

Michel Henry
The Living Body

In this paper I would like to discuss the body, more precisely I would like to tackle the problem of the living body. Reflecting on this problem, two different approaches become apparent. One approach is to start from the body of ordinary perception, which would be a question of the material body or our own body as it appears to us in the world alongside other objects and similar to how other objects appear to us. From this rather general experience of the body, one could then seek to differentiate from the inert body what is proper to the living body, even though the living body also belongs to the world, just like the material body.

It is this first path that I will follow in the first. But if one reflects on the living body, another path opens up based on life and showing how, in life, a body is born, how in life, God's life, something like a living body, such as ours, is produced, this body which feels, acts, breaths and with which our very life seems to be bound. It is this second more difficult, and to my knowledge rarely followed, path that I will try to follow in the second part.

So, I will start from the ordinary experience of the body, of the bodies that populate the universe and of which ours too is a body in this world. Our access to this body is limited to what it presents of itself, what it gives of itself. It presents itself in the world. In short, it is a sensible body, something that is seen, heard, that I can touch, feel, is cold or warm, firm or soft, which is rough or smooth and finally which is beautiful or ugly, as the things in the world generally tend to be. It is strange for us to find ourselves, through our body, similar to everything else in the world.

This experience of the body, this idea of the body belonging to common experience, has served as the foundation to the philosophies of the body or theories of the body that deal with our access to the world as it operates in and through sensibility.

This description or interpretation of the body was shattered at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The collapse of the traditional view of the body is at the origin of modernity, the culture to which we belong. We are the children of a culture that differs from those that preceded it, in that it arose from an intellectual decision. And this intellectual decision of which we are the descendants, whether we know it or not, whether we want it or not, was made by Galileo. This decisive event occurred in the very beginning of the seventeenth century when Galileo declared that this body that we take for the real body, this body that can be seen and touched, that has colours, odours, tactile qualities, etc. is only an illusion and that the real universe is not comprised of such sensible bodies—that our access to this real universe can no longer be a sensible knowledge. Instead, he claimed that the real universe to which the body belongs is actually made up of extended material bodies that, consequently, present certain shapes and forms. It is this extended material body, endowed with shapes and forms, that must be understood. And the proper knowledge for understanding these shapes is geometric knowledge. So the sensible knowledge of sensible bodies, a knowledge that varies from one individual to another and on which no universal, scientific knowledge can be founded, must be replaced by this rational knowledge that can be applied by any mind, namely geometry. And that is exactly what Galileo did.

The sensible qualities that cause these bodies to appear to us as coloured, sonorous, odorous, warm, hard, etc. are due to the biological organization of the particular animals that we are. It is known, for example, that some animals do not hear the same sounds that we do. So there is a universe of sensible appearances that is due to the contingent organization of our organisms. It is necessary to substitute this series of naïve appearances with the geometric knowledge of material bodies, the sole true knowledge. There is no science of sensibility. The universe, said Galileo, is a great Book. This book is written in a particular language the characters of which are circles, triangles and other geometric shapes. Only those who understand this language can know and comprehend our particular universe.

The Galilean decision is what I call the proto-fundamental act of modernity (*l'acte proto-fondateur de la modernité*). It established ways of thinking in which we still all, unhesitatingly and uncritically, believe today. Those who doubt these propositions are very rare indeed. These ideas spread quite rapidly in the first two decades of the seventeenth century. Notably they were taken up by a great philosopher, Descartes who, in his analysis of a piece of wax in his *Second Meditation*, advances a definition of the body using terms he borrowed from Galileo, even if he didn't cite their origin. For Descartes the body is *res extensa*, an extended thing that has geometric properties. What Descartes adds to Galilean physics is due to the fact that it is possible to give a mathematical formulation to these geometric properties, using a system of abscissas and ordinates. That is how modern science was actually created, a science that is simply the geometrical-mathematical knowledge of the real objective universe, but “real” only insofar as this universe is the correlate of such a knowledge. What is astonishing is that when these ideas came to shape modernity and found the new science, Descartes, who played a considerable role in this foundation, opened up other more decisive perspectives, even if they remain largely incomprehensible and unexploited today.

Galileo performed what in phenomenology is called “a reduction,” that is he reduced the world to those real extended material bodies that physico-mathematical science would make into its new object. As for sensible qualities, sensibility, and subjective appearances in general, thus subjectivity and what I call “life” or “living subjectivity,” he sets them outside of the field of research of the science that he founded and to which modernity reduces true knowledge.

Descartes, on the contrary, performs a counter-reduction. While following Galileo in his effort to found a new science of the material universe, he does not treat subjective appearances, sensations, impressions, desires, emotions, sensibility, affectivity, and subjectivity in general as illusions. For what does it mean to assume a pain, fear or anguish as an illusion? Do we not experience this pain, this suffering and, as we experience them, do they not actually have reality—a reality that is not possible to dispute and which is more certain than that of the world—an undeniable reality. Such is the extraordinary counter-reduction achieved by Descartes. Everything that Galileo had set aside from his rational knowledge of the external objective world, Descartes gathers together to create what he calls *cogitationes*, modalities of the soul. These modalities of the soul are more essential, more certain than the reality of the bodies that comprise the universe and that science studies.

This is what Descartes established in the collection of texts in which he defines the cogito—and notably in article 24 of *Passions of the Soul*. Let us suppose that I am dream-

ing. The assumption of the dream is that of the world's non-existence –the hypothesis that this world which I habitually take for certain—and which is the world of science—is doubtful. If I am dreaming nothing that I see in this dream exists. The entire world is perhaps only a dream. But if, always in this dream, I experience fear or fright—this fear, even though it occurs in a dream, does exist. Not only does it exist, but it exists just like I experience it, absolutely, undeniably. Thus, subjective life is a sphere of absolute certitude, independent of the truth of the world and science—since it exists even if the world should cease to exist.

The body, you say. Fine, the body is in doubt as long as we believe that it belongs to the world and depends upon the certainty of that world. For if the world is open to doubt, the body is too. However, it is quite remarkable that, for Descartes, the body does not depend upon the certainty of the world but only of the perception that I have of it. This is because my perception of the body—of this body that Descartes understands following Galileo as *res extensa*—is certain that the body itself could be taken as a certainty. The further that the truth of the body is distanced from that of subjectivity, it is on the contrary the absolute certainty of subjectivity, of the subjective perception of the body, as a certain *cogitatio*, which is capable of establishing the certainty of the universe and the science of that universe. Thus the reversal of the perspective of modern science is complete.

In Descartes however, with regard to the body, one finds still more radical intuitions, even if they were not fully developed by him. The completely unprecedented thought that he revealed in his *Meditations* was barely understood by his contemporaries. Whence those Objections addressed by his celebrated critics, one of which gave Descartes the opportunity to formulate a truly “unheard of” theory about the body. To Gassendi who asked him why instead of saying “I think therefore I am,” he didn’t say as effectively and correctly “I walk therefore I am,” Descartes replied in a completely unexpected manner that this proposition is indeed correct if by “walk” one understands the subjective consciousness that I have of walking, which is a *cogitatio (nisi quatenus ambulandi conscientia cogitatio est)*. Hence there is a subjective experience of walking, that is to say of the originary body of which the walking is an activity. So here, formulated for the first time in the history of human thought, in an implicit manner of course, yet undeniable, the radical theory of the subjective body. Thus there exists a body that is not the one that you see in the world, but rather an invisible, originary body that is identified with what I am, that walks, strikes, that accomplishes all my actions, that belongs not to the domain of the universe but to that of the *cogitatio*. Descartes did not develop this point, nor will I, because somebody else, about whom I am going to speak, is going to do so instead.

Let’s set Descartes aside, not gratuitously, but because, paradoxically, Descartes’ cogito had no successor on the philosophical plane. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a crucial situation would arise, which is not unlike that of Descartes in regard to Galileo. It is remarkable to realise that it is once again Galileo and the foundation of modern science that are questioned, but this time the questioner is Husserl—one of the few great philosophers to have taken up the radical problematic of Descartes’ *Meditations*. What Husserl objected to in the Galilean universe of modern science is to take the universe as an absolute—a universe that would be true unto itself, to some extent, and whose truth would depend solely on it. However, it is enough to reflect on

Galileo's analysis of this universe to recognize that this is a vain assertion. This universe, he tells us, is a book written in a language the characters of which are geometric shapes. However, none of these shapes actually exists in the real world. In the real world, there are neither circles nor triangles nor squares, but only round and other similar sensible appearances; for example, a circle is an ideal entity created by an act of the mind. The collection of geometric shapes and, similarly, their mathematical formulations implies the effects (*prestations*) of the transcendental consciousness without which they would not exist. These geometrical idealities can be constructed from the material world—through acts of *ideation* that arise from a specific analysis— but in themselves they do not belong to this world and cannot define it. The real material world from which such geometrical idealities are derived is the sensible world. Far from being able to create the organization of this world and put it between brackets, the construction of Galilean science presupposes it and depends upon it.

Not only do the idealities of Galilean science refer to the sensible world from which they are constructed, but they have meaning only in relation to it. It is their reference to the sensible world, as explanatory principles of that world, which justifies all of the theories of Galilean science, for example the theory of the light. These theories are always the last resort of the theories of this world and the sensible phenomena in which they find their ultimate cause.

So it is necessary to return to the sensible world and, consequently, ponder the sensible body that we have taken as the starting point of our analysis of the body and which cannot be discarded so easily. This sensible world, which serves as the ground of the scientific world, is the one in which men and women live and that Husserl calls the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). This is the world where water is cool, where it is pleasant to go for a dip, look at the blue of the sky, or listen to the wind. If we imagine a world in which the sensible qualities have all vanished, a world of particles, wouldn't such a world be unlivable? In such a world, a kiss—emptied of all desire, emotion and sensation—would be reduced to a bombardment of particles. All this is not only abstract, but actually senseless.

So in the sensible world there is the sensible body, which brings up a profound ambiguity. On the one hand the sensible body denotes the felt body, a body that is seen, that makes a sound if struck, that has a sweet honey-like scent, like Descartes said in the *Second Meditation* in regard to his piece of wax. But—and here is the paralogism of every theory that deals with this sensible body-object of the world—this felt body presupposes a separate body that feels it, touches it, sees and hears it. Now we are led from an object body, if I may call it that, to a subject body, to a body that is endowed with those fundamental capacities of seeing, touching, hearing, moving, etc. Consequently, we are led from the question of the felt body to the question of a feeling body—from a given body to a giving body—no longer the body given in the world but rather the body that gives this world and the bodies within it, including one's own body as a sensible object. This giving body is the original, fundamental body and one's theory must be based on it.

In fact, modern philosophy has discovered this idea of a subjective body that is not an object of experience but an ability, a principle of experience. So before being an object-body that can be seen, touched, felt, we are this originary capacity to see, touch, hold, etc. Thus it is this fundamental body that must be analyzed, since it is the one that

knows the other. If there were no knowing body, there would be no known body, neither my own nor those of the universe.

Modern phenomenology contributed to the discovery of this subjective body lying at the origin of experience, but it limited its investigation to the relationship of this feeling body to what it feels. Admittedly it is no small matter to say, as Merleau-Ponty did, that Kant's transcendental subject is not at the origin of our experience, but rather a subject that is a body, an incarnate subject. Basically, the world that we have access to, in which we live, is quite different according to whether it is a world known through the intellect, as Galileo believed, or this world of life that is known by our touch, vision, smell, etc. The relationship of the feeling body to the felt body is certainly an essential problem. Only, what should be understood is that modern phenomenology has solved it with its own means, inside of presuppositions that were never called into question. In short, this relationship between the feeling and the felt is understood as an intentional relation. The body, which is the true subject of knowledge, knows other bodies by intentionally relating to them. Consciousness is the location of this fundamental surplus (*dépassement*) by which it always projects itself beyond itself towards a world, towards other bodies and its own. If the term subjectivity is retained, it should be said that modern phenomenology interprets our subjective body as an intentional body because it has already interpreted subjectivity as an intentional subjectivity. For, as all phenomenologists have established and known, this movement by which I am cast out into a world is consciousness. It is through this kind of transcendence, as Heidegger says, through this going beyond, that experience is possible. Consciousness has experiences because it can go beyond itself towards all that appears to it in and by this going beyond.

Consequently, from the body's point of view, because the question of the body is related to fundamental philosophical questions, the subjective body that must feel the felt body, that must hear a noise and see a colour, is essentially an intentional body. It is obvious here that the originary body is only analyzed in its capacity to refer to an experience as an experience of something external to it. I feel what is felt, I see what is seen, I hear what is heard, in such a way that what is seen, heard or touched is always situated in a kind of space outside of me, in a world in the original sense where "world" refers to this transcendental horizon of visibility where everything appears as other than me, as external to me.

In these often remarkable descriptions, something is overlooked. Generally, what is overlooked in a theory is often the most essential thing. What is overlooked in the present case is that the relationship of the feeling body—the body that theoretically has experiences—is not a relationship to what it feels or knows, but rather the relationship of this knowing, feeling body to itself. How does this body that is subject, this body that apprehends both a sensible world and its own body as sensible objects, relate to itself as feeling, as knowing?

This is a fundamental question. It was posed before phenomenology by a brilliant philosopher named Maine de Biran. Under what conditions did he make this extraordinary discovery? It would be beneficial to briefly describe the context of the theories of the body during his time. The most important theory is Condillac's. Condillac had a very original conception about the body, because, instead of framing the problem of the body like Galileo did—how do we know the bodies of the universe?—instead of questioning the knowledge of other bodies, he questioned that of his own. I too have a body.

Do I know my body like I know this table or that glass? Many observations could be made about this. If it is a question of any body whatsoever, I can distance myself from it, I can look at it from various angles. Yet my own body does not present itself in this way at all. I cannot leave it, I cannot see it from behind. In short, I am in my body whereas I am outside of other bodies. Apparently, some people do experience being outside of their own body, they perceive their body to be three metres behind them. But generally such cases are considered pathological, and such people are taken care of in a special hospital. Even in these cases however, it is *in the representation of the patient*, not in reality that someone finds him- or herself outside of their own body. Generally, it is not possible for us to take leave of our body and place ourselves outside of it. Why? Due to what strange bond? It is to this question especially that Maine de Biran's theory responds. Let's continue with his historical context.

Condillac sought to understand how he knew his own body before knowing how he knew others. Condillac took a person to be a milieu of pure sensations and impressions. "I am," he said in a famous proposition, "the scent of a rose." A person is a kind of place where sensations are felt. But these pure impressions understood in their purity do not have the capacity to indicate a reality behind them or to form part of this reality. And yet, in our experience, they refer to precise parts of the body, and that is what Condillac sought to explain. According to him, we have an organ that allows us to attain reality through and beyond these pure sensations and in this way to locate these sensations in this reality. This organ is the hand that gives us the feeling of solidity. By moving it over various parts of the body, the hand makes it possible to determine and locate these different parts.

In light of this theory, Maine de Biran, in a text from 1804 entitled *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, raises two fundamental questions. How does this instrument, the hand, by moving over our own body, allow the different parts to be known? And how is this instrument itself known in the first place? For it is this primitive knowledge of the hand itself (and not of what it touches) that enables me to move it. Hence the latter, no less essential, question.

These two fundamental questions raised by Maine de Biran compelled him to develop what would later come to be called a phenomenology. With Maine de Biran however, it is a question of a radical phenomenology, infinitely more profound than historical phenomenology would be and one must discern what differentiates it. For it is precisely in regard to the body proper that Maine de Biran made this decisive discovery. At first glance his originality might appear disconcerting. For him, the way in which the hand knows itself as a hand which moves, placing itself all over the body, has nothing to do with the way in which it knows this body over which it moves. The hand knows—i.e. touches, grasps, holds—the parts of the body as a touched, felt, grasped body, as a transcendent, objective body belonging to the world. It is this body that the eye sees, that the ear hears, of which the sense of smell perceives an odour: an external body belonging to the world. The relationship of the hand (or eye, or ear) to this body that it knows is an intentional relationship—and that is why whatever this intentionality touches is transcendent, external in relation to it.

On the contrary, the relationship of the knowledge in which the hand originally knows itself in order to be able to act, to move and touch is a non-intentional relation, it is an immediate experience of itself in which the hand coincides with itself in order to be

able to make use of its capabilities, to be able to act. It is the development of this immediate experience in which the hand is given to itself and knows itself as a moving, touching hand that led Maine de Biran to construct this phenomenology that is radically different from what we refer to today by this name and that I call “historical phenomenology,” and to which we will now briefly return.

The “historical” phenomenology founded by Husserl is not defined by its method but by its object. The object of phenomenology differs from that of the sciences in that it does not consist of “things” themselves, but by the way in which they appear to us, in which they are given to us. The object of phenomenology is the “how” of manifestation, of monstration, of the givenness of things. However, to this problem, classical phenomenology offers only a single answer, despite the diversity of conceptual systems in which it is expressed. This answer is that things are given to us “in a world,” in this horizon of visibility where everything appears to us by becoming “phenomena.” This horizon is an ecstatic horizon, to use Heidegger’s expression, it is primitive, a medium of pure exteriority—a medium of transcendence where, to use Husserl’s term this time, intentionality overflows itself (*se dépasse*) towards all that it touches and gives us to be seen in this way, as an intentional correlate, as transcendent object.

The limitless profundity of the Biranian theory of the body consists in the assertion that the hand which traverses the various parts of the object-body is not given to itself in this way, in this hollow of exteriority that is the world. It is not and cannot be for if it were given to itself in that way, as an object, how could it rejoin itself, rejoin this object so as to set it in motion? Mustn’t it first move towards it and be capable of doing so?

To this hand-object that I am incapable of uniting with, it is appropriate to oppose a primitive capacity of prehension, which is the original hand, which is a pure lived experience (*veçu*)—a *cogitatio*. How do I have access to this power of prehension, how can I identify with it so as to be able, having become one with it, to set it to work, to act, take and grasp? It is precisely not in an intentional act that would have no other effect than to separate me from it forever. Thus there is an originary mode of the relation to the originary self in the originary body—a self-revelation of this subjective body—a self-revelation of the absolute subjectivity that allows me alone to coincide with it and with each of its powers. This self-revelation of the originary body, that puts it in possession of itself and of each of its powers, and which allows it alone to act and do all that it does, is what I call the originary corporeity.

The essence of this originary corporeity is life. In the second part I will attempt to follow this more difficult path that seeks to understand what life is, what this originary corporeity, the living body, is.

II

In the first part I stated that if one considers the theme of the living body, two paths arise that provide access to it. One can start from the body, envisaged as a kind of substance, a kind of given that everyone knows, and examine what makes this body, unlike the inert bodies of material nature, a living body. Following this path has led us, after separating out several unilateral and superficial approaches, to a decisive answer from a little known philosopher called Maine de Biran, who interpreted the living body as

a fundamental “I can,” which is the “I can” that I constantly make use of and that allows me to engage, from the inside, the body that is mine, that will enable me to rise and go somewhere else. We have established that this fundamental “I can” is a radical subjectivity in relation to itself without the mediation of any relation to the world. In other words this I, immanent to the originary body, is foreign to the experience of the world, an experience however to which the ideological approaches of the body refer, since they have always considered the body as an object that appears to us in the world.

We have thus prepared the ground for a kind of second path that I will now try to follow without evading its difficulty. The problem is to think through the living body—this body the experience of which we never cease to muffle in our daily life, yet that we employ in each of our actions—neither starting from the world and the experience of the world nor starting from the objective sensible body. It is a question of starting not from the world but from life and considering whether, in this life, one can understand how something like this living body that we experience—an experience more certain than the experience of the objective body—can be born in this life. So it is this second path that I am now going to try to elucidate.

Obviously, if one wants to proceed from life to the living body by proposing a kind of genesis of this living body inside of which we have found ourselves, one must already know what life is. However, no epoch is more poorly placed to speak of life than ours. Paradoxically: in the twentieth century the science that is supposed to deal with life, biology, is not the one that has made the greatest progress, as such progress would lead to questioning our mode of life and asking so-called social problems. Moreover, a famous biologist declared that, “Life is no longer investigated in the laboratory.”¹ This proposition, I believe, is profoundly true; especially if one recalls what I referred to above as the proto-founding act of modern science and, consequently, of modern biology, namely Galileo’s decision to exclude from our knowledge of the material universe all that concerns sensible qualities and, generally, sensibility, affectivity, subjectivity and life, in order to hold as constitutive of this real universe only its geometrical and mathematical determinations. The geometrical or mathematical determination of these material particles are algorithms. Whereas all that depends on living subjectivity is set aside by this science including the very condition of its development. So, it is not surprising that, at the end of this development, biology only rediscovered the presupposition of the beginning of modernity, namely bracketing out life. In biology, there is no life.

If life is eliminated *a priori* from biology in the actual presupposition of this science, then where can it be found? Would it be in the world? In the world, do we not see, alongside inanimate things, living beings, living bodies and specifically our own life more or less similar to that of animals.

I will take a second risk, and formulate at the outset the thesis that will direct this entire analysis. In the world, there is nothing like life. In the world, life never appears and that, moreover, is why life is absent from the field of biology, because biology, despite the abstraction of its methodologies, still seeks life in the world, never ceasing to focus its gaze outwards at the world. In the world, admittedly, we do see living beings, living bodies, but never life. This character of being alive has a significance that is inherent to the perception of living bodies and which plays a crucial role in this perception. We grasp this character of being alive, signs of life, in the perception of these bodies, never life itself. This is because we never grasp life in itself, we only grasp it in the form of an

irreal signification, i.e. an irreality. This signification can invest the living being and wholly determine the perception that we have of it, in such a way that these eyes, as Husserl says, are perceived as “eyes that see,” these hands are perceived as “hands that touch.” But such significations remain in their irreality, they only signify life without being able to present it in itself, in person, as phenomenologists say.

That is the philosophical reason why it is advisable, from now on, to reject Heidegger’s thesis which states that life is not the path that must be followed if one wants to arrive at what makes up the essential-being of man. The reason invoked in paragraph 10 of *Being and Time*—and that he uses to reject the problematics of life of his time, such as those of Bergson, Scheler and even Husserl—is that if life constitutes a particular genre of being, it is however only in *Dasein* that we have access to it, so that the analytic of *Dasein* constitutes the indispensable ontological basis for the development of a biology as well as a psychology and an anthropology in general. “Life has its own kind of being but it is essentially accessible only in *Dasein*.”² Given that *Dasein* is primarily *In-der-Welt-sein*, being-in-the-world, it follows that life is accessible only in the world. What is true for living organisms and living bodies as empirical objectivities subordinate to the general terms of experience, whether those of Kant or Heidegger—for that is *Dasein*—is thus attributed without any other kind of process to life itself. The confusion between empirical organisms, living bodies as objects, with their objective physiological processes, on the one hand and, on the other, life itself that no one has ever seen in the world and never will see, this ruinous confusion is already achieved and what it implies is nothing less than a kind of murder by which life is deprived at the outset of its most proper essence, namely the fact of experiencing itself and thus living.

If life itself never appears in the world, so that it is not possible to perceive it, except in the form of irreal significations, if life is thus absent from the world then it is also, for this reason, absent from the field of biology, so the question arises: Do we originally have access to life itself and, if so, where and how? To which we reply: We do have access to life itself. Where? In life. how? Through life. For insofar as we are living in life, we have access to this life and our mode of access is life itself; because only life arises in itself, only life grants access to itself. Hence, the question is twofold: it is a question of knowing, on the one hand, how life has access to itself, how life arises in itself, how it gives itself to itself and, on the other hand, of knowing how we have access to this life, how we find ourselves situated in it, once placed in it and plunged into it, to assume our role, the role of life (*à avoir part à l'oeuvre qui est la sienne, à l'oeuvre de vie*).

As for the first question: how does life originally arise? Life experiences itself and that is all. It is not something that has this property, but the very fact of experiencing itself. As such, life is not the subject of any ontology but only of a phenomenology. It does not belong to the order of what is, of what appears, but to appearing itself. And it is here that the thought of life demands that we reject not only classical phenomenology but, beyond it, a good part of the development of western philosophy. For phenomenology as for western philosophy, appearing means to present oneself in a world, coming into the light of day. Such moreover is Heidegger’s thesis, as can be seen in his analysis of the Greek phenomenon. But you would be fooling yourself if you thought that traditional philosophy of consciousness had introduced a new concept of appearing as, according to it, consciousness is essentially consciousness of something, it

is a representation—*vor-stellen*—which means: to set before. To set before what becomes conscious, what appears from the fact of being set before one in this way, what manifests both because of and within this outside. Or, as a disciple of Husserl's declared: "Originary consciousness understood in an intentional manner is the true access to being." This means that the access to being is through this excess (*dépassement*) by which consciousness is able to project itself outside of itself, into this "outside" which is the "world."

What characterizes appearing throughout these various forms of conceptualization—it would take too long to list them all—is that it turns away from itself, with such violence that what appears is always something other than appearing itself. What it gives instead is the other towards which it throws us. Intentionality, for example, which gives everything, which opens the entire field of being to us, how does it give itself? Intentionality is a making-seen, but this making-seen is never seen. Traditional consciousness is a representation, it presents in face of and it makes seen in this way but then—although with Schopenhauer and Freud the suspicion arises that not everything can be reduced to this being-represented, to the fact of being represented—the thought of the Occident no longer deals with phenomenality, but rather with the unconscious. And consequently, when by chance philosophy encounters its ultimate question, being not that of the givenness of the world in intentionality, but the question of this givenness itself, of the givenness of intentionality or the question of self-givenness, it has no answer.

The givenness of givenness, self-givenness, is life. Hence, life is phenomenological in a radical and fundamental sense, it is not phenomenological in the sense that it is just another phenomenon among others in the world, a living body beside other living bodies, made up of its many components: molecules, cells, etc.—the various physiological processes comprising the body. Life is phenomenological in the sense that it is phenomenality itself, givenness itself and, moreover, the originary mode in which this phenomenization phenomenizes. It is not givenness, but rather the givenness of givenness, self-givenness. The self-givenness of life means that life gives itself and experiences itself. Life does not somehow first experience the world, its resistance, its pressure, no more so than anything it receives from any of the things and beings within that world, it does not first feel what is felt, the qualities of things nor the things themselves. Life is not affected by nor acted upon by any other phenomenon other than itself. It is in this sense that I say that life is auto-affection.

But given that the domain of auto-affection is that of life, it should be thought through with rigor; however not with the meaning of auto-affection as it is found in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; nor in the sense that Heidegger gives it in his commentary on Kant entitled *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. This Kantian auto-affection basically refers to an auto-solicitation of time by itself. It is a question of affection by the temporal horizon of the world, so that this so-called auto-affection is an affection by a radical alterity, that of the ecstatic horizon that defines the world. Life is not an auto-affection in the sense of a self-positioning, of a self-objectivization; life affects itself without pro-posing itself to itself, i.e. without setting itself before itself, as an "en face," in a difference, for example in the difference of an ek-stacy. Only on this condition can the content of its affection be itself and not the other or the different. Because life affects itself independently from everything outside, it has no outside, no side of its being is offered to any gaze. That is why no one has ever seen it. Life is

invisible. The invisibility of life is not provisional but insurmountable. The idea of a realization of life that is achieved by a kind of objectivization, by an action that would be an exteriorization in the world is absurd, for such an operation does not signify a realization of life, but its destruction. That is also why the idea of an access to life arising in the world and hence on the ground of a previous opening of the world, on the ground of *Dasein*, is only another expression of this absurdity. Because life is incapable of separating itself from itself, it supports itself in a fundamental passivity that characterizes it from top to bottom and which I will not dwell on here.

The question is instead this: If the givenness of life occurs as self-givenness, what appearing allows this self-givenness? For not just any appearing is susceptible to instituting a givenness of this kind. Specifically when this givenness is, for example, intentionality, we have seen that this appearing turns away from itself, so that it never gives itself to itself, but only “en face.” All thought is of this kind, including phenomenological thought. The phenomenological method is only a practical application of intentionality. And, consequently, it is not intentionality that can give us life. Insofar as our question is philosophical, meaning it concerns thought, it has no answer. As the original appearing, which allows life, which realizes itself as life, i.e. as self-givenness, escapes the phenomenological method insofar as it is an intentional method, that it now escapes we who are trying to think it, leaves open only one possibility, namely that, independent of the effort of our thought, beyond our gaze, outside of the world, life bears itself within itself, it phenomenizes itself in its phenomenality and according to this phenomenality.

How this original phenomenality phenomenizes itself comes down to asking what is the pure phenomenological material from which it is made, what is its phenomenological flesh. The “how” of givenness, its *Wie*, must be a *Was*, a content. The how of the phenomenization which life is is a transcendental affectivity that inhabits everything that auto-affects itself and that is found, in that way and only in that way, to be alive; for example, every impression, every feeling, every desire, every want, every action, but also every sight, every thought and intentionality itself. For the sight that is never seen wouldn’t see anything if it didn’t auto-affect itself as seeing—as seeing living. Yet life has no need of intentionality in its primitive self-givenness, whereas intentionality, for example of seeing, is not possible without life.

When looking at the world, i.e. when considering anything external, thus asking exteriority to provide access to things and perhaps their essence, we find ourselves in the presence of a hierarchy that proceeds from oneself. There is the material world, organic life, man. In this hierarchy life occupies an intermediate place that undoubtedly explains the great obstacle to traditional thoughts about it. Even a philosopher like Max Scheler, who undertook to entirely renew the problematic of intersubjectivity, remains a prisoner of this hierarchy and so fails in this endeavour. However, in such a hierarchy, humans have always been more than living beings. Indeed, humankind is an animal but endowed with logos, i.e. with the capacity to form significations and hence to speak. Thus for us humans, who are these higher animals endowed with logos, life is difficult to understand. It can only be understood through a kind of subtraction in relation to what we are, we these living beings endowed with logos. Heidegger says, “The ontology of life is realized by the path of privative interpretation, it determines what must be so that living can be something rather than nothing (*so etwas wie nur noch Leben*).” This thesis according to which life is less than us, who are open to the world, would be taken up again by

Biswanger and would totally corrupt the analysis of *Dasein*. If, on the contrary, life makes intentionality itself possible and, consequently, the noetic acts that Scheler placed above in the cosmo-vital sphere and if, in addition, this life self-reveals itself before a world is opened and independently of this opening of the world, then mustn't this hierarchy between life and man, that proceeds from oneself and which was instituted from the very beginning, be reversed? It is the very idea of the logos that must be fundamentally changed. Ultimately it is a question of thinking of another logos, not this logos that forms significations but the fundamental Archi-revelation of life—that primordial Logos that John calls the “Living Word.”

Now let's return to this phenomenalization of life and to our second question which is to know not only how life arises in itself, but how we arise within it, within this life that has no face, that is unaware of the world and that originally reveals itself to itself in its pathetic auto-affection and only in this way. How do we arise within it, so as to take part in this self-revelation that is life's own self-revelation? This does not happen based on us, nor is it based on some originary ego, an ultimate constituent functioning in the last instance, as it is described in the *Krisis*, a bearer of some device [*dispositif*] of experience, such as Kant's or the *In-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world) of intentionality—an ego that could thus, proceeding from itself, encounter life, by experiencing it. No *a priori* precedes our relation to life nor determines it in any way, except for the *a priori* of life itself. In life, we are always already there and it is only because we are always and already in life that all other forms of experience are possible for us. But how are we in life? How do we always and already come into it, so that this coming both precedes us and makes us living beings?

We come into life by our birth. To be born does not mean coming into the world, to be born means coming into life. We can come into the world only because we have already come into life. But the way in which we come into life has nothing to do with the way we come into the world. We come into the world by consciousness, by intentionality, by *In-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world). We come into life without consciousness, without intentionality, without *Dasein*. In truth, we do not come into life, it is life that comes into us. Our birth, the transcendental birth of our individual self (*moi*), consists in just that. It is life that comes, it comes into itself, so that, coming into itself, it also comes into us and engenders us. The question is thus: how is this coming into itself of life that is its coming into us, which is our birth, accomplished? Life comes into itself through the process of its eternal auto-affection. In such a process life is crushed against itself, i.e. it experiences itself and enjoys itself, so that from this experience a Self results each time identical to its pure experience of itself. In other words, by realizing itself as auto-affection, life generates in itself its own Ipseity, it experiences itself as an originary Self, which inhabits every conceivable Self, this Self that therefore has its origin in life alone and that is only possible in life. But the experience that life has of itself in its originary Ipseity is a phenomenologically effective experience, as such it is necessarily a singular experience—for there is no experience as such. So, all ipseity as phenomenologically effective, as living, appears in this irreducibly singular experience as a singular Self. Thus life generates itself, that is to say comes to experience itself as a singular Self. If you prefer, there is no life that comes into itself, except as a singular Self and notably as this singular Self that I myself am. Life auto-affects itself as me. If, with John or Meister Eckhart, one calls life “God,” then one could say with Eckhart, “God engenders himself

as me.”³ But this singular Self that is generated in life, that is given to itself only in the self-giveness of life, bears life within it. Hence life necessarily communicates with each of the Selves that it generates, giving it to itself by giving itself to itself, in such a way that in this Self there is nothing that isn’t living. I repeat: its Self, i.e. its giving to itself, only occurs in the self-giveness of life. No Self does not contain this self-giveness of life, and if one calls life God, then again one could say with Meister Eckhart, “God engenders me as himself.”⁴ If we now understand that the Self is the condition of the transcendental possibility of all individual selves (*moi*) and of every conceivable ego, for there is an individual self only united with itself in Life that unites to itself by uniting itself with itself, then we understand that there is individual self or ego only united with itself, given to itself in the self-giveness of Life and by it alone.

In current terminology, we say indifferently “*me*” and “*I*.” It is not however the same thing, even if traditional thought slips from one to the other in the most perfect confusion and without even seeing that there is, in this double designation of the Self, at least one problem. The singular Self was first spoken in the accusative, i.e. as a *me*, that translated the fact that it is created, this means very precisely that it did not produce itself under the condition that is the own-self of being given to itself (*la sienne d’être donné à lui-même*). Specifically, it was produced in itself, under its condition of being constantly given to itself, only in the self-giveness of absolute life. However, because this generation of the *me* in the self-giveness of life is phenomenological in an absolute sense (since life is the *Archi-phenomenality*), therefore this generation is also phenomenological. That which motivates using the accusative form of *me* reads itself into this *me*, resulting in this feeling of being fundamentally passive, not only in regard to each of its states, its pain, its pleasure, etc., but, what is more, of being fundamentally passive in regard to its own condition, to being given to itself. In an unpublished manuscript Husserl said I am myself otherwise I would be for nothing in this being myself, in other words I experience myself without being the source of this experience. I am given to myself otherwise this givenness would never concern me in any way. I affect myself and in this way I auto-affect myself, in other words I am not affected by something from outside, something other than me—but by myself. Yet I am for naught in this auto-affection. And so, I do not affect myself absolutely, this auto-affection is not my doing. Therefore it would be more precise to say: I am auto-affected and thus generated as a Self in the auto-affection of life. *Me* ultimately refers to this character of being auto-affected of the singular Self, and due to which, auto-affected by itself, it is henceforth a Self and a *me*.

To be auto-affected is to be in possession of oneself and hence of all the powers that the Self and thus the *me* bear within them. Consequently, by the very fact that it is in possession of itself and of all the powers that it finds within itself, the *me*, being in possession of these powers, is in a position to exercise them. Coinciding with these powers in its self-giveness, which is also the self-giveness of each of these powers, it coincides with them. Among these powers, there is notably all the powers of the body, for example that of grasping, of moving, of touching, that, generally, of employing all the powers which together constitute a phenomenological body.

Thus, this ego is identical to the living body that we are seeking, that we have found earlier starting from the current experience of the body, and that we now find in its generation starting from absolute life. As far as the *me* is now, due to its giving to itself,

in possession of all those powers which it has at its disposal, this *me* that possesses itself and all that lives within it, this *me* calls itself an *I*. “I” means “I can.” “I can” is not a synthetic proposition, i.e. in this proposition, no power is superadded to the essence of the *I*, but the *I* is, as such, “power,” it is the ultimate power because it is in possession of all of the powers that it finds within itself. And it is in possession of those powers on the inherent ground of the *me*, in other words on the inherent ground of the Self, that is to say on the inherent ground of the absolute life that gives it to itself. Thus only a living ego can be called a body, i.e. something that can take itself as support, because it is given to itself. It is not without foundation, it is based on its transcendental *me* and in the self-givenness of life. Consequently, having based itself on itself and on each of its powers, it can exercise them. It can exercise them and, it lives this capacity constantly, it can exercise its powers when it wants, freely. This ego, as living body, is free. All freedom rests on a power and the freedom of which we can speak is the capacity to implement the powers that we find phenomenologically within us because we are in possession, on the ground of the self-givenness of life, of the ego itself and of each of its inherent powers. We are never free in regard to anything external, but only within this fundamental *I* that, itself, presupposes the *me* and the Self. Thus, in the final analysis, the ego is free, only on the inherent ground of a *me* that necessarily precedes it, i.e. on the ground of this Self generated in the self-engendering of life, in other words given to itself in the self-givenness of life.

I hardly need to mention that the theories critical of freedom, or that deny the freedom of this *I*, are totally absurd. What we see clearly is that those theories rest on the transfer of the rules of the world to a region that does not concern them in the least. This is a question of a sort of ontological nonsense, because it is above all a phenomenological nonsense, since the condition of the exercise of a power, i.e. of freedom, resides in the very essence of the ego. It is in its actual birth that the ego is free, in its generation. The theologies that claim that God created the free man express, with a somewhat unsuitable vocabulary, something that is profoundly true. If one understands what it means, if one separates out the word “creation” that, once again, doesn’t belong here—since creation means creation of the world and thus of an exteriority—so, in the fundamental acosmism of life and there alone, the possibility of something like the effective exercise of a power—i.e. freedom—becomes intelligible.

from *Prétenaine Octobre*

(original text available online at <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/henrycor.htm>)

¹ François Jacob, *The Logic of Life*, 1982, Pantheon

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, 1996, Albany, SUNY Press

³ Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defenses*, 1986, New York, Paulist Press, Sermon 6, p. 187

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 187