theme can be described as the phenomenology of the victory over despair. That victory is the recovery of motivation, the sort of motivation that empowers the individual to persist in life instead of giving up – the motivation that is the living out of the conviction that life is indeed worth living. James gathers together the testimony of a wide variety of individuals who have experienced such moments, and who have ascribed to those moments “more reality than to all other experiences.” The rebirth of such motivation in the midst of despair, James says, involves a coming into awareness of a “higher part” of the self. That “higher part” evokes a sense of something beyond the self that yet has something like the same character of self. I think that what James calls “the higher part” of the self and the infusion of motivation through “the more” is very closely related to what Henry calls “second birth.” James describes this experience in terms of what he calls “the more.” For James, the “higher part” of the self is “conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck”<sup>14</sup>. It is one of Henry’s achievements to have developed a language in which to speak of the self which gets beyond talk of “parts.” But James is attempting to describe exactly what Henry means by life returning to itself, which is a matter of an inner transformation in the very quality of autoaffection as autoaffection, of life as life. Henry explicitly describes “second birth” as the overcoming of despair and the rediscovery of joy, and the joy and despair he refers to pertain to the very being of ipseity in the most fundamental way.

Henry would agree with Emerson that “the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there,” only replacing “sentiment of duty” with “works of love.” And like Emerson and in a sense James as well, Henry closely connects, and perhaps even equates, the self’s experience of its own true essence with its experience of God. In Emerson’s poetic text, a genuine ambiguity arises precisely about the relation self experience and the experience of God. Does the self become God? Or perceive God? Or merely intuit within itself a mysterious origin? The same ambiguity arises in Henry. For Henry, ipseity experiences its origin within its own non-objective self-experience and not primarily through reflection or speculation. I think that Henry here does take a very important step

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<sup>14</sup> W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, 1929), p. 508.

forward in understanding the genuine reality of our experience of what James called “the more,” and Emerson “the Oversoul.” But James also, I think, raises a very important issue for Henry. The issue may be put like this: at the heart of non-objective self-experience, there does arise an incomparable sense of the origination of the self in a vague beyond. But what is the status of this elusive “beyond”? Henry often writes as if I experience the origin of myself with the same certainty that I have in my non-objective experience of myself itself. James, as a philosopher of religion, does not describe “the More” in quite those terms. “The more” is shorthand for the “the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which the saving experiences come,” a fact that “is literally and objectively true as far as it goes”<sup>15</sup>. And as a philosopher of religion James does note that these saving experiences almost always involve beliefs about their origin – for example, a belief in God. And James regards the question of the truth or falsity of such beliefs as meaningful. But he clearly distinguishes the immediate experience of the more as such from the “overbeliefs” with which it is usually infused. It does not appear that James regarded the experience of “the more” as tantamount to the fully evident presence of God. Rather, “the more” involves an insistent hinting at or hunch about something beyond. It appears that James would say a definite “overbelief” goes beyond the mere suggestiveness inherent in “the more” as such. The assurance that this sense is rooted in a transcendent reality requires an act of faith. This points to a genuine issue regarding the relative status of immediate experience and of faith within non-objective self-experience and its immanent sense of origin, to which I shall return.

### **The Relationship of Christ as God’s Autoaffection with the Historical Jesus**

Henry’s philosophical writing speaks about the word of life. And Henry finds the word of life expressed in the writings of John, and in the sayings attributed to Jesus both in John and in the synoptic gospels. But, as Henry notes, all of these words are in human language. Human language is the language of the world. Words and sentences are in the realm of “the outside of itself” – they refer to objects which they are not. And they are themselves objects in the world. How is it

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<sup>15</sup> James, *Varieties*, p. 515.

that objects in the world can have the function of describing, or can have any role in revealing, what Henry calls life, which is radically both prior to, and, Henry insists, *alien to*, the world as such? Henry himself does deal with this question, especially in chapter 12 of *I Am the Truth*, entitled “The Word of God, Scripture.” Henry does clearly assert that the words we speak are not merely words of the world, and that in every human speaking, the word of life speaks as well. In other words, when humans speak to each other, life does speak to life as life. Were it not for this, the word of life could not speak to us through the text of the bible or through the words of Jesus. And Henry believes that the texts of the New Testament do have some kind of role to play in revealing the word of life, that the word of life does speak to us in them. In fact, in his last book, *Words of Christ*, Henry affirms not only that the New Testament as a text speaks the word of life, but that the historical Jesus was himself the word of life<sup>16</sup>. But Henry does not have any clear discussion of how Christ as God’s autoaffection is related to the historical Jesus.

If the historical Jesus was in fact a human being, in what sense does he differ from all other human beings? Not in the sense that he is begotten or generated while we are made or created. Henry could not be more clear and explicit that this sort of unity with God applies to every “I” as such, as its very essence. How then would the unity of the historical Jesus with God differ from that of every other human with God? One way of understanding what he may be asserting would be that Jesus was unique in that for him, his human status of sonship was perfectly transparent, and this inward transparency constitutes a revelation to all humankind of our status of sonship. But Henry holds that this inward transpa-

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<sup>16</sup> “Yet this word does not speak only to each one of us in our timeless birth – where, brothers to the First Born, Icon of the divine essence, we are given to ourselves in the self-revelation of life in his Word. It is also expressed in human language. And this happened twice in history. It spoke through the prophets before turning us upside down when it became that of Christ.” “Or cette Parole ne parle pas seulement à chacun dans sa naissance intemporelle – là où, frère du Premier-né, Icône de l’essence divine, il est donné à lui-même dans l’auto-révélation de la Vie en son Verbe. Elle s’est exprimée aussi en usant de la langue des hommes. Et cela advint deux fois dans l’histoire. Elle a parlé par les prophètes avant de nous bouleverser lorsqu’elle s’est fait celle du Christ” (PAROLES 148; WORDS 114). “After this identification with the Father of Him who is thus distinguished from all humans, from all the other sons, in this sense in which he alone knows the Father, his designation as ‘Son,’ encountered in the aforementioned passages from Matthew and Luke, receives an absolutely singular meaning: it only refers to him.” “Après cette identification au Père de Celui qui se différencie ainsi de tous les hommes, de tous les autres fils en ce sens que lui seul connaît le Père, sa désignation comme ‘Fils,’ rencontrée dans les passages précités de Matthieu et de Luc, reçoit donc une signification absolument singulière: elle ne concerne que lui” (PAROLES 65-66; WORDS 51).

rency is already possible for all humans – even though it is not at the disposal of our will: “This possibility, which is always open to life, to suddenly experience its self-affection as absolute Life’s self-affection, is what makes it a Becoming. But then, when and why is this emotional upheaval produced, which opens a person to his own essence? Nobody knows. The emotional opening of the person to his own essence can only be born of the will of life itself, as this rebirth that lets him suddenly experience his eternal birth. The Spirit blows where it wills”<sup>17</sup>. As we have seen, elsewhere Henry asserts that the concrete way in which this transparency occurs is through works of mercy<sup>18</sup>. The difference between Jesus and other humans cannot be simply that Jesus is open to his own essence while we are not – because Henry clearly asserts that sometimes, we are.

At this point it has become clear that Henry’s whole outlook is quite close to Schleiermacher’s. Schleiermacher’s notion of the feeling of absolute dependence is quite close to Henry’s notion of autoaffection or life. According to Schleiermacher, “the self-consciousness which accompanies all our activity, and therefore, since that is never zero, accompanies our whole existence, and negatives absolute freedom, is precisely a consciousness of absolute dependence.” Our feeling of absolute dependence cannot arise from any object we encounter or indeed from the world as a whole, because in both cases we experience not absolute dependence but relative dependence and relative freedom. And it is through, in, or as, this feeling of absolute dependence that God is revealed to us: “the Whence of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is to be designated by the word ‘God’ and ...this is for us the really original signification of that word”<sup>19</sup>. So for Schleiermacher, “the feeling of absolute dependence” is equivalent to “God-consciousness.” But Schleiermacher holds that the feeling of absolute dependence which all humans necessarily share, is, by itself, feeble or infinitesimal. Jesus differs from other humans in the nature of his God consciousness: “instead of being obscured and powerless as it is in us, the God-consciousness in Him was absolutely clear and determined each moment, to the exclusion of all else, so that it

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<sup>17</sup> “Cette possibilité toujours ouvert dans la vie, pour qu’elle éprouve soudain son auto-affection comme celle de la Vie absolue, c’est ce qui fait d’elle un Devenir. Mais quand donc ce bouleversement émotionnelle du vivant à sa propre essence ne peut naître que du vouloir de la vie elle-même, comme cette re-naissance qui lui donne d’éprouver soudain sa naissance éternelle. L’Esprit souffle où il veut” (CMV 290-91; IAT 232).

<sup>18</sup> CMV 214, IAT 170.

<sup>19</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), p. 16.

must be regarded as a continual living presence, and withal the existence of God in Him”<sup>20</sup>. It seems to me that Schleiermacher's conception of the relation of God to Jesus is congruent with what Henry says about that issue. While for us the experience of our self-affection “as absolute life's self-affection” is but a feeble possibility and fleeting achievement, Henry might be saying that for Jesus, this possibility has somehow attained perfect fulfillment. And yet Henry seems to be saying more than that Jesus simply knows his own sonship perfectly whereas we know our sonship merely feebly. While we are also sons, we are only sons through being sons within the Son. Jesus is not a son within the Son. He *is* the Son.

### The Relationship of The Truth of the World and The Truth of Life in Reading Scripture

In general, the inadequacy in Henry's philosophy lies in his treatment of the question of the relationship between what he calls the truth of the world and the truth of life. And this inadequacy finds expression in Henry's exploration of the nature of Scripture and of the human Jesus. Henry wants to insist that the self-revelation of life as absolute life does not take place in the world and does not in any way depend upon the world. And yet he affirms that written documents and the very existence of a certain historical individual at least have aided greatly in the accomplishment, for humans, of the self-revelation of life as absolute life.

Henry holds that without the words of Jesus Christ which we read in the New Testament, “it would be difficult” to recognize our self-affection as absolute life's self-affection: The condition that permits humans to hear the word of Christ “consists in *a decisive affinity between human belonging to the Truth and the nature of the Word which it is a matter of hearing: the voice of Christ*. To understand what is decisive about this affinity would be difficult if we did not take it from Christ's words themselves”<sup>21</sup>. Henry clearly believes that in reading at least parts of the New Testament, specifically the prologue to John and apparently all of the statements attributed to Jesus in all four gospels, what he calls the word of life speaks

<sup>20</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, p. 397.

<sup>21</sup> “Et cette condition consiste dans *une convenance décisive entre l'appartenance de l'homme à la Vérité et la nature de la Parole qu'il s'agit d'entendre: la voix du Christ*. La compréhension de pareille convenance en ce qu'elle a de décisif serait difficile si nous ne la tenions des paroles mêmes du Christ” (PAROLES 145; WORDS 116).

to us. He evidently does not hold, as it might at first appear, that there just happens to be an agreement between the description of Christ in the prologue to John and the results of independent phenomenological analysis. In fact he seems to imply that such analysis itself in a way depends upon the text of the New Testament and upon Jesus himself. Yet Henry insists that Christ – and specifically Jesus as the Christ of the gospels, does not reveal himself to the world or in the world<sup>22</sup>. The encounter with Christ which takes place through reading the gospels, does itself not take place within the world, but only in life. But if this is true, what role do the gospels, as written texts, play?

Henry's problem with explaining the role of scripture and history in faith is rooted in the deeper problem he has with explaining the relationship between life and objects. For the gospels, as well as all writings, including writings on phenomenology, are in a way objects in the world. And Jesus was a human being who lived and died in the world as all human beings do. The linguistic utterances of Jesus were objects in the world just as all human utterances are. Henry does believe that the human being Jesus, his linguistic utterances, and the book through which we know him, do after all play an essential role in our "second birth" whereby we remember that we are "sons within the Son." Henry seems to be very much assuming what he apparently would deny: that there is at least *some* sense in which life *needs* the world.

It is difficult to reconcile Henry's apparent assumption that life, at least in some sense, does need the world, with his repeated statements that very much seem to regard the world as unreal. Intentionality – as the "outside of itself" which constitutes the world – makes unreal the objectivity it constitutes. Henry is quite explicit about this: "Everything that appears in the world is subject, in principle, to a process of derealization [*déréalisation principielle*]"<sup>23</sup>. It seems as if that consciousness, in its function of constituting objects, in fact functions to constitute unreality: "This phenomenality, that of the world, as we have seen, makes unreal a priori everything it makes visible, making it visible only in the act

<sup>22</sup> CMV 105-113; IAT 82-88.

<sup>23</sup> "Tout ce que apparaît dans le monde est soumis à un processus de déréalisation principielle, lequel ne marque pas le passage d'un état primitif de réalité à l'abolition de cet état mais place *a priori* tout ce qui apparaît de la sorte dans un état de irréalité originelle." "Everything that appears in the world is subject, in principle, to a process of derealization. That process does not consist in the passage from a primitive state of reality to the abolition of that state. Rather, that process, a priori, places everything that appears in the world into a state of original unreality" (CMV 30; IAT 20, translation modified).

by which, posing it outside itself, it empties it of reality.” “*A cette phénoménalité qui est celle du monde, il appartient, on l’a vu, d’irréaliser a priori tout ce qu’elle fait voir, ne le faisant voir que dans l’acte par lequel, le posant hors de soi, elle le vide de sa réalité*”<sup>24</sup>. But if to be objective means to be derealized, how can anything objective play any sort of positive role in the return to itself of life? Equally puzzling – and equally significant – is Henry’s insistence that Life is in fact the essence of both intentionality and the world – despite the gulf, or contradiction, or incompatibility between the two. In *I Am the Truth* Henry directly asserts that “radically foreign to the world, life nevertheless constitutes the real content of the world”<sup>25</sup>. In his early work *The Essence of Manifestation*, he clearly states this problem – a problem he never effectively ends up addressing: “But how affectivity is something which understands, how it is able to grasp and to live transcendent significations, this is what must precisely be explained especially if, as we have claimed, nothing is so repugnant to the essence of feeling as transcendence, if the deployment of a horizon of understanding is that which is most foreign to feeling”<sup>26</sup>. The relationship between the truth of the world and the truth of life, and the relationship between life as autoaffection and life as the essence of the world, represent essential issues Henry has left unresolved. I would now like to consider both of these issues more closely.

While intentionality for Henry derealizes all that it objectifies, life is nevertheless for Henry the essence of both intentionality and the world. But what does it mean to constitute? For Husserl the function of consciousness is precisely to constitute objects – to constitute the rationality of the world and its truth. Henry’s

<sup>24</sup> CMV 184; IAT 146.

<sup>25</sup> “Radicalement étranger au monde, la vie n’en constitue pas moins le contenu réel de celui-ci” (CMV 322; IAT 258, translation modified). Jean-François Lavigne expresses the terms of this contradiction in Henry very succinctly: “If the world ‘is’ not, it if it has no proper being because it is always dependent on the spontaneous activity of a transcending power, then *this power*, derived from its self-affective transcendental source, is the one which *is*, and has an ontological consistency, a being. But we can equally say that the world *is*, precisely because it never ceases to derive its own mode of being from a powerful source of effectiveness, the utterly positive and *evident making of self-affection*.” “The Paradox and Limits of M. Henry’s Concept of Transcendence.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17.3 (2009), p. 381.

<sup>26</sup> “Comment cependant l’affectivité est-elle compréhensible, apte à saisir des significations transcendants et à les vivre, c’est là ce qui doit être précisé si rien ne répugne davantage à son essence que la transcendance, si le déploiement d’un horizon de compréhension est ce qui lui est le plus étranger?” M. Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), p. 607.

philosophy neither explores nor incorporates this dimension of Husserl. Henry makes it clear that the phenomenality of the world is a matter not only of the phenomenality of spatial objects, but begins at the deeper level of the phenomenality of temporality. But truths of the world include assumptions such as: once a series of event occurs, the temporal order within that series is fixed as that one unique temporal order. Is this rational ordering of time also unreal, also repugnant to life? Is logical consistency to be dismissed as a dimension of what is unreal and alien to life? Or is rational order part of what life gives to the world as its “true content”? But if rational order is part of what life gives to the world, then the world must after all not be utterly repugnant to life, because in constituting it as a meaningful order, life has given the world something of itself. Henry does not confront the question of whether he means that the function consciousness has of constituting objective rationality is any part of what he means by life being the true content of the world.

If objectivity for Henry is, as such, the realm of unreality, it is difficult to understand how any sort of objectivity can play a role in life remembering its true reality. This issue becomes especially pressing given the key importance Henry does after all find in the historical Jesus, his life, and his words. Henry clearly states that a specific person and a specific text, through our reading, are able to lead us to “second birth.” Second birth is a matter of the truth of life realizing itself. But texts include factual statements, and human beings, including Jesus, are encountered in the visible, temporal world. What does Henry make of the fact that the Bible includes statements of worldly fact – such as, that a certain person lived and said and did certain things. Henry does engage this issue, but his statements are not entirely consistent. He at one point says that the truth of Christianity is not that Christ did and said all that the texts assert he did and said. Instead, the truth of Christianity is that Jesus really is the son of God.

Let us suppose on the contrary that the composition of the canonical texts is pushed up to as late a period as skeptical criticism desires, so that the canonical gospels date from the fourth century... and their content is suspect to the point that the historical existence of Christ becomes what it truly is: *as uncertain as that of each of the billions of human beings who have trod the earth ever since the human species first wandered its surface*. In this case the identity of Christ, his identification with eternal life, would be no less true, despite the great emptiness of history, despite that fog in which everything that was supposed to have been shown there is lost to the world of the visible<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> “Supposons au contraire la rédaction des textes canoniques reculée aussi longtemps que faire se peut par la critique sceptique, les Évangiles canoniques datés IV<sup>e</sup> siècle... leur contenu

He makes a point of asserting that the texts do not establish that Jesus is the Son of God, and neither can any kind of textual or historical research. It is only through life itself that we know this. But if what we know is that Jesus is the son of God, then wouldn't part of what we know be that he really lived, and that he really did, said, and suffered what he is asserted to have? What is the connection between knowing that Jesus is the Son of God, and knowing that, say, there really was a person who said he was the Son of God, etc.? Henry does affirm that the evidence for historical fact provided by any text, including the New Testament, is inherently uncertain. Henry appears to be saying that the identity of Christ nevertheless survives even the greatest historical skepticism. But at the same time he clearly does not regard the words of the Gospel of the Gospel of John – the words therein of Christ and about Christ – as a mere specimen of admittedly very accurate phenomenological analysis entirely independent of the existence of Jesus in history. And Henry attaches a great deal of importance to the contention that Jesus did assert about himself all that, for example, John reports him to have asserted:

To this overwhelming declaration devoid of any ambiguity, it does no good to object that it can only be found in a late text or one claimed to be such. Even if it is here repeatedly formulated, Christ's identification with the Word of God is by no means the prerogative of the Gospel of John alone. It is all over the synoptics, either in the form of explicit statements, or resulting directly from Christ's words or his actions<sup>28</sup>.

He also asserts that “contrary to the falsehoods of the positivistic, pseudo-historical, and atheistic exegesis of the nineteenth century, it can therefore be assumed that Christ's words are in no way invented by late Christian communities. They present themselves to us as authentic documents”<sup>29</sup>. While Henry does in effect support the historical accuracy of New Testament narratives, he also asserts

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suspecté au point que l'existence historique du Christ devienne ce qu'à vrai dire elle est: *aussi incertaine que celle de chacun des milliards d'êtres humains ayant foulé la terre depuis qu'erre à la surface de celle-ci une espèce humaine* – en ce cas l'identité du Christ, son identification à la Vie éternelle, si elle est vraie, n'en serait pas moins vraie, en dépit du grand vide de l'histoire, de cette brume où se perd dans l'univers du visible tout ce qui est censé s'y être montré” (CMV 13; IAT 6).

<sup>28</sup> “À cette déclaration massive et dépourvue d'équivoque, il ne servirait à rien d'objecter qu'on la trouve dans un texte tardif ou prétendu tel. Si elle y fait l'objet d'une formulation réitérée, l'identification du Christ au Verbe de Dieu n'est nullement l'apanage du seul Évangile de Jean. Elle est partout dans les synoptiques, soit sous la forme de déclarations explicites, soit qu'elle résulte directement des paroles du Christ ou de ses actes” (PAROLES, 64; WORDS 50).

<sup>29</sup> “On peut donc admettre, contrairement aux contrevérités de l'exégèse positiviste, pseudo-historique et athée du XIXe siècle, que les paroles du Christ n'ont rien à voir avec les inventions

that “the truth of Christianity has precisely no relation whatsoever to the truth that arises from the analysis of texts or their historical study” (“*La vérité du christianisme n’a précisément aucune rapport avec la vérité qui relève de l’analyse des textes ou de leur étude historique*”)<sup>30</sup>. It is one thing to maintain, as Henry clearly means to, that the rational methods readers use to understand and evaluate historical documents as records of events cannot establish the truth of the revelation of life. But he goes further than that. He says that the truth of Christianity “has precisely no relationship whatsoever to – “*n’a précisément aucune rapport*” – to such methods. But how can we separate the truth that arises from the analysis of a text from the truth of a text as an authentic document? It is one thing for Henry to maintain that revelation cannot be based upon the objectivity of the world and the objectivity of historical evidence with its inherent uncertainty. But it is difficult to see how he can maintain, given the essential role he finds in Scripture, that objective statements in texts can have no relation whatever to Life. At one point he even directly asserts that the scriptures are true only if the deeds they report really happened: “the extraordinary facts and actions of Christ, his companions, those mysterious women who served him, are known to us only through the text of Scripture. But Scripture is true only if these deeds and actions, despite their extraordinary character, really happened”<sup>31</sup>. When Henry makes this claim, it is not entirely clear what his intent is. He has just said that “historical or textual truth self-destructs”<sup>32</sup>. For Henry, the deeds and words of Jesus, as mere textual or historical truths, are inherently uncertain – or even null. He in fact believes that not merely the academic study of history but language itself, in its capacity to refer to objects including events in the past, is incapable of attaining any kind of genuine truth. But Henry nevertheless does very much seem to be claiming that we can know these events really happened as the texts describe.

Henry is certainly fully aware of these questions. And he confronts them very directly, especially in Chapter 12 of *I Am the Truth*: “Aren’t the Scriptures

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de communautés chrétiennes tardives. Elles s’offrent à nous à titre de documents authentiques” (PAROLES 11; WORDS 6-7).

<sup>30</sup> CMV 9-10; IAT 3.

<sup>31</sup> “Les faits et gestes extraordinaires du Christ, ses compagnons, ces femmes mystérieuses qui le servaient, nous ne les connaissons que par le texte des Écritures. Mais ces Écritures ne sont vraies que si ces faits et gestes, en dépit leur caractère extraordinaire, se sont réellement produits” (CMV 15; IAT 8).

<sup>32</sup> “Cette double impuissance trace le cercle en lequel toute vérité historique ou textuelle s’autodétruit” (CMV 15; IAT 8).

composed of words bearing meanings? If the word of the world is characterized by its impotence, doesn't the same impotence afflict the Scriptures one and all? (...) Does not Christ speak to people in their own language? Is it not in their very own language that He reveals the Truth it is His mission to bring to them?" Henry starts his answer to this question by reiterating that "It is not the word of Scripture that gives us to understand the Word of Life. The Word of Life itself – by engendering us at each instant, by making us Sons – reveals, within its own truth, the truth that the word of Scripture recognizes and to which the word of Scripture witnesses"<sup>33</sup>. It is only the word of life itself, speaking through my very life, by which I am able to understand the word of the scriptures as revelatory of the word of life. And then Henry quite appropriately puts the question: "So do we really need Scripture?" (*"Qu'avons nous alors besoin des Écritures?"*)<sup>34</sup> Isn't it enough for me to hear the Word of Life in depths of my own life, *as* my own life? But it is part of our condition that even though Life speaks through us, we have forgotten its word. We need to be reminded. "It is precisely, we might say, because man forgot his condition as Son that he needs Scripture to remind him of it"<sup>35</sup>. We need the Scriptures to remind us in our very being of our condition as sons within the Son, and yet we are only able to be reminded insofar as the word of life speaks in us. It is through the word of Life speaking in us that the words of Scripture remind us of the word of life speaking in us: "But how is a man able to hear Scripture, to listen to its word, to know that what it says is true? To the extent that the Word of Life speaks within him"<sup>36</sup>. We can't deliberately "remind ourselves" of the word of life. It is only the word of life itself which can remind us of the word of life which is always speaking even though we may have forgot-

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<sup>33</sup> "Les Écritures ne sont-elles pas composées de mots porteurs de significations? Si la parole du monde se caractérise par son impuissance, celle-ci ne frappe-e-elle pas les Écritures dans leur ensemble? (...) Le Christ ne parle-t-il pas aux hommes leur propre langage? N'est-ce point dans ce langage qui est le leur qu'il leur révèle la Vérité qu'il est venu leur apporter?" (CMV 286; IAT 228-29, translation modified.) "Ce n'est pas la parole des Écritures qui nous donne à entendre la Parole de la Vie. C'est celle-ci, en nous engendrant à chaque instant, en faisant nous des Fils, qui révèle dans son propre vérité la vérité que reconnaît et dont témoigne la parole des Écritures" (CMV 288; IAT 230, translation modified).

<sup>34</sup> CMV 288; IAT 230.

<sup>35</sup> "C'est précisément, dira-t-on, parce que l'homme a oublié sa condition de Fils qu'il est besoin des Écritures pour lui rappeler" (CMV 290; IAT 232).

<sup>36</sup> "Mais comment l'homme peut-il entendre les Écritures, écouter leur parole, savoir que ce qu'elles disent est vrai ? Dans la mesure où parle en lui la Parole de la Vie" (CMV 290; IAT 232, translation modified).

ten it. “This possibility, which is always open to life, to suddenly experience its self-affection as absolute Life’s self-affection, is what makes it a Becoming. But then, when and why is this emotional upheaval produced, which opens a person to his own essence? Nobody knows. The emotional opening of the person to his own essence can only be born of the will of life itself, as this rebirth that lets him suddenly experience his eternal birth. The Spirit blows where it wills”<sup>37</sup>. But he does not hold that the movements of the Spirit are *utterly* random. It is true that reading Scripture cannot automatically awaken the word of life. But through reading Scripture, the word of life may indeed be awakened.

A few pages earlier, Henry had seemed to admit that there is a “connection” (*“cette connexion entre les deux paroles”*<sup>38</sup>) of some sort between the words of the Scripture as words of the world, and the Word of Life itself (despite the fact that he has also claimed that there is “no relation whatsoever” between them): Scripture “utters propositions that relate to a reality different from the propositions themselves, to a referent situated outside them – that is, to these Sons of God, about whom it affirms that this is what we are [i.e., Sons of God], this is our condition.” (*“Elles énoncent des propositions qui se rapportent à une réalité différent des propositions elles-mêmes, à un référent situé hors d’elles, à savoir ces Fils de Dieu dont elles affirment que l’est là que nous sommes, notre condition”*)<sup>39</sup>. Here Henry makes an interesting shift: The “outside of itself” of the “word of the world” now actually becomes its opposite, the word of life. It is apparently possible, after all, for words of the world to “indicate” the word of life. “This referent that is exterior to them, and which they are unable to bring into existence, *this is where we are, we the living*, living in Life... By saying ‘you are sons’ the worldly word of Scriptures turns away from itself and indicates the place where another word speaks. It achieves the displacement that leads beyond its own word to this other place where the Word of Life speaks”<sup>40</sup>. Again, Henry must be claiming

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<sup>37</sup> “Cette possibilité toujours ouverte dans la vie, pour qu’elle éprouve soudain son auto-affection comme celle de la Vie absolue, c’est ce qui fait d’elle une Devenir. Mais quand donc ce bouleversement émotionnelle qui ouvre le vivant à sa propre essence se produit-il et pourquoi ? Nul ne le sait. L’ouverture émotionnelle du vivant à sa propre essence ne peut naître que du vouloir de la vie elle-même, comme cette re-naissance qui lui donne d’éprouver soudain sa naissance éternelle. L’Esprit souffle ou il veut” (CMV 291; IAT 232).

<sup>38</sup> CMV 287; IAT 229.

<sup>39</sup> CMV 287; IAT 229, translation modified.

<sup>40</sup> “Ce référent qui leur est extérieur et qu’elles ne peuvent poser dans l’existence, *c’est là ce que nous sommes, nous les vivants* – vivants dans la Vie... En disent ‘vous êtes les Fils’, la parole

that it is only the word of life speaking in us by which the words of Scripture as words of the world do ever “indicate” the Word of Life. But at this point Henry appears to have admitted something that elsewhere he is at pains to deny. He has said over and over that the truth of the world is utterly alien to the truth of life, and that intentionality, whose whole function is objectification, derealizes all that it objectifies. The emptiness of the world does consist partly in its inability to ground itself. To dwell merely in the truth of the world is to dwell in a realm of endless interpretation, endless deferral, endless uncertainty. And Henry does not now contradict *that* claim. But here, at this particular point, Henry actually says that the word of life can, as it were, make use of words of the world. He does not mean that words of the world become a medium or an intermediary for revelation. And he certainly does not mean that the truth of the world is the basis of the truth of revelation. But what then is the connection between the words of Scripture as words of the world, and the Word of Life? Henry's statements directly imply that the word of life speaking in us somehow empowers words of the world to, through our reading, help lead us back to our “second birth.” Henry does not have an adequate explanation of how it may be that life is somehow essentially related to the world in a positive sense – but he does in fact assume, and at times explicitly state, that there is some such positive connection.

On the one hand, as we have seen, Henry has a problem in that the function of consciousness is to impart rationality to the world. But on the other hand there is also a sense in which consciousness depends upon the objects it constitutes. Henry's own research makes it clear that we do depend upon objects in order to reach the point of recognizing the life within ourselves as absolute life. In his study of Kandinsky, *Seeing the Invisible*, Henry makes his position clear that artworks can play this role, although he again there skirts the implications of the simple fact that Kandinsky's paintings, whatever else they are, are objects in the world<sup>41</sup>. Likewise, the New Testament, and the words spoken by Jesus and the words of Jesus there reported, are objects in the world. And the whole history of philosophy, whatever else it is, is an object in the world. Were it not

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mondaine des Écritures détourne d'elle-même et indique le lieu où parle une autre parole. Elle accomplit le déplacement qui conduit hors de sa propre parole à cet autre où parle la Parole de la Vie” (CMV 287; IAT 230, translation modified).

<sup>41</sup> See J.H. Smith, “Michel Henry's Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience and Husserlian Intentionality.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14.2 (April 2005), see esp. pp. 205-206.

for the books I simply hold in my hand and the words I read on the page, the specific realizations that constitute Henry's philosophy would not be possible. And yet Henry asserts quite clearly that the realm of objectivity is the realm of unreality.

Perhaps a way forward is first of all to accept Henry's denial that even expressive objects in the world – such as a human face, human speech, poetry, drama, narrative, and Scripture itself – as objects, are independent, self-supporting realities which function as intermediaries or vehicles for the reality of Life, including the life of others and the life of God. We may continue to maintain that the only “medium” within which we enter into communion with Others, with our own life, and with God, is Life itself. But if that is so, what role do objects such as bodies, faces, gestures, utterances, and writings play? However we are to describe that role, we must say not that Life is first of all in those objects, but rather that those objects are first of all in Life. We are all immersed in a common Life, *and our bodies and the objects in the visible palpable world around us are no less so immersed*. It is only in and through that prior immersion that then, in a sense, it can be that life is in the objects. In the most fundamental sense, we must say that Life underlies the world and not that the world underlies Life. This might help clarify the sense in which we can affirm that Life is the essence of the world, in a way that preserves what Henry assumes while dispensing with the categorical condemnations of objectivity itself which again and again make their appearance in his discourse. But even if we deny that the world is deeper than Life, we still need to come to some understanding of how it may be that the world has a positive role to play in Life, and specifically in that inner Becoming or “second birth” whereby life returns to itself.

Henry describes at least three ways that “second birth” takes place, corresponding to the aesthetic (the experience of life in shape and color); the ethical (the experience of life in works of mercy); and the religious (the experience of life in the words of Christ). Life, in coming to itself, is the lived experience of the life mattering in the way it truly matters. And this experience leads ineluctably to a sense of life's origin – the sort of experience that Emerson and James express. Life comes to itself in the same absolute intimacy of autoaffection whereby it is itself. And we may affirm that the sense of origin is precisely within life itself, within this same absolute intimacy, and not first through any kind of reflection or interpretation or speculation. But does the origin sensed even in this most intimate sense, have the same certainty we live through at the core of our self-experience as unique ipseity? And how does hearing and embracing the Word of Life

through the words of Christ compare with our aesthetic and ethical experience of life coming to itself? How is it that embracing the Word of Life is more than an uncertain sense of origin, and becomes an absolute confidence in God? Is it possible to describe our affirmation of the Word of Life in this sense without referring to faith? And can faith itself be described merely in the terms of immediacy that Henry uses? Does not faith in God in some sense involve a surpassing of the mere feeling of origin? Yet, even if we admit that it does, the question remains of the meaning of faith and the meaning of what is believed in. Is faith a blind, uncomprehending affirmation of a mere idea? Or does faith itself, in way very difficult to define, actually involve an experience of that which is believed in? Is not the object of faith itself experienced through faith in a way it could not be experienced without faith? This is not to say that the object of faith first presents itself to consciousness prior to faith in a way that proves itself so that faith can begin. But it is to suggest that faith itself involves an experience of the believed-in that only arises through faith itself, and that makes faith convincing within and through its very believing-in. If there is such an experience, of what character is it? It is in this way, I suggest, that we might understand Henry's contribution. The experience of the believed-in, in faith, is experienced not objectively but within life, within our affective self-experience which, within itself, opens out to a beyond<sup>42</sup>.

Henry sees a danger in world as such and intentionality as such. The danger of the world is that it tempts us to regard its objectivity and ultimate and foundational. The danger of intentionality is that it tempts us to regard our action as sovereign, and to regard as real only what we can grasp and to the extent it is the grasped. But at the same time Henry takes a positive view of the world and intentionality – that the essence of the world is life, and that the activity of speaking, writing, and reading words of the world can lead us back to the word of life. How

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<sup>42</sup> For a related discussion of faith in Henry see J. Hart, "Michel Henry's Phenomenological Theology of Life: A Husserlian Reading of *C'est moi la vérité*," *Husserl Studies* 15 (1999), pp. 194-195; 204-208. "The distinction between... on the one hand, my passivity and receptivity of 'ipseity' in the stream of self-affections which effect the self-affection which makes me 'me,' and not yet 'I,' and, on the other hand, my actuation of this original I-can by self-qualifying and character-forming I-me acts (Husserl) is the phenomenological center for Henry's Christian theological explication. But the justification for the move from the weak self-affection to God as the source of the strong self-affection is not evident phenomenologically. It would seem to be, although Henry never puts it this way, a faith-informed taking-as, an intentional act, which requires explication" (pp. 206-207).

might we make sense of this positive view that seems at odds with so much else of what he says?<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> F. Seyler, in *“Barbarie ou Culture”: L'éthique de l'affectivité dans la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2010), has very precisely defined the basic issue with which I am dealing here, an issue which will arise for any attempt to explore the meaning of Henry's philosophy for ethics, for social thought and politics, for culture, for art, and finally for religion. What is the relationship between the truth of life and the truth of the world? Henry does say that the truth of life founds the truth of the world. But how are we to understand that foundation? For he also says that the truth of the world is alien to the truth of life. The words of the world point to that which is of the world, namely objects. But those words also somehow point to life, and this other kind of reference is at the heart of our ethical life, our attempts to describe that life and to describe life itself, and is also at the heart of aesthetic experience and religious faith. Seyler presents very clear and thorough textual support for the existence of these conflicting but intertwining strands in the thought of Henry. Regarding the role of words of the world in understanding life, Seyler concludes that two contrasting interpretations are possible: “Deux interprétations sont à première vue possibles: soit que la représentation, même vraie, de la vie n'est qu'une construction a posteriori et que pour cette raison elle est sans aucune conséquence sur la vie elle-même, soit que la représentation ne change pas la *nature originnaire* de la vie... La première interprétation est soutenue par les passages déjà évoqués où Michel Henry n'admet pas que la philosophie, et donc aussi la Phénoménologie elle-même, puisse valoir comme préparation nécessaire ou simplement possible à la seconde naissance... La seconde est soutenue par la déclaration de l'auteur selon laquelle seule une philosophie de la vie ‘peut guider le regard transcendantal jusqu'à la compréhension intérieure de ce monde – sans cela énigmatique – au milieu duquel il nous est donné de vivre, comme il peut seule aussi ouvrir à chacun le chemin qui conduit jusqu'à lui-même’” (pp. 227-228, Henry quote is from “Qu'est-ce que cela que nous appelons la vie?” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, vol. 1). Seyler pursues this second interpretation in detail. One strand in Henry's analysis that supports this second interpretation is his notion of “hearing twice.” Texts which refer to life need to be heard twice. On first hearing, they will be heard as signifying objectivities such as things in the world, propositions, or ideas. But on second hearing, our hearing will not direct us toward objects, but rather direct us away from objects and toward life. The ‘direction’ in this case must not be misunderstood as making an object of life, but rather as a kind of inspiration for the “second birth” in which the life that we already are remembers itself through an inner transformation of non objective self experience as non objective self experience – of life as life. In the case of the Scriptures: “C'est bien là ce que souligne M. Henry à propos du texte des Écritures: ‘La parole qui a constitué ces significations dans une parole d'homme et dicté ces textes, c'est la Parole de la Vie qui parle en nous, qui nous a généré dans notre condition de Vivant. Ainsi l'entendons-nous pour ainsi dire deux fois et pouvons-nous la comprendre. Nous entendons la Parole des Écritures pour autant que ce que s'auto-écoute en nous la parole qui nous a institués dans la Vie.’ [Henry quote from “Phénoménologie matérielle et langage,” in A. David and J. Greisch, eds. *Michel Henry: l'épreuve de la vie* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), p. 344] Entendre deux fois le texte signifie donc ici l'appréhender comme parole humaine, c'est-à-dire comme ensemble de significations idéales, *et* comme parole de la vie, c'est-à-dire dans une saisie affective de la vie par elle-même où la vie ‘s'auto-écoute’” (pp. 218-19). By focusing on the question of the relationship between the two modes of appearing – that of life and that of the world – Seyler lays the basis for a resolution of the bind in which Henry's philosophy appears to be caught: “Cette objection nous fait parvenir au point essentiel. Car si la thèse central de la duplicité

Henry often says that life owes nothing to the world. If it is true that life is the essence of the world, then all that the world has of value, meaning, and being it owes to life. I suggest taking this further than Henry does: if the world has any value, meaning, or being, that value, meaning, and being are tantamount to its being-in-life. Henry also says that words of the world can lead back to life and they are able to do this only through life itself. Here again I suggest taking this further: if the writing and reading of words of the world has any power to lead back to life in the sense of bringing life back to itself, that power is also tantamount to their being in life.

Would Henry agree that life gives the world genuine being, meaning, and value? In the course of his actual analysis of experience, Henry does not in fact advocate anything like the extinction of objectivity. A different Henry might have claimed that for life to truly return to itself, all historical “knowledge” should be ignored or forgotten as meaningless, the beauty of the world and of art should be dismissed as an empty panoply of illusory charms, and perhaps the moral life itself should be dismissed as a pointless quest. He might have recommended some sort of practice of quietistic meditation that would promise to return life to itself in its absolute purity, uncontaminated by the world in any sense. But his philosophy does not in fact have this character – even though many of his overt statements taken in isolation are quite consistent with some such thoroughgoing world-denial. If the positive value that Henry does in effect assign to the world is to make sense within his philosophy, I believe his thought needs to be supplemented in a crucial way. His philosophy might explicitly acknowledge that life does indeed give the world – the *objective* world – meaning, value, and being. World would not be world were it not objective. Were it not objective, there would be no world endowed with meaning by life. Objectivity is not some sort of flaw. It is true that the meaning, value and being that life gives the world can-

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de l'apparaître introduit par définition une séparation radicale entre deux ordres de phénoménalité, il n'est pas vraie pour autant que ces dimensions de l'apparaître soient sans rapport ni sans lien” (p. 303) “En effet, il faut rappeler ici que selon la Phénoménologie de la vie, l'apparaître pathétique *fonde* l'apparaître ek-statique et en constitue l'origine... Or, si ce passage est possible dans un sens de l'origine vivant dans l'expression représentative, ne faut-il pas maintenant envisager la possibilité d'un passage en sens inverse, c'est-à-dire de la représentation vers l'affectivité? Non pas, bien sûr, dans le sens d'une inversion de l'ordre de fondation... mais bien plutôt come *cheminement à rebours du fondé vers le fondement*” (p. 304). My reflections are an attempt to further work out the implications of this possibility of “hearing twice” and of a “*cheminement à rebours du fondé vers le fondement*.”

not be reduced to its objectivity or to what can be made objective. But the world as objective is precisely that which has meaning, value, and being. Life is the dimension of world as such that exceeds objectivity, but it also is the origin of objectivity as such. Another way to put this is that the being of the world is being-in-life<sup>44</sup>.

This also means that life coming to itself is not simply a matter of ipseity coming to itself apart from world. Rather, life coming to itself is also a matter of *the being-in-life of world* coming to itself within the intentionality of ipseity's experience of world. This coming to itself is also a matter of non-objective experience. And this would simply be what it is for the world to have value, meaning, and being, and to be experienced as such.

I would like to make a similar point about the role of words of the world. Henry says that some words of the world, through our activity of reading, can lead us back to life itself so that this experience of reading becomes the experience of life returning to itself. But these words of the world only lead back to life through life itself. It is first of all true here as well that it is only through being-in-life that words can be words at all – that objects in the world can become signs, and signs within language. But the ability of words of the world to lead us back to life cannot simply be a matter of the potential of the being-in-life of words to return to itself. Some “words of the world” for example, some poetic metaphors, as well as the words of Christ, have the power through our reading to lead us back to Life. I would suggest that this is a matter of the being-in-life of those words returning to itself in a unique way. Poetry and the words of Christ, in and through our reading, as they return us to life, do not point to objects or concepts, even though on the literal level they do refer to things and ideas. The total experience they evoke involves more than language as objective signification. Language as objective

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<sup>44</sup> At this point a very subtle and difficult question arises. We may agree that life is the essence of the world. We may even agree that life is the origin of the world as objective. But is the being of the world simply identical to life? This appears to be Henry's actual position. That is to say: life is the true being of the world, and objectivity is illusory or at least somehow deficient being. But again this raises the question of what world would be were it not objective. I suggest that the being of objectivity cannot simply be identified with life, even if we still maintain that objectivity depends upon life and that it pertains to the essence of objectivity to be the bearer of life, and even if we also still maintain that objectivity in abstraction from life is meaningless. If objectivity owes its being to life and nothing else, if life inhabits objectivity and it is only thereby that objectivity even is, it still would seem that objectivity is in some sense other than life. Life constitutes, inhabits, and sustains “something” other than itself.

signification is already the being-in-life of these words. But the being-in-life of these words as poetic or revelatory words only comes to life when through our reading their meaning becomes the return of life to itself within the ipseity of the reader. That is the meaning of the being-in-life of words as poetic or revelatory words. But if Henry means to assert that the function of intentionality is *merely* to derealize, none of this would make sense. And I am asserting that the positive role his analyses do assign to the world does not make sense either if the function of intentionality is *merely* to derealize. The objectivity that intentionality constitutes is genuine being which has genuine meaning and value. Any object has value both in itself and as its capacity to function as a sign of other objects or indeed as a sign that leads back to non-objective life. I think that Henry's genuine insight is that the being, meaning, and value of an object would vanish without the non-objective life that is its essence. But that does not mean that objectivity as such is unreal, empty, or meaningless.

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## Fenomenologiczna chrystologia Michela Henry'ego: od transcendentalizmu do Ewangelii św. Jana

### Streszczenie

Celem tego eseju jest interpretacja i ocena Michela Henry'ego ujęcia chrześcijaństwa i doświadczenia religijnego. W pierwszej kolejności zajmuję się decydującym pojęciem nieobiektywizującego doświadczenia samego siebie, które Henry nazywa także po prostu „życiem”. Życie, które zapomina swej autentycznej istoty, jest równoznaczne z fenomenami rozpaczy oraz tego, co francuski filozof nazywa barbarzyństwem nowoczesności. To, co Henry nazywa „drugimi narodzinami”, jest zaś wewnętrzną przemianą życia, poprzez którą życie uświadamia sobie tę istotę, którą zapomniano, lecz w rzeczywistości nigdy nie utracono. Dla Henry'ego, strumień życia we mnie samym, który jest moją autoafektacją, nie można oddzielić od strumienia życia od Boga we mnie. Artykuł rozpoczyna się od wyjaśnienia stanowiska Henry'ego poprzez porównanie z dwoma amerykańskimi myślicielami: Ralphem Waldo Emersonem (1803-1882) i Williamem Jamesem (1842-1910). Następnie rozważam niektóre z centralnych zagadnień: jaki jest stosunek „drugich narodzin” do wiary? Jak należy pogodzić nieraz powtarzaną tezę Henry'ego, że intencjonalność odrealnia wszystko to, co czyni obiektywnym, z jego niejednokrotnie formułowanym twierdzeniem, że życie jest istotą zarówno intencjonalności, jak i świata? Oraz jak należy traktować fakt, że Henry mimo wszystko pisze, że jakoby przedmioty w świecie mogą pełnić funkcję w kierowaniu Ja ku jego „drugim narodzinom”? Odpowiadam na te pytania, proponując uzupełnić analizy Henry'ego o kolejne pojęcie, a mianowicie pojęcie bycia-w-życiu.