

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

**THINKING TOGETHERNESS**

**PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY**

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ANDREJ BOŽIČ (Ed.)

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Max Schaefer

# RENEWING THE EROTIC RELATION

## MICHEL HENRY AND THE LOVER'S NIGHT

*Abstract:* The paper engages in a critical examination of Michel Henry's phenomenological study of the erotic relation. While Henry's analysis sheds light on the nature of eros and how it might be renewed from obscene objectivism, it undermines his account of the phenomenological life of the subject as a radically immanent mode of appearing and calls for a revision. By acknowledging life as a movement of transcendence towards the world, we can resolve this issue and further refine Henry's insights into the nature of eros. I begin by laying out Henry's account of how the forgetting of life results in a reduction of the erotic (i.e., inter-subjective) relation to a merely sexual (i.e., inter-objective) one. Following this, I outline Henry's account of the nature and limits of the erotic relation, and I demonstrate how Henry's work harbors the latent suggestion that the failure of eros can serve as a step towards a higher union with others in a love of God. In the closing section, I show how Henry's analysis of the erotic relation calls for a re-conception of life as a movement of transcendence.

*Keywords:* eros, sexuality, life, anxiety, intentionality, body, voyeurism, *agape* love.

### I. Introduction

If well-founded, then Michel Henry's (1922–2002) phenomenology of life would call for a radical rethinking of human life as we know it. The radical implications of his thought were not lost on Henry. As early as 1965, in his *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, Henry asserts that his phenomenology, insofar as it “reveals on the ontological level the subjective essence of all the original determinations of bodily life,” will eventually lead “to a new philosophy of all the ‘material’ acts of man, to a new philosophy of rites, of work, of cult, etc.” (Henry 1975, 218).

Among those acts that are given more extensive treatment in Henry's phenomenological studies are those of a sexual or erotic nature. Sexual acts

receive consideration from the very onset of Henry's work in *The Essence of Manifestation* (Henry 1973). However, it is in his later work, in a volume entitled *Incarnation*, that Henry provides his most extensive treatment of such acts. It is in this work that Henry takes significant strides towards laying out the new "philosophy of sexual love" that he anticipated in his earlier works, a philosophy based on "the data of the philosophy of the subjective body" (Henry 1975, 218).

As we will see, the data yielded by this philosophical study of bodily life is interpreted by Henry as suggesting that the proper nature and limits of the erotic relation can only be understood on the basis of life. For, according to Henry, it is only in the unconscious, non-intentional, non-objectifying self-affection (i.e., auto-affection) of our immanent bodily life, and not in the transcendence of the world opened by the intentional regard of consciousness, that we can truly account for how other living beings are actually given to us, and thus for how different people, with different experiential situations, can nevertheless understand and communicate with one another.

206 According to Henry, it is only by appreciating this newfound life of the erotic relation that *eros* can be rescued from an inevitable slide into a pornographic objectivism proper to the world and instead undergo a renewed vitality outside of it. However, in subjecting Henry's analyses to critical inquiry, I will argue that the data yielded by Henry's undoubtedly powerful phenomenological examination of our lived experience of the erotic relation suggests something other than what Henry himself concludes. I find that Henry's analyses compromise his account of the life of the subject as a radically immanent mode of appearing. As I will show in this work, it is by acknowledging life as a movement of transcendence towards the world that we can remedy this issue and, in so doing, further develop Henry's insights into the nature of *eros* and how it might again be renewed in contemporary Western civilization.

## II. Worldly *eros* and the fall into obscenity

Let us begin by investigating Henry's account of how the forgetting of life leads to the reduction of the erotic relation to an obscene objectivism. From beginning to end, Henry's work is directed by the claim that the history of

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Western philosophy has been guided by an ontological monism. In his view, this monism consists in the assumption that there is only one mode of appearing, that of the ecstatic, transcendent appearing of the world, which is opened by the intentionality of consciousness, and which allows objects to appear before our perceptual gaze. By conceiving of appearing in this way, Henry maintains that nearly all Western philosophy has unduly limited the field of appearing to object-manifestation, to the appearance of objects within the horizons of perceptual consciousness, such that something is if and only if it can be seen by a subject (Henry 1975, 14–15). In so doing, Western philosophy has laid the groundwork for a civilization which unduly privileges forms of theory and knowledge that are guided by intentionality and that emphasize seeing, objectivity, and universality.

In fact, the ramifications of this seemingly innocuous assumption stretch into all domains of human life, including that of the erotic. For, as Henry makes clear, this assumption is nothing less than a metaphysical decision, which ushers in a radical upheaval of the life of the subject as a whole. This upheaval originates with a forgetting of life. At its most basic level, this forgetting is ontological.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, it is made possible by life's very own ontological structure (Henry 1973, 382). In the eyes of Henry, life is a radically immanent and affective mode of appearing, which, as such, can never appear within the ecstatic appearing of the world, despite the fact that it is the condition that makes the latter possible. Henry thus leaves us with a radical bifurcation of these two modes of appearing, of life and the world, where the former is absolute and self-sufficient, and the latter is relative to and dependent upon the former. Because of this, life is essentially hidden from thought, which, as inherently directed towards something outside itself, is prone to existential and historical acts of forgetting.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the forgetting of life is not arbitrary, or even the result of a mistake, but belongs to the very constitution of the finite living subject.

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1 For an extended analysis of the nature and role of forgetting in Henry's material phenomenology, see Steinbock 1999.

2 That being said, since life always remains that which founds and sustains each living creature and its thought, Henry acknowledges that the living subject can never entirely forget life. Thus, rather than being altogether forgotten, it would be more proper to say that life is overlooked (Henry 1973, 274).

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Concretely, this means that life's reality and all its hidden depths are covered over and usurped by the shallow display of an unreal objective world. For Henry insists that, since life, as the fount of all reality and appearing, can never appear in the light of the world, the latter is altogether unreal.<sup>3</sup> In forgetting life for the world, then, the living subject forgets her reality. She forgets the truly transcendent depth of her life; she forgets that her life, as the immanent movement of self-affection that each individual undergoes in her flesh, cannot be reduced to the biology of its natural body as determined by the mechanistic laws of nature.<sup>4</sup> According to the late Henry, this means nothing less than the forgetting of the free play of life's passion, its innate need to ascend towards the absolute ground of its being, towards the living God (i.e., Christ), whose endless self-affection each finite individual undergoes within the depths of her flesh.

This fall from life plays out on the level of our erotic relations. In forgetting the essential condition of the erotic relation (i.e., life), Henry notes that

208 [t]his life's sensuality, its capacity to feel and enjoy, are crushed onto the [natural] body, incorporated in it, identified with it, and one with it; they become what one touches, what one caresses, and what one gives joy to by touching; what is there, really in the world, the object before one's gaze, and near at hand. The erotic relation is reduced to an objective sexual relation; and that is how it now comes about, as a performance and a set of objective phenomena. (Henry 2015, 218.)

In reducing the erotic relation to a strictly sexual one, what is effectively brought about is a shift from an "inter-subjective" relation to an "inter-objective" one (Henry 2015, 220). For Henry observes that eros, at its heart,

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3 Joseph Rivera points out that, although Henry regards the intentional order of appearing, which determines the natural, embodied subject (i.e., the objective body) as it is experienced in the world as unreal, to be sure, he does not reject the existence of the objective body (Rivera 2015, 20).

4 In other words, for Henry, the forgetting of life involves forgetting that life is causally and ontologically irreducible to natural life. Henry's work thus tries to liberate us from a merely biological conception of life. In fact, especially in his late work, Henry makes it clear that, in his eyes, the forgetting of life is tantamount to forgetting that one is a son of God and not merely a natural being (Henry 2003, 134).

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consists in an inter-subjective relation, which is to say, it consists in “each living being’s desire to enter into symbiosis with the life of another living being and finally to be united with it in a loving vital fusion” (Henry 2015, 218). However, in identifying reality with objectivity, and all knowledge with objective knowledge of the world, the erotic relation is “reduced to an objective sexual behavior” (Henry 2015, 220).

For Henry, this is tantamount to a profanation of life. He writes:

To that which is cloaked in the secret of an original modesty because it carries within it the spirit that is heterogeneous to every thing and every objectivity, it really claims: This absurd thing and indecent sex is what you are and is all you are—indecent because it has nothing in common with you, or with spirit [i.e., life]. Only this claim is not simply an allegation, it is an act—the act that brings about a subjectivity’s extraordinary metamorphosis into an inert object: the sexuality whereby life exposes itself, and thus affirms that it is nothing other, and nothing more, than that. (Henry 2015, 219.)

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In this case, it is no longer life but “this body in its objective condition (seen, touched, felt, heard, and smelled) that becomes the agent of communication” and understanding between living beings (Henry 2015, 220).

In the eyes of Henry, this reduction of eroticism to sexuality does not stand as a new phase in the erotic relation, but as a radical transformation of it (Henry 2015, 220). In short, it marks the time of a sadomasochistic voyeurism and pornography. And, indeed, Henry’s study here may be seen as providing a phenomenological account of the nature and limits of voyeurism and pornography, not to mention their prevalence within society. For voyeurism is “a logical consequence of the act of undressing *which makes the flesh identified with a visible body* and then forces it to behave as an objective reality in the inter-subjective communication of living beings” (Henry 2015, 220). Ontological monism makes all of the world a stage. Thus, as Henry writes,

[v]oyeurism is not at all limited to the traditional actors of the erotic relation; it carries in principle the possibility of extending to everyone

who will have decided to hand the erotic relation over to the world. Either to undress together and give themselves over to various sexual practices reduced to their objectivity, establishing between them no longer an “intersubjective” relation but an “inter-objective” one, and expecting from it all the tonalities of anxiety, disgust, degradation, masochism, sadism, and enjoyment (the kind of degradation it provides) that these practices can bring. Or, without themselves resorting to this, then at least watching it, the possibilities of which are multiplied by the new technologies of communication, which are themselves forms of voyeurism. (Henry 2015, 220.)

210 Carried to its limit, this voyeurism writ large is pornography. That is to say, it is a world “where everything is given to be seen—which then requires the vantage points on the behaviors and sexual attributes to be multiplied, as if something within sexuality were endlessly refusing this total objectification” (Henry 2015, 220). According to this world-view, what matters is not the content, or whether these actions serve the growth of life—i.e., its ability to feel and act—, but whether they are communicated and multiplied.<sup>5</sup> What matters is the orgy of communication, in which the “who” of it all is of no significance and everything is indistinguishable.

In Henry’s view, the inevitable result of this process is nihilism, understood as the destruction of all values. In his eyes, it is only in life, and not in nature, that values can arise. Henry writes:

Only in life and for it, by virtue of the needs and values that belong specifically to life, are the values that correlate with these needs assigned to things. Life is a universal principle of evaluation, and this principle is singular. At the same time, life proves to be the origin of culture, in as much as this is nothing other than the set of norms and ideals that life imposes on itself in order to realize its needs and desires, which in the end are summed up or concentrated in one alone: the need for life to

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard makes a similar point with regard to communication in contemporary Western society in general (see Baudrillard 1988).

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increase itself constantly, to increase its capacity to feel, the level of its action, and the intensity of its love. (Henry 2015, 218.)

The forgetting of life thus effectively means the diminishment and obscuring of its values (Henry 2015, 219). In fact, this is what the transformation of the erotic into the pornographic truly is: an obscuring of life's values in masochism and sadism. As Henry has it,

it is masochism for the spirit [i.e., life] to declare that it is nothing other than a contingent objective determination (foreign precisely to spirit) and for it to lower itself to the rank of a thing, of a masculine or feminine sex. The other's sadism corresponds to this masochism, as its correlate, and enjoys the suffering of the one that is diminished like this, affirming in and by its display that its truth is in this poor thing, which is indeed foreign to spirit, indecent, and absurd. (Henry 2015, 219.)

In the erotic realm, the nihilistic attitude that pervades the world's penchant for a pornographic objectivism is played out in sadomasochistic practices. It is played out in actions that profane life, that provide some semblance of pleasure in degradation, in convincing living subjects that there is no real value in life, that all there is is the mechanical causality of nature, and our own fleeting constructions. The seeming liberation from life thus comes at a high cost: it results in the impoverishment of the erotic relation, so important to our sense of self-respect and self-confidence, and, more generally, in the growing feeling that life has no real value, and that it would be better to die than to slog away at this unrelenting degradation.

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### III. Awakening the life of *eros*

In response to this mounting nihilism, Henry stresses the need, in our erotic relations, for a reawakening of life and its absolute priority over intentionality. The living subject needs to rediscover that the erotic relation essentially consists in a desire to unite with the life of the other. And, for Henry, this means nothing less than a desire for union with God. At its core, the desire

to unite with the life of the other is a desire to unite with the eternal life that dwells in the depths of her life. Accordingly, what needs to be rediscovered is that, at heart, the erotic relation is bent on a union with the absolute, with the fount of all being. It is this union with the absolute that is the true meaning and purpose of the erotic relation and that is lost in the blinding light of the world's obscenity.

In Henry's view, a rediscovery of this meaning necessarily involves a reassertion and an acknowledgement of life's absolute priority over intentionality in the constitution of the erotic relation, a task which Henry himself takes up in his phenomenological study of the matter. In turning to this analysis now, our aim is to determine what it reveals about the nature and limits of the erotic relation.

212 To begin, Henry stresses that desire is made possible by the duplication of anxiety (Henry 2015, 202). Drawing on the Danish religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's study of anxiety, Henry first notes that what causes anxiety is the subject's pre-reflective, non-objectifying bodily awareness of the possibility of its own power.<sup>6</sup> At heart, prior to any objectifying (i.e., intentional) act of consciousness, the subject feels the possibility of its freedom; she feels the possibility of her power, and this fills her flesh with a "mix of attraction and repulsion before the unknown" (Henry 2015, 192).

Furthering this analysis of anxiety, Henry makes the following observation:

The inability to get rid of itself exacerbates it [i.e., anxiety] at the moment the possibility of power comes up against the non-power in itself [i.e., the absolute life of God] that is older than it and that gives it to itself—against the powerlessness that we have shown to be the source of this power. This is when anxiety is brought to its paroxysm and increases vertiginously: Wanting to flee itself and coming up against its inability to do it, cornered by itself, the possibility of power is thrown back on itself, *which means that at the same time it is thrown back on the power that makes it possible*. So it throws itself into it, as if it were the

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<sup>6</sup> As Kierkegaard puts this, "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." For more on Kierkegaard's own view of anxiety, see Kierkegaard 1980, 61.

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only way out, the only possibility that remains, and takes action. (Henry 2015, 193.)

Anxiety increases when the finite subject comes to feel that the affective movement of its flesh is based upon that of an absolute, eternal life, over which it has no power. The subject thus becomes anxious about the limits of its power, about what this absolute life, whose limits are unclear and indeterminate, might have the power to do. As Henry details here, it is ultimately the subject's inability to escape itself that brings this anxiety to its highest point. Since the subject is given over to itself in its bodily life in a radically immanent manner, without any distance or outside, the subject can never throw itself outside itself; it can never escape the unrelenting movement of its bodily life and its awareness of itself and the possibility of its power. Unable to bear this affective state any longer, the self finally takes action in an attempt to escape or distract itself from its anxiety. Ultimately, this reveals the tragic nature of the human condition: that "anxiety about sin produces sin" (Henry 2015, 207).

In Henry's view, this anxiety is redoubled "the moment desire is born" (Henry 2015, 202). That is to say, anxiety is redoubled the moment the subject becomes aware of the objective body of the other as inhabited by a living soul (i.e., a finite life) and spirit (i.e., absolute life). In other words, desire arises the moment one is awoken to the sensual body of the other, to the fact that the objective body of the other is imbued with the ability to sense and be sensed. Such a subject becomes aware of what Henry, following Kierkegaard, regards as "the monstrous contradiction that the immortal spirit is determined as a genus [i.e., as male, female, etc.]" (Kierkegaard 1980, 69). It is in and as anxiety that the subject becomes aware of the paradoxical relation between the two modes of appearing, between life and the world (Henry 2015, 197).

More concretely still, what redoubles the subject's anxiety is its newfound awareness of the possibility that is made possible by this monstrous contradiction: the possibility of its power to touch the life of the other, to unite with the other in a moment of loving fusion by touching her where she touches herself. The flip side of this coin is that the subject is alerted to the fact that, in its own case, as a spirit that is somehow connected to this sexed body, it too can touch and be touched, that it too may be the cause of anxiety in others, a

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fact, which contributes to the redoubling of anxiety amongst the living (Henry 2015, 214–215).

According to Henry, what this reveals is that it is life's drive to increase its capacity to feel that makes possible sexual desire and the erotic relation, which springs from it. It is life, in its absolute priority over the intentional acts of consciousness, that is wholly responsible for spurring on the subject to touch the life of the other in its own-most depths, to communicate with and understand the other on a primal level, via the affective movements of their bodily lives and their pre-reflective, non-objectifying awareness of those movements.

214 However, what Henry discovers is a metaphysical limitation to the erotic relation between finite living subjects. With respect to the question as to whether "eroticism gives us access to the life of the other," Henry begins by noting that "having accounted for the implication of sexual difference for the understanding of eroticism—of its anxiety, and of the desire that takes shape there—the question refers to sexuality. Is sexuality so extraordinary that it allows us to attain the other in himself or herself, in what he or she is for themselves in some way?" (Henry 2015, 208.) Examining the matter, Henry observes that in trying to touch the life of the other, the agent, in brushing up against the skin of the other, encounters a practical limit in its own ability to feel. In brushing up against the sexed body of the other, the erotic agent finds that she cannot feel the other where she feels herself, and this contributes to her anguish. Henry is careful to stress that it is a limit internal to the immanent life of the finite subject (i.e., of its organic body, to use Henry's term), against which the erotic agent runs up in the erotic act.<sup>7</sup> In Henry's words:

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<sup>7</sup> According to Henry, when the energy or force of life drives the living subject to engage in action, "the body runs up against a first resistance. Its internal phenomenological systems give way to its effort and constitute our 'organic body.' These are not our group of 'organs' as they appear to an objective knowledge of some kind but precisely as we live them within our subjective body as the terms of our effort. These are the primal 'configurations' whose entire being consists in their being-given-to-effort and exhausted in it. Second, at the very heart of this zone of relative resistance offered by the organic body, the pressure that weighs on it and gradually makes it give way, that is,

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What the other drive feels remains beyond what the first feels. The impotence of each to attain the other in itself exasperates the tension of desire up to its resolution in the paroxysmal feeling of orgasm, in such a way that each has its own without being able to feel that of the other as the other feels it. If this is the erotic desire in the sexual act, here again it is a failure. (Henry 2015, 211.)

This failure determines the metaphysical limit of the erotic relation. While the erotic relation can stimulate the life of the subject, it can heighten and allow one's pleasure in and feeling for life to grow, it cannot allow the finite subject to feel the other finite subject where she is in herself, in her life. Even at the height of their erotic engagement, each living self remains in "the lover's night," which is to say, in the immanence of its own flesh and life. In Henry's words, "[i]t is in the immanence of the drive that desire fails to attain the pleasure of the other where it attains itself; it is in the lovers' night that, for each of them, the other remains on the other side of a wall that forever separates them" (Henry 2015, 211). As Henry continues,

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a proof of this is given by the signals lovers offer each other while carrying out the act, whether it is a question of spoken words, sighs, or varying manifestations. Such that the coincidence sought is not the real identification a transcendental Self with an other, the recovery of two impressional flows melting into one, but at best only the chronological coincidence of two spasms powerless to overcome their division. (Henry 2015, 211.)

Indeed, it is this very play of signs that prevents eroticism from collapsing into an auto-affective solipsism. As Henry writes, it is because

these signs and signals are themselves phenomena, that the auto-eroticism at work here differs from auto-eroticism properly speaking,

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the use of the powers of the subjective body, runs up against an obstacle that no longer gives way. The Earth [i.e., nature] is a line of absolute resistance that lets itself be felt continually within the organic body and is the unsurpassable limit of its deployment." (Henry 2012, 44–45).

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where everyone is truly alone with himself [...] In the impassioned coupling, on the contrary, a recognition for him or her who has produced or allowed this sort of satisfaction, however provisional, is added to the immanent phenomenon felt by each drive at the moving limit of its organic body, and to the enjoyment in which its desire results, and is indissociable from it and from the well-being it procures. The erotic relation then doubles the pure affective relation, which is foreign to the carnal coupling, and is a reaction of reciprocal recognition, of love perhaps, even when this might well precede and indeed provoke the entire erotic process that results from it. (Henry 2015, 211.)

Although Henry regards the ecstatic appearing of the world in which these signs arise as a realm of extreme unreality, he suggests here that this realm, and the signs and signals that people it, do make some effective difference, inasmuch as they spare eroticism a solitary fate, and seem to contribute to life's enjoyment.

216     Apart from this, Henry's work, although he does not state this explicitly himself, bears the suggestion that the failure proper to the erotic relation may serve as a stepping stone towards a higher union with others in a love of God. Similar to Kant's account of the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, the initial moment of failure or counter-purposiveness in the erotic relation may ultimately be put to purposive use by leading the living subject to discover the transcendence of the absolute life that, according to Henry, dwells within its flesh, and in which all finite souls are one in His mystical flesh.<sup>8</sup> In developing an awareness of the limitation of the erotic relation, the subject, in its frustrated yet rising passion, may turn to other cultural acts—i.e., ethical, religious, or aesthetic—, in which its relation with all of the living in the mystical body of Christ may be revealed. In this sense, the true promise of the erotic relation may be seen as consisting in leading the finite subject towards a higher sense of relation in *agape* love, understood as a form of love distinct from *eros*, as a distinctly religious relation, in which all are unified in the body of Christ as

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<sup>8</sup> For Kant's account of the mathematical and dynamical sublime, see Kant 2007, § 25 and § 28.

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the foundation of all relationality and meaning. In the eyes of Henry, it is only the awakening of erotic life to this *agape* love beyond the obscenity that walks hand-in-hand with the world that we can liberate the erotic relation from the nihilistic attitude into which it has fallen.

#### IV. Renewing erotic life in the world

The question is whether Henry's own analyses support the conclusion that it is the a-cosmic nature of life that is responsible for motivating the renewal of the erotic relation. As we have seen, the redoubling of anxiety that marks the birth of sexual desire requires both modes of appearing—that of life and the world. Sexual desire arises from the contradiction between life and the body. Even if life is always responsible for driving the actions of the subject, this indicates that life does in some sense need the objective body. There can be no growth in life's capacity for feeling in the erotic relation unless there is a physical body.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, there could be no genuine diminishment and degradation of life's feeling in the absence of such a body. Yet, if the objective body, as determined by the intentional order of appearing, is the extreme unreality that Henry holds it to be, then it would not be able to have a hand in contributing to these very real changes in the life of the subject.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Henry's analysis of the erotic relation betrays his conclusion that life is entirely self-sufficient.

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Now, if the objective body plays an essential role in the erotic relation or, indeed, in any action whatsoever, then, as Frédéric Seyler notes, there arises the very real question as to the status that should be assigned to this body, and to the intentional order of appearing in general (Seyler 2012, 107). As Seyler writes, if the intentional order of appearing is necessary for any and all action,

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<sup>9</sup> One can make the same point with regard to any living activity. As Frédéric Seyler notes, "it remains unclear on what grounds we could designate a purely immanent praxis as an action: does action not also and obviously imply intentional components, e.g., in the case of the runner (seeing the track unfolding in front of him, feeling his movements, evaluating the situation from a tactical point of view, etc.), and necessarily imply those components?" (Seyler 2012, 106–107).

<sup>10</sup> Christina Gschwandtner makes a similar point when she observes that "[i]f the world were purely an illusion in the extreme sense Henry occasionally suggests, it could not have the power of barbarity and evil he also claims for it. There would be no need to fight it as intensely as he does." (Gschwandtner 2016, 72.)

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then it “cannot be discarded as unessential in defining the *reality* of action itself” (ibid.). However, if the intentional components function as essential and therefore real components of life’s activity, then Henry’s radical bifurcation of life and intentionality is altogether problematic. For, if intentionality is a real component of life’s action, then one must explain how the latter gives onto the former. Yet, as Renaud Barbaras observes,

Henry cannot provide answers to these questions precisely because he argues that they concern two completely impenetrable regimes of appearance. In other words, it is not possible to pass from immanence to transcendence. On the contrary, within the auto-impressional embrace, everything is in place to prevent a window from opening onto exteriority or to prevent an outside from forming. In order to articulate the impression, along with the ek-static givenness, the border must become porous, and “immanence” must be thought in such a manner that transcendence may come about in and through it. (Barbaras 2012, 57.)

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Indeed, at certain points in his analysis of the erotic relation, however unwittingly, Henry seems to stray from his assertions regarding the strict bifurcation between the two modes of appearing. He observes:

To reach out her hand, to squeeze, to caress, to feel or to breathe in a scent, a breath, is to open oneself to the world. It is in the world, in its appearing, that the other is really there, and that his body (to which the other is united) is there and is real. If it is a question of attaining the other beyond the limit that crushes the impassioned movement, beyond the resisting continuum in which the organic body becomes a thing body, and beyond the invisible side that this body opposes to desire—is it not in the appearing of the world that this body now lies before the gaze, the touch, or the caress? What shows me this ungraspable “within” of the other’s thingly body is its “outside,” and that is what occupies me, whether it be a question of ordinary experience or of the radical medication it undergoes when the sensible body becomes an erotic and sensual body. (Henry 2015, 214.)

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Yet, how could the exterior body in any way reveal the interior life of the subject, if the two modes of appearance were as radically bifurcated as Henry claims? Indeed, how could one ever recognize that the objective body that moves now before me is inhabited by a life at all, if life is utterly unable to appear within the light of the world?<sup>11</sup> The truth is that Henry's conception of the radical immanence of life is unable to accommodate the results of his own analysis of the erotic relation.<sup>12</sup> Henry's analyses indicate that both life and the body play an essential role in the renewal and diminishment of the erotic lives of living subjects.

To support Henry's findings regarding the erotic relation, it is necessary to acknowledge that while Henry deserves credit for highlighting that only the auto-impressionality of life, as a power that takes hold of itself, can function as the ultimate foundation of any real movement and appearing, this life must be understood as a primordial movement of transcendence. Only by acknowledging that the primal impulsion of life functions as an ecstatic movement can we explain how the non-objectifying drives of life and the objectifying acts of consciousness relate to one another, and thus how, as Henry's analyses reveal, both flesh and body function as necessary conditions for the possibility of *eros*.

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Indeed, contrary to what Henry suggests, by acknowledging the primordial transcendence of life, we neither reduce all appearing to object-manifestation nor do we necessarily condemn society to unduly privilege forms of theory and action that favor objectivity, seeing, and universality. First, the fact that life, in its movement, necessarily throws itself outside itself does not mean that it does not possess itself, that it is thereby rendered foreign to itself, such that

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11 As Barbaras puts this, “[i]f I attribute a carnal meaning to others or to my face, it is because *something within exteriority urges me to do that*, without which I would aim at any material reality as if it were flesh. But this amounts to saying *that there is a mode of presence of living interiority within exteriority*, which directly conflicts with the division of appearing that Henry establishes.” (Barbaras 2008, 7.)

12 As Emmanuel Falque similarly notes, in Henry's study of the erotic relation, “[e]verything happens as if, according to us, the Henryan determination of immanence or of the pathos-filled flesh now buckled under the weight of transcendence or corporeality, no longer being able to express the truth of the erotic relation without definitively renouncing its own solipsism” (Falque 2016, 156).

it only ever appears to itself as an object to the reflective gaze of a subject. In its ecstatic movement, life still appears in itself in a pre-reflective and non-objectifying manner. In its movement outward, life still affects itself in the flesh of the subject in a pre-reflective and non-objectifying way. However, in acknowledging life's outward movement, we lay the groundwork that better allows us to account for how this non-objectifying mode of appearing gives onto and communicates with the objectifying mode of appearing. In a word, we lay the groundwork that allows us to make sense of the essential role that, as Henry's analyses themselves reveal, both life and the objective body play in the formation of anxiety, desire, and the erotic relation between finite living subjects. Thus, it is only by virtue of an acknowledgment of the ecstatic movement of life's impulsion that Henry's insights into anxiety, desire, and the erotic relation can be consistently maintained and, as we shall see, even allowed to mature.

220 For one, this modification allows us to refine Henry's account of the depths of meaning at play in the erotic relation. On our account, the non-objectifying self-affection of bodily life may be understood as an unconscious, indeterminate, pathic order of meaning, which underlies the determinate, objective meaning proper to objectifying acts of consciousness. The former is an order of meaning that cannot ever be fully thematized or controlled by the objectifying acts of consciousness. Thus, as Henry himself knew, the meaningfulness of the erotic relation cannot ever be reduced to an obscene objectivism. Insofar as life functions as a primordial transcendence that founds and exceeds the immanence of consciousness, there always remains a depth of sensation that is refractory to reflection and language. Here, we begin to see the true, lasting contribution of Henry's phenomenological study of the erotic relation: a rich account of a depth of feeling that functions as a real type of meaning in itself and which remains irreducible to objectifying acts of consciousness and its control.

More than that, although transcendental life is no longer a-cosmic, but fundamentally ex-posed to the natural world, this does not mean that the life of the subject can be entirely explained in terms of the laws of nature. For the living subject is not simply an object in the world, but a world-directed agent for whom there is a meaningful world replete with values and norms.

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Returning life to the natural world simply means that neither subjectivity nor worldly entities can function as an absolute ground, to which the other is merely relative; it means that a thorough understanding of the reality of the subject requires both the first-person perspective of phenomenology and the third-person perspective of the natural sciences.

Indeed, though we cannot comment on this matter at length here, insofar as the bodily life of the subject here remains, like Christ in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a unique singularity, which is irreducible to conceptual understanding, this bodily life can come to be seen as harboring at least a hint of a divine life within its carnal flesh (Mensch 2020, 189–191). In fact, inasmuch as one's awareness of the singularity of life can be felt in a pronounced way in the erotic relation, the erotic relation remains a way in which this kinship can come to be known in a most striking manner.

Consequently, life's depth of feeling can motivate a higher relation to God, even if, contra Henry, it cannot provide certain knowledge of Him. So long as life remains a radically immanent self-affection, without distance or outside, there is no room for error, and so, the self-affection in which one comes to feel oneself as being lived by an absolute life, provides the finite subject with indubitable knowledge of itself as a son (or daughter) of life. However, once the night of life has been cracked open, and a sliver of light allowed to enter, there is always room for error and uncertainty. At most, the erotic arousal of life's non-objectifying self-affection can motivate and merge into a spiritual feeling for the absolute, which can spur on reason, in its ascending function, to believe in a divine fount of all that is. To the extent this is the case, the erotic relation, in merging into this spiritual feeling for the absolute, can similarly give rise to a rational belief in a spiritual relation, in a relation of all the living to one another in the mystical body of Christ. In this case, *eros* and *agape* love are not wholly distinct, as they are in Henry, but are in fact inseparably intertwined.

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In line with this, it needs to be acknowledged that the renewal of the depth of feeling in erotic life, up to, and including, its merging into a spiritual relation, is something that is accomplished by both the non-objectifying drives of life and the objectifying acts of consciousness. Both the non-objectifying drives of life and the objectifying acts of consciousness are required for the erotic relation to find as complete a fulfilment as possible.

Indeed, given the reality of both life's drives and its objectifying acts of consciousness, it is important to bear in mind that a full renewal of the erotic relation must not only take place in its ascension towards the spiritual, but also in the objectifying acts of the natural body. Owing to the ecstatic movement of life, and the interplay between the objectifying and non-objectifying modes of appearing that this enables, it follows that, however imperfectly, life necessarily finds some manner of expression in the objective body and in the signs and signals (e.g., gestures, spoken words, etc.) that arise within the objective realm, a fact which perhaps helps explain the very real allure of the obscene, even pornographic expressions of the world. A renewal of the erotic relation in contemporary Western society would thus require us to put these signs to as best a use as possible.

222 Accordingly, even if erotic desire in the sexual act is unable to perfectly feel the other where she feels herself, she does attain something of the other through such erotic relations. The boundaries of the lover's night thus need to be redrawn. The lover's night is always broken by shafts of daylight, although never enough to allow the other to be seen in a perfectly clear and distinct manner. An acknowledgement of this point aids us in understanding why it often takes time for lovers to feel comfortable with one another, since, especially in the early stages of such relationships, there is always something to the other that remains hidden.

Because of this, eroticism is always vulnerable to both a nihilistic attitude that demeans life in sadomasochistic practices and an affirmative attitude that renews the depths of life's forces. For, in this case, not only is the allure of objectivism as real and as enticing as that of spirituality, but both are invariably at play in every subject to varying degrees. Hence, the very real practical significance of addressing the matter. In Henry, it is never clear why one needs to struggle against the debasement of *eros* in the world's objectivism, given that the latter is utterly unreal and foreign to life's sublime solitude. As such, while the erotic relation may forget its basis in life, there is never any real threat that the forces of the world might infiltrate and destroy erotic life altogether. However, as our analyses have shown, the erotic relation is under threat, not only from the outside, but also from within itself, and is always at risk of being genuinely lost.

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